

Dinner Party Politics:

The relevance of Handmade Tableware today

Is handmade tableware still a viable and relevant craft form today? In the last century, studio potters making functional ware defined their role in the face of what they felt to be the aesthetic impoverishment and social injustice brought about by industrialisation. They believed that handmade tableware was morally superior to its industrial counterparts and set out to produce widely affordable, beautiful, usable pots as an alternative to the industrial product. Today, however, this ideology seems untenable. Industrial production provides a vast selection of tableware in a wide range of styles, quality and prices, and efficiently caters for our utilitarian and lifestyle needs, and we have to consider what this craft form has to offer that neither industrial tableware nor non-functional ceramics can.

Tableware belongs, ultimately, in the home, and becomes part of our daily life and surroundings. We form an intimate relationship with these constantly handled pots. Their familiarity endows them with a special resonance and thus tableware can serve as a highly suitable medium through which to express and convey meanings both *through* and *beyond* its immediate function. It is important to explore this potential in order to discover the relevance and significance of handmade tableware to the potter and society today.

Though producing functional tableware imposes certain limits on freedom of expression, function can provide an unending source of inspiration and act as a powerful spur for the imagination. Through relentless re-examining and rethinking of all

aspects of functional pots, the potential for new revelations, challenges and continuous explorations within the narrow field of tableware can sustain a lifelong pre-occupation. Furthermore, for some potters, the need to make is inseparable from and answered only by making objects *for use*. In interviews I conducted with some prominent tableware potters¹, they explain that they cannot find sufficient meaning in non-functional ceramics. They feel that the very essence of a pot lies in its potential for use; the user's enjoyment is crucial to them; function gives their work a *raison d'être* and they invest their soul in it. It is an obsessive preoccupation, almost an addiction.

A significant theme to emerge from these interviews was that handmade usable objects provide a longed for and direct link between potter and user, a crucial bridge from the inner world of the potter to the outer world via the user. Producing tableware enables them to develop a particular relationship with other people on physical, sensual and intellectual levels, to get to the heart of people's lives, to connect with the natural world as well as to issues of food, culture and customs.

Tableware's central function is to contain our most elementary sustenance – food and drink. Through this inevitable connection tableware acquires special symbolic meanings. For example, eating is at the core of the highly-charged relationship between mother and child. By extension, the potter can connect to, explore, and communicate this universal and fundamental relationship whether nourishing, comforting, sustaining, frustrating or undermining, from the perspective of mother or child.

Handmade tableware can also contain a symbolism within family relationships. Family

mealtimes bond family members and express their kinship and unconditional, continuing loyalty.² At once fragile, precious, and durable, handmade tableware is a pertinent symbol of the fragility, preciousness and durability of family relationships. Moreover, each item is unique within a unified, but not standardized set, and underlines the separate, unique individuality of each family member while still belonging within the bigger family unit.

Tableware constitutes an important part of our dining rituals. We combine social occasions with dining to mediate our social, filial and personal relationships through our dining customs which reflect our cultural ideals, aspirations and identities.³ Functional potters can therefore make interventions, engage with and contribute to these rites. Their pots can ritualise and elevate moments in our humdrum daily living. They have the potential to create a sense of mystery and adventure, inspire imaginative use, provoke thought and surprise, provide a topic for conversation, a focus of action, and facilitate social engagement and conviviality.

The specifically domestic context of tableware opens the door to expressing and communicating our complex cultural perception of the home: handmade tableware objects can mediate between the aspirational 'ideal' home and the 'real' home. We associate these pots with notions of self-sufficiency, sophistication, bucolic pleasures and home comforts. Thus, they furnish us with a variety of ideal emotional and social circumstances. Through their creation and possession we can imagine eventual possession of these ideals which present circumstances now deny us⁴.

The home is the base and shelter for the individual, the family and familiar objects.⁵ Creating things for the home provides an opportunity to re-visit, re-tell, and recreate

intense and supremely significant relationships. Makers, and through them, users, can confront and renegotiate moments of pain, deprivation, torment and disappointed expectations, as well as re-live moments of love, togetherness and grace and, through their work, draw and confer comfort.

The production of thrown handmade tableware involves repetition, and the ambiguous semiotics inherent in this aspect of tableware provide potters with an exciting field for exploration. Repetition and quantity are notions that conjure plenitude and reassure us of replenishment and replaceability, helping to relieve anxiety concerning want and devastating loss, and so keeping the shadow of death at bay⁶. Handmade tableware objects, produced and displayed in series of repetitive form, communicate these meanings, which gain added intensity through the association with food. Simultaneously, the sight of objects in multiples has a reductive effect. Repetition detracts from the rarity value of an object, and poses difficulty to our notion of and desire for uniqueness. This can undermine the perceived value of handmade tableware items.

The repetitive aspect of production throwing is often regarded as automatic and uncreative and, by implication, so does handmade tableware. Repetition throwing, however, is not only an efficient method for producing large quantities of uniform shapes, but also a process which lends thrown tableware its unique qualities of fluency and palpable energy. It is the means by which potters explore ideas through theme and variation, and search for the concrete, yet illusive 'ultimate' form, a search that takes place in the subtly varied production of each and every pot in each series.

The tension between the potter's conscious intention of uniformity and the inevitable vagaries of hand manufacture endows handmade tableware with an "attractive, non-mechanical frisson" and makes it special.⁷

The relationship between studio tableware and industrial products is also worth examining. Handmade tableware objects and industrial tableware items are ostensibly similar in appearance. However, the differences between them are fundamental. They lie not only in their mode of production, but also in the intentions behind their production, their aesthetic qualities and, consequently, their resonance and meanings.

Handmade tableware products, unlike their industrial counterparts, are seen as products of love. They are exquisitely tactile and express thoughtful consideration, service and creativity, as well as the intentions of their producer. By infusing their work with historical, symbolic, psychological, ritualistic or metaphysical meanings through their own personal interpretation of tradition, material and use, functional potters can create artefacts which are also art works.

I have touched upon a few strands from the rich web of subliminal meanings contained in and transmitted by handmade tableware and sought to demonstrate how these pots can be both utilitarian *and* aesthetic, functioning as both craft and art. This dual role imbues handmade tableware with a particular poignancy and sets it apart from both art ceramics and the industrial product. These objects cannot be dismissed as superfluous to our needs, nor be regarded as purely utilitarian or purely decorative or, indeed, as elitist luxury items. Their function extends beyond their utilitarian purpose and answers the psychological, emotional intellectual and spiritual needs of potter and user. Their

relevance lies in their capacity to express, symbolise and convey subjective and cultural feelings, values and ideas both through and beyond their utility. Their value lies in their power to sustain or enrich life; in the way they fit into everyday practices and ways of life of particular people at particular times, in their ability to fulfil some of the needs of our souls while holding sustenance for our bodies.

Notes

1. With many thanks to Sven Bayer, Edmund de Vaal, Karen Downing, Lisa Hammond, Walter Keeler, Philip Wood and Takeshi Yasuda for sharing their thoughts and feelings on this subject.
2. Visser, Margaret, *The Rituals of Dinner*, Penguin Books, England, 1993, pp 80-81.
3. Kass Leon, *The Hungry soul, Eating and the Perfecting of our Nature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. xiii.
4. McCracken, Grant, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington Indianapolis, 1990, p. 105-117
5. Dant, Tim, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles*, Pa Open University Press, Buckingham Philadelphia, 1999, p. 60.
6. Schjahl, Peter, 'Ceramics and Americanness', in *The American Way, Views of Use; Function in American Ceramics*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 1993, p. 25.
7. Dormer, Peter, *The Art of the Maker*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 81.

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