

Dining Rites

The Maker

"I must ask you to extend the word art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture, and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods...

... People talk about, and advertise, art pottery, art furniture, art fire-grates, and the like, giving us clearly to understand by such words, that it is unusual for pottery, furniture and fire-grates to have anything to do with art, that there is ... a divorce between art and common life ..."¹

The debate of Art versus Craft stretches at least as far back as William Morris, and for decades the Ceramic scene in Britain has been caught in the grip of a conflict of identity between the two. The Craft world generally, with Ceramics forming a part of it², has been undergoing a process of polarisation between the differing values inherent within the Arts and Crafts. A large section of studio ceramics has become increasingly distant from a concern with utility and more involved with the concerns of Fine Art: these makers have been concentrating on 'self expression', 'pure formal issues', 'making a comment', 'breaking new ground' ... Others have been continuing with the long-standing role of making pots for the traditional use of containing food and drink.

Although both approaches to working with clay have existed side by side throughout this century, there has been a growing tendency to feel that fine art is the superior specialisation³, that ceramics which are involved in the concerns of Fine Art deserve a higher regard than 'mere tableware'.

It is against the background of this, which I can only call misguided prejudice, that I conceived the idea for this exhibition. As a maker of tableware myself, and a passionate advocate of the cause of domestic pottery, one becomes thoroughly tired of hearing the now trite praise of vessels which look like tableware but which do not fulfil their apparent utilitarian function, 'which you could use if you wanted to, but they stand in their own right': as if the act of actually using them would degrade them.

'Dining Rites' sets out to remind all of us that '... far and away, [ceramics'] most important function, underlying all the historical evolutions of separate traditions, has been to contain food and drink'⁴; that '... the constant relationship with food has probably played the most vital part in endowing pots with their special symbolic qualities'⁵ and that 'this intimate connection with a potent aspect of daily life and experience is what gives ceramics its particular aesthetic interest'⁶. While acknowledging that the other concerns of ceramics deserve their respectable place, it is quite mistaken to push domestic pottery to a marginal, or worse - an inferior position.

Craftsmanship was defined by Morris as the fusion of beauty and use.⁷ Utility provides pottery with an immediate context and meaning: it is the utilitarian purpose of a pot which must inevitably be the main factor in dictating the form and character of any good functional pot, although a variety of other components like desire, association, nostalgia etc. contribute to and influence style. Nonetheless, far from the popular conception of the activity as automatic, mindless and repetitive, the making of high quality, functional tableware is an intellectual activity, which requires of its makers not only the acquisition of manual and technical skills, but also a highly enquiring mind. It presents them with a constant challenge in their search for the concrete, yet oh so illusive 'ultimate' mug, or the 'ultimate' dinner plate, a search that takes place in the process of the production of each and every piece.

Furthermore, although working within a well-established tradition of the studio potter as a designer-maker of tableware, these potters, while they may be romantic, are not nostalgic: their pots are shaped by the spirit of their time, and try to answer what they perceive as the needs of the present way of life of the particular user each maker has in mind. For the

craftsman/woman of tableware is guided by a broad sense of function and considers the fulfilment of our mental and spiritual needs as well as our physical ones. Far from being degraded by use, it is we who are graced when we use these pots.

In this exhibition we aim to direct the spotlight at handmade tableware, to rekindle the debate about the relevance of handmade tableware today, to draw renewed attention to the important contribution that such objects can make to our everyday life, and thus, to re-establish domestic pottery in the position it deserves.

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1. William Morris, in Allan Lipman & Howard Harris, 'Social Architecture: William Morris Our Contemporary' in *William Morris Today*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1984, P. 47.
2. In this article I refer only to the world of studio crafts, excluding any discussion on the world of the craft industry.
3. See for example: Tanya Harrod, '*From A Potter's Book to The Maker's Eye: British Studio Ceramics 1940-1982*' in *The Harrow, Connection*, Ceolfriith Press, 1989, p. 33.
4. Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 3.
6. Ibid., p. 3.
7. Allan Lipman & Howard Harris, op. cit., P. 45.