

FEEDING THE HUNGRY SOUL
A Discussion of the Relevance of Handmade Tableware
In our Society Today

by

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Introduction

In our contemporary society, industrial production provides a wide range of styles, quality, and prices and efficiently caters for both our utilitarian and lifestyle needs. Crafts are no longer needed to fulfil that role. Peter Dormer identifies that the biggest problem for the contemporary craft-practitioner, is what to make and why.¹ Similarly, Alison Britton states that the main responsibility of the craft-practitioner is “the skilful achievement of relevance.”²

One view maintains that *functional* craft, which includes functional pottery, is no longer relevant as a serious genre for crafts practitioners to be concerned with. Anatol Orient has recently expressed this opinion, concerning handmade tableware in particular:

If you want variety and fine craftsmanship, there's a stunning selection of tableware at Harrods, ranging from classical to fashionable, and most of it's dishwasher proof. Habitat, Heals, Ikea... who needs another earnest brown cereal bowl, or breakfast set covered in polka dots or circus scene? Does anyone actually use breakfast sets? Given that we occupy a post-post-industrial international landscape, and ourselves live in a country with such high living costs, why bother throwing plates and bowls in expensive studio space, when people can choose from a vast range of ware, machine- or handmade, manufactured here or imported from other countries? More particularly, why should art colleges concern themselves with craft pottery?³

As a maker of functional tableware who is passionately involved with the subject, I have a particular interest in understanding and promoting the relevance of this particular craft today. In this paper I discuss the relevance and significance of handmade tableware to the maker and to society.⁴ I argue that handmade tableware

objects can express and carry symbolic and subliminal meanings beyond their obvious use as utensils. They can function as a vehicle for self-expression, aesthetic experimentation, and social criticism, *while* serving to hold our food and drink. They can play a part in satiating our intellectual, emotional, psychological and spiritual hungers at the same time as containing the sustenance that provides physical nourishment to our bodies. It is precisely this dual role that gives them a particular poignancy. Their connection to and participation in our daily life imbues them with peculiar and potent resonance.⁵

I have found that there is little specific material written about the subject, which goes beyond describing 'what' and explaining 'how', to analysing 'what for' and 'how-come'. Betty Woodman⁶ and Alison Britton⁷ both feel that functional work is hard to write and talk about. In order to tackle the subject I have applied some theories of Material Culture in addition to more specific critical writings about crafts generally and ceramics in particular. I have also used quotations from semi-structured interviews I conducted with seven prominent functional potters to provide material for my argument as well as to support it.

I have chosen to concentrate on five aspects of handmade tableware, each illuminating a different issue connected to it. Although they are separated into distinct sections, they are not completely discrete, and some overlaps are inevitable.

In Section 1, 'Function', I explore the way this notion is perceived within the craft world, the effect this has on the production and reception of functional pottery, and the role it fulfils for the functional potter. 'Food' contains a discussion of the particular resonance

of handmade tableware through its connection to eating, and the contribution it makes to our dining rituals. In 'Home', I consider the meanings evoked by the location to which tableware belongs. 'Repetition' is a discussion of the connotations of this aspect of the production process of handmade tableware. Finally, 'The Handmade and the Industrial Product' relates to the differences in meanings imbued in and conveyed by the handmade product in comparison with its industrial counterpart.

In this way I hope to get a broad, if not complete, picture of the conceptual depth of handmade tableware.

Notes

1. Dormer, Peter, *The Art of the Maker*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p.70.
2. Britton, Alison, 'The Manipulation of Skill on the Outer Limits of Function', in Frayling, Christopher (ed.), *Beyond the Dovetail: Craft, Skill and Imagination*, Crafts Council, London, 1991.
3. Orient, Anatol, 'The View from London', in *Ceramics in Society*, No. 49, Autumn 2002, p. 8.
4. I use the term 'handmade tableware' to mean pots designed and made by studio-potters, whose central function is to contain and present food and drink. Functional potters refer to studio-potters who produce handmade tableware.
5. Ferleger Brades, Susan, 'Preface' in *Richard Wentworth's Thinking Aloud*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, The South Bank Centre, London, 1998, p.3. Ferlager Brades explains that Wentworth's art is "informed by his acute awareness of the peculiarities and potency of everyday objects."
6. Woodman, Betty, in 'Betty Woodman and Scott Chamberlin - A conversation', in *The American Way: Views on Use; Function in American Ceramics*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 1993, p.6.
7. Britton, Alison, in conversation at RCA Ceramics and Glass Studio, May 3rd, 2002.

Section 1: Function

In the crafts there has been a strong tradition of usefulness. In the pre-industrial era, every item of human use was made by hand.¹ The industrial revolution which brought with it commercial mass production, has altered the relationship between handicraft and usefulness. Our purely utilitarian needs are being amply catered for by the industry, and it has become necessary to redefine the purpose of crafts generally, and the purpose of the handmade utilitarian work, including handmade tableware, in particular.

Today, the 'folk' understanding of crafts is still that it is a body of knowledge whose purpose is to produce useful objects.² However, the purpose of craft work, including ceramics, has shifted emphasis from answering the utilitarian needs of our society, to expressing and fulfilling the emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual needs of both the maker and our society. Pots have adopted the role of other abstract works of art: as aesthetic compositions of three-dimensional forms, colour and surfaces; making references to other objects, attempting to symbolise feelings or ideas and carry meanings of a subliminal kind.³ The 'Art' aspect has come to dominate the ceramic scene. Art philosophies have been introduced and adapted to ceramic practice and thinking.⁴ The notion of function in art was berated and rejected by the modernist orthodoxy. Although since the mid 1970's Modernism's dry puritanical dictates were largely replaced by a liberal mood of pluralism,⁶ their notions concerning function have had a lingering negative effect in the craftworld. Dormer explains that the shift of emphasis among ceramic practitioners towards art-ceramics, has been accompanied by a belief that "to increase the 'art feeling' or expressive content – one must suppress

or eliminate the functional aspect.”⁷ Functional craft work is still largely looked down upon. Ceramic artists often regard functional potters as “backward looking flat-earthers, digging for something fundamental at the roots of craft.”⁸ In the Ceramic World, tableware is regarded as mainly utilitarian. It has not been thought possible that functional tableware could eschew the aesthetic qualities and subliminal messages that art-ceramics is able to express,⁹ and therefore its status has been consistently marginalized.¹⁰

Tim Dant spells out the aesthetic attitude shared by artwork and functional work:

There is an ‘Aesthetic attitude’ in which the form, line, colour and so on of an object, are appreciated and enjoyed without ignoring the capacity of the object as ‘ordinary’, and its lack of claim to being artwork The ‘aesthetic attitude’ locates the object in cultural tradition – the valuation of quality is done in relation to other objects. These objects are designed by the makers’ intention to elicit this response. Both artwork and the aesthetic functional object are created within an ‘aesthetic dialectic’ in which what has gone before is preserved with the very newest form which mediates the way it could be used now. The aesthetic language is partly “pure” - the interaction of lines, shape, mass, colour and texture, and partly functional - the relation of the handle to the rim, the base to the body, etc. We can engage with these properties before we use the object.¹¹

I strongly believe that functional tableware can, like art-ceramics, be invested with human observations and emotions, containing and conveying meanings beyond its immediate function. Unlike art-ceramics, it carries these meanings *through its use* as well as through its context and the processes of production. Rather than being mutually exclusive, art-ceramics and functional pottery should be seen as complementary in their function. Art-ceramics removes pots out of the home and places them in the

public arena.¹² Ceramics are separated and distanced from everyday use. The effect is the creation of a space for detached observation, contemplation, consideration and evaluation. Art-Ceramists make use of irony and paradox to comment on various aspects of our lives and culture.¹³ Liberated from the constraints of usefulness, any form, texture, colour and technique may be used to convey ideas. Yet, as Richard Wentworth points out, the gallery occupies an ambivalent place in our culture – “somewhere between a library and a shop...things are laid out for you...but there is a threshold to overcome. You don’t wander into a gallery by accident...”¹⁴

Functional tableware has a different dimension. It belongs, ultimately, at home and becomes a part of our everyday lives, of our daily environment. As such, it is easily accessible. It takes an active part, small yet significant, in contributing to and shaping our day-to-day activities. We form a personal, intimate, physical and emotional relationship with these pots that serve, support, and entertain us daily. They may affect us more unconsciously than art-ceramics. Some would regard these aspects of functional pottery as degrading the object, “insulting contemplative detachment by being devoted to a quotidian Eros.”¹⁵ Functional potters and their audience however, feel that these objects, far from being debased by use, grace us with their presence, elevate our animal necessities and quotidian living, and endow the mundane with ritual and spirituality.

Function – An Aspect of the Maker’s Psychic and Emotional Need

Pennina Barnett draws on the theories of the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who believes that for the artist, art is a psychic necessity. “The artist’s life and work form a

continuum...the work is part of the life, and without it the artist would be physically diminished...through the work and play of signs, crises of subjectivity are sublimated.”¹⁶ I believe that the subject matter that makers choose to work with, is an inseparable component of their work. As Dormer says, in craft-work, intentions, processes and themes are interdependent and intertwined.¹⁷ It is therefore reasonable to see the function of tableware as an inseparable part of some potters’ psychic need to make. This view is reinforced by the reasons some potters gave me for making tableware during the interviews I undertook as part of my research for this paper. Walter Keeler related that he used to make both functional and non-functional pots, but found that he responded much more to the functional work.¹⁸ Karen Downing feels that the very essence of a pot is in its potential for use. Function gives her work reason, ”necessariness.”¹⁹ Philip Wood says that he cannot find deep enough meaning in making anything else.²⁰ Svend Bayer never before asked himself why he is making tableware. Trying to define his reason, he eventually exclaimed: “Who am I kidding, I’m doing it for myself...I invest my soul in it...it is like obsessive behaviour, I’m addicted to it.”²¹

The artist Deborah Schneebeli Morrell draws on psychoanalytic theory, and describes the process of making as a bridge between the inner world of the maker to the outer world, which is mediated through the creation of an object.²² she maintains that this journey from the inner to the outer world is “a most profound human experience, widely felt, constantly and repeatedly engaged in by many artists....”²³ I would like to suggest that for the functional potter, it is not only the process of making generally, but the particular notion of making an object *for use*, which serves as a vehicle through which to make this journey.

The importance to the potters of the connection that is formed between themselves and other people, themselves and the outside world, through the aspect of use, is a common theme that runs through most of the interviews. Karen Downing is very clear that her “main drive is the connection tableware affords [her] with the end user. Function provides a crucial link or interface with the world through the user. It anchors the work in the world ...the work is completed by use – a circuit from me to the user and back to me.”²⁴ The thought of the enjoyment the user might derive from using her pots gives her great satisfaction.²⁵ Keeler feels that “through making tableware, it becomes possible to develop a particular kind of relationship with other people on physical, sensual and intellectual levels”.²⁶ De Waal comments that “tableware objects have more access to people’s hands and hearts through their use. As a maker of these objects one has an unparalleled opportunity to get to the heart of people lives – which is the most interesting place to be”²⁷. Philip Wood feels that making pots for use connects him to the elemental world and to other people. Making tableware connects him to issues of food, culture and customs as well as to the basic elements of the physical world (earth, fire, water, air). He believes that when people use these pots it connects them too to the elemental, tangible, fundamental world.²⁸

Function, and Creativity and Imagination

Among many makers, function is regarded as constraining creativity and imagination. Others, however, find that while making something for use imposes some limits on freedom, these limits in fact help creativity and imagination rather than hinder them.²⁹

The work of Walter Keeler is proof that function can provide an unending source of

inspiration and act as a powerful spur for the imagination. Keeler regards the role of the potter as an “academic role” – to be provocative within one’s own sphere, to generate ideas or combine ideas in ways that encourage other people to develop new ideas.³⁰ Since the 1970’s, he has been relentlessly occupied with re-examining and re-thinking all traditional aspects of functional pots: the even roundness of wheel-formed shapes, conventions of forms for function, and glaze finishes. Throwing, then altering the thrown shapes, Keeler plays with the forms and proportions of the constituent elements of the pot. Base, foot, body, handle, spout, knob, are assembled in endless variations within the constraints of functional tableware.³¹ In this way he transforms traditional shapes and departs from the conventions of



(fig 1)

thrown pottery forms.³² His use of salt-glaze firing at a time when it was rarely used,³³ introduced new thinking to the conventional conceptions of glaze finishes for functional pottery (fig 1).

In recent years Keeler has developed a range of new forms, shapes and processes, and has continued to explore notions of functional forms. These earthenware pots have lush tortoise-shell lead glazes. Some have organic, ‘rose stem’ handles, which send an ambiguous message. The prickly, ‘thorns’ warn one to keep away, or at least to handle with care. Yet they are covered with a soft, sensual glaze and are carefully designed to provide a good grip for hand and fingers on the slippery, shiny surface (fig 2). Some pots have tray-like bases,³⁴ and are often arranged in an offset

position, inducing uncertainty as to whether they are attached.³⁵ Handles stuck onto the plinth, separated from the body of the pot exacerbate this feeling. Keeler achieves his aim to produce extraordinary, surprising objects, performing a commonplace job.³⁶ His pots are characterised by utility, fine design, immaculate and robust execution, crispness and precision, wit, inventiveness, and “a newly forged, uncannily imaginative relationship with [English] ceramic past. They engage and entertain the mind and delight the eye – pots to savour and...to use.”³⁷ Keeler’s following comments succinctly make the point that function can be a never-ending source for inspiration:



(fig 2)

Each line of work evolved in its own way, but each is vitalised by unexpected cross fertilisation, opening new avenues for exploration in what might be considered the narrow field of useful pottery. After forty-four years of potting, it is gratifying to feel that the potential for revelation and challenge is as alluring as ever and that the journey continues.³⁸

To summarise, in today’s world, industry has taken over the role of answering our utilitarian needs, and the role of the craftsman has become shamanistic, rather than functional.³⁹ The practice of pottery is no longer motivated by the need for utensils, but

rather by our emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual needs. While some potters choose to break away from the concept of use altogether, and make art-ceramics as a vehicle to express themselves, explore formal and aesthetic ideas and comment on our society, others find function a central, necessary and inspiring vehicle for this purpose.

Notes

1. Danto, Arthur C., 'Between Utensil and Art, The Ordeal of American Ceramics', in Danto, Arthur C. and Koplos Janet (eds.), *Choices from America: Modern American Ceramics*, s'. Hertogenbosch, NL Het Kruidhuis, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999, p. 8.
2. Becker, Howard S., *Arts Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1982, p. 160.
3. Britton, Alison, 'Use, Beauty, Ugliness and Irony', in *The Raw and the Cooked: New Work in Clay in Britain*, The Barbican Art Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993, p. 11.
4. Dormer, Peter, *The Art of the Maker*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 72.
5. Clark, Garth, 'Pottery and American Art', in *Who's Afraid of American Pottery?*, Dienst Beeldende Kunst, Kruidhuis, 1983, p. 17.
6. Ibid., p. 18.
7. Dormer, op.cit., p. 73.
8. Keeler, Walter, 'An Abstract art', *Ceramic Review Issue 197*, September-October 2002, p. 34.
9. Clegg, Emma, 'Art and Soul' in *Ceramic Review Issue 179*, September/October 1999, p.36. For example, the 1993 exhibition *The Raw and the Cooked* aimed to show that the boundaries between art and contemporary ceramics have eroded, and that ceramics can act like art. While acknowledging that utilitarian objects carry symbolic and aesthetic values beyond their immediate function, functional pots, "having utility uppermost in their offerings" were consciously excluded. See Britton, *op. cit.*, p. 11.-
10. Casson, Mick, 'The Future of Function', in Orient, Anatol, *High Table: British Studio Pottery of the 1990's*, Craftspace Touring, Birmingham, 1994, p. 22.
11. Dant, Tim, *Material Culture in the Social World: Values, Activities, Lifestyles*, Pa Open University Press, Buckingham Philadelphia, 1999, p. 160.
12. Alison Britton explained in a conversation with me at the RCA studio, that this was one of the motivations behind the "New Ceramics", May 3rd, 2002.
13. Elliott, David, 'Forward', in *The Raw and the Cooked*, *op.cit.*, p. 7.
14. Wentworth, Richard, in 'Thoughts on Paper: Richard Wentworth prompted and transcribed by Roger Malbert', in *Richard Wentworth's Thinking Aloud*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, The South Bank Centre, 1998, p. 6.
15. Schjahl, Peter, 'Ceramics and Americaness', in *The American Way, Views on use; Function in American Ceramics*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 1993, p. 25.
16. Barnett, Pennina, 'Making, Materiality and Memory', in Johnson, Pamela (ed.), *Ideas in the Making: Practice in theory*, Crafts Council, London, 1998, p. 144.
17. Dormer, Peter, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

18. Keeler, Walter, Interview at his home and studio, Penalt, Monmouth, 9th July, 2002.
19. Downing, Karen, Telephone Interview, 10th July, 2002.
20. Wood, Philip, Interview at his shop and studio, Nunnie, Sommerset, 30th June, 2002.
21. Bayer, Svend, Telephone Interview, 17th June, 2002.
22. Schneebeli Morrel, Deborah, 'She's Clever with her Hands', in Johnson, Pamela (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 49-56.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
24. Downing, Karen, Telephone Interview, 10.7.02.
25. Downing, Karen, Telephone Interview, 10.7.02.
26. Keeler Walter, Interview as above, 9.7.02
27. De Waal, Edmund, Interviews in his studio, Van Guard Court, Camberwell, London, 7th June, 2002 and 19th June, 2002.
28. Wood Philip, Interview in his workshop, Nunnie, Somerset, 30th June, 2002.
29. Pye, David, 'Things Men Have Made: A dialogue on workmanship with David Pye', in Frayling, Christopher (ed.), *Beyond the Dovetail: Craft, skill and Imagination*, The Crafts Council, London, 1991.
30. Keeler, Walter, Interview as above, 9.7.02.
31. Britton, Alison, 'Walter Keeler', in *(Un)Limited: Repetition and Change in International Craft*, Crafts Council, London, 1999, p. 34.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 34, and Cooper, Emmanuel, 'Form, Function and Fire' in *Walter Keeler*, Solo Exhibition at Rufford Craft Centre, 1995.
33. Lees, Nicholas, 'A Sense of Proportion' in *Ceramic Review Issue 179*, September/October 1999, p. 32.
34. Britton, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 35.
35. Lees, *op.cit.*, p. 32.
36. Harrod, Tania, 'Walter Keeler', *Walter Keeler*, Solo Exhibition at Contemporary Applied Arts, 17 September – 30 October, 1999.
37. Cooper, *op.cit.*
38. Keeler, Walter, 'Artist statement', for *Walter Keeler*, Solo Exhibition at Contemporary Ceramics, September 3rd – 14th, 2002.
39. Harrod, Tania, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, p.95.

Section 2: Food

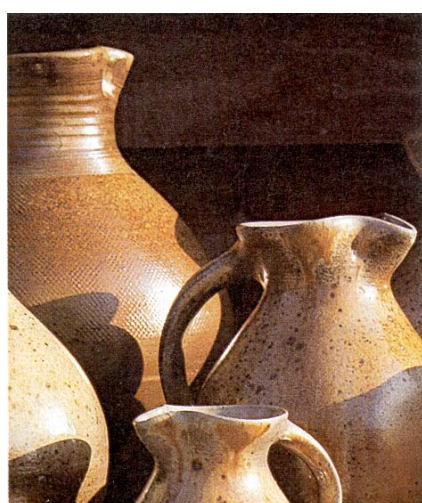
The central function of tableware is to contain, present, and serve food and drink. Eating and drinking constitute the first and most urgent needs of human life.¹ We must eat to live and we must go on eating. For this reason, explains Visser, “human-beings pour enormous effort into making food more than itself, so that it bears manifold meanings beyond its primary purpose of physical nutrition.”² The constant and intimate relationship with this potent aspect of daily life and experience endows pottery generally, and tableware in particular, with special symbolic meanings.³

The Relationship between Mother and Child

The actual process of eating always begins as mother feeding and child being fed,⁴ and is central to the highly charged relationship between mother and child. Through making tableware, the potter can connect to, explore, and communicate this universal and fundamental relationship in all its aspects, whether nourishing, comforting, sustaining, frustrating or undermining. S/he can do so from the angle of the experience of either mother or child. One could interpret Lisa Hammond’s account of her reasons for making tableware, in this context. Hammond explains that she loves cooking and finds inspiration for the pots she makes through her cooking. She loves the effort, love and care that go into making the pot, as they reflect the feelings invested in her food preparation. She finds comfort in making tableware.⁵

Pennina Barnett explores the meaning of the relationship between mother and infant in connection to craft-work.⁶ She cites Christopher Bollas who believes that when we are touched by an image, we experience a fusion with the object that re-evokes a pre-verbal memory. It is the memory of being an infant at one with the mother, who both sustains the infant and gives form to its internal and external world by the way she creates an environment, conducive or otherwise, to its growth and transformation. As adults, we search for further transformational objects that hold the promise of self-metamorphosis. Bollas, says Barnett, regards artists as privileged individuals, uniquely able to both create and to communicate their own moments of unity with the mother, in which the distinction between subject and object dissolve. The artist both remembers for us and provides us with occasions for the experience of these pre-verbal memories. Barnett believes that through their evocations, cultural objects act as symbolic equivalents of early experiences and offer an aesthetic space for recollection of the pre-verbal holding environment provided by the mother.⁷

These ideas may help to understand Svend Bayer's desire to make tableware pots that people would want to eat⁸ (fig 3), and Downing's gratification when a man expressed a



(fig 3)

desire to eat her pots⁹. One's pots are an extension of oneself. When we ingest and digest something it becomes an inseparable and indistinguishable part of us.¹⁰ Through 'eating' the pots, then, consumer and potter become one. Bayer's and Downing's wishes for their pots to be 'eaten', and the desire to eat the pots, expressed by a member of Downing's audience, could be understood as expressing their

longings to be one with one other. Through the function implicit in the subject matter of their choice, and the particular qualities they bestow on their work, the potters recollect, create and provide transformational objects, which, like the mother, would hold the promise of self-transformation. Potter and consumer, can metaphorically merge into one and achieve metamorphosis through the partly real, partly symbolic ingestion and digestion of both the contents of the pots and the pots themselves.

Filial Bonds

Eating together is a means by which to bind a family together. Visser suggests that the daily meals express the relationships between family members, their kinship and unconditional, continuing loyalty.¹¹ The dining table itself is a symbol for the family, togetherness, and the bonding mechanism of mealtime sharing.¹² Handmade tableware belongs on this table, both physically and metaphorically, as it can symbolise these special relationships. Because of the uniqueness and individuality of each handmade item within a unified but not standardised set, each family member can have his/her own, customised piece – which symbolically marks one's own individuality while still belonging within the bigger family unit. The handmade functional ceramic object, is fragile and precious, and needs to be handled with special care. At the same time it is regarded as more durable than its mass-produced counterpart,¹³ precisely because of these qualities. It is therefore particularly pertinent as a symbol of both the fragility and durability of family relationships.

Tableware and Dining Rituals

As eating constitutes a central part of human life, we use the rules of eating to transmit our moral, emotional and spiritual values.¹⁴ We develop and shape dining rituals, using dining to mediate social relationships and create a community.¹⁵ While our dining rituals have become more relaxed and less formal,¹⁶ they still exist and dictate what we eat, when, where, how and with whom. Now as ever, they reflect our cultural ideals, aspirations and identities and reveal our deeper desires, appetites and longings.¹⁷

Our society is characterised by long working days for both men and women, an increase in single-person households, single-parent families, etc. These conditions are more conducive to TV-dinners, fast food and eating-on-the-run, than to daily cooking and regular, shared, sit-down meals. In day-to-day life most people take a utilitarian, “economic” approach to food and eating. This attitude saves time, fuels the body and provides instant gratification, but diminishes the opportunities for conversation, communion and aesthetic discernment.¹⁸ It answers the needs of the body, but neglects the needs of the soul.¹⁹ Cooking and shared sit-down meals have become leisure activities, reserved for weekends, holidays and special occasions. They acquire a sharpened significance because they mark a special break from, compensation for and counteraction to our rushed daily modern living with its associated arid, uncouth meals. They provide an opening to answer the cravings of our soul.²⁰

Potters who make functional tableware have the opportunity to make interventions, engage with and contribute to the humanising²¹ of our dining activities, both in the course of the rushed everyday, and during the special occasions. For the design and

production of tableware evolve in tandem with dining habits and rituals. Tableware is shaped by the requirements of our dining customs, contributes to them, enriches them and shapes them in turn. Contemporary potters can make beautiful pots for everyday use, and break the humdrum of daily living by enhancing and enriching our simple daily activities in a modest, yet profound way. They can also create ceremonial pieces for special occasions, contributing to the conviviality of these occasions by heightening the shared aesthetic pleasure of the participants through their work. Their pots grace and ennoble the table or provoke thought and surprise. They provide a topic for talk or focus of action and attention, and help to facilitate interaction between people at the dinner table. They may answer some needs of the soul while fulfilling their utilitarian function.²²

De Waal, for example, is conscious of “those rare objects that seem to accrete meaning with their particular use: a coffee cup ritualises the start of the day....”²³ He sees his challenge in making pots that can “surprise us on our quotidian days and sustain us on our feast days.”²⁴ Similarly, Downing wants to transform banal objects into ritual ones, “to reveal the spiritual components of the activities that comprise our temporal lives.”²⁵ She feels that we spend so much time eating and drinking that it would be a wasted opportunity not to involve beauty in the activity.²⁶ Hammond too, wants to contribute visual and sensual beauty to daily eating by providing the ‘right’ colour and ‘right’ shape dishes for particular foods.²⁷ Keeler wishes to create a sense of mystery and adventure in using tableware. He aspires to adjust people’s minds and change the way they use tableware items. He feels he can prompt intellectual activity by the use of the visual, tactile, specific, subtle, and rich language involved in the making of concrete objects, and thus remind people of other wonderful things in the world.²⁸

Takashi Yasuda is acutely aware of the important role handmade tableware can play in enhancing the dining rituals of today, as well as ensuring the rituals of the future.²⁹ Producing functional pots allows him to actively participate and engage with these rituals. Through the kinds of pots he makes, he attempts to revitalise and encourage dining rituals back to the everyday fabric of people's lives.³⁰ Yasuda has been fascinated with the technology of cooking from a very young age, and grew up educated in good cooking. Cooking and its related aesthetics are integral parts of him and he is confident of his philosophy and artistic judgement concerning food. He believes that we are taught our whole value system through food and its associated customs from a very early age. Yasuda finds eating a magical subject, illusive and interesting. It is a fascinating activity that provides us with a great opportunity for endlessly repeated pleasure on all levels and reflects how we live.³¹ In Japanese cuisine, all the senses are involved: taste, smell, sight, touch and hearing - all contribute to a total, subtle harmony of beauty and flavour. The dishes chosen for the display of food are critical elements of the meal.³² With this as his cultural background, Yasuda's interest in the utensils of dining is inseparable from his concern with food.³³

Miller comments that "food is intimately associated with the particular cooking and smells of one's natural home, and more generally, the taste of one's homeland. By virtue of this redolence it helps people create a 'home from home.'³⁴ This, surely, applies not only to the food itself, but to the customs and utensils that accompany it. It seems to me that Yasuda uses his passion for food, cooking and the study of dining rituals to negotiate the cultural differences between his birthplace and his new homeland by interpreting them into his work. He marries aspects of the two cultures to produce highly individual and original functional tableware. His large three-coloured

-serving dishes draw on Japanese Sansai ware, but acknowledge eating customs of carving, offering and sharing at the table in the West (Fig 4). They are pillow forms and fat-rim dishes, with no edge, rim or lip, no defined boundary between interior and



(fig 4)

exterior. The fluidity of the glaze accentuates form and detail, and increases the tactility and sensual qualities of the work. These magnificent, flamboyant, visually solid and imposing dishes challenge preconceived notions of functional pottery forms. They are dramatic, and would dominate any table top; they celebrate food, dining and

theatrical ritual.³⁵ Yasuda describes them as “dangerous carving surfaces, that provide a slippery, elevated centre stage for the act of carving, splashing juices and communal sharing.”³⁶ In his Creamware series, Yasuda combines a porcelain body of Eastern origin with a thick, fat, wet looking warm, earthenware glaze of Western origin. These immaculately composed and sumptuously glazed pots have a quiet but assertive presence, invite use and bring refinement and casual elegance to the dining occasion.³⁷

More recently, Yasuda has been developing a new range of high-fired porcelain, based on two radical techniques of ‘Folding’ and ‘Unfolding’. This work consists of beaten and wire-cut round and rectangular platters, ruffled-edge or jugged-edged thrown bowls and tall, soft, organic vases. This work is rougher, more free and conceptual than other lines of his work³⁸. While the function of these pieces is less obvious, they are, as he says, “more functional than you think”³⁹ (Fig 5). Yasuda’s believes that “an object cannot be truly functional unless it fulfils one’s emotional, sensual and intellectual needs.”⁴⁰ His philosophy of function differs from our western conception of it. He feels

that “when people talk about function their mind just freezes”⁴¹. He explains that in the West, we have a fixed and rigid view of function, and conceive of it as inherent in the object - objects are designed with an intended function. So when we see an unconventional form, we think of it as purely decorative. Yasuda believes that the function of objects is in our minds, and up to our imagination. He acknowledges the influence of Japanese culture on his philosophy. The most



(fig 5)

important qualification of the master of the Japanese tea ceremony, is his imaginative use of the various objects in his disposal. Similarly, Yasuda’s inspiration for function is increasingly driven by form or process rather than prescribed use. Having made a piece, he experiments with how it may be used.⁴² In this way he makes tableware which invites social and imaginative engagement.⁴³

To summarise, through their connection to food, tableware objects are highly charged with meanings and connotations. They can express and invoke the highly significant and complex relationship between mother and child. They can symbolise family ties. They can both reflect and affect our dining rituals, and thus contribute directly to our cultural values, aspirations and identities.

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Section 3: Home

Tableware belongs essentially within the home, and so the relationships between maker, object and user take place within that context, and are charged with the meanings which 'home' resonates. With its specifically domestic context, tableware is an ideal vehicle for expressing and communicating our complex cultural perception of the home.

The modernist avant-garde regarded domesticity as dull, oppressive and cossetting and held that 'real life' happened away from home, at work or in the outside world. Art activities and genres associated with the domestic, like the 'decorative' and the 'functional', were seen disparagingly as preventing art from being divine.¹ Today, the domestic is returning to a position of cultural prominence and is an area for work by both artists and architects.² In society generally, the home has become "a key arena in transmitting and codifying an image of oneself to others, through the appropriation of the material environment."³ In the past twenty years people have increasingly been building their identity from within the scope of the home, rather than the workplace.⁴ The proliferation of DIY activities and home improvement programmes in the media signifies that people transform their home interior as a model for self-expression, as a means by which to construct their identities and their ideologies.⁵

Tableware as Mediator between Ideal and Real Home

The home is caught in a tension which arises from the discrepancies between a home's actual state at a given time, and the 'ideal home' that a household or an individual within

the household aspires to.⁶ Grant McCracken discusses the gap between ideals and reality as one of the most pressing problems a society has to deal with.⁷ He explains that as a means of dealing with this gap, we employ the device of 'displacement'. Society takes its ideals and removes them from harm by displacing them to another time or another place, a golden age in the past or a hope for a better future. Transported to another cultural universe, where, through distance, they seem practicable, our ideals are kept within reach but out of danger. Recovering the meanings of these ideals into our present life requires a delicate process. When meaning is brought back to the 'here and now', it must be done so that the meaning does not take up all the responsibility of full residency; it must not be exposed to the possibility of disproof. To mediate the gap, then, there is a need for something one covets and can partially acquire, but cannot fully possess. McCracken suggests that on an individual level, some consumer goods act to bridge the gap. One anticipates possession of an object that would bring with it possession of a certain ideal circumstance that at present exists in a distant location – ideal of emotional condition, social circumstance, entire life style. The object has to characterise these ideals in itself. The motivation for choosing a particular object through which to bridge the gap between the ideal and reality is anticipatory – in anticipation of the eventual purchase of a larger package of objects, attitudes and circumstances of which it is a piece. In order to represent these longings, there has to be a similarity between the scarcity and desirability of the meaning and the scarcity value of the object. The object coveted has to be beyond one's reach, an exceptional purchase.⁸

Handmade tableware objects are suitable mediators between the aspirational ideal home and the real home. They are not readily available, they are rare and unique⁹ and their purchase is a special occasion. They are seen to belong to a sophisticated

culture.¹⁰ Through the time and effort invested in them by the maker they symbolise thoughtfulness, care and special attention.¹¹ They are associated with an ideal, rural lifestyle that belongs to a by-gone golden age in which, through their possession, one can participate vicariously.¹² They represent self-sufficiency, a happy childhood, and the comfort of hearth and home.¹³ Thus they furnish us with a variety of ideal circumstances, emotional as well as social. Through their possession we are able to entertain eventual possession of these ideals that present circumstances now deny us.¹⁴

Functional potters have the opportunity to metaphorically 'make' their own 'ideal home' through investing their longings and aspirations in these domestic objects, and thus to bridge the gap between their ideal and real home.

Family Relationships

The home is the base for the individual and the family, a shelter for loved ones and familiar objects.¹⁵ In our society, "most of what matters to people, is happening within the privacy of their home."¹⁶ "Home", says Miller, "is where the heart is, it is also where it is broken, torn and made whole in the flux of relationships, both social and material."¹⁷ Home is the place where our most intensive relationships are formed, enacted and entangled for better or for worse. Pamela Johnson suggests that "we tell ourselves who we are, in part, through the objects we make, select and value.... We remake episodes of our experience, we choose objects that enable us to reflect upon this experience."¹⁸ She believes that for many makers, the act of making an object can

be “a piecing together of deeply felt experience in three-dimensional form.”¹⁹ Thus, making things for the home provides an opportunity to re-visit, re-tell, recreate these intense and supremely significant relationships. The maker can re-live moments of love, togetherness and grace, as well as confront and renegotiate moments of pain, deprivation, torment, and disappointed expectations and, through his/her home orientated work, piece his/her heart together again. As Svend Bayer observes, “the most challenging things happen in a domestic situation, and if we can get that right, we are half way ‘there’.”²⁰

An Instrument of Change

Culturally, the home is regarded, on one hand, as our stable foundation, an anchor to kinship and domestic life,²¹ and on the other, as a cradle of empowerment and change.²² McCracken explains how an object can bring radically new ideas into people’s lives and experience and reshape this experience according to its own blueprint.²³ It transforms people’s lives because its existence demands a different behaviour and new companion goods to match the new arrival.²⁴

The handmade tableware object can act as an instrument of change, when brought into a home, because it stands out among our mostly mass-produced home environment of things. De Waal believes that the handmade tableware object is an ideal engine for change. He equates it to the Trojan Horse, seeing it as a way of smuggling ‘dangerous’ objects into people’s lives without them noticing. It is initially an unthreatening familiar object, which one can get close to, hold and handle, yet it is

dangerous because it can affect people and change them in ways they are unaware of and cannot control.²⁵

Handmade tableware sometimes enters a home as a gift which gives the recipient an opportunity to effect changes. At other times, it is a purchase that a person makes in the hope that it would set in train a transformation of their own life, and give its owner a new identity.²⁶

To conclude, by belonging to the home, handmade tableware can provide a fertile genre through which to express and explore our complex relationship with and understanding of home. It can be infused with all the powerful and complicated meanings and symbols the home carries, and used to communicate and share them with others.

Notes

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Section 4: Repetition

Although handmade tableware is made using a wide variety of construction methods, the most dominant technique currently associated with and employed for its production is throwing on the potter's wheel. This close association between the 'genre' of tableware and the technique of throwing has important implications for the perception of hand made tableware, the meanings embedded within it and imparted by it. In this paper I shall concentrate only on the aspect of repetition throwing.

The production of thrown tableware is a specialist activity and involves repetition and series.¹ Makers and consumers alike have shared a traditional conception that tableware comes in sets of nearly identical items: bowls, plates, cups and saucers, mugs, etc. Repetition throwing is an efficient way to produce tableware in volume that makes it economically viable. Simultaneously, it is the process through which qualities of fluency and palpable energy, which lend thrown handmade tableware its unique qualities, are endowed. Thus, handmade tableware produced by means of production-throwing hovers between individuality and uniqueness on the one hand, and repetition and reproduction on the other. This tension has interesting implications to the way handmade tableware is perceived and valued.

Quantity and Uniqueness

Since Leach, who believed that handwork could halt the progress of industrialisation², to the present day, with some few exceptions, consumers and makers alike have been

regarding handmade tableware as an alternative to industrial mass production. The intention of most makers of tableware is to make beautiful, delightful pots for everyday use, affordable for as large a number of people as possible.³ This entails speed and repeat-work in large quantities.

Repetition and quantity are notions that conjecture plenitude. Tozer, for example, speaks of our pleasure at the sight of supermarket shelves stacked in high concentration, to a striking, lustrous effect with a bewildering selection of goods in multiples. He regards this as our society's eagerly embraced belief in the endless reproduction of commodities.⁴ Edmund de Waal confesses to a love of stacked industrial porcelain plates, and comments on the heightened resonance of lines of pots on boards, "the charged life of repetition that came into play in the gravitas of the pared down environment of the studio."⁵ Repetition assures us of replaceability, which is valued for its ability to avert mourning in case of loss through damage.⁶ It reassures us of abundance and constant replenishment; that we shall not suffer want or devastating loss, and through all these associations, keeps the shadow of death at bay. Handmade tableware, produced and displayed in series of repetitive form, communicates these meanings, which gain added intensity through its inevitable connection to food.

Simultaneously, the sight of objects in multiples has a reductive effect. Repetition detracts from the rarity value of an object. Tozer claims that "the essence of a thing is only appreciated when it adopts an expressive form that is unique."⁷ He explains that "when a form is repeated again and again...it has a tendency to lose its meaning – meaning escapes, leaving only the form behind."⁸ Similarly, Andy Warhol believed that "the more you look at the same thing the more the meaning goes away, and the better

and emptier you feel.”⁹ Repetition drains uniqueness and has the potential to diffuse one’s sense of self.

This effect of repetition poses a difficulty to our notion of and desire for uniqueness. Repetitive work is closely associated to copying. Having decided on a particular design for a product, the potter then repeats it with an intention of uniformity in each batch. It could therefore be said that production potters copy an original design of their own, and repeat it again and again. This interpretation of the concept of repetition involved in the potter’s work is contradictory to our notions of originality and authenticity. In our society, the artist is regarded as a genius endowed with unique creative abilities and gifts that give each piece of work a unique expressive character.¹⁰ There is an overlap between the unique, original artwork and its unique originator, which bestows authenticity. As Tozer says: “The uniqueness of the hand-crafted object...has been seen as the moral responsibility of the artist or artisan, as if the object may, or indeed should, stand in as some form of equivalent to the author him/herself, if for no other reason than to confirm the authority and authenticity of the dynamic into which both creator and consumer are bound.”¹¹

Ceramic artists produce ‘Individual’ pieces, which are conventionally described as ‘one-offs’. This “stresses their unique and special qualities. It suggests exclusivity, a result of a unique line of thought - there is none other like it.”¹² The position of handmade tableware is more complex and less clear. On the one hand, each potter is unique and works in a unique style of their own – no two potters are alike. Yet among each potter’s output, there are series of pots that look alike. Although on closer inspection, no two pots are the same and each pot is subtly different, the idea and

intention of the maker remain fixed for the duration of executing each series.¹³ The greater the skill of the potter the more the pots in each series look like copies of one another. This diffuses and confuses the relationship between author/ object /consumer.

Uniformity and Creativity

The repetitive aspect of production throwing is often regarded disparagingly, as mindless, automatic, mechanical, boring and uncreative, and by implication, so does handmade tableware. While this may be true in some cases, it is mostly a misconception. Repetition throwing is not only the basic, 'learning by rote' method of acquiring throwing skills. Far from being mechanical, it is one way in which the potter injects vitality into their work. As Casson explains, in order for the individual pots to be 'alive' they've got to come through concentrated repetition of a particular form "until its really inside you."¹⁴ Repetition throwing is a highly disciplined activity of slow, subtle, yet persistent self-exploration that unfolds and reveals itself gradually. It is the means by which potters explore ideas through theme and variation, and search for the concrete, yet illusive 'ultimate' mug, bowl etc., a search that takes place in the subtly varied production of each and every pot in each series. Alan Caiger-Smith explains that "a great deal of learning in pottery depends on comparing several similar things and trying to understand why one is better than the others. Without repetition, this can't be done."¹⁵ More poetically, De Waal says that "through repetition throwing of a similar shape, the potter becomes attuned to the nuances of form, to the qualities of balance, volume and proportion that change a pot from being banal to being a lyrical expression of the pulse of the maker."¹⁶

The tension between the production potter's intention of uniformity and the nature of handwork endows handmade tableware with singular qualities. Peter Dormer discusses the "attractive, non-mechanical frisson"¹⁷ produced by this contrast:

It is the tension between the inevitable vagaries of handicraft with the conscious desire of keeping to a static intention, a repeated design, that combines to make the handicraft production potter's work special.¹⁸

Tozer explains that meaning is to be found in the relationships between the repeated motifs, "in the necessarily idiosyncratic variations that the craft practitioner introduces in the course of manufacture.... The play that exists within a group of related objects and the possibility of surprise and wonder that may present itself, is the dynamic that elevates objects above the quotidian."¹⁹

The work of Karen Downing demonstrates these issues well. Downing works with porcelain glazed in a white satin glaze. Her pots are white, austere and minimal, devoid of any superfluous detail or decorative flourishes. They possess a pure, ethereal and powerful beauty. Downing works with a small range of domestic shapes, and one of the main challenges for her is the accurate repetition of established forms. Careful weighing of the clay and a systematic throwing method for each familiar design facilitate control over the process of accurate repetition, while allowing for flow and rhythm. Yet with such pure form the slightest variation in height or diameter creates significant differences. Working with one clay, one glaze and within such a strict framework might seem very restricting, but for Downing it offers great freedom – "it opens the possibility of infinite variations within the constraints of repetition."²⁰ It is this

fine and tightly balanced relationship, so well demonstrated in a cup nestling in three graduated sizes of plates (fig 6), that endows her work with its unique character, its humanity and its quiet beauty. Her pots, unashamedly practical, carry a pure, centred, contemplative, otherworldly quality.²¹



(fig 6)

In conclusion, the aspect of repetition involved in the making of handmade tableware adds complexity to its perception. Repetition elicits an ambivalent response from us. It gives us comfort, reassurance and pleasure, at the same time as undermining the individuality and uniqueness of objects and people. Handmade tableware is at once unique, rare and individual, as well as repetitive, replaceable and reproducible. As such, it reflects the conflicting expectations of the consumer, and holds an ambivalent position in the ladder of perceived values.

Notes

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Section 5: The Handmade and the Industrial Product

Studio tableware items share several characteristics with industrially produced tableware, such as form, function and a repetitive process of production. So in these aspects there is, ostensibly, a similarity between industrial mass production and the production-potter's work. This, unfortunately, makes handmade tableware a target for the sort of criticism expressed by Anatol Orient, quoted in the introduction to this paper.¹ Orient claims that the industrial product provides for all our table and kitchen needs and questions the very *raison-d'être* of handmade tableware. Makers of handmade functional objects find themselves in a defensive position, needing to justify their work within the context of cheaper, more readily available and efficient mass production.

The relationship between the handmade and the industrially produced tableware is, however, more complex than might be seen on the surface. Andrew Jackson makes the point that short-run or batch production, like that of the potter, is effectively an *equivalent* to mass-produced [tableware]. "However, as well as being an equivalent it is also expressive of a difference, and the difference is made more powerful by the equivalence."²

The differences between these two kinds of tableware products are fundamental. They lie not only in the mode of production, but also in the intentions behind their production, their aesthetic qualities, and subsequently, their resonance and meanings.

Difference in Priorities

Through industrialisation, the change in the form of production altered the way in which we regard mass-produced objects. Mass production is driven primarily by economical considerations³, where profits dictate decisions concerning design and manufacture. Products are produced primarily in exchange for money, rather than directly for use.⁴ Money acts as an intermediate link between people and objects. Exchange for money requires rational weighing and measuring which creates 'distance' between people and objects. Furthermore, we may become indifferent to mass produced objects because of their incessant supply, "their impersonal origins and their easy replaceability."⁵ Thus people can live "free of a direct concern with things, and from a direct relationship with them."⁶ This is to say that industrial products are commodities. As such, they "sacrifice themselves to currency values and yield to the rhythm of consumerism,"⁷ and symbolise expediency and even ruthlessness. By contrast, the craft object is seen as pre-industrial, authentic and 'politically correct'.⁸ Its makers choose a particular lifestyle over economic security, so the handmade is seen as the product of a labour of love, not money.⁹ It symbolises integrity, truthfulness and wholesomeness. As such, it is perceived as resisting commoditisation, or at least, it is "a commodity that rebels against the market place."¹⁰

Difference in Production Modes

Kerr Inkson illustrates the difference between the industrial worker and the work of the craft-potter thus:

Although [studio potters] are manual workers, in many respects, their work is the antithesis of typical manual work. They create individualised rather than standardised items, they work to their own designs and they complete a total production process without subdivision of labour.¹¹

Metcalf observes that a culture of craft is shaped by three shared values: handwork, technical mastery and passion in one's labour.¹² He argues that this craft culture is "a distinctly Twentieth Century phenomenon."¹³ In our Western society that emphasises the intellect and fails to find any significance in hand labour, people use craft "to exercise a gifted bodily intelligence partly because Western society provides few other vehicles for self-determined and dignified handwork."¹⁴ His opinion is echoed in Yasuda's statement, that he regards making tableware as a legitimate vehicle for sensual expression in an increasingly non-sensual society.¹⁵

The potter is engaged in 'significant work', which involves "focus, skill, instinct, poetics of the body, movement, commitment to the object, determined realisation, continual absorption of all past methods, rhythm, spontaneous improvisation, and a veritable jazz-dance of the hands."¹⁶ The handmade object gives us a sense of the intentions of the maker as the work evolves.¹⁷ It is an expression of human care, thought, service and creativity,¹⁸ of the spirituality of its single producer.¹⁹

While craftwork is integrated and self controlled, industrial production is characterised by centralised design, standard procedures and products, and division of labour. The separation of conception from execution dispossesses the worker from freedom over working action.²⁰ While mass-produced goods have function, they do not have the *singularity* of the handmade product; they do not embody the intentions of their

creator.²¹ As Dormer points out, “industrial technology fails to deliver the exquisite tactile and expressive qualities of handmade artefacts.”²² The industrial product is therefore alienated from us – it seldom bears trace of who made it and when, at best carrying a brand name and place. It is objective and impersonal.²³ Dant quotes Simmel to explain how these characteristics match the intentions of industry:

The more objective and impersonal an object is, the better it is suited to more people. In order to be acceptable and enjoyable to large numbers, it cannot be designed for subjective differentiation of taste, while on the other hand, only the most extreme differentiation of *production* is able to produce the objects cheaply and abundantly enough in order to satisfy the demand for them.²⁴

Building on the work of Mumford, Dant suggests that the introduction of technology into the production process was linked to a cultural acceptance of a new way of thinking which tolerated the ‘impersonality’ of the new instruments and machines.²⁵ At the same time, however, industrialisation created a gap between function, and aesthetics, values and meanings.²⁶ As Britton says, there was an awareness of the impoverishment that accompanied the advantages of modern industrialised society, a sense of “the apparent loss of some aesthetic, or ‘spiritual’ or individual characteristics, marks of human difference and engagement that had been perceptible in handmade work.”²⁷ It was this sense of impoverishment that gave crafts their place in the Twentieth Century.²⁸ The modern handmade object fills that gap and attempts to answer the needs that remain unfulfilled by the mass product.

Since the 1960’s, industry has tried to answer the growing demand for more individualised products, causing the gap between the hand-made and the mass-

produced to shrink. Developments in technology have made it possible for the industry to copy some of the external qualities of handwork²⁹ (e.g. throwing rings, reduction glazes and new methods of decoration). At the same time, commerce has increasingly abandoned economies of scale aimed at selling to huge, homogenous audience, and attempts to accommodate the growing diversity of consumers.³⁰ Industrial designers today recognise the significance of emotion in consuming goods and aim to offer, both functionally and stylistically, a more specialised relationship with the owner (e.g. Memphis, Alessi, Studio Linnie, etc.).³¹ The commercial world now acknowledges the fragmentation of market interests, and accommodates a more limited and varied forms of production, including the crafts.³² Thus, far from rendering handmade tableware obsolete, as Orient claims, this development creates room for them. As Jackson observes, “where consumption patterns are becoming increasingly specialised – then the custom-designed and the one-off or batch-produced object begins to take on new significance. We could think of it as a way of fine-tuning consumption.”³³ Helga Dittmar believes that people use objects to construct their identity. She thinks that in our contemporary society, our sense of self is increasingly defined by what we have. Through our possessions we project a desirable image to others, express our social status and make visible our personal characteristics.³⁴ Similarly, McCracken maintains that people associate the characteristics of objects in their possession with their own personal properties.³⁵ Jackson points out that “craft and small scale production allow for customisation. Where previously consumers defined themselves and constructed an identity through a limited range of functional artefacts, the specialised production and consumption of goods allows for the construction of particular lifestyles - lifestyles that define themselves *against* the consumption of widely available mass-produced objects.”³⁶ Unlike the commercial product, the hand crafted object is regarded as

unique, special or rare, sophisticated, precious and expressive.³⁷ As such, it is a perfect vehicle through which to negotiate multiple identities in the complex, fragmented world we inhabit.

Art and Non-Art – Difference in Conscious Intentions

Arthur Danto claims that ever since Warhol displayed the Brillo box in a museum, the difference between art and non-art lies no longer in semblance but in meaning. Like Britton, he believes that since industrialisation, the very activity of craft practice implies a form of cultural criticism.³⁸ So handmade functional tableware objects today have meanings beyond their use, not least, as a comment on our society. Unlike their industrial counterparts, they contain ‘aboutness’³⁹ while serving a use. Furthermore, while they may serve the same domestic functions as their industrial counterparts, their use ritualises and colours the consciousness of those who use them. In this respect, argues Danto, they are closer to the art object than to the industrial product.⁴⁰ Danto considers that

Hand made pottery has the use that pots and dishes have as standard- usually the same use as their mass produced counterparts. It’s their made-by-handness – their non-standardness, which qualifies their makers as critics of industrial society. They are artefacts.... But for each such artefact, a work of ceramic art can be imagined that looks exactly like it. The artwork will differ from its artefactual counterpart through its meaning, which has to be brought to awareness through interpretation.⁴¹

In other words, potters of handmade tableware can infuse their work with historical, symbolic, psychological, ritualistic or metaphysical meanings, through their own personal interpretation of tradition, material and use, and thus create artefacts which are also art works.

The best of Edmund de Waal's functional 'Kitchenware' are a good example of functional work that operates on both these levels. De Waal works with porcelain and makes simple forms, plainly glazed with a white glaze or a blue/green celadon. His pots are loosely thrown, purposely slightly off-centre, and with just enough finish to make them pleasant to use. They are not extremely thin, and maintain the soft look of thrown unfired clay. They invariably bare the mark of the maker in the form of indentations made by the thumb,⁴² a square stamp, a ribbed line, or a vestigial finger grip. The lush glaze gives the pots a sensuous finish (fig 7). Kate McIntyre observes, De Waal "balances the perceived preciousness of porcelain with a desire to produce kitchen porcelain... 'porcelain that can be lived with and handled'."⁴³ He intentionally reveals the handmade quality of his pots, while remaining highly aware of the cultural values inherent in the material of his choice.⁴⁴ De Waal himself defines his intentions as follows:



(fig 7)

I want to make porcelain pots that can be handled, for handling allows for a certain breadth of intentions, the pots can be used in the domestic realm ('things known and handled' in the words of David Jones), and also in the more sacramental realm of things put aside, looked after, cared for, placed in special places, given in particular ways. It is this realm, caught between the everyday and the numinous, the present and the historical, that pottery can inhabit.⁴⁵

His intentions are embodied in his functional 'kitchenware'. For me, his best pots are breathtakingly poised between opposing qualities. They are familiar in their utilitarian form and completely usable, while inspiring spiritual contemplation; they invoke folk tradition, but are highly sophisticated; they carry echoes of history but are uncompromisingly contemporary⁴⁶; they echo the Far East, yet they are peculiarly English; they are simple yet decorative⁴⁷, ascetic yet sensuous. Their overall effect is transcendental. De Waal intentionally infuses his functional kitchenware' with layers of meanings, and brings these to our awareness through his personal aesthetic approach to his work. These pieces thus operate both as functional artefacts and, by Danto's definition, as works of art.

It seems then, that the idea of handmade tableware products as superfluous to requirements, springs out of the similarity in semblance and utility between them and their industrial counterparts. I am inclined to agree with Danto's opinion that the most significant differences lie in meanings rather than semblance. The differences between the respective intentions, aesthetic qualities and semiotics of the two kinds of products make them fundamentally unlike one another.

Peter Schjahl observes that "cultural history is moving in tidal waves of technological innovation and commercial exploration."⁴⁸ Crafts are a minority activity and of a minority interest.⁴⁹ While handmade objects cannot replace mass production, nor halt its powerful progress, they can extend the range of options, offer an added choice for people of a particular sensibility, fulfil those spiritual and aesthetic needs which remain unanswered and unfulfilled by industry and "contribute eccentric riptides and eddies of the humane."⁵⁰

Notes

1. See page 2.
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3. Britton, Alison, 'The Lost and The Free: Continuity and Disruption in Ceramic Art', in *The American Way: Views of Use; Function in American Ceramics*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 1993, p. 36.
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6. Ibid., p. 138.
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9. Frayling, Christopher and Helen, 'Scenes from a Seminar on Skills', in Frayling, Christopher (ed.), *Beyond the Dovetail: Craft, Skill and Imagination*, Crafts Council, London, 1991.
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11. Inkson, Kerr, 'The Craft Ideal', in *Human Relations*, Vol.40, No.3, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, New-Zealand, 1987, p. 164.
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14. Ibid., p. 79.
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18. Dormer, Peter, 'Beyond the Dovetail, Craft, Skill and Imagination', in Frayling, Christopher (ed.), *op.cit.*
19. Dant, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
20. Ibid., p. 134.
21. Ibid., p. 134.
22. Dormer, *op.cit.*, 1994, p. 100.
23. Dant, *op.cit.*, p. 197.

24. Simmel, *op.cit.*, pp. 454-455 in *ibid.*, p. 137.
25. Dant, *ibid.*, p. 133.
26. Dant, p. 134.
27. Britton, *op.cit.*, p. 35.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
29. Kane, Kyra, 'Introduction', *Ceramic Contemporaries 4*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 2002, p. 6.
30. Hickey, *op.cit.*, p. 84, and Jackson, *op.cit.*, p. 96.
31. Margetts, Martina, 'Metamorphosis: Culture of Ceramics', in Elliot, David, *The Raw and the Cooked*, The Barbican Art Gallery, Oxford Museum of Modern Art, 1993, p. 13.
32. Hickey, *op.cit.*, p. 84, Jackson, *op.cit.*, p. 96.
33. Jackson, *ibid.*, p. 96.
34. Dittmar, Helga, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have Is To Be*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, St. Martin Press, 1992, p. 13.
35. McCracken, Grant, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington Indianapolis, 1990, p. 87.
36. Jackson, *op.cit.*, p. 96.
37. Hickey, *op.cit.*, p. 85.
38. Danto, Arthur C., 'Between Utensil and Art, The Ordeal of American ceramics' in, Danto, Arthur C., *Choices from America, s'*. Hertogenbosch, NL Het Kruithuis, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999, p. 14.
39. Danto coins this term, meaning that a piece of work comments *about* something, in *ibid*, p. 14.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
42. McIntyre, Kate, 'Structures and Practices: Towards a Discourse of the Craft Object', in Johnson, Pamela (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 88.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
45. De Waal, Edmund, in an Invitation to Gallery Besson solo exhibition, 16th July - 14th August, 1997, in McIntyre, *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
46. *Ceramic Review Issue 158*, March/April 1996, p. 39. (No named author).
47. Peter, Ting, 1998, referred to by McIntyre, in *ibid.*, p. 90.
48. Schjahl, Peter, 'Ceramics and Americanness', in *The American Way, op.cit.*, p. 27.
49. Dormer, in Dormer (ed.), *op,cit.*, pp. 14-15.
50. Schjahl, *op.cit.*, p27.

Conclusion

Alison Britton points out that contemporary “artists in clay tap into Twentieth Century gentle...resistance to some of the larger sweeps of modernisation, standardisation, over-production, mechanisation, sanitisation, mass marketing and other aspects of progress that threaten to crush the human spirit.”¹

In this paper I have discussed the specific response of functional potters to these current social, economical and political circumstances, and the contribution of their particular work to the bolstering of the human spirit.

I argue that through their functionality, handmade tableware objects become part of daily life, and answer our emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual needs at the very same time that they serve our practical and physical needs. Their usefulness mediates as a bridge between maker and user, maker and the outside world. For some potters, it acts as a necessary vehicle for self-expression, and as a source of constant creative inspiration for their work. Through their association with food, handmade tableware objects connect to our most fundamental existential concerns. They elevate moments of mundane eating and drinking and enrich and enhance our dining rituals. I explain how, by constituting part of the home environment, they act to mediate between notions of the ‘ideal home’ and ‘ideal family’ and reality. They can be used to symbolise, express and explore family relationships, as well as our complex cultural perception of ‘the home’. They can help to instigate change. The repetition process involved in the production of handmade tableware endows these objects with particular characteristics and ambivalent meanings which affect the perception and reception of

handmade tableware by society. I describe the differences between handmade tableware objects and their industrial counterparts, and claim that the differences between the priorities, modes of production and conscious intentions of their respective producers, determine their meanings. I maintain that by infusing their work with historical, psychological, emotional subliminal and metaphysical meanings, the potter can turn their artefacts into artworks.

Peter Schjahl describes the predicament of studio potters as “pitted against the brutal imperialism of industrial mass culture and the haughty elite of “high” art.”² In the course of this paper I have tried to demonstrate that handmade tableware can be simultaneously utilitarian and aesthetic, and function as both art and craft. I believe that functional handmade tableware objects today, cannot be dismissed as superfluous to our needs. Neither can they be regarded as purely utilitarian, purely decorative or as elitist luxury items. 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 genuine 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,³ in their ability to nourish our souls while they serve our bodies.

Notes

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