COLLECTOR'S VIEWPOINT: Collecting studio pottery

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While pottery has been popularly collected for many years, the major focus has been in the field of fine chinaware – the produce of the big Stoke factories in England and their counterparts in other countries. Collecting studio pottery is a relatively recent phenomenon in England, mainly because the studio pottery movement itself only began in the early years of the last century with people like Bernard Leach and William Staite Murray. For many years its popularity was confined to a very narrow audience interested in the craft movement as a relief and rebellion against the industrialisation of consumer products. The idea of individually made pieces of tableware that were slightly irregular with, to most eyes, rather dull and subdued glazes and decoration, was anathema to the British public. People were used to the high standards of perfection turned out by the Stoke factories in both ornaments and tableware. It took many years to persuade people that there was beauty in the accidental, that the hand of a person gave a piece warmth and vitality, and that the process of making pots in a small workshop was creative, personal, and on a human scale. In the 1950s and 1960s pottery became a mainstream subject in many schools and art colleges, and with the emergence of more contemporary looking potters, such as Hans Coper (see figure 1) and Lucy Rie, studio ceramics, became more widely accepted as objects of art.

Today many of the major auction houses have specialist studio pottery sales and Bonhams emerged as the leader for this new market. Led by its ceramics expert Cyril Frankel, Bonhams soon became market-makers achieving record-breaking prices for pots by Hans Coper, Lucy Rie and others. When Frankel moved to the Phillips auction house he continued this success with a New York sale of Japanese ceramics and design which also featured many pots by Bernard Leach. Thus he proved the interest in collecting studio pottery was world-wide.

I first entered the world of collectors in 1997 when, with friend and art consultant Kate Chertavian and her father, an avid collector, we formed CBS Ceramics. We decided to create a collection by buying and selling, but reinvesting all profits, thus building an ever-greater collection. At the time I was reorganising and refurbishing my ceramics gallery in St Ives and it was decided to house the collection there, where it would sit alongside the regular exhibitors of contemporary pottery in the gallery and would act as a reference and a complement to the exhibitions (figure 2). The fact that everything in the collection would be for sale probably sets me as

Figure 1 Stoneware pedestal bowl by Hans Coper, c1960

a retailer of classic pieces rather than a real collector, but I do not make my decisions for buying a pot on purely commercial lines. I buy pots that I can afford and hopefully sell on, but many I know will be in the collection for years before the market catches up with the price I have to put on them. I have bought them because they were good examples of a potter's work, or they fit in with the collection, or simply that I could not resist them.

From a modest budget of £10,000 the CBS collection has grown in six years into a large stock of more than 100 pots. When I first started I bought pots almost solely from auction although over the years prices and commissions have risen considerably. A lot, I think, has to do with the fact that more private collectors are going to auctions. I cannot compete commercially with these collectors as they are buying with retail prices in mind, whereas I must have a wholesale price as my guide. Although I still attend the auctions, I have to be a little more creative in my

Figure 2 CBS collection, St Ives Ceramics

search. Smaller auction houses sometimes yield a good prize and there is also the private seller. As the collection becomes more established I am often approached by collectors, relatives of potters, or gallery and shop owners, wanting to sell me pots.

Figure 3 Stoneware square bottle with willow pattern by Bernard Leach, c1960s

My philosophy regarding the collection is that while pots are for sale they are still alive; they can be handled, bought and exchanged. There is much more excitement when looking at a pot knowing it is still available even if it is beyond your budget. The pot is still accessible, still has a use, it may not be the best example of a potter's work, but it is in your hands and available to you. My criticism of museum collections is that although a pot or a painting may be of the highest standard, it no longer has its freedom. Items in collections are like caged animals devoid of the vitality of life, and the warmth of love, except for brief visits by total strangers. This may be a whimsical definition but I profoundly believe that to obtain anything of value from objects of art or craft they have to be lived with and absorbed over a period of time. Although the CBS collection is in my gallery I visit it regularly and often take pieces home for a while. In a way I have the best of both worlds; I have all the excitement of buying and owning rare pieces of pottery, but without the feeling of cluttering my life with them.

When buying for the collection I stay mostly within my area of expertise, which is what might be called the St Ives connection. These are pots by the Leach family, people who worked for the Leach Pottery, or worked in the style of Leach (figure 3). I also look for Japanese potters (figure 4) with connections to Leach and the Mingei group; these are some of the most expensive pots in the collection as pottery is valued as high art in Japan and even purchasing contemporary pottery requires deep pockets. My reasons for concentrating on this area are practical – I worked at the Leach Pottery for eight years and know how to evaluate a good pot from a bad one. The quality of the glaze is important. They have mostly been fired in single cycle kilns fuelled by gas, oil, or wood. Kilns of this type require seat of the pants control; the quality of the firing, and consequently the pots, relies heavily on the potter's instincts. There are, therefore, good and bad firings. The glazes from a good firing will sing, the clay body colour will be warm, the pots will not warp or distort too much, and the decoration will come out bold and clear. Sometimes the distinguishing characteristics of a quality within a pot will be very subtle

Figure 4 Stoneware bowl with iron brushwork, Shoji Hamada

Figure 5 John Bedding at work at Gaolyard Studios

and esoteric, to be seen only by other potters or discerning collectors. These pots are the Holy Grail for collectors, the joy of it being that you rarely have to pay top prices for them, as often they are quite simple pots.

Another reason for concentrating on this fairly narrow field is that I give a letter of accreditation as part of the pot's provenance. Sometimes pots are not marked with the potter's seal, or it is indistinct, and having an intimate knowledge with a lot of the work I can sometimes put my head on the block and confirm that, in my opinion, it was made by a particular artist.

About 70 per cent of the collection comprises works from this genre, many of them produced by potters who are still active and some, unusually in the UK, not necessarily British. It includes many Japanese pots, as well as works by the American potters Warren Mackenzie, Jeff Oestreich and Harvey Young, the Danish potter Aase Haugaard, and the Australian potter Richard Brooks.

There are many other deserving potters from around the world but, unlike painting and sculpture, ceramics is not very international in its distribution. This probably has to do with the costs involved in shipping, and the relatively modest prices of pots compared to other forms of art. Shipping is also dangerous; it is difficult to obtain insurance for breakages on ceramics and once a pot is damaged it loses a high proportion of its value. I can understand how people value something that has survived intact over the years, but I cannot really comprehend why it should devalue it to the extent that it does. Professional restorers do fantastic work and I am hard put to find evidence of their work on a pot and often cannot, even if I have seen the damage beforehand. People are reluctant to buy restored or damaged pots, yet they can be picked up with only minor damage at auction for a third or even half the price of an intact equivalent. A pot can be damaged easily, but this is as much a part of its history as the patination and cracking that continue to shape it through the years. The reluctance to accept damage to pots is, I believe, a throwback to the collecting of industrial chinaware and the standards of perfection that are desirable in this type of collecting. This is fine when the output of a factory is rated in thousands of pieces, and quality is seen by its standard of perfection, but handmade pottery is different, and most pots that reach auction are individual pieces. They are unique and quality is marked, as in a painting, by other factors than physical perfection. If the public is to become really appreciative of studio pottery, people have to overcome this obsession with perfection and look beyond it to see the "real" pot.

As in most collecting, there are trends and fashions in studio ceramics; these are fickle and can change overnight. An article in a quality daily newspaper, or the death of a potter, can make someone hot. I try to avoid the trends and go for the long-term view. About 30 per cent of the collection is more modernist in style – representing potters who broke away or actively rebelled against the Leach style and philosophy. These works are still mostly wheel-thrown but also explore dif-

ferent areas of ceramic production, looking for different surface textures and experimenting with different glazes. Most of all, their shapes are of a more sculptural nature. The best known examples of these more modernist or sculptural potters are Hans Coper and Lucy Rie, but there are others working today like Colin Pearson, Robin Welch, Walter Keeler, John Maltby, John Ward and even myself. We learnt our skills from traditional workshops, but decided to explore and find inspiration from sources other than oriental ceramics. I shy away from the constructional ceramics with influences more from the world of college teaching than workshop training since their content is more intellectual and not to my taste. From watching the sales, or often lack of them, from the auction rooms I know that these are more prone to fashion and trends, and their prices are less sustainable.

In 1998 I opened the Gaolyard Studios in St Ives – nine purpose-built, small workshops for potters who work individually, but share kilns and large equipment (figure 5). A cohesive working group has slowly coalesced in the five years that the studios have been open. At the moment the Leach Pottery is up for sale and there are moves to take it into public ownership and create a place of pottery excellence. With these factors, along with sales from my own gallery in St Ives continuing to rise, there seems to be a new chapter unfolding in the connections St Ives retains in the history of studio pottery.