



# Altered States

**FOCUS** – **ASHLEY HOWARD** investigates the complex language of the thrown and altered vessel.

*The making of pots on the wheel... is by far the most exciting method. In swift directness it can be compared to drawing, and like drawing it must be done and left, for retouching can only spoil it. Once one has realised the difference, a thrown pot can never be mistaken for one made in any other way, unless of course it has been tampered with and its distinctive character lost.*

Dora Billington, *The Art of the Potter*, 1937 [1]

For many studio potters Billington's notion that 'tampering' will somehow diminish the essence of a thrown piece is provocative. One is tempted to question whether she would have made the same claim had she been aware of the concept of 'thrown and altered' ceramics. This relatively recent term is generally applied to wheel thrown work, which, while the clay is still wet or damp, has undergone some kind of further manipulation. It is both an obvious and a convenient categorisation, especially for makers who are reluctant to apply specific titles to their work. The process of alteration is not a corrective measure applied to a thrown form that has failed to achieve an ideal (a frequent misconception). The basic thrown form, before its alteration, may well fulfil all Billington's criteria of a good pot. This form is then subjected to a process in order to realise a concept or ideal, and is invariably focused and methodical rather than random or careless. Surely such thoughtful intervention hardly qualifies as 'tampering'?

## ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

From the late 1950s such terms as 'thrown and altered', 'thrown and assembled' and 'thrown and stacked' – or combinations of all three – began to be used to describe forms that had begun life on the wheel. These may have been part of a desire to shake off the shackles of utility and the associated perceptions of lower aesthetic value.

In one sense, almost all pottery could be described as thrown and altered as most thrown forms undergo some kind of manipulation. A jug that starts life as a simple cylinder is altered when the lip is formed, and a handle may be added later, while a simple oval pie dish is made by removing a leaf-shaped slit from a circular form and pushing the sides together. The individual components of a teapot may be thrown and altered before they are assembled. Often throwing produces only the initial form: the remainder of the making can take longer, though artists have developed a remarkable range of short-cuts. The US-born potter Ruthanne Tudball completes her pots while they are still almost wet. How can such pots be usefully described? For me, thrown and altered means any kind of manipulation carried out on a piece of work, whether during the throwing process or shortly afterwards, before the material has had time to stiffen.

The traditions imposed by function are almost a genetic blueprint for pottery, and sustained effort is required to override this. Even non-functional work produced from the



twentieth century onwards often echoes, translates and questions the idea of a vessel or container. Philip Rawson's 1971 book *Ceramics* includes a section, Morphology, in which he identifies the small rounded jar as the basis 'from which a vast number of humanity's ceramic types are derived by combination and development of different special attributes such as necks, pedestals and handles'. [2] None of the primarily domestic pieces he mentions, however, are described as thrown and altered. It seems that only when these pieces move from the stall at the ceramics fair to the gallery or exhibition catalogue, and occupy the kind of arena set up to project a more exclusive image, that the definition becomes appropriate. This term is not a simple categorisation of a production method but a reference to more individual or 'one-off' pieces, that as such can be seen as 'art', so influencing perceptions of value in both aesthetic and monetary terms.

#### THE WHEEL AND PERCEPTIONS OF VALUE

Historically, the wheel has been an effective means of meeting the constant demand for ceramics. Vessels can be thrown quickly and thus sold cheaply, and so until the advent of industrial production the wheel was a viable economic option when compared with other methods. Speed, while one of the most satisfying aspects of throwing, may in part be responsible for the modest esteem in which thrown pots are held in comparison to those made using other techniques. Geoffrey Whiting believed that 'it is the first 30,000 pots you make that are the worst', a remark that highlights the extensive practice that underlies such apparently effortless skill.

It could be argued that the scope of the potter's wheel is limited, and that it offers a fairly tight framework within which to operate. The action of forming clay on a revolving disc forces the potter to address the limitations of the



process. Hans Coper acknowledged that: 'The wheel imposes its economy, dictates limits, and provides momentum and continuity.' [3] However, when the unique actions of the individual are taken into account the permutations are endless. For George Wingfield Digby, 'the modulations of this upward- or outward-moving spiral may be infinite.' [4]

Peter Voulkos, a valuable touchstone on the philosophy underpinning much twentieth century ceramics, held that 'the community doesn't need us'. [5] It is reasonable to suppose that with the ready availability of cheap, commercially produced goods the community does not, so the logical conclusion is that it must want them. How else are potters able to secure their future than by the production of objects of desire; artefacts that are not necessarily functional but are nevertheless to be coveted?

Potters are aware of the vast history of their craft, and it is reasonable to assume that each wants to make a contribution to that history. A pot will survive, like your own child, after you have gone. Walter Keeler told me that the action of altering a pot by, for example, pushing in its side, could be seen as claiming it as one's own. Thus, potentially, the

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Simon Carroll throwing and altering a large pot | Peter Voulkos - *Two Brick Stack*, stoneware, wood fired, 1981, H100cm | Hans Coper - *White forms*, c.1972, H max. 24cm | Victor Greenaway - *Spiral/multi-tipped vase and bowl, bucchero*, H max. 34cm | Paul Soldner - *Pedestal Piece*, raku and terracotta, 1990, H65cm.



deconstructive act can become reconstructive. One is reminded of a child's desire to poke an exploratory finger in the side of a wet clay object, the graffiti artist's urge to 'tag', or even the handprints of long-dead stars embedded in the cement of a Hollywood pavement.

#### MOTIVATION

Potters alter pots in many different ways, whether by dropping them on the floor (Paul Soldner), reshaping and assembling (Betty Woodman) or tearing the rim (Colin Pearson). Others press dents into the side of a wet pot (Walter Keeler). These actions can be perceived as an additional gesture, intended to encourage the unacquainted eye to study the vessel more intently. Such treatments are intrinsic to the approach of Far Eastern makers, who feel they have 'permission to explore'. In *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present* (1987), Garth Clark acknowledges the influence of Zen concepts of beauty on American potters who broke with the formalist traditions of European ceramics: 'Through Japanese pottery the Californian potters glimpsed a new value, based on risk and expression. They saw new forms of expression in the subtle asymmetry, in the simplicity, and in the often random, abstract decoration of the wares of the tea ceremony.' [6]

However, integral to the Zen approach is a search for perfection which, for some Westerners, is merely tedious. Peter Voukos, for one, became bored by the discipline required, saying: 'Throwing became instinctive. I could do it and read a newspaper at the same time. I did it until it became so facile it didn't have any meaning.' [7] Voukos was one of many Western potters for whom the achievement of such a heightened state of consciousness was ultimately impossible, exemplifying the gulf between East and West. If exploration of the thrown form was partly attributable to the influences of the Orient, it could not have been the only reason. It was as much the influence of contemporary social and cultural developments that resulted from the upheaval of war and the liberation of the 1950s that enabled potters to reveal this approach in artefacts that were removed from the functional and utilitarian.

#### ART AND PLATONISM

The advent of neoclassicism in the eighteenth century brought a new awareness of the ancient world and its philosophies, which continues to the present; an interest



much in evidence at the time Billington was writing. Among the ancients, Plato believed in a world of ideas that was once inhabited by the human soul. The ideas, or ideals, contained within this world are eternal and immutable.

Plato suggested that most of the world's inhabitants are content to remain within the sensory world, and that philosophers must point the way to the world of ideas, to which we can only fully return upon death. This in turn suggests that the earthbound soul can only strive for perfection it can never attain. There is nothing in Plato to contradict the proposition that there are an infinite number of perfect forms, and it follows that these do not necessarily have to represent forms that exist in the world as opposed to the world of ideas. Zen philosophy seems to suggest that not only are there an infinite number of ideal forms, but that each of these is theoretically achievable. In order to progress, the potter must both embrace the notion of the ideal form and believe that he or she is capable of realising it. Michael Cardew said: 'You must make pots unceasingly even if they betray – as they almost certainly will – the worst as well as the best in you'. [8]



## REFLECTIONS

In looking into the reasons why potters throw and alter their work, I have been concerned primarily with the psychology of the process. Every potter will tell you that occasionally they produce a pot that they would not want to change in any way, a view that is just as valid for thrown and altered pots. The making of a mark or dent in a pot, with its allusion to the plasticity of the clay, accords with abstract expressionism in that it could be viewed as an attempt to strike at the essence, not so much of the pot, but of the material.

Dora Billington appreciated the notion of striving towards perfection embodied in Zen principles, and believed that this could only be achieved within narrow parameters. As Zen celebrates an infinite number of possibilities, so potters can realise an infinite number of ideas. The growing recognition and appreciation of thrown and altered ceramics has opened up new possibilities for the wheel as the means to realising a far wider vision. **CR**

This article is an edited version of Ashley Howard's MA thesis, completed at the Royal College of Art, 2003.

Ashley Howard: Email [ashleyhoward@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:ashleyhoward@ukonline.co.uk)

**[1]** Dora Billington, *The Art of the Potter*, UK, 1937, p.27

**[2]** Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, University of Pennsylvania Press, USA, 1984, pp.93-96

**[3]** Cited by Alison Britton, *Overthrowing Tradition*, transcript of lecture given at Camberwell College of Arts conference, January 2001, p.2

**[4]** George Wingfield Digby, *The Work of the Modern Potter in England*, Murray, UK, 1952, p.45

**[5]** *Ibid.*

**[6]** Garth Clark, *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present*, Abbeville Press, New York, USA, 1987, p.99

**[7]** Rose Slivka, *The Art of Peter Voulkos*, Kodansha International with Oakland Museum, USA, 1978, p.47

**[8]** Michael Cardew, *A Pioneer Potter: an Autobiography*, William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., UK, 1988, p.31



LEFT TO RIGHT: Takeshi Yasuda - *Iceberg*, bowl, porcelain, Ø39cm | Sandy Lockwood - Oval pot with handles, porcelain, H12cm | Anja Lubach - Thrown and altered forms with halo rims, porcelain, H max. 28cm | Luke Haslam-Jones - Vessels, black terra sigillata and earthenware, H max. 30cm | BELOW: Ashley Howard - *Font*, porcelain, thrown and altered, H30cm.