

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Things of Beauty Growing

By Simon Olding



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Simon Olding
Co-researchers:	Co-curators: Professor Glenn Adamson Dr Martina Droth
Name of Output:	Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery
UCARO link:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Things_of_Beauty_Growing.html
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component output comprising edited book with contributions from the researcher and curated exhibition at multiple venues
Year and mode of dissemination:	EXHIBITION Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, USA (September – December 2017) The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK (March – June 2018) BOOK Adamson, G. Droth, M. and Olding, S. (2017) <i>Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery</i> . New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 9780300227468
Key Words:	Studio pottery, British ceramics, ceramic history
Funding:	The Fitzwilliam contributed a total of £268,087 in hosting <i>Things of Beauty Growing</i> The Crafts Study Centre receives £70,000 from Research England annually

Synopsis

Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery is the title of an international exhibition and a book. Both were commissioned by the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA), Yale University in a collaboration with the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. The exhibition was held at the Yale Center in 2017, transferring to the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2018.

The exhibition was co-curated by Glenn Adamson, Martina Droth and Simon Olding and the book was co-edited by the curators. Olding was invited as the external co-curator and co-editor by YCBA. His contribution as co-curator was: to recommend, with Glenn Adamson, the exhibition theme and rationale; to make a provisional recommendation of the objects to be displayed to the co-curators; to refine the object selection after visits to private and public collections in the US and UK; to incorporate selections from The Fitzwilliam Museum when they joined as exhibition partners; to write the object labels for the YCBA exhibition; to work directly with UK

makers and commission them to make new ceramic works.

As co-editor, Olding jointly proposed the book's contributors and contents to Yale University Press; wrote the object catalogues and biographies; commissioned and oversaw new photography of makers in the UK, and the chronology of British Studio Pottery. His research focused on the identification, detailed analysis and scrutiny of object collections and associated archives in public and private hands in the US and UK in relation to the exhibition thesis, and original writing using published and unpublished sources.

This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It is illustrated throughout with images of key pieces featured in the book and exhibition and features two sections dedicated to installation images from each exhibition. The portfolio also includes a PDF of the book in its entirety.



*Nao Matsunaga
The Illusion of Reflection 2, 2016
Collection of Nao Matsunaga,
London*

The exhibition surveyed the ceramic vessel in typological groups defined by the curators. Moon Jar was the introductory section, enabling a single influential form of historic and cultural significance to be re-imagined by four contemporary makers. Nao Matsunaga was commissioned to make two new works.



*Artist Unknown, Jar, 1600–1800
Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, given by Bernard Leach. P.79.46. Lent by
the Trustees of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts*

In order to make the visual link back to historic ceramics which informed the thinking and practice of pioneer potters, Olding selected works from Bernard Leach's personal collection such as this Korean jar, which Leach kept his whole making life. This enabled the collections of the Crafts Study Centre to receive international exposure.

Context

Things of Beauty Growing considers and reveals a narrative of the defined ceramic field through the specific lens of the vessel. This approach enables an original focus on the history of the field of studio pottery, and uniquely placed historic ceramic vessels that inspired and shaped British studio pottery from the early 20th century onwards.

Things of Beauty Growing was the first summative exhibition of British Studio Pottery ever held in America, and the first to trace the development of studio pottery through a series of archetypal forms marking out a chronology as well as a trajectory of thinking: from the tea bowls that Bernard Leach brought from Japan and shaped into the foundations of British pottery to recent monumental works by Julian Stair, Felicity Aylieff and Clare Twomey which have pushed the medium beyond limits previously imagined (Twomey's *Made in China*, for instance, created for *Things of Beauty Growing*, was huge in scale). The exhibition focused on ceramics as a global and intertwined medium of practice (despite the 'national' title, which alludes to Oliver Watson's major 1990 catalogue of the V&A ceramic collection) and connects the hand made

and independent 'art' object with its functional counterparts, adding a section on the ceramic 'set' where art and industry coincide.

The book represents the most significant and detailed exposition of the vessel form in studio ceramics, as a consequence of the depth and range of the essays and the detail of the catalogue entries and builds on international studies such as *Vessels: the spirit of Modern British Ceramics* (Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, 2014). However, *Things of Beauty Growing* covers a wider time period and presents a more extensive object survey, and one of its features is a creative connection between art, country and studio pottery at the founding of the studio pottery movement in the early 20th century.

REFERENCES

Watson, O. (1990) *British Studio Pottery: the Victoria and Albert Museum Collection* (Oxford: Phaidon Christie's in association with V&A).

Research Aims and Insights

Research aims:

To present an original focus on the narrative of British studio pottery with a specific focus on the vessel form

To use the typology of the ceramic vessel form to illustrate the history of modern and contemporary studio pottery in Britain

To connect the national story to the international narrative of ceramics and investigate the artefact through an analysis of transhistorical and transcultural forms, methods and iconographies

To place contemporary practice in a historic context and come to a deeper understanding of the field through the contextualisation of specifically selected works

To understand modern studio pottery through the lens of ancient antecedent ceramics

To counterpoint pots of domestic intent with pots of sculptural force and scale

Research insights and contribution:

The exhibition enabled a clear reading of the importance of ceramics to the canon of modernist art forms, able to stand on its own ground

Critical reaction to the show supported its thesis to present British pottery as an expressive, challenging medium of contemporary art

The book presents British studio ceramics in a strongly international and global context



*William Staite Murray
Bowl, Vortex, ca. 1929
Lent by York Museums Trust (York
Art Gallery)*

The exhibition selection drew strength from juxtapositions as well as series of works. In this case, the vorticist drawing of Staite Murray's bowl contrasted with the unmediated ash glaze effects of work by Pleydell-Bouverie to show the oppositional forces of the fine art and the craft approach to form and decoration.



Ralph Toft, *Charger, a Mermaid holding a Mirror and a Comb*, 1676–83
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, J. W. L. Glaisher Collection. C.211-
1928. Lent by the Syndics of The Fitzwilliam Museum

In some cases the curators selected historic ceramics which specifically influenced trends in pioneer studio pottery, including this rare 17th century charger from the collections of the exhibition partner the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Research Methods and Process

A peer review meeting of international experts was called by the Yale Center for British Art in September 2015 to enable the curators to test the initial theoretical position of the exhibition.

Once the vessel form had been established as the principal means of inquiry, Olding made research visits to the most important collections in the UK and the US to source potential objects in order to present a wide first-draft selection for the curatorial team. Further refinement then took place when the thematic sections of the exhibition had been settled (Moon Jar; Vase; Bowl; Charger; Set; Pot; Vessel; Monument). Further research visits to the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum were made when the museum joined as an exhibition partner.

The book was conceived both as a standalone contribution

to the ceramic literature and as the catalogue to support the exhibition. The essays cover connecting fields of exhibition history, the founding history of British studio ceramics, the relationship of the independent maker to the ceramic factory, the relationship of ceramics to sculpture and the place of ceramics in popular culture. The catalogue entries for each ceramic or associated group of ceramics set the individual object in a theoretical, historical or aesthetic context following art historical convention. This placed an unusual emphasis on the works, not regularly undertaken in ceramic writings.

Olding's specific contribution to the text was the authorship of the catalogue entries, having seen every pot beforehand (pp. 166 to 411; 30,000 words) plus newly researched artist's biographies (pp. 412 to 429).



*Ruth Duckworth
Coffee Set, 1958–64
Lent by Joanna Bird Contemporary
Collections, London*

The exhibition drew attention to the way in which many studio potters had to combine their individual works with runs of domestic pottery, to help sustain an income. Domestic work by makers such as Ruth Duckworth, renowned for her ceramic sculpture, is rarely seen in ceramic exhibitions.



*Hans Coper, Monumental Pot, 1972.
The John Driscoll Collection, New
York*

*The exhibition aimed to shed a new light on makers' practice, in this case, the unusual selection of monumental works by Hans Coper. This large pot was one of a large number in the exhibition from the outstanding private collection of John Driscoll, New York. The collection had never been seen in public before *Things of Beauty Growing*, adding to the revelatory impact of the exhibition in the US and the UK.*

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

The exhibition was seen by over 60,000 visitors at its two locations at the Yale Center and Fitzwilliam Museum. The associated activities (such as an opening panel discussion, ceramic conferences and educational activities) were made available online. There were over 20,000 Facebook views of the videos and highlights of the exhibition during its run at the Yale Center. The book/catalogue was distributed by Yale University Press in the UK and the US.

Follow-on-activities:

LECTURES

The co-curators were invited to lecture at two national conferences, organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art at Tate St Ives, and at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Olding presented the exhibition at two Yale Center 'Year Ahead' meetings in 2017 and 2018.

PUBLICATION

Olding was invited to contribute a piece to *Ceramic Review* as a result of the exhibition and catalogue: 'Things of Beauty Growing'. *Ceramic Review: The Magazine of Ceramic Art and Craft* (290). pp. 21-25. ISSN 0144-1825 (2018)

Influence of the research:

AWARDS

Things of Beauty Growing won the 2019 award from the Historians of British Art Book Prize Committee (US) (multi-author books category) and the 2018 American Ceramic Circle Book Award, which described it as 'a benchmark publication that will endure as a leading reference on British ceramics' (ACC citation).

IMPACT

This research underpins the Impact Case Study 'The Role of Studio Pottery in Developing the Local Economy and Changing Museum Exhibition Practices'.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of the research:

EXHIBITIONS

The exhibition directly stimulated further exhibitions in the UK:

- the Crafts Council presented *Masters of British Studio Pottery* ‘inspired by Things of Beauty Growing’, shown at Collect 2018
- Erskine, Hall & Coe gallery presented *British Ceramics* from 25 April – 26 May 2018, ‘to coincide with *Things of Beauty Growing*’

PRESS

Things of Beauty Growing received positive reviews in specialist arts publications including:

- *CFile* (<https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-yale-center-for-british-art-things-of-beauty-growing-is-a-sparkling-gem/>): ‘certainly the best volume on British studio pottery to date’
- *Apollo* (<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/a-potted-history-of-studio-ceramics/>): ‘a revelation’
- *Times Literary Supplement* (<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/objects-of-feeling-and-substance/>): ‘exuberance and drive’ . . . ‘it detonates the ghastly good taste that has constantly dogged [studio pottery]’.
- *Antiques and the Arts and Crafts* (<https://www.antiquesandthearts.com/things-of-beauty-growing-british-studio-pottery/>)
- *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/18/top-of-the-pots-the-smashing-rise-of-ceramics>)

Eminent American critic and collector Jack Lenor Larsen stated in a letter to Grant Gibson (December 10, 2017) that ‘the works selected are the best of their kind with several knockout examples from most. Newer works by several makers not known here brings us up to date’, making the exhibition ‘the most important showing of British craft in America - ever’.

*Magdalene Odundo,
Untitled, 2009.
Collection of Dr Brian Harding,
Philadelphia (YCBA only)*

*This section drew attention to the
discourse of work with links to
Africa rather than East Asia, thus
establishing a thematic enquiry
into notions of place and identity.
Magdalene Odundo's work
featured included this terracotta
vessel from a private American
collection, shown for the first time
in public.*





*Clare Twomey,
Made in China, 2010
Lent by the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough*

The concluding section of the exhibition introduced the enormous conceptual work by Clare Twomey, made up of some eighty human-scale vessels. These were distributed throughout the museums in schemes designed by the artist herself, adding a performative element to the exhibition

Fitzwilliam Museum

A portfolio of images from *Things of Beauty Growing* during its exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum ©The Fitzwilliam Museum





Moon Jars
©The Fitzwilliam Museum



Moon Jars
©The Fitzwilliam Museum





Bowls and Chargers
©The Fitzwilliam Museum







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COVER IMAGES

Monuments (front) and Vessels (back)

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