

# Connections: Canadian and British Studio Ceramics

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THOMAS AITKEN SCOTT BARNIM KENT BENSON JOHN CHALKE LOUIS HANSEN  
ROBIN HOPPER TAM IRVING ROGER KERSLAKE ALEXANDRA MCCURDY  
MARTIN PETERS JOHN REEVE JULIANA REMPEL SAM UHLICK

## THIS EXHIBITION OF THIRTY WORKS FROM THE 1960S TO THE PRESENT HIGHLIGHTS CANADIAN CERAMICISTS' STRONG TIES WITH THE BRITISH STUDIO POTTERY MOVEMENT AND DRAWS LARGELY FROM THE GARDINER'S RAPHAEL YU COLLECTION.

The classic definition of studio pottery is functional ceramics made by hand typically in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> It is a revival movement that emerged in England after the First World War championed by Bernard Leach. Initially, the techniques of choice were throwing on the wheel and the use of high-temperature, reduction-fired kilns fuelled by wood or gas. This resulted in the production of rougher stoneware bodies and neutral glazes of shino white, temmoku brown, and celadon green, reflecting the movement's desire to emulate early Chinese pottery from the Tang and Sung dynasties and Japanese folk pottery known as Mingei. Its mantra, "no beauty without utility," led to a tidal wave of handmade functional pots around the Western world. By the time of Canada's centenary, British studio pottery featuring qualities of spontaneity and vitality replaced the prevailing Scandinavian aesthetic, which was considerably more polished and hard-edged. As the jury of the exhibition *Canadian Ceramics '67* proclaimed, "the ideal pot if there ever is such a creation... [is] bold, vigorous, possessing an earthy quality, completely unpretentious, and showing the plastic nature of the clay."<sup>2</sup>

### THE APPRENTICES

Leach wielded his considerable influence through his popular publications, his teaching at Leach Pottery, which he established in St. Ives in Cornwall in 1920, and the workshops he offered abroad after 1950. Some one hundred potters apprenticed at St. Ives (usually three at a time), while many artists visited for inspiration. John Reeve, Louis Hanssen, and Martin Peters, who all have work presented in this exhibition, spent time there where they learned the tenets of an anonymous craftsman.<sup>3</sup> They visited Michael Cardew, Leach's "first and best student,"<sup>4</sup> who also attracted a global following at Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall and Abuja Pottery in Nigeria, including Sam Uhlick and Kent Benson who are represented in this show. Part of the appeal of studio



pottery was that it fit with the counter-cultural, back-to-the-land movement that was sweeping over the West. However, the two-year programme was tough, both physically and mentally, as apprentices learned to eliminate all unnecessary gestures by throwing one hundred pots a day. But it took at least six weeks of sweeping the floor, preparing clays, and learning to throw before an apprentice's work was accepted.

John Reeve was one of the first Canadians to study directly with Leach in St. Ives, and to bring that tradition back to Canada. However, he was only able to secure an apprenticeship after several tries. He crossed the Atlantic in 1957 and first worked at the Aylesford Pottery in Kent before training in porcelain with Harry Davis, a pupil of Leach's. He was finally accepted at St. Ives in 1958, opening the door for other Canadians. According to Reeve, "you were given a bowl

full of cards, which gave the recipe for the particular piece, cup, bowl, etc. Then you would get your pre-mixed clay stored in the cupboard at the back." As their skill increased they were awarded more responsibility and complex jobs.<sup>5</sup> They were trained by William Marshall, a brilliant thrower and long-standing employee of the pottery. Leach worked in his studio upstairs and would come down for tea breaks and discuss what constitutes a good pot. Apprentices were allowed to make their own pots on their own time, which Leach would critique at an appointed hour. By all accounts, he was rarely encouraging and expressed his disapproval with body language rather than words. He was also dismissive of studio pottery in North America because he believed it lacked an inherent culture, or in his own words, that it had no "tap roots."<sup>6</sup>



IMAGES: Martin Peters at the train station in St. Ives, 1974. Photo courtesy of artist; Tam Irving, Fisherman's Cove, West Vancouver, c. 1965. Photo courtesy of artist; Tam Irving, Plate, 1980, wheel-thrown stoneware with glazes, Gift of Brian Wilks, G07.12.5

The apprentices returned to Canada to teach and open rural potteries of their own. According to ceramicist Tam Irving, “the Leach apprentices had the advantage of understanding more clearly the expressive possibilities of thrown forms... This realization was slow to dawn, however, and it took a while for me to understand the Leach aesthetic.”<sup>7</sup> But understand he did, as did Canadian potters across the country.

## THE BRITISH ÉMIGRÉS

The other side of the story is the arrival of British studio potters who immigrated to Canada with their glaze recipes and potters’ wheels. They became important teachers and the country’s leading ceramicists. Robin Hopper arrived in 1968 at age twenty-eight making his mark in Ontario and eventually residing in British Columbia. John Chalke, also at age twenty-eight, came over in 1967 and chose to settle in Alberta. Roger Kerslake, at age thirty-two, immigrated in 1970 and settled in Ontario. While they never met in Britain and had taken up pottery in different parts of the country, they all brought with them the Leach Anglo-Asian philosophy. All three knew and admired the important vessels of Lucie Rie and Hans Coper—the two European émigrés living in London espousing ceramics as a modern art form. Their attraction to Canada was the same: the physicality of the land and its openness. “I could not do what I do here over there, Britain was too crowded,” says Kerslake. Hopper expands: “the class system was too tight. I would have to wait twenty years to break the hierarchy.” For Chalke, there is one word that describes what moves him about the country: “space.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early years they had to adapt, adjust and perfect their techniques to suit the country’s climate.<sup>9</sup> Hopper foregrounded the practise of expressing both the physical attributes of the earth and pictorial landscape in ceramics. With his adopted Canadian eye, he was profoundly affected by the Canadian Shield and its majestic nature when he travelled across the country.<sup>10</sup> In order to evoke a geological aesthetic, he mastered three distinct techniques: *neriage* / agate ware, *mocha*





diffusion, and painted glazes. Like Hopper, Chalke draws deeply from his environment: "I was reborn in the foothills of southwest Alberta," he says.<sup>11</sup> Much of his original romantic notions of being a production potter of functional wares have disappeared and his work is far more conceptual. His "clay paintings," or "Artplates," made from local clays and minerals, feature deep ruptures evoking the land and sky as well as painted farm imagery typical of the region.<sup>12</sup> Kerslake concedes that when he arrived, he was impressed by the self-referential and expressive approaches of American ceramicists Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner. However, of the three ex-patriots under discussion, his work is the most faithful to the tenets of the anonymous potter, making necessary pots for everyday use. While Hopper, Chalke, and Kerslake all followed their own personal approaches to clay, they helped shape the development of ceramics in postwar Canada through their teaching, but especially through their praxis at their countryside potteries.



IMAGES: John Chalke with Bernard and Janet Leach c. 1967. Photo courtesy of artist; John Chalke, *Mid-November*, 1984, glazed stoneware, Raphael Yu Collection, G11.6.10. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella; John Chalke, *Jugs*, c. 1997, glazed stoneware, Raphael Yu Collection, G11.6.15.1-2. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella; Roger Kerslake age twenty-five in England. Photo courtesy of artist; Roger Kerslake, *Vase*, 1984, stoneware, temmoku glaze, Raphael Yu Collection, G11.6.45. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella



## THE POSTGRADUATES

The latest trajectory is that of ceramicists completing postgraduate degrees in Britain. Scott Barnim, Alexandra McCurdy, Thomas Aitken, and most recently, Juliana Rempel all studied at the Cardiff College of Art Design (formerly Institute) in Wales. As their work on display shows, they practise a greater openness to colour and decoration, which was foregrounded in the 1980s by the New Ceramics movement in Britain.

Barnim says that his lifelong connection with British ceramics “began on the side of the road in southern Ontario, waiting for the bus, shuffling through the mail box for my *Ceramics Monthly*. In the spring of 1976 they ran a double issue on British ceramics.” The issue featured Alan Caiger-Smith and Michael (Mick) Casson, two powerful forces in British studio pottery who would have the most impact on his career. He met them at local workshops hosted by the Ontario Potters’ Association when he was an eighteen-year-old apprentice in the production studio of Donn Zver (who was president of the association). Barnim explains the impact of Casson’s visit to his studio: “he encouraged my work with salt-glazed stoneware in the 1980s challenging me to engage completely in the traditions of salt-glaze that I grew up around in the Brantford area... It was Mick’s guidance that directed me to study in Cardiff for my Master’s, and it was Alan’s personal support that helped me through the process.”<sup>13</sup>

Aitken first discovered the Master’s programme after he acted as technical assistant to British ceramic artist Michael Flynn, a teacher at Cardiff, who was on the International Artist in Residence programme at Red Deer College in Alberta. He consequently attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (now University), where he was taught by Peter Castle, who came from Cardiff as a visiting professor. After meeting Castle, Aitken settled on the idea of Cardiff because he liked the school’s “open-ended” approach. For Aitken, it was also an opportunity to explore Europe and its traditions, which he feels are his “ceramic roots.”<sup>14</sup> He then apprenticed with Scott Barnim. Now based in Warsaw, Ontario, Aitken is known for the generous use of saturated colours on his functional tableware and vessels made of porcelain, and insists on leaving his thumbprint, “a romantic but evocative association that transmits a powerful sense of the maker’s life,” in the words of craft historian, Sandra Alföldy.<sup>15</sup>

Halifax artist Alexandra McCurdy graduated in 1980 from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where she studied ceramics under John Reeve, Homer Lord, and Walter Ostrom. In 1991 McCurdy chose to attend the Master’s programme at Cardiff on the recommendation of Richard





Slee, an important British ceramicist whom she met when he was a visiting artist at the Banff School of Fine Arts.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the conceptual work of her fellow students, she moved away from functional pottery. *Blue Butterfly Box*, presented in this exhibition, was made shortly after she returned from Cardiff; it draws from her dissertation on textiles (both she and her mother worked in the medium), and demonstrates a move towards conceptual issues related to containment and transparency.

At Cardiff, Juliana Rempel also worked closely with Peter Castle, Ingrid Murphy, and Jeffrey Jones, enjoying the school's sense of community. Currently residing



in Alberta, she distilled from the school that “objects that are part of our everyday retain memories through their use and become symbols for the actions of our lives.” She explores “the familiar for the reinterpretation of these forms as the archetypes of our lives.”<sup>17</sup>

What lies ahead for ceramics and future connections between Canada and Britain is uncertain. The declining status of ceramics departments at art schools is alarming. Paul Greenhalgh, Director of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, writes that the number of ceramics degree courses has fallen to three in Britain, compared to more than twenty two decades ago.<sup>18</sup> In Toronto, Ontario College of Art and Design University offers ceramics only as a service to other departments, no longer as an independent programme. What is more, apprenticeships with production potters are also disappearing, as many have reached the age of retirement and are not being replaced. Yet, as ceramicists who have graduated from the Cardiff school reveal—particularly Barnim and Aitken—production potters still thrive though they follow a looser orthodoxy than in the past. Or as McCurdy and Rempel show, they can delve into the conceptual while still exploring the functional.

**Rachel Gotlieb**, Senior Curator



IMAGES: Thomas Aitken, *Tulipiere*, porcelain, 2009. Photo courtesy of artist; Alexandra McCurdy at her workbench in Cardiff, 1991. Photo courtesy of artist; Juliana Rempel on the potter's wheel in Cardiff, 2009. Photo courtesy of artist; Juliana Rempel, *A Rediscovered Tautology*, porcelain, 2012. Photo courtesy of artist

1. For more on British studio pottery, see: Jeffrey Jones, *Studio Pottery in Britain 1900–2005* (London: A&C Black Publishers, 2007); Oliver Watson, *British Studio Pottery* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1990).
2. *Canadian Ceramics '67*, Montreal Museum of Fine Art/Canadian Guild of Potters cited in Scott Watson, Naomi Sawada, and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, *Thrown: British Columbia's Apprentices of Bernard Leach and Their Contemporaries* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 2009), 107.
3. For more on Bernard Leach's influence in Canada see: Scott Watson, et al., *Thrown* and Gail Crawford, "Bernard Leach Uncommon Edwardian," in *On the Table 100 Years of Functional Ceramics*, ed. Sandra Alföldy and Rachel Gotlieb (Toronto: Gardiner Museum, 2007), 12–15.
4. "The Michael Cardew Centenary Symposium University of Wales Aberystwyth 27 - 28 June 2001," *Interpreting Ceramics* 3, 2002. Report by Jo Dahn.
5. "John Reeve: An Interview with Naomi Sawada," Scott Watson, et al., in *Thrown*, 171–94.
6. Edmund de Wall, *Bernard Leach* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2001), 61.
7. Tam Irving, "A Personal Reminiscence," Scott Watson, et al., in *Thrown*, 105–27.
8. Roger Kerslake, interview with author at his studio, February 3, 2012; Robin Hopper, interview with author at Gardiner Museum, October 13, 2011; John Chalke, telephone interview with author, February 15, 2012.
9. John Chalke "John Chalke's Amazing Glazes," *Ceramics Review*, July/August 1995, 154.
10. Patricia Bovey, *Robin Hopper Ceramic Explorations (1957–87)* (Victoria: The Koffler Gallery/The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1987).
11. John Chalke, email to author, February 7, 2012.
12. Margaret Sundstrom, *Bridging East & West*, The Triangle, January 17 March 9, 2002.
13. Scott Barnim, email to author, February 10, 2012.
14. Thomas Aitken, email to author, February 2, 2012.
15. Emmanuel Cooper, *Contemporary Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 15; "The Function of Ceramics," Sandra Alföldy in *On the Table*, 115.
16. Alexandra McCurdy, email to author, January 16, 2012.
17. Juliana Rempel, email to author, January 31, 2012.
18. Jay Merrick, "Paul Greenhalgh Calls For Better Funding of Craft-based Art," *The Independent*, April 22, 2011.



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COVER IMAGES: Alexandra McCurdy, *Blue Butterfly Box* c. 1992, porcelain, wire, beads, Plexiglas tubing. Photo courtesy of artist; Martin Peters, *Ovoid vase*, 1994, stoneware, celadon glaze, Raphael Yu Collection, G11.6.74. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella; Sam Uhlick, *Vase with net pattern*, 1989, stoneware, multiple glazes, Raphael Yu Collection, G11.6.87. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella; Kent Benson, *Teapot and teabowl*, late 1980s, stoneware with shino glaze, wood-fired, Promised gift from the Raphael Yu Collection. Photo credit: Ferruccio Sardella