

Studio Pottery in Britain 1900-2005

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2008, A&C Black

ISBN: 9-780713-670134

Introduction: 'Well, Which is it, Sam?'

In a cartoon published c1936, two puzzled men contemplate a pot on a plinth. It is a simple and undecorated shape and gives few clues to assist in making a judgement. The first man asks his friend, 'Well, which is it Sam – a lovely old vase or a hideous modern one?' If only they knew this they could at least fall back on their prejudices, but as things stand they are stumped and can go no further; they need to know more.

Figure 1

Let us imagine that the pot under consideration is by the studio potter William Staite Murray. In 1925 he stated that 'pottery is perhaps more readily enjoyed as a pure aesthetic expression than either Sculpture or Painting ... a finely proportioned Pot is accepted as beautiful without the disturbing question of the meaning of its form'.¹

Clearly Murray had not yet bumped into Sam and his friend at an exhibition, or if he had done so, he had not taken notice of what they said. It is people like them, rather than Murray, who demonstrate in their stumbling way that there is nothing pure and unmediated about pottery; its interpretations are as much hedged about by the conditions of the real world as any other art form. Murray's view relies on the notion of the spectator who looks at the work through innocent eyes, whereas each of us inevitably brings our preconceptions to bear on pottery exhibited in an art gallery, or on pots that are used or displayed in the home. Indeed it is the very familiarity of pottery that makes these preconceptions so difficult to avoid, or even be aware of.

Murray's ideal pot is an autonomous object that speaks directly and unambiguously to the viewer, sidestepping tricky problems of culture and environment. In one sense, perhaps Murray was on to something: pottery may seem to offer the possibility of evading the complications of context and interpretation through its status as an 'accepted' art whose forms are unlikely to 'disturb'. Studio potters like Murray were attracted to the powerful idea of making an authoritative aesthetic statement which could somehow bypass the particularities of the medium and the conditions of its reception. But there is a paradox here: too 'pure' an art can leave the spectator stranded. Like Sam and his friend we all need sufficient clues to set us on our way to understanding.

Studio potters have always been attracted to the idea that the pot speaks for itself and furthermore that studio pottery is essentially an independent art form. Thus the self-sufficiency of the maker is reflected in the self-sufficiency of what is made. For the studio potter, it can still seem that the pot is everything. Yet is it? So much of what is rich and meaningful about studio pottery depends upon what the individual pot is perceived to stand for, and what it stands for has to be communicated and learnt through some means external to the work itself. Studio pottery relies on the spectator to be in the know, but how is 'the know' to be achieved? For many people it is achieved through being part of a studio pottery culture which is transparent and largely taken for granted. This book gives an introduction to that culture for those who are outside yet wish to develop an informed interest. It will also provide insights for those studio pottery insiders who want to know more about their 'movement', its history, and its relationship to a wider world of ideas and practice.

The word 'movement' suggests a dynamic historical process or an unfolding story. Far from being fixed, the culture of studio pottery has been constantly re-negotiated over a period of a century or more. If not quite an underground culture, at most times it has been a marginal one, occasionally overlapping with mainstream visual art but generally on the edge of it. Despite the odd cry of complaint, this has mostly suited the potters themselves, left free to pursue their own agendas. However, until recently, this has meant that when studio pottery has moved on it has been all too easy for it to leave its own history behind. Remarkably, much of the historical record has survived, although a good deal of it is not readily accessible. It consists of newspaper and magazine articles, promotional material, catalogue essays, booklets and pamphlets, personal papers, lecture notes, technical treatises, minutes of meetings, glaze and kiln logs, photographs, plans etc, and even, as we have seen, cartoons. Some of this material has been preserved and cherished by surviving partners, children and grandchildren, enthusiasts and collectors, and some has been deposited in archives. Fortunately the efforts of oral historians during the last decade or so has meant that the reminiscences of particular potters have been recorded before it was too late. This wide range of relatively raw source material has proved invaluable in the researching and writing of this book.

Figure 2

Of course the story of studio pottery also continues to be told in the pots themselves. Each new generation of pots speaks both to us and to the pots that have gone before. Layers of meaning and references build on one another and the nuances become increasingly complex. So, if we look at this beautiful grey bowl by Walter Keeler, made in 2003, we might ask ourselves is it possible to consider it as an autonomous object, a 'pure aesthetic expression', self-contained within its own borders and able to speak directly and unambiguously to the receptive spectator? Or does our appreciation of the bowl rely, at least to some extent, on what we have already learnt about pots and their makers, and might that change and deepen as we continue to learn more? It is the second of these possibilities that provides the motivation and justification for a book

such as this. After all, if the first is true, then there is little more to be said. That pots are capable of giving aesthetic pleasure without need for justification there is no doubt, yet there is a further reward to be gained by seeking to understand the context and ideas which lie behind their making and which continue to contribute to their meanings.

ⁱ William Staite Murray, 'Pottery and the Essentials in Art', *Arts League of Service Bulletin 1923-1924*, London, 1925, p.11.