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making FUTURES

Salience in the making of contemporary hand-thrown tableware: an analysis of ribbing

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Subject and focus

This paper contributes to the debate on procedures of making with an analysis of the ribbing techniques used in contemporary pottery practices. The findings emerge from a practice-based doctoral study of functional tableware made on the potter's wheel in contemporary British workshops. Ribbing is one of the operations performed by potters during a throwing session on the wheel. The analysis of the ribbing techniques and tools employed by the participants exemplifies the approach used in the wider study, and shows how the findings can help address a gap in current literature.

Handmade pottery in British post-industrial society is appreciated for physical qualities unattainable in industrial products, and often described through narratives about potters and their approaches to making (see Bloomfield, 2013; Walter, 2002; Wood, 1999). The study presents an account of contemporary British pottery practices which goes beyond a generic appreciation of handmade products, and locates the origin of key qualities and narratives associated with the ware in salient making operations. The complexity of pottery practices is revealed in the interconnectedness of key phases of production with aspects of cultural identity, knowledge transmission, philosophies of making and personal expression. 'Manufacturing salience' identifies the effect that making operations have on products, whereas 'cultural salience' locates the origin of key narratives within the making process.

This practice-based study is informed by reflection on pottery making and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three well-established professional workshops: the Leach Pottery in Cornwall, Lisa Hammond's Maze Hill Pottery in London and Ewenny Pottery in Wales.

Ribbing techniques

A rib is a flat tool typically made of wood, metal, plastic or ceramic, which is held in the thrower's hand to smooth the surface of the pot in the later stages of throwing (Hamer and Hamer, 2015: 308; Hooson and Quinn, 2012: 311). The word 'ribbing' may refer to various actions, but here it indicates the use of a rib tool on the surface of a pot by the end of a session on the wheel. In general terms, ribbing 'compresses the clay, helps it stand up, and removes excess water from the surface' (Troy, 1977: 98).

The application of the rib tool depends on the typology of pots being made. Bowls and dishes are typically ribbed on the inside whilst mugs and tall pots are ribbed on the outside (McErlain, 2002: 89). This paper discusses the making of mugs in three case studies. Ribbing takes place after a clay cylinder is thrown with only the fingers, and before the shape is cut and lifted off the wheel.

The rib can be used in three main ways (for ease of explanation these are referred to within this paper as type A, B and C). In the first method, the desired shape is achieved with the sole use of fingers, and the rib tool is

only used to scrape the excess slurry off the walls (type A, figure 1). This enables the potter to pick up the mug off the wheel without slippage. The rib is applied lightly and locally, with an upward or downward movement. It does not alter the shape of the pot, though it inevitably softens or removes some hand marks off the surface.

Figure 1. Kat Wheeler ribbing a Leach standard ware mug cylinder using a D-shaped wooden rib tool (type A ribbing). Image: Salani, 2016.

Another method involves pushing the wall horizontally from the inside onto a rib on the outside, moving upwards (type B, Fig. 2). This widens and finalises the shape, removes most hand marks and gives a smoother finish to the pot, but the height of the cylinder remains roughly the same.

Figure 2. Florian Gadsby ribbing a Maze Hill mug with a metal rib, from the bottom up (type B ribbing). Image: Salani, 2016.

Finally, the rib can replace the hand on the outside of the pot and pull the clay upwards, supported by the hand on the other side (type C, not observed in the case studies). The action changes the profile of the pot and its height. It results in a smooth and 'tooled' surface, which shows barely any hand marks on the ribbed side. Some potters stretch the clay between two ribs to achieve a fine section, smooth on both sides, which would be challenging to make with only the fingers.

Ribbing in pottery literature

In his study of craftsmanship, Richard Sennett lamented the 'problem solving' approach of a craftsman who asks 'how?' without asking 'why?' (2008: 11). A similar concern could be extended to much literature on pottery, in which unproblematised explanations of techniques elude the diverse effects that alternative solutions produce on the pots, and the narratives associated with each approach. This brief review of literature on ribbing illustrates this point and helps locate the contribution of the study.

Literature on functional handmade tableware is mostly non-academic and operates at a relatively generic level. Unlike other pottery processes (such as throwing, firing or glazing), currently no publication is entirely dedicated to the use of ribs, but techniques are often discussed as part of the actions required for throwing. Authors on ribbing are typically potters or connoisseurs who share their expert knowledge of the subject, informed by personal experience.

There is no mention of ribs or kidneys (a type of rib) in Kenneth Clark's Pottery Throwing for Beginners (1970), but manuals throughout the 20th century typically provided some instructions on ribbing when describing methods for throwing on the wheel (e.g. Wondrausch, 2001: 20; Leach, 1978: 72; Billington, 1972: 44). Explanations of techniques were offered in an assertive language which likely reflected the personal preferences of the authors, all well-established potters, and alternative methods were rarely considered. In his influential Pioneer Pottery, Michael Cardew discussed the most appropriate size and materials to make one's own rib tools and explained the multiple operations in which a rib can be used, i.e. to remove slurry before lifting the pot, compress the surface of a bowl or make saggars (182). However, the exact ways it should be done were not described. (2002, 1969: 110-182)

A similar approach is followed in a more recent publication by Alex McErlain (2002: 80), in which the rib finds many uses but precise techniques are not explained. Other recent descriptions of throwing techniques provide a more fine-grained resolution but continue to offer singular instructions on how to perform ribbing (e.g. Cohen, 2008: 45; Collins, 2011: 30) and the direction of pulling or the force exercised on the rib tool are not indicated.

This approach is appropriate for technical manuals intended for beginner and intermediate potters. Contemporary technical handbooks (e.g. Hooson and Quinn, 2012: 95) continue to provide simple instructions for students by, understandably, only describing the use of ribs in generic terms. More sophisticated discussions on pottery techniques, including ribbing, which may occur among potters and connoisseurs, are not captured by most technical manuals (figure 3).

Figure 3: These images accompany simple descriptions of ribbing in Cohen (2009: 45; left) and McErlain (2002: 130; right). The latter does not show the position of the left hand.

A recent handbook by American potter Ben Carter presents subtler alternatives to their readers and links techniques to distinct effects on the ware. He explains:

Working with a rib: When shaping, it can be helpful to hold a rib on the outside or inside of the pot. This replaces the pressure you apply with your fingers, which enables a smooth, compressed surface. Try using a wooden, rubber, or metal rib to experiment with how crisp you want the surface to be. The denser the rib, the more compressed the surface will be (2016: 36).

This description exemplifies the viewpoint of studio potters, who apply a 'problem solving' attitude to making and can draw from different approaches at once.

In the early 1970s, Philip Rawson wrote a key text on the appreciation of qualities and narratives in ceramics in which he described the 'repellent' attributes of a 'cold' smooth surface (1971: 85). Rawson discussed these 'tactile values' (i.e. surface qualities) in some detail, but he made no mention of ribbing or other techniques by which these qualities can be produced, despite describing other operations at length.

Academic research on ceramics offers some insight on the use of tools, but studies of throwing are scarce and do not include systematic analysis of making operations. In his doctoral study on the Leach Pottery's standard ware range, Matt Tyas discusses the shape of rib tools extensively (2014: 81) but not the ways they are used in action. In his doctoral thesis on craftsmanship in ceramics, Geoffrey Kay discusses the importance of tools in mediating between the hand and the finished pot (2007: 197) but his description of ribbing remains unproblematised.

In contemporary country pottery practices, ribbing continues to be employed as a necessary step in smoothing the outside of flower pots. Potter Jim Keeling from Whichford Pottery explains that ribbing creates a smooth, clean surface which 'doesn't hold the bugs' (Keeling, 2012: 6:50 mins). Andrew McGarva confirms this explanation in his book on country pottery and quotes potter Reg Harris's description of pots with clearly visible hand marks as 'louse ladders' (2000: 60), an evidently pejorative term. McGarva describes the effect ribbing produces on pots but does not describe the exact techniques involved (ibid: 52).

Finally, texts which include more extensive interviews with potters begin to offer a satisfactory link among operations, qualities and narratives. In his book on firing, David Jones quotes potter Ian Jones's reflections on his different styles of ribbing:

If I am making pots that are meant to carry the heavy ash and charcoal effects of the main firebox, or making jugs and teapots to go in the shelves, I have to, in a sense, be a different potter, to think differently about the clay. When I make copper-green glazed (inspired by oribe glaze) pots, I am another potter in the sense that I am interested in different qualities of surface, a different way of working with the clay, and I throw using a rib much more than I usually do. I assume that I'm not alone in this changing of mental hats, but I am quite conscious of trying to think differently (2007: 84).

This account resonates with the ethnographic approach used in this study. It highlights the importance of the technique in creating 'different qualities of surface' and that it would require the potter to 'think differently about the clay' (ibid). David Jones's publication captured this comment but it is primarily concerned with firing and does not analyse the potter's actions on the wheel.

Initial fieldwork

Fieldwork at Maze Hill and Ewenny potteries in winter 2016 consolidated the method for data collection tested in the pilot study and provided initial content for analysis. Over a series of visits, the processes used in the two workshops – including ribbing – were mapped and documented in interviews, photos, videos and field notes. A

'process matrix' spreadsheet was used to categorise the operations involved in the making of mugs, and to generate further questions for the potters.

Participating in soda firings at Maze Hill provided a first opportunity to learn about the potters' processes. Florian Gadsby's neat approach to making and fine personal work contrasted with the gestural pots made by his master Lisa Hammond (Gadsby, 2016a). Despite notable aesthetic differences between the Maze Hill range and Florian's own design, the methods he employed for forming and handling the mugs were remarkably consistent, shaped by the progressive refinement of skills acquired through making hundreds of pots. At this stage, data was only gathered on throwing and firing, but the way he attached handles to mug cylinders was later also shown to be consistent.

A 3-week work experience at the Leach Pottery in April 2016 produced much material for analysis. A first set of mugs was produced by the author on site by following the potters' precise instructions and their actions captured on video. The next two months were spent transcribing videos, coding all material and practising the Leach mugs at college (figure 4). By making 'in the manner' of the Leach potters, actions observed on site could be interpreted experientially *through* practice (Frayling, 1993).

The difficulty in achieving a thin wall at the base of the cylinder (as noted in the research journal on 3 June 2016) is a common issue among inexperienced potters. This was quickly resolved by squeezing the clay upwards between the rib and the left hand (a method close to type C ribbing), but this was not entirely satisfactory as it could weaken the corner between the base and the wall.

Figure 4. First attempts to reproduce the Leach mug (left) at college. Image: Salani, 2016.

Questions about ribbing

The second visit to the Leach Pottery in July 2016 provided the opportunity to complete the filming of processes and interviews, and produce a more refined set of mugs under the potters' instructions. As a senior member of staff, Kat Wheeler could offer clarifications and insights on the making of the Leach mugs. Using the process matrix as an interview guide, the conversations covered all operations involved in making the Leach mugs and identified the origins of her methods (Wheeler, 2016).

The author's difficulty in achieving the desired form and qualities at college inspired new questions for Kat about her style of ribbing. Her answer clarified that it was not just an issue of direction. She explained:

I try to already have the shape. So, I get the shape with my fingers because I think you don't want to overwork it with the rib otherwise it cuts, it looks a bit dead, it's like you killed the life. You know, there's like a certain kind of breath that you get from throwing the spirals and everything, and you don't want to take all of that out. So, I get the shape right with my fingertips and then just cut it once over just to kind of clean the surface (ibid).

Kat's way of using the rib on the mug (type A) provided some evidence of her style of throwing. Her description was in line with what lead potter Roelof Uys would describe a few days later as the 'softness' of the Leach style of pottery, a quality produced by the throwing marks left on the walls (Uys, 2016; figure 5). He achieves it by throwing with the wheel spinning slowing and using a bamboo rib with a blunt edge to rib the sides, a method he encourages others to adopt.

Figure 5. The black 'tenmoku' version of the mug designed by Roelof Uys and produced by the Leach Pottery team. Image: Salani, 2016.

Kat also mentioned her colleague Britta Wengeler-James ribbed more markedly and from the bottom up (type B), a way she found 'very strange' (Wheeler, 2016) and which resulted in a more 'tooled' and sharp surface. The underlying suggestion was that Britta had learned to throw accurately and to exact specifications, with the use of ribs, during her formal apprenticeship in Germany. Britta's personal work still shows a preference for clean surfaces, with decoration concentrated on bands of rouletted motifs rather than an abundance of soft throwing marks (figure 6).

Figure 6. Britta Wengeler-James's personal work, also made at the Leach Pottery but in different materials and style. Image: leachpottery.blogspot.com accessed 24/2/18.

Emerging narratives

The discussion at the Leach Pottery inspired more direct questions about ribbing techniques during a second round of interviews and filming at Ewenny in September 2016. A collage of videos captured during the first visit compared Alun and Caitlin Jenkins throwing mug cylinders (Salani, 2016a) and showed great similarities in their actions (figure 7).

Figure 7. A still from the video collage showing Alun (left) and Caitlin Jenkins (right) performing ribbing in an almost synchronised manner. Image: Salani, 2016a.

The video showed the potters cleaned the surface from slurry with an upward movement. The left hand pressed the clay against the rib, held in position with the right hand, and very slightly altered the shape (a light version of type B ribbing). A close examination showed the ribbing techniques between the two potters differ in timing but are in fact very close, and the qualities produced in the ware are consistent. Unlike all other potters interviewed in the study, Caitlin and Alun share all tools (Jenkins, C. 2016a), e.g. the rib shown in figure 7 is the same one in both images. A rectangular rib is cut by the potters from a sheet of metal in a similar shape and size to those previously used at Ewenny (figure 8). The simplicity of the tool and its production in-house are characteristic of the pragmatic approach of country potters, and similar tools are discussed in literature (McGarva, 2000: 70).

Figure 8. An old metal rib used at Ewenny from the family collection (left) and the one currently in use by the potters (right). Image: Salani.

At Ewenny in the past, 'they wouldn't be so particular about the surface finish' but the current glazes require 'a nice clean smooth surface' (Jenkins A., 2016). Alun explained that the ribbed surface relates to the mottled effect of the glaze (figure 9), which needs 'the glaze to move on the surface of the pot' (ibid). Caitlin confirmed the smooth finish has to do with the glaze being shiny and very reflective (Jenkins C., 2016a).

Figure 9. The mottled effect on the Ewenny Pottery's mugs decorated with the four versions of their characteristic 'splash glaze'. Image: Salani.

Ribbing at Ewenny was generally more pronounced than at the Leach, but Alun also showed some appreciation for visible hand marks on pots:

If I go around and I look at other potters' works, the first thing you do, you pick up a piece. I tend to run my fingers up the side. It's just a feel, you know, but it's a connection with the man who made it, or the woman who made it. The pot and, you know, the marks. She would have had her fingers on the pot (Jenkins A., 2016).

More fieldwork was carried out at Maze Hill between June 2016 and May 2017. Interviews and filming of Florian's processes included asking him specifically about his method of ribbing. The analysis of the videos of processes and semi-structured interviews confirmed Florian pushed clay onto the rib and created a smooth wall. The videos captured how this would slightly change the shape of the cylinder, as hands and rib tool

progressed towards the rim. His method (type B, see figure 2) was similar to the one used by Britta at the Leach.

Florian writes extensively about his practice on the social media platform Instagram. His accurate description of the ribbing technique he uses for his own mug design matches the notes recorded on the process matrix for the Maze Hill mug:

I then use a metal rib to compress the outside surface of the pot, I don't push the tool into the clay, instead I hold the tool on the surface and push the clay outward into it, running my fingers up and pushing the clay along the sharp edge. This not only strengthens the pot, but removes all the slip, which impedes the rate [it] dries at and makes it difficult to pick off if not taken away (Gadsby, 2016b).
Lisa Hammond's former apprentice Darren Ellis showed a much lighter style of ribbing (type A), which he had developed by closely imitating Lisa's actions on the wheel (Ellis, 2016). The Maze Hill mug is dipped in or brushed with slip before being sprayed with oxides and fired in an atmospheric kiln which alters the surface qualities of the pots considerably (figure 10). Like Roelof at the Leach Pottery, Lisa does not dictate the exact method in which the pots should be thrown, or ribbed, as long as the potters can produce satisfactory results. Florian's style of ribbing is integral to his throwing method and resilient across typologies and designs. It was shaped in his training at DCCoI Ceramic Skills & Design Course in Thomastown, Ireland (Gadsby, 2016c) and refined during his experience at Maze Hill.

Figure 10. Mugs designed by Lisa Hammond and made by Florian Gadsby at Maze Hill Pottery, London. Image: Salani.

The effect of ribbing on the pots

A total of 94 distinct operations were identified across the three workshops in the procedures employed by the potters to make mugs, collected in over 150 videos of processes and interviews. All research material from fieldwork and reflection on making was coded descriptively (Saldaña, 2009: 70) using the software Nvivo, under four main topics: processes, products, qualities and narratives. A second cycle of coding (ibid: 149) using a word processor identified themes and collected information on each case study in single files. An operational sequence analysis (Cresswell, 1976) was then conducted based on key parameters emerging from coding or suggested in literature (e.g. Gosselain, 2000). The findings investigate the complex interrelation between making operations, key physical characteristics appreciated in the pots and aspects of cultural identity associated with potters, pots and processes.

Ribbing is one of many operations conducted on the potter's wheel and only takes a few seconds for each mug. However, the study shows that in all three workshops ribbing is not a neutral operation, merely employed as a technical solution for lifting pots or smoothening surfaces. The characteristic marks on the walls of thrown pots are readily associated with their handmade production and distinguish them from those manufactured industrially or in other ways (Bloomfield, 2013: 78). Perhaps surprisingly, the study did not identify a wide range of diverse techniques employed by the participants, despite notable differences in the surface qualities of the pots produced by the three workshops. All potters employed one of two principal ways (type A or B) and even if differences are noticed at bisque stage (i.e. before glaze is applied), they derive more from the force exercised on the clay than the type of movement carried out by each potter.

The manufacturing salience of ribbing is evaluated as 'medium' in all three cases as the operation contributes to qualities in the ware, but the exact methods observed in the process cannot be clearly identified in the final products. The Leach mug maintains visible throwing marks but differences observed across the pots made by the various members of the team are alleviated, among other factors, by the use of thick, rich glazes. The Ewenny mug's reflective splash glaze distracts from any undulation on the walls, and differences among products are only really identifiable by the potters. At Maze Hill, ribbing prepares the surface for subsequent treatment, but the qualities of the final ware are mostly linked to the reaction of the soda firing with the slipped surfaces.

Narratives associated with ribbing

The significance of the operation is best expressed in cultural terms. This is briefly summarised here to exemplify the nature of the findings produced by the wider study. Ribbing is a highly salient operation in the making of hand-thrown tableware as it enables interpretation of the potters' work, including aspects which would otherwise be hard to identify. Ribbing techniques are learned over time and embodied in motor skills, and can point to resilient aspects of cultural identity of the potters (see Gosselain, 2000). Alternative methods to rib pots are dictated by habits formed in early training, and biographical narratives are linked to the diverse 'technological styles' of the potters (defined by Lechtman, 1977: 270).

Differences in ribbing observed across potters within the same team highlighted the role of design and operational management in ensuring consistent qualities in the finished ware. The glaze applied to the Leach mugs and the soda firing process at Maze Hill alleviate potential discrepancies. At the same time, professional potters such as Britta and Florian are aware of the effect of different ribbing methods and make a conscious effort to match the qualities desired for the ware by the lead potter. These dynamics are absent from the simplistic descriptions of ribbing found in much pottery literature.

At the Leach Pottery, Roelof's use of the bamboo rib exemplifies his vision for the workshop. The tool aims to standardise methods and sensibilities across the diverse team, and produce a consistent range of commercial tableware. It is also a clear reminder of Oriental influences on the work and has a precedent in the illustrious history of the Leach Pottery. The method of ribbing encouraged in the workshop is balanced between the desire to preserve the traces of the potters' hands on the clay, ensure production pottery techniques of lifting off the wheel to speed up the process and allow for personal takes on the use of tools which characterises the work of studio potters.

This contrasts with the sharing of all tools between Alun and Caitlin Jenkins at Ewenny. The potters' direct, economical approach is visible in the way they rib the pots. The simple rectangular rib cut from a sheet of metal in the same shape and size as those previously used at Ewenny is characteristic of the pragmatic approach of country potters. Caitlin has clearly assimilated her father's style of ribbing and made it her own, preferring to throw more with her fingers and use the rib less. The proficiency of the potters and their tuned

attitude to making is noted in the identical surface finishes on the cylinders at the end of a throwing session on the wheel.

At Maze Hill, Lisa Hammond's mug design allows for some flexibility in the exact ways the pots are formed (figure 11), and the focus of the range is on the surface treatment received in the soda firings. Lisa is renowned for her commitment to teaching ceramics but her approach is not intrusive, as long as skills are learned and standards are respected. The production of mugs is key to subsidise the presence of an apprentice in the workshop. The variation observed across the mugs made by the many apprentices over time is accepted and discussed in light of personal preferences in appearances and techniques (Hammond, 2017).

Figure 11. An example of the degree of variation observed within the range of standard ware mugs made by Maze Hill apprentices over the years. The first two mugs on the left were made by Florian Gadsby. Image: Salani.

Contribution and applications

The principal contribution of the research is the systematic assessment of each operation involved in the making of the case study mugs. As illustrated by the analysis of ribbing summarised in this paper, the study connects making operations with distinct qualities in the ware. The ethnographic treatment of all material also produces a rich and convincing interpretation of the potters' actions which illustrates individual potters' technological styles and the philosophies of making encouraged in the workshops in which they work. In some cases, this leads to a reappraisal of salient phases in the making of pottery (e.g. ribbing, centring and handling) which complements 'problem solving' explanations found in existing literature.

The methods and findings of the research could be employed in practical contexts. At a time in which ceramic degrees in the country are reduced to a small number of colleges (Partington, 2010) and alternative platforms for teaching ceramics are on the rise (Maughan, 2018), the interpretation of manufacturing and cultural significance of making operations could enhance the information provided in technical handbooks for potters, and help problematise a standard curriculum based on the consolidated ideals of studio pottery.

When potters acquire their skills and knowledge, they also develop a personal technological style and an aesthetic language. In the early stages of training, when habits are still malleable, the analysis of salience can inform potters to make conscious choices among suitable approaches. Identifying the relative importance of techniques also locates craftsmanship and craft knowledge in contemporary practices. Linking operations with

key qualities and narratives can inform measures for the preservation of pottery and other craft skills, and inform a distinction, for example, between traditions and revivals.

Finally, the research offers an alternative reading of making which can inform the way craft objects are displayed in museums and exhibitions. The focus on the technological styles of the makers and use of video comparisons, for example, uncover narratives about processes which can complement the appreciation of the ware based on history and aesthetics, and inform innovative ways to discuss the objects in shows and catalogues.

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