

# The song remains the same

PIONEER STUDIO POTTER BERNARD LEACH IS KNOWN AS MUCH FOR HIS IDEAS AND IDEALISM AS FOR HIS WORK AT THE WHEEL Words • Alan Harper

*N*ot long ago in the English market town of Alresford, hidden away in the crowded cabinet of an antiques shop, sat a small, olive-green pot, simply decorated with fluting scored into the still-soft clay by its anonymous maker, more than 900 years ago. In colour, shape and quality it was a perfect example of a Yaozhou tea bowl, made in northern China during the Song dynasty. The price was £500.

In a modern art gallery a few doors down, there was a fluted, green-glazed bowl almost identical to its Chinese ancestor up the street, but for the mark of its English maker. It, too, was £500. If it was a contest between the antique and the artwork, honours were even. The question is, does today's market value the potter, or the pot?

It is largely down to Bernard Leach that the question arises at all – and for him it was all about the pot. He was a passionate admirer of the anonymous Song craftsmen, and believed that their work should be an inspiration for all studio potters. Leach, who died in 1979, could sell signed, individual pieces for large sums, but he is remembered for this ideal of well-made, practical and above all 'necessary' pots.

"There are people even now who very much follow his style," affirms Marijke Jones, head of contemporary ceramics at Bonhams. "But you've also got people trying to do something very different. Leach is as significant as someone to react against, as someone to emulate."

Nic Harrison was the last student to join the production team at the pottery Leach founded in St Ives, and he still works according to the principles taught there. "It's the Leach tradition," he says. "Your life is your work, and vice versa –

you think, work and live pottery. It's a whole way of life – a continuous process, from clay to kiln."

Like Leach, Harrison makes one-off pieces for the art-pottery market, but the mainstay of his business is simple, practical and durable stoneware, with rounded, organic forms and iron-rich green and black glazes – Song in spirit and wholly in keeping with Leach's ideals.

Leach was evangelical in his belief that pots should be 'honest, ethical and necessary'. "He was trying to make honest pieces, on a large scale, that were affordable – but where the quality was genuine and true," says Marijke Jones. However, this idealistic fervour came to him relatively late in life.

## East meets west

A gifted artist who had studied drawing at the Slade and etching under Frank Brangwyn, Bernard Leach was born in the Far East and educated in England. He returned to Japan in 1909, at the age of 22. The idea was to teach – there was a heavy etcher's press among his luggage – and as a devotee of Morris and Ruskin, who could pepper his conversation with references to Augustus John and Whistler, he quickly made a name for himself among the modernisers of Tokyo's art set.

Leach became a potter almost by accident, after a demonstration of Raku pottery, in which he was invited to decorate a bowl and then see it glazed and fired. He was amazed. "A dormant impulse must have awakened," he wrote. He apprenticed himself to a master potter, and went on to establish his own studio outside Tokyo.

As a novice potter of middle-class colonial stock, Leach ➤

Stoneware jar, Northern Song dynasty (960-1127). Yaozhou kilns.

A Bernard Leach grey-glazed, spherical stoneware vase, date unknown.

Contemporary tenmoku-glazed stoneware jar, by Nic Harrison, Cornwall.





Bernard Leach at work  
on the wheel in his  
St Ives pottery, c. 1970.



Leach, in Japan in the 1950s, demonstrates pulling a handle.



Celadon-glazed, fluted stoneware bowl, c. 1960, by Bernard Leach.



Cut-sided, stoneware bowl, 1970s. Bernard Leach, St Ives.

Carved fluted bowl, porcellanous stoneware, Southern Song dynasty (1128-1289). Longquan kilns.



initially knew nothing of the craft traditions of either East or West. Many of his earliest pieces, inspired by book illustrations and Tokyo museum exhibits, imitated European shapes and styles. He admired the 'severe dignity' of medieval English pitchers, but was also drawn to the elaborate 18th-century slipware of Staffordshire potters such as Toft and Simpson. He would make pieces in this vein for many years, but it was modest vessels like the Yaozhou bowl in the Alresford antiques shop which made the most profound impression.

"The work of the Song potters has been widely accepted as the noblest achievement in ceramics," Leach was to write in *A Potter's Book* (1940). "The strong, simple forms, the plain, deep glazes and minimal decoration possessed qualities Leach described as having 'beauty and vitality'," according to his biographer, Emmanuel Cooper. New finds were unearthed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "The profound effect of Song pots was far reaching, bringing a new understanding of form and glaze that was the equivalent to contemporary

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reassessments in painting engendered by abstraction, or in music by atonality."

#### Artist craftsman

Leach had an instinctive distaste for both the processes and the products of machine manufacture. A hand-made object was 'intuitive and humanistic'. Mass-production expressed only the 'rational, abstract' work of an engineer or designer. "Nine-tenths of industrial pottery is hopelessly bad in both form and decoration," he fumed. The Song potters, he felt, had raised their craft to unsurpassed levels of both aesthetic and technical perfection, without compromising the integrity of the 'artist craftsman'.

After 11 years in Japan, Leach returned to England with his family in 1920, aged 33. Assisted by Hamada Shoji, he set up a pottery on the Japanese model by a stream outside St Ives, in the far west of Cornwall. This was the origin of 'the Leach tradition'. "He is known as the father of studio pottery, and it's true," says Nic Harrison. "He took rough medieval English pots and the refined work of the East, brought them together, and made them affordable."

That, however, was the hard part. Leach's large, individual pieces could command good prices in Bond Street galleries, but he couldn't sell enough of them to make a living. And the pottery's hand-made housewares could not compete on price with the factories. For most of the 1920s, the pottery struggled to make ends meet.

Ironically, it was only after his eldest son David took himself off to the industrial-pottery heartland of Stoke-on-Trent to study pottery management – very much against his father's inclinations – that the St Ives Pottery was able to fulfil the dreams of its founder. On his return in 1937, under the direction of Leach, David designed the pottery's 'standard ware' range, organised the pottery on more rational lines, and created the business which has been a model for virtually every studio pottery since.

It's still no way to get rich, however. "Making pottery affordable means keeping costs down, sourcing local materials, and paying low wages," says Harrison. "It's tricky – there might be four times as much work in a teapot as in a jug, for example, but you can't charge four times as much for it."

"It is possible to make a living, just not a very good living." ➤

A cut-sided, long-necked vase from the 1970s by Bernard Leach. Bernard Leach stoneware 'pilgrim' bottle, tenmoku glaze, 1970s, St Ives. Large 1970s Bernard Leach stoneware vase, dark olive green glaze.





Leach at the wheel in the St Ives pottery, which has just been re-opened.

#### A living tradition

### The Leach Pottery at St Ives

Founded by Bernard Leach (1887-1979) in 1920, the pottery in St Ives continued to operate after his death under the direction of his wife Janet – herself a potter – until 1999. Acquired by the Leach Pottery Restoration Project, it was closed in 2006 for restoration as a pottery, museum and study centre.

As well as individual donations and local government support, the project has been financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Arts Council. In February 2008 Bonhams held a sale of studio ceramics donated by more than 100 potters and ceramic artists, many of them, like Nic Harrison, with strong personal links to the pottery. "It was one of our best attended sales ever," said department head Marijke Jones. Some £40,000 was raised. The pottery reopened to the public in March 2008. [www.leachproject.co.uk](http://www.leachproject.co.uk)

agrees Marianne de Trey, who in 1947 took over the Dartington Pottery, in Devon, which had been set up by Leach at the invitation of the Dartington Estate's wealthy owners. "Studio potteries tend to attract idealists."

#### The unwilling artisan

The list of apprentices and students attracted by the Leach Pottery at St Ives reads like a who's who of English studio ceramics: Michael Cardew, Richard Batterham, Harry Davis, and over 100 more. After David's reorganisation ensured the survival of the pottery, the most important of these alumni was Bill Marshall, who joined straight from school in 1938

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and stayed for nearly 40 years.

Although he worked at the wheel throughout his career, Bernard Leach never regarded himself as a particularly accomplished potter – certainly not compared with such masters as his friend Hamada Shoji. As a painter and etcher, his real love was for line. He was skilled at slip-trailed decoration, and free, Song-inspired brushwork.

"Bernard was not a terribly good thrower," says Marianne de Trey, who at 95 still lives in the wooden cabin Leach built on the Dartington Estate. "But he did establish a system of apprentices – of whom Bill Marshall was the star – which several of us have followed." This habit of using an apprentice, or professional, to throw pieces for him to decorate, de Trey feels, may have chimed in with Leach's belief in the ideas of Ruskin and Morris – that traditional craftsmen should work under the direction of an artist.

In Leach's later life it was Marshall who played the role of artisan – sometimes, it seems, not quite willingly. Nic Harrison, who was taught by Marshall at Cornwall College, remembers his tutor going through an auction catalogue pointing out the 'Leach' pots he had thrown for his boss.

According to Marijke Jones at Bonhams, a pot bearing a painted 'BL' signature next to an impressed pottery mark is an indication that Leach decorated the pot, but didn't necessarily throw it. "Also, Bill Marshall would sometimes, very craftily, put a little cross on the underside of a pot, just so he could remember which ones were his," she says.

It's a point which might interest collectors, but Leach was untroubled by such questions of authorship. Whether he made it himself or just made it happen, the important thing for Leach was the pot, not the process.

Which brings us back to Alresford. Those two teabowls – the Song original, and the signed, studio homage, were identical not just in value, but in spirit. How could you choose between them?

"That's easy," says Marianne de Trey, amused. "You must just decide which one is the better pot."

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| Brush holder by Bernard Leach, 1930s. Brush-decorated stoneware. | Stoneware bottle, wax-resist design and red slip. Bernard Leach, 1960s. | Bernard Leach stoneware bottle from the 1970s, with Song-inspired brushwork. |
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