

A passion for ceramics: The collectors



In the second part of his investigation, *Tim Martin* discovers the reasons why people collect ceramics

ABOVE: Terry Bacon and John Oldham, pictured with part of the collection they have donated to The Hepworth Wakefield

Why do we collect objects? Why do we take the time to group, study and hoard multiple items of similar type? At first, the answers seem relatively obvious: academic research, investment, sentimental comfort, to deepen a personal interest, or to share similar passions with like-minded individuals. It may be just to have something to fill our walls and shelves. Collecting ceramic objects links us to the maker, so perhaps it is a human connection we ultimately crave.

In this second part of my article, I asked private collectors – and those that advise them – why ceramics hold such intense and passionate interest. In addition, I have looked at the mechanics of acquiring pieces, what makes some pieces rising stars, and the influence of specialist galleries, auctions and the secondary market.

WHY CERAMICS?

'They are tactile, diverse, plentiful and varied,' suggests Jonathan Gray, President of the English Ceramic Circle. 'They are also familiar.' Being familiar is perhaps the key entry-point: from time immemorial ceramics have had an elemental association. Cups, plates, bowls, oil lamps, amphorae for storing wine, deities for daily worship... they have been the most basic of functional objects.

Today, we collect ceramics of infinite variety and artistic expression. Andrew Renton, Head of Design Collections, Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales, suggests that: 'For me it is the ability of ceramics to be personal, direct, expressive and intriguing that is so attractive. Ceramics can embody great subtlety, wield power, and bring deep cultural resonance.'

Collectors are often more interested in the ceramicist themselves. Terry Bacon, who, along with his partner John Oldham, gifted their entire collection to The Hepworth Wakefield, reflects on what moves him most about collecting ceramics: 'You are taking an interest in what the artist feels he/she must make... you can discuss their inspiration and the artists they admire. They want to know where you are coming from and the artists you collect. It can lead to great friendships.'

WHAT IS 'COLLECTABLE'?

'For emerging makers to become collectable on the secondary market, there is often the need for good exposure and representation from a well-known gallery or studio,' suggests Senior Specialist of Maak auctions, Frances Robinson. 'It is here where the work is put into context and will be assessed by the public in parallel to other makers. Innovation and how an artist is pushing boundaries within their medium and conveying that within their practice will be the deciding factor of whether or not a collector believes a piece to be successful and if they see merit to add it to their collection.'

Collector and author Ashley Thorpe believes it is part quality, part strategy. 'I think galleries and influential collectors do play a part in this, and some of these relationships can be quite close, which can generate some deserved – and some undeserved – excitement about particular work.' He believes being original, consistent, and producing objects that have quality is important. 'These things can get you into collections and museums and suggests that you have something to say that goes beyond your own time.'

The desire to collect is not always driven by aesthetics, artist process or investment. There is also a thriving sub-culture where those dedicated to the study of ceramics and ceramic history can come together to share their passion. Many are also avid collectors. The English Ceramic Circle is one such organisation and Jonathan Gray has collections that include both early Swansea pottery and modern studio pottery.

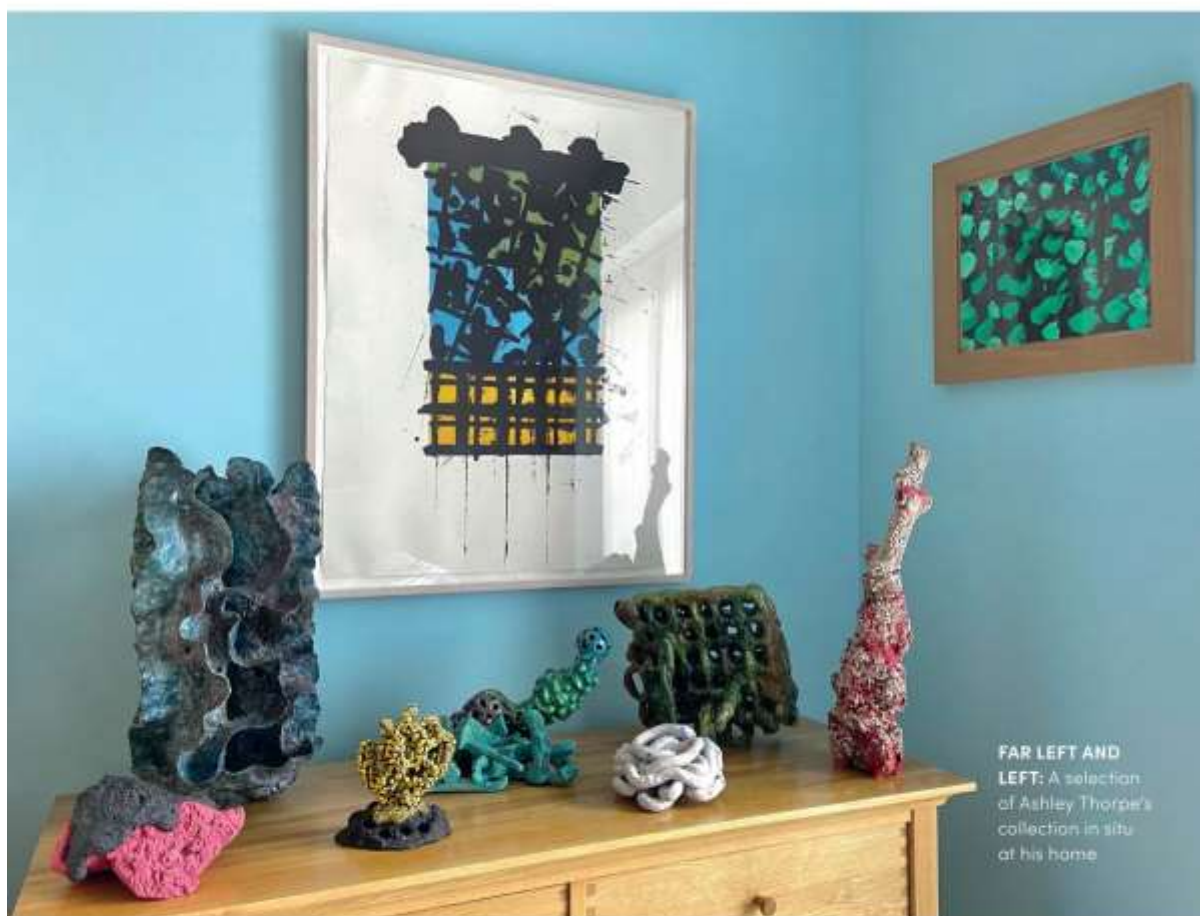


According to Gray, prices for antique ceramics in the UK have generally fallen, possibly due to supply and demand, with several collectors passing away and fewer people coming into the market. 'People talk about weekly London auctions in the 1960s and 1970s,' he states. 'Whereas Bonhams now has two sales a year that are combined with glass. Contemporary ceramics have, however, broken through as a modern art form, which is encouraging for the future.'

FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

Many private collectors have felt they are not owners of the pieces, but merely custodians. Several UK museum ceramic departments have expanded greatly by the generous gifting from private collectors who have amassed large ceramic troves. Some collectors have made detailed stipulations as to how these collections must be exhibited and loaned out; others have allowed the museum to fold the collection into their current exhibition and development policies, as the museum sees fit.

Anthony Shaw, whose collection is loaned to the Centre of Ceramic Art (CoCA), York Art Gallery, had particular requirements when entrusting his collection to the York Museums Trust. He had always felt that his collection is most at home in a domestic environment, and he worked with the ceramicist Martin Smith to develop a domestic-style space in which to show his collection. 'It has worked very well. I said I would never donate my collection to a museum, because you have no control how the work is used and most disappears into stores,' he explains. 'But Janet Barnes, CEO at York Museums Trust, supported us from the beginning.'



FAR LEFT AND LEFT: A selection of Ashley Thorpe's collection in situ at his home

The Derek Williams Trust at the Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales had few stipulations. Renton looks after several notable collections that were once private and is sensitive to how they are incorporated into the larger museum context, allowing individual works to be shown on their own terms. 'The collection of a figure like W.A. Ismay shows that, if someone has the drive and the rationale, almost any ceramic item can be collectable. That rationale can be a specific context – a period, a place, a culture – or a particularly interesting artist or circle of artists, a fascination with technique or function or creative influences, but ultimately it will come down to what beguiles the collector.'

CURRENT TRENDS

Whether collectors are influenced by trends is a personal choice, although acquiring notable studio potters appears to have staying power, typically because of the potential long-term investment.

Renton suggests that a clear current trend is the breaking down of hierarchies and categories and the recognition of ceramics as an artistic medium on a par with any other.

'It is also reflected in the strong rise in prices for work by studio potters, not just ceramic superstars like Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and Magdalene Odundo but also figures like James Tower and John Ward. The practice of collecting ceramics seems to be global now, with an emphasis on work that is conceptually interesting and without too much concern about the need (if indeed there is one) to preserve traditional craft skills.'

Maak's Robinson and Founding Director Marijke Varrall-Jones believe trends affect the market to a certain extent, however quality and craftsmanship will always stand above. 'Historically there was a desire amongst collectors to build collections that included examples by as many of the leading names in British studio pottery as their budgets would allow. Books like the V&A *British Studio Pottery* catalogue were almost treated like a shopping list. However, developments over the last 20 years or so have led to an ever more diverse aesthetic within studio pottery so this approach becomes increasingly less cohesive. Today people tend to be a bit more focused, either on a smaller range of artists or a particular period. The way people live with their



ABOVE: Anthony Shaw Collection, pictured at Billing Place, London, in 2011

collections has also changed as people become increasingly invested in curating their home environments and so some collectors are searching for works for very particular places within their homes.'

STARTING A COLLECTION

Largely, private collectors differ enormously from public museum ceramic buyers for one fundamental reason: they generally collect what they like, rather than what they think they should have. The collector's challenge in terms of building a collection of importance is finding a focus.

'A love of the medium and a passion for what can be done with it is a starting point,' Shaw explains. 'I start from the gut and want work that I sense will be of interest. I like to go on the journey that the artist is taking.' Bacon agrees. 'Many people look but do not see. Don't be afraid to approach artists; explore group studio spaces and commercial galleries and ask questions, very few people start collecting with expert knowledge. Art in all its forms is a product not only of the mind but of the soul.'

Gray suggests that: 'You can create a world-class ceramic collection and become knowledgeable in your chosen field with a modest outlay – in a way that would not be possible with other art forms such as paintings.'

Curatorial specialists suggest following trusted institutions and to take note of their acquisitions, whether they are well-known names or the newly discovered. Some suggest looking for artists that are innovating craft techniques, subverting traditions, or those that make you question form, space or preconceived ideas.

Yet the final word must go to W.A. Ismay MBE, librarian and collector of over 3,600 pots: 'As a collector I am primarily a man who is pleasing himself and enriching his own life.' ■

For details visit *Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales*: museum.wales, *CoCA*: yorkartgallery.org.uk, *English Ceramic Circle*: englishceramiccircle.org.uk, *Maak*: maaklondon.com

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