Simon Olding, co-curator of *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery*, on show at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, reflects on the aims and objectives of this ambitious exhibition, which started out at the Yale Center for British Art in North America.
The exhibition makes no claims to present a comprehensive history of British studio pottery, neither should it be seen as a survey of the field’s most important makers… our aim, instead, has been to bring out a history of ceramic forms – to focus not on a canon of makers, but on a canon of vessels?
pots made expressly for the exhibition by Nao Matsunaga, Akiko Hirai, Adam Buick and Jennifer Lee. It culminates with an installation of carved vessels by Halima Cassell made using clays dug the world over, itself a work continually in progress.

The show starts with a section on the moon jar, a particular form developed in Choson dynasty Korea, which has played an important part in the story of British studio pottery. In 1935, Bernard Leach bought a notable example in an antique shop in Seoul while on a collecting trip with his friend, the Japanese philosopher Sōetsu Yanagi. The pot, dating from the 18th century, was seen as an exemplar of the standard that Leach felt was an immutable ambition of pottery. It was a captivating symbol of the work of the ‘unknown craftsman’. It entered Leach’s personal collection of ceramics, but unlike the other pieces, which were displayed and handled at the Leach Pottery in St Ives, this work was first loaned then gifted to Lucie Rie, who kept it in her showroom at Albion Mews until her death. Leach gave it to her in 1947 in memory of a life-long and deeply felt friendship, finally remarking, ‘keep the Korean pot in memory’.

Although the actual work is not in the exhibition, its symbolic presence lives on in the works of several contemporary potters, including Buick, who made a pure white porcelain moon jar especially for Things of Beauty Growing. This section reprises the Korean Cultural Centre’s Moon Jar exhibition of 2014, echoing the show’s presentation of the important history of the moon jar and using it as an underpinning theme throughout. These are pots with both sentimental and public pasts.

EASTERN INFLUENCE

The introductory sections of Things of Beauty Growing – moon jar, vase and bowl – highlight the influence of the ‘Song standard’ on the emerging field of British studio pottery, and the emulation of early Chinese work is represented both as a liberating force and a straitjacket. The Canadian potter Harlan House wrote, in an exhibition catalogue for the Ceramic Modernism exhibition in 2002, that he admired Coper and Rie because: ‘they did not bow down to Leach, and did not jump on the Japanese, West-meets-a-tiny-bit-of-the-East bandwagon.’ The exhibition pays attention to this tension. In the section called ‘Vessel’ there is, for example, a remarkable set of satirine works by Rie, most of which are sourced from the magnificent personal collection of John Driscoll, who has assembled the most important private collection of British ceramics in North America. These works range from a Vienna-period plate of around 1927, to Rie’s so-called ‘Black Firing’ in May 1981 – when most of the pots came out of the kiln an all-over black. Rie saw this in retrospect as an omen of Coper’s death.

The assemblage encapsulates Driscoll’s search for a career-long set of examples. His collection demonstrates range as well as depth, and one of the great glories of this display is the exceptionally rare chance to see this major private collection of British studio pottery in public. They join works by other notable American collectors such as Tanya Harrods, Penelope Curtis and Miller.

The vessel section also marks both a mood and colour switch, as well as a remodelling of form. Gone are the quiescent harmonies of Song dynasty precedents. In the hands of Angus Suttie, Gordon Baldwin, Alison Britton or Jacqueline Poncelet, the vital sculptural and painterly possibilities of clay are made explicit; the declining interest in function and the departure from traditional forms becomes vividly evident.

The finale of the exhibition melds many of the themes and approaches of the exhibition, but using significant scale as the means of expression. ‘Three elegiac monumental jars from Quiryut by Julian Stair are grouped together, using, as co-curator Adamson explains: ‘that material which symbolises our origins and then making vessels to house the body to take it back to the ground… a wonderful kind of circularity’. Equally dramatic is the modestly titled Large Pot by Alan Caiger-Smith, with its references not to China or Korea, but to the maiolica traditions of Italy and lustreware of the Middle East. Both Stair and Caiger-Smith had to find solutions to seemingly intractable technical challenges to create these pieces and yet make work of utter certainty and ease. The ‘large scale’ in Adamson’s words, is ‘being used to signify a new level of artistic aspiration for the vessel form.’

CANON OF VESSELS

Adamson, who is also Senior Scholar at the Yale Center, goes on to remark that this exhibition has boundaries. It makes no claims to present a comprehensive history of British studio pottery, neither should it be seen as a survey of the field’s most important makers… our aim, instead, has been to bring out a history of ceramic forms – to focus on a canon of makers, but on a canon of vessels.

This has been both liberating and rigorous, for it has focused a steely attention on the selection of the individual works. It is not a coincidence that Oudendo’s unfell pot, also shown in The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art, is in this exhibition. It is one of her canonical shapes, and seems as if to say that pots should be at the heart of all great art collections without question or demur. That argument holds fast in New Haven and in Cambridge.

Drooth, co-curator and Deputy Director of Research, Exhibitions and Publications, and Curator of Sculpture at the Yale Center, locates the exhibition against the sweep of history. ‘The antiquity of the vessel, the familiarity of its shapes and forms, provides a ready-made language, which ceramic artists have for decades invoked and emulated but also distanced, transformed and rejuvenated,’ she explains. In this light, Things of Beauty Growing places the ceramic vessel in an international context, where pots are of the world, not just a specific garden in Wiltshire or even a country. Nowhere is that clearer than in Twomey’s 80-vessel installation Made in China. It is a work raising questions of identity, the meaning of labour, the contested relationship between art and China, and the creative synergies between them.