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Ethics, Education and the 'Kitchen Table' Potter

'Potters are such lovely people, aren't we?'
So said a rather 'well-oiled' chap to me at the end of a National Association for Ceramics in Higher Education (NACHE) Conference in the early 1990s. At the time I couldn't demur as it had been a good conference, I got a certain glow from being accorded honorary potter status and, let's face it, I was rather 'well-oiled' myself. The comment lingered with me though, and despite the intervening years having seen a sad collapse in the amount of ceramics delivered within British higher education, the implication of the positive nature of pottery making as an approach to life as well as a process that might be extrapolated from the remark has become memetic in the sense that it is both embedded in the popular psyche and has undergone change and evolution over time.

I would like to explore one aspect of thinking about the 'lovely' in pottery in more detail. That is the way that ethical values and standards were communicated from potters who viewed themselves as professional to potters who viewed themselves as amateur during the first quarter century after the end of the Second World War. 'Professional' is here represented by those potters who authored technical manuals aimed at the amateur or home potter. This definition is, I know, open to question as the majority of these authors combined their careers as potters with careers as art school educators, a very particular form of professionalism that was the subject of debate even at the time. Nevertheless, my argument is that the value of such a case study, in the insights that it offers, outweighs its limitations. To this end I have sampled twenty eight of the manuals that were published and available on the domestic market from the 1940s through to the end of the 1960s, analysing the way that they discuss the workshop environment, firing and glazing and the throwing wheel and throwing as equipment and processes. For the sake of balance, I have included texts published by key individuals before the war that were still available in print after it, as well as American publication that were also published in Britain. Lastly, 'ethics' is considered in this paper very much in its applied context, in order to better understand the way in which standards of work practice, quality of finished product and approaches to life and living evolved as important elements of the message being sent out to amateur potters by these texts.

These issues were neither new to the subject or particular to this country. Indeed, they can be traced back at least as far as the late nineteenth century, to the potters caught up in the Arts and Crafts Movement and those (mainly female) devotees of the china painting craze that swept through Europe and America at that time. These makers sought to occupy what the radical American economist Thorstein Veblen, writing at the end of the century persuasively identified as 'that certain margin of crudeness' that signalled 'good' hand-crafted pottery, whilst at all times avoiding 'the marks of cheapness or commonness [that] are accepted as definitive marks of artistic [and therefore honorific] unfitness' (Veblen 1953: 115).

Evidence surrounding china painting points to it being an example of how ethical and moral assumptions were applied to amateur practice, as well as shedding light on what were regarded as fit and proper activities for a lady in the late nineteenth century western home, the completed objects of her craft becoming emblematic of her fitness as a wife and mother.

Early manuals written to support these china painters are amongst the earliest ceramic 'how-to-do-its' we can find, and were most often authored by men. Although the beneficial use of art for the treatment of what were described as 'women steeped in sin'

(Anon 1877: 11) was highlighted by some, from their pages we can see that it was out of the domestic environment that women were usually expected to find subjects for china decoration. Women were expected to 'cultivate delicacy of feeling' (Mason 1895: 94) in their china painting, and moral concerns continued through into description of the proper attitude to take to china painting. Heavy emphasis was put on 'learning to labour and to wait' (Ibid), on avoiding any trickery of technique because 'the art will catch you out' and on the earnest worker being 'promised the reward of faithfull labour' (McLaughlin 1885: viii). Above all, the authors of these manuals aligned themselves with the view that the ultimate role of this work was to make things beautiful for humble, everyday use.

For the authors of these manuals, to hijack the term coined by Oliver Watson, 'the ethical pot' (Watson 1993: 15) could only be decorated using a moral approach to process, and within the domestic context. The moral and ethical boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable employment for these women tended to be that between the dry and wet parts of the pottery making process, whether in the factory or the home.

For the moment that challenged these boundaries, we need instead to look across the Atlantic to the 'University City' experiment of the early twentieth century. This establishment was built on subscriptions from thousands of women from throughout America who sought correspondence education through the magazine *The Keramic Studio*, edited by Adelaide Alsop Robineau. The publication held out the possibility of china decoration as a new, professional existence for women workers. To this end Robineau promoted 'conventionalised' design to her readership, based on the stylisation of natural forms. She felt that this form of decoration marked a shift away from the obsession with naturalistic decoration that had locked china painting within the amateur (and unpaid) domestic realm. It promised a system by which the china paintress could exist side by side with commercial concerns, offering the buying public hand, rather than machine made products. Robineau's ethical approach therefore had self-improvement and emancipation at its heart with *The Keramic Studio* as the vehicle for that process. It also relocated the right and proper realm for the finished object from the private to the public, commercial space.

The example of nineteenth century china painting was more than just a valuable foretaste of what was to come in the next century. It played a large part in laying the moral and ethical foundations for the new century's craft pottery movement. In order to understand how these ideas matured and developed over time we can look to the 'boom years' for this movement of the first quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War. During this time the practice of ceramics blossomed for a variety of reasons that ranged from post-war optimism and the urge amongst many to put quality of life ahead of standard of living, through to technological developments that allowed ceramics to be practiced more easily within the domestic context. The use of Nichrome wire for example meant that for the first time small electric kilns could be fired using the domestic, 15 amp mains circuit.

Publishing aimed at amateur potters was caught up in this optimistic atmosphere once war-time restrictions on the use of paper for printing were eased in the late 1940s, and as a result the output of these manuals over the first quarter of a century after the end of the war was immense. In the light of this my sample is intended to be representative rather than all-encompassing. What fascinates me about them is the way in which they reveal not only the 'next stage' after the work of the nineteenth century pioneers, but also the ethical and moral tensions between a general urge towards openness and democracy in the dissemination of skills and techniques, and a growing desire on the part of established potters to promote clear boundaries (readily understandable by the buying public) between their work and that of amateur or 'hobbyist' potters. These 'border tensions' around issues of standards, and what it meant to be a professional

potter were played out in the pages of these manuals and mirror issues being faced by those deeming themselves professional during the early years of their trade organisation, the Craftsmen Potters Association (CPA) which was founded in the mid 1950s. Today, the archive of the association, housed at the National Library of Wales, provides a valuable insight into how these potters felt about themselves and their work as well as about the amateur potters that were the target of the manuals I am surveying.

The approaches to these issues taken by the earliest group of handbooks that I examined, those written immediately before and during the war reflect the fact that their authors were both significant potters and also members of what might be described as the pre-war craft and design 'establishment'. Authors like Dora Lunn, Dora Billington, Gordon Forsyth and Bernard Leach may have diverged on the particular nature of their approach but they united in their belief in the power of craft activity to improve the lives of makers and consumers, and the language used in their published manuals therefore emphasises these ambitions. To Bernard Leach for example the accurate delineation of terms like 'hand', 'tool' and 'machine' became a central constituent of what he described as the 'Counter-Industrial Revolution', a vision where the machine was seen as a block to pure artistic feeling (Leach 1948: 371).

Considering first the way in which these authors treated the issue of workshop space, Leach's approach to the description of the workshop through the pages of his seminal *A Potter's Book* is very different to that of later manuals. For Leach, the prime importance of the workshop was as an environment conducive to creativity:
A friendly and inviting atmosphere in the rooms where pots are thrown and decorated, good lighting, reasonable orderliness and quiet, the tools and furnishings attractive in themselves, however simple, and a few examples of first rate pots against light toned walls make all the difference to the mood in which the work is done. An individual potter's workshop means more to him than a mere setting where the routine of production can conveniently go on. He has to seek and weigh new ideas, comparing them and his finished work with the standards of the past and the needs of an unborn future. (Leach 1940: 214)

A Potter's Book can be contrasted with later manuals in that Leach chooses to be general rather than particular in his treatment of the workshop, feeling that more than this would be 'tedious to read' (Ibid) and choosing instead to discuss workshop layout in terms of a month in the life of the Leach Pottery.

Nevertheless, the period I surveyed can be characterised as one that sees a gradual but sustained move away from the general towards the particular where discussion of the potter's workshop environment is concerned. This is demonstrated by Leach's famous pupil Michael Cardew in *Pioneer Pottery* (1969). Cardew's stylised illustration for a small studio pottery is complemented by a text that details types of machinery and materials to be used. Significantly for a potter who eschewed industry for a crafts lifestyle, Cardew's workshop environment bears close comparison with a small scale Staffordshire industrial pottery based around a courtyard, with processes divided room by room.

These books are by two of the key names of twentieth century crafts pottery in britain, and it is therefore undeniable that the concerns and trends they reflect are suffused with political as well as technical or educational motivations. Nevertheless, this pattern of change in attitudes towards the workshop environment is widely reflected elsewhere in the survey. We can examine as less well-known examples of this tendency, *Pottery* by Henry Trevor (1963) and *The Pottery Book* by Jess and Denys Val Baker (1959). Both of these include a chapter on the workroom. In both, the design and systematic organisation of the workroom is linked by the authors to a commercial outlook. Workroom organisation and equipment therefore comes under 'How to Start Your Own Pottery: Premises, Capital, and Raw Materials' in *The Pottery Book* and 'A Pottery of Your

Own' in *Pottery*. A clearly discernable move can therefore be seen through these books in regarding increased workshop organisation as a positive aspect of expansion towards supplying consumers and the marketplace, and an opportunity for amateurs to dip their toes in the commercial world rather than giving in to what Bernard Leach certainly regarded as the evils of industrialisation.

The ethical and moral debates hinted at here are brought into sharper focus when we look at those essential aspects of the making process, kilns and firing for, as one author put it 'ceramic work is possible without a wheel, but it is not practical without a kiln.' (Brookshaw 1967: 27) This view is supported by the first rules of the CPA that show that, alongside selling to the public under one's own name, ownership of a kiln was deemed a pre-requisite to full, professional membership; an approach to thinking about professionalism in pottery making that was held by many of the association's members into the late 1960s at least:

There is only one basis in my opinion which the C.P.A. can decide who will be its members, without implying dictates and stifling that which it may not understand, that is the seriousness which the person has towards his work. This dismisses the "pin moneyite" and the hobbyist, and leaves only those whose energy is directed towards creative work as a way of life, and to whom membership would be open on having the prime factors – a kiln etc (NLW CPA 2/2: 12 January 1966)

The fact that technology, particularly in relation to electrical firing was undergoing significant change and development during this period opened up something of a schism between those who saw firing as at the moral and ethical heart of pottery as a making process, and authors who welcomed electrical processes as a way of gaining more control over the outcomes of that process. A prime example of the former approach is the American potter and artist Henry Varnum Poor in *A Book of Pottery*. Aligning his preference for wood burning kilns with the romance of the open fire, Poor argues for the superiority of the natural over the man-made:

The burning logs are tangible, the living flames that consume them are familiar; but, heaven knows, the process that you are watching and which holds you enchanted, is more miraculous, more stimulating to the imagination than the heat of the electric oven. (Poor 1958: 164)

Poor establishes and reiterates a philosophical stance which essentially criticises the standardisation and the certainty of electrical firing, leading him to discuss wood and coal firing in terms of 'the pleasure in clean combustion' (Ibid: 165) by contrast with the 'standardised heat' of electricity. He is careful to separate the mysterious unpredictability of the wood kiln from the mystery of electricity, where 'cause and effect are so remote, so hidden, they soon are put into that ever growing category of things taken for granted, things intangible, and de-humanising like the transmission of sounds over radio and of sights over television.'(Ibid: 164)

Poor's approach highlights the way in which the earlier manuals in the survey concentrated on promoting a particular moral and philosophical stance in the amateur potter over technical rigour or quality of outcome. It seems that for these early potters a key stepping point for the amateur was the extent to which they were able to construct their own kiln. As a result they alighted on building and firing a Raku kiln as a valuable tool for learning. The Raku kiln was perceived as accessible, constructable and educational. It was at one end of a scale of equipment which had as its opposite the electric kiln, a symbol of the modern age with its mysterious power source, a machine that was factory built, controllable and with connotations of industrial making. That Raku, a type of working alien to British ceramic traditions could be used in such a way was justified by the ease with which this method satisfied aspects of these author's philosophies. These included the use of available, natural materials, the understanding of technology used, the unpredictability of the firing method and what could be described as the 'virtuous toil' involved in the building process. All of this can be seen as an

amalgam of ideas originating in the Far East and Japan in particular, with those of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

These ideas notwithstanding, the period of the survey sees a shift from such attitudes to ones that see the small home kiln, electrically fired and requiring little time or space on the part of the amateur enthusiast, and capable of firing a full range of ceramic objects, rising to predominance. Later authors seem to have increasingly regarded natural firing as a quaint, if impractical process.

Embodied in this change is a move in the ethical and moral concerns of authors away from educating the character and spirit of the amateur towards a concern with the quality and standard of their output. The change was from one that regarded the results of a firing as an exciting gamble which culminated in the tense moments opening the kiln, to one that saw kiln control (and thereby control of the finished effect) as a proper goal of the amateur as well as the professional potter. Most authors agreed that the application of the glaze was a crucial stage of the making process that contributed in a very important way to establishing the overall unity of the piece, a view powerfully summed up towards the end of the period under review by an exasperated David Canter (secretary of the CPA) in the light of what he considered were slipping standards in the Association:

In reply to my suggestion that certain work did not measure up to our minimum standard because the glaze used was identical to the result which would be obtained by dipping the pot in oil paint, came the generally supported comment “And why not”. If this is considered a legitimate point of view, then why not accept pots that have in fact been painted and not glazed, in fact where does it end except in a complete denial of the values in the work of the great potters or the teachings of the schools of pottery? (NLW CPA 2/8: 1 February 1967)

Glazing was regarded as a mysterious and (to an extent) haphazard process, and also an area of pottery where large differences between industrial and craft process could be perceived. Almost all early authors also see it as an inherently romantic process. By contrast, towards the end of the period specialised manuals dealing with this aspect of the potter’s work began to appear such as Harry Fraser’s *Kilns and Kiln Firing for the Craft Potter* (1969) which argues strongly for craft potters to adopt industrial techniques as a way of ensuring results.

The common ground that emerges over the period of the survey is a greater acceptance of some industrially based approaches that were formerly regarded as ‘taboo’ by craft potters. Foremost amongst these was the use of scientific technique to inform the development of glazes. In a sense this represented a victory for approaches heralded by pre-war authors such as Dora Billington, who had opined as far back as 1934 that ‘Much blind groping can be eliminated by a little knowledge of inorganic chemistry’(Minter 1934:71). Whilst some, like Poor and Honore argued for the qualities achieved by accident in the firing process, the use of scientific approaches to glaze chemistry is generally accepted into the pages of manuals for the amateur as the period under survey progresses. That an avowedly craft-orientated potter such as Randolph Wardell Johnston could accept this change, and indeed recommend it is a measure of the extent of its acceptance:

It puts into our hands a method of designing glazes on paper; of manipulating molecular relationships in a very fascinating way, so that experimenting with glazes is no longer a blind stabbing in the dark, but the projecting of an intellectual concept into physical reality, accompanied by an exciting curiosity as to the outcome. (Johnston 1964:120)

The ethical and moral concerns at the heart of the debate about kilns, firing and glazing played out through the pages of these manuals were ones about process and about the attitude of the maker to the finished product. By contrast the debate surrounding teaching the use of the throwing wheel to the amateur focused on the one hand on the

introduction of a 'machine' into craft activity, and on the other of mastery of throwing as a key emblem of professionalism in clay working, a view underlined by a distinguished member of the CPA writing in 1969:

For me the obvious centre of the activity of potting is a thrown pot. From this point one can radiate outwards in ever-widening circles but eventually a circumpherance [sic] must be drawn if words or concepts are to have any meaning. (NLW CPA 2/1)

It is important to say however that the use of the throwing wheel was not covered by all of the authors in the survey by any means. In part this was due to practical considerations with authors such as Dora Billington acknowledging the difficulties of teaching such a manual skill through the pages of a book and arguing that 'It is better to get personal instruction' (Billington 1962:41). Nevertheless, it is clear that throwing was regarded as a crucial bridging point between amateur and professional attitudes to clay working. Daniel Rhodes is an example of an increasingly general impression that mastery of the wheel 'is one process in pottery which marks the serious worker from the dilettante, and which may give to forms the authority of highly developed craftsmanship.' (Rhodes 1959:165) To Joan Priolo throwing was 'a special skill requiring practice, practice and more practice' (Priolo 1960: 10) whilst for Johnston the 'step' represented by throwing justified the structuring of his book:

This is why is why this important part of pottery making [throwing] has been left so late – because it involves a real commitment to the craft, requiring a wheel, a special place to work, and constant practice before even modest results may be achieved. (Johnston 1964: 108)

The growing use of electric throwing wheels as the survey period progressed (supported by the decreasing cost of electric motors) raised dilemmas as to their use within the 'hand' craft of pottery. It was a particularly difficult issue for many authors because the throwing wheel was used within their texts to symbolise tradition, and in particular craft tradition. The new energy source therefore had to be justified. Although essentially mechanical in construction, the use of the wheel as part of the craft potter's repertoire of tools was considered acceptable by writers in three ways:

Due to its historical, world wide associations, stretching back to prehistoric times

Due to the innate simplicity of the engineering involved in its construction

Due to it being seen as merely the tool of the potter, who must control it totally to achieve a satisfactory result.

We can glean from the writing of York Honore a way to support the use of electricity that seems to have been at the back of many author's minds:

Work on the wheel does require the use of machinery, but under ordinary conditions even this can be quite easily made at home…with little sacrifice of principles, we may add a potter's wheel to our equipment and gain a workmanlike neatness in our results. This machine is very much today as it was in prehistoric times in the Eastern countries. While it has been made to run smoother and with a variety of motive powers, the principle of operation is the same now as it has always been. Whether the wheel is powered by slave, foot, or electricity, it is the hands of the potter that supply the actual skill of operation. (Honore 1950:49)

The point that Honore is making is that, unlike in the case of firing, the use of electricity as a motive force does not intrude upon the skill, intention or creativity of the potter. By the end of the period under review this need to justify the use of electric throwing wheels from an ethical point of view was replaced by a pragmatic understanding that they could ease the amateur into the difficult skill of throwing.

In conclusion, there are very clear dangers in trying to suggest that there was anything like a smooth chronological change in attitudes within the books that I have surveyed here. What we can say instead is that these manuals present one form of evidence base that indicate shifts in the ethical and moral emphases being transmitted by professional potters to their amateur colleagues. These shifts are mirrored elsewhere, for instance in

the internal debates within the CPA and also (and on a far larger scale) the trend towards viewing design education as a facilitating rather than a determining process. Although the detail of these shifts varied between different interest groups, common factors do emerge. The 'black and white' approach to industrial processes and techniques that divided potters at the start of the survey period was blurred as time went on by the development of materials, tools and machinery such as kilns and throwing wheels designed specifically for the needs of the amateur or studio potter. They were no longer scaled down versions of those found in factories; the period of the survey for example seeing the rising significance of the small scale (usually electrically fired) home kiln. The emphasis on virtue and morality as at the heart of the firing process, typified by authors like Henry Varnum Poor was to be largely replaced by a new regard for techniques and technical skill. This brought with it more assurance that the finished item would emerge from the kiln as its maker had intended it to be at the start of the making process.

To view these changes as indicative of the total defeat of the philosophies espoused by authors like Leach would be entirely misleading. Rather, the survey demonstrates that the concept of the approach to clay working having, as much as anything, a potential for being a metaphor for an approach to life continues throughout this period. What changes is that the range of approaches available to the aspirant potter expands, and the emphasis on a 'right' or 'wrong' approach diminishes so that authors like Henry Trevor in *Pottery* feel at ease including within their works guidance on primitive, hand methods of clay working alongside approaches to the organisation and running of studio-based pottery businesses.

A distinction can be seen to emerge between those who (like York Honore) placed emphasis on the making process, on the manipulation of the clay as the key to an approach to making and to life, and those who regarded the clay, an ultimately plastic material, as a means to an end – the accurate depiction of the intention of the potter. Pragmatic solutions such as the use of prepared clays and glaze materials that went a long way to ensuring an accurate final product were ethically allowable when they went hand-in-hand with a new scientific understanding by the amateur of their technical basis, of the structure of clay as a material, of the nature and action of glaze materials and of the previously secret and mysterious processes involved in firing. All of these are evidences of a wish to control the end product, to make pottery a rational, scientific means towards an artistic end for, as Michael Cardew suggested 'Technology properly understood is simply an instrument for humanising matter' (Cardew 1969: 248).

The most powerful message to emerge from this survey however is that this was a period when professional potters, writing to support the needs of amateurs, tacitly accepted that an aspect of their task was to provide a bridge into the professional world for them. In order to achieve this, the ethical and moral emphasis necessarily had to shift from simply laying the groundwork to make a 'good' potter to also providing the skills, equipment and techniques necessary for making a 'good' pot.

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