

Bernard Leach and his Circle

Spring 2008

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Notes for Teachers

Information and practical ideas for groups

Written by Angie MacDonald

Ceramics by Bernard Leach and key studio potters who worked alongside him can be seen in the Showcase (Upper Gallery 2). These works form part of the Wingfield-Digby Collection, recently gifted to Tate St Ives.

For discussion

- There has been much discussion in recent years as to whether ceramics is an art or a craft. Leach insisted that he was an 'artist-potter' and he always regarded his individual pots as objects of art rather than craft.
- Why do you think he considered these pots more important than the standard ware (tableware)?
- What do you think the display at Tate St Ives says about the status of these objects? Are they sculptures or domestic objects?
- The Japanese critic Soetsu Yanagi complimented Leach by describing his earthenware as 'born not made'. What do you think he meant by this?
- Leach said he wanted his pots to have 'vitality' – to capture a sense of energy and life. Can you find examples that you feel have this quality?
- The simplified motif of a bird was a favourite for Leach. He considered it a symbol of freedom and peace. Can you find other motifs in his work and what do you think they symbolise?

Things to think about

This stoneware tile has the design of a bird feeding its young, painted in iron. It has sgraffito detailing where Leach scratched through the wet clay slip before firing. It is an excellent example of Leach's commitment to quiet, contemplative forms with soft, muted colours derived from the earth. It also shows his powerful sense of composition.

Leach would sketch his ideas before decorating his ceramics. He was an expert at combining pattern and motif with the colour and shape of each work. He had his own favourite decorations such as birds, horses and griffins and he often combined animals and plants with simple patterns and marks. Look here how he fits the curved design with the shape of the square tile. The drawing has a lightness to it that is both playful and energetic. This tile has the St Ives pottery stamp and another illegible signature in the lower corners and there are eight St Ives seals impressed on the back.

Leach set up the St Ives pottery in 1920 with fellow potter Shoji Hamada. With a team of workers and students, Leach made a range of ware that included decorative raku, and functional tableware, souvenirs and large earthenware dishes. He also produced individual pieces in stoneware such as this tile.

Practical ideas

Everyday objects. Explore and discuss everyday objects such as tea-cups, bowls, jugs and plates. Build up a collection display of different objects. Get students to find words for shape, textures, pattern and rhythm of these objects.

Designing a pot. Students to make decorative designs for pots. Encourage them to combine pattern and form and to think carefully about how the design will suit the particular shape of the pot.

Ceramic carpets. Students to design and make individual tiles to create a 'ceramic carpet'. If clay is not available use other materials such as cardboard or wood.

Experimenting with clay. Explore different clays (and other materials) and encourage students to experience and describe their individual qualities.

Firing the imagination. Look at different kilns and firing methods around the world such as raku kilns, Nigerian bush firing or paper kilns. Explore the different cultural and community contexts for these methods. If there is access to a kiln, experiment with different firing temperatures and glaze materials. Consider also making paper and cardboard kilns (see Sebastian Blackie's book *Dear Mr Leach...*)

Further research

Bernard Leach (1887-1979). Leach spent the first ten years of his life in Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan before going to school in Britain in 1897. He studied at the Slade School of Art and in 1909 returned to Japan where he studied traditional Japanese pottery. His experience of both the East and the West meant his work included ideas, aesthetics and stylistic influences of contrasting cultures. Leach was passionate in his desire to introduce to Britain a feeling for harmony in pottery that he had learned in the Far East. At St Ives he and Hamada built the first oriental climbing kiln in the West. His sources of inspiration were wide; he studied Medieval British and Staffordshire pottery as well as Chinese, Korean and Japanese ceramics. Leach travelled extensively throughout his life and in 1940 he published his influential *A Potter's Book* outlining his philosophy and methods. He is often described as the 'father of the modern studio ceramic movement' inspiring people all over the world to value handcrafted work. Leach coined the term 'head, hand and heart' to express the sense of equilibrium and wholeness that he believed industrial societies needed to regain.

The Leach Pottery, St Ives

The proposed opening date of the fully restored pottery, workshop and cottage is now scheduled for March 2008. See www.theleachpotterystives.co.uk

Penlee House, Penzance

Changing exhibitions that feature the Newlyn School and Lamorna Group (1880-1930). Work by Bernard Leach included in the Collection. See www.penleehouse.org.uk

Bernard Leach Come to the Edge, exhibition catalogue, Tate St Ives, 2005

Bernard Leach, Hamada and Their Circle from the Wingfield Digby Collection, Marston House, 1992

Blackie, Sebastian, *Dear Mr Leach*, A & C Black, London, 2004

Cooper, Emmanuel, *Janet Leach, A Potter's Life*, Ceramic Review, 2006

Cooper, Emmanuel, *Bernard Leach, Life and Work*, Yale University Press, 2003

Dormer, Peter, *The New Ceramics, Trends & Traditions*, Thames & Hudson, 1999

Frankel, Cyril, *Modern Pots, Hans Coper, Lucie Rie and their Contemporaries*, The Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Thames & Hudson, 2000

Janet Leach A Retrospective, exhibition catalogue, Tate St Ives, 2006

Waal, Edmund de, *Bernard Leach*, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2003

Thinking Through Craft, Glenn Adamson, Berg Published in Association with the V&A

www.e-yakimono.net - Information on Japanese Pottery

www.craftscouncil.org.uk Crafts Council

www.british-museum.ac.uk British Museum

www.caa.org.uk Contemporary Applied Arts