

Ceramics in Britain, 1750 to now

Every Thursday

5 March to 2 April 2020

18.30-19.00 Drinks Reception, 19.00-20.15 Lecture and Discussion

This course, delivered by experts in the field, will explore five key influential developments in the history of British ceramics since the mid-18th century, examining the multiple ways in which innovators, entrepreneurs and artists have reinvigorated the field.

While the story of ceramics is a global one, Britain has played a leading role in the last three centuries, a period in which British invention has shaped developments and brought constant renewal to the industry.

By 1750, ceramics of different types were available to all levels of society. However, the uniquely British innovation of combining print culture and ceramics, transfer-printing political propaganda and the graphic satire of London's leading caricaturists onto earthenware, enabled these contemporary controversial messages to be understood by all classes. During the same period, scientific experimentation by Josiah Wedgwood led to the invention of new bodies and glazes, many copying the ceramics and glass of Ancient Greece and Rome. His range and ambition, summed up by his aim to become 'Vase Maker General to the Universe', helped to change ceramic tastes to an unprecedented degree.

The production of an abundance of styles characterised the 19th century. However, blue and white – one of the most distinctive visual effects in ceramics – became, and remained, more popular than any other. Heavily influenced by porcelain exported from Asia, Britain became the leading ceramic producer of this style, driving international trade and retail opportunities. 'Chinamania' gripped the nation; debates about taste and authenticity drove collectors, consumers and creators.

Ceramics was largely unaffected by the first wave of anti-industrialism in England. Neither William Morris, nor the Arts and Crafts movement, fully established a new type of pottery. However, an urge to turn away from the industrially-produced ceramics of the late 19th century, combined with a renewed interest in form, earlier Chinese ceramics, and abstract art, gave rise to a wave of pioneering British potters who insisted on the importance of the handmade and established the role of the 'artist-potter'. This philosophy was widely popularised by the influential studio potter, Bernard Leach, who spent formative periods in China and Japan and wrote that, 'all my life I have been a courier between East and West'.

While studio ceramics continue to flourish today, global economics and advanced production technology have greatly impacted the ceramics industry in Staffordshire, the traditional heartland of British ceramics production. Artists have played a key role in documenting and commentating on these changes. The course will conclude with an artist's examination of the decline of ceramic manufacturing and its associated artisanal skills, emphasising the importance of sustaining the intangible heritage of this longstanding and important industry.

No prior art historical knowledge is necessary.

Thursday 5 March: *Pots with Attitude: British Satire on Ceramics 1750–1820*

Patricia Ferguson, Project Curator, British Museum

An examination of a uniquely British innovation – cream-coloured earthenware transfer-printed with political propaganda, attacks on the clergy, or the latest royal scandal, that swiftly broadcast current events throughout the United Kingdom and overseas. Mostly made in Staffordshire but printed elsewhere, these designs openly reproduced the graphic satires of London’s leading caricaturists on to mugs, jugs and plates, which were sold at a fraction of the price of the originals, disseminating their controversial messages to all levels of society.

Suggested reading:

- David Drakard, *Printed English Pottery: History and Humour in the Reign of George III* (London: Jonathan Horne Publications, 1992)
- Stella Beddoe, *A Potted history : Henry Willett’s Ceramic Chronicle of Britain* (Woodbridge: Antique Collector’s Club, 2015)
- David Drakard ‘Napoleon on pots, Part I’, in *English Ceramic Circle*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1987)
- David Drakard ‘Napoleon on pots, Part II’, in *English Ceramic Circle*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1987)
- Danielle Thom, ‘Sawney’s Defence’: Anti-Catholicism, Consumption and Performance in 18th-Century Britain’, *V&A Online Journal*, Issue No. 7, Summer 2015

Online Exhibitions:

- *Printed British Pottery & Porcelain 1750-1900: A Remarkable Story*. Transferware Collectors Club and the Northern Ceramic Society. <http://printedbritishpotteryandporcelain.com/>

Thursday 12 March: *Josiah Wedgwood: Experimentation and Innovation*

Catrin Jones, Chief Curator, Wedgwood Museum

Josiah Wedgwood’s ambition was to become ‘Vase Maker General to the Universe’. This lecture explores the origins and early history of his factory in Etruria, Staffordshire, and the many innovations in technique, material and style he pioneered and marketed to establish Wedgwood as one of the most recognisable names in British ceramics.

Suggested reading:

- *Cream Colour: ‘The First Designer Pottery’*, pp. 80-103, and *Stoneware Meets Porcelain: A Marriage of Refinement*, pp. 132-145, in Robin Hildyard, *English Pottery 1620-1840* (London: V&A Publications, 2005)
- ‘From the Potteries to St Petersburg: Wedgwood and the Making and Selling of Ceramics’, pp.9-20, in Hilary Young (Ed.), *The Genius of Wedgwood* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1995)
- ‘Pots’ pp. 46-56 in Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future 1730-1810* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)

Thursday 19 March: *‘Blue China’: a 19th-century British obsession*

Rebecca Wallis, Curator, National Trust (London and South East)

The combination of cobalt blue decoration and a white ground is one of the most familiar and distinctive visual effects in ceramics. Porcelain exported from Asia later inspired the 19th-century British Potteries who dominated global ceramic production. This, combined with an expansion of international trade and increased retail opportunities, led to

an abundance of blue-and-white ceramics in British homes. 'Chinamania' gripped the Nation; debates about taste and authenticity drove the collectors, consumers and creators.

Suggested reading:

- Robert Copeland, *Blue and White Transfer-Printed Pottery* (Princess Riseborough: Shire, 2003)
- Patricia O'Hara, "'The Willow Pattern That We Knew': The Victorian Literature of Blue Willow" pp. 421-442 in *Victorian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1993
- Anthony Ray, *Liverpool Printed Tiles* (London: Jonathan Horne Publications, 1994)
- Paul Scott and Knut Astrup Bull (eds), *Horizon: Transferware and Contemporary Ceramics* (Bonn: Arnoldsche, 2015)

Online Exhibitions:

- *Printed British Pottery & Porcelain 1750-1900: A Remarkable Story*. Transferware Collectors Club and the Northern Ceramic Society. <http://printedbritishpotteryandporcelain.com/>

Thursday 26 March: 'Beyond East and West': the founding of British Studio ceramics

Prof. Simon Olding, Director of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham

Bernard Leach wrote at the end of his life in his 'memoirs, portraits and essays' that 'all my life I have been a courier between East and West'. In the centenary year of the foundation of The Leach Pottery by Leach and Shoji Hamada, this lecture reviews some of the key achievements, tribulations and forceful characters of the pioneer potters who established a powerful movement for ceramics in the early 20th century.

Suggested Reading:

- 'Early Years, 1903-1909' pp. 27-37 in Bernard Leach, *Beyond East & West: Memoirs, Portraits & Essays* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978)
- 'Towards a Standard', pp. 14-17 in Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)
- 'Barnaloft' pp. 32-33 in Bernard Leach, *Drawings, Verse and Belief* (London: Jupiter Books, 1977)
- Glenn Adamson, 'Introduction', in *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017)

Thursday 2 April: *OBSOLESCENCE AND RENEWAL: Reimagining North Staffordshire's Ceramic Heritage*

Prof. Neil Brownsword, Artist and Professor of Ceramics, Staffordshire University

In recent decades, global economics and advanced production technology have greatly impacted the ceramics industry in North Staffordshire, Britain's traditional heartland of ceramics production. Neil Brownsword's artistic practice reflects upon the changes of this industry, drawing particular attention to the value and sustainability of its intangible heritage. In collaboration with former industrial artisans, Brownsword restages their endangered practices (including engraving and flower-making) through performative works at prestigious venues, which have included the Korea Ceramic Foundation, Victoria and Albert Museum and the site of Stoke's own Spode factory.

Suggested reading:

- Ezra Shales, 'Soil so good: Neil Brownsword's reinventions' (2017) pp.135-141 in Tanya Harrod, *Craft* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2018).
- 'Chapter 1: Globalisation the Ongoing Debate', pp. 9-19 in Neil Ewins, *Ceramics and Globalization: Staffordshire Ceramics, Made in China* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)
- 'Chapter 4: Materiality in the Ruin', in Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Berg, 2005)
- 'Imagining Change, Reinventing Place', pp.175- 194 in Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (University of Toronto Press, 2012)