

Coming full circle

Tim Andrews The craftsman as artist – or is it the other way round?

His work is displayed in public museums and art galleries. New pieces are eagerly sought by private collectors. Ceramics bearing his discreet mark grace the corporate headquarters of multinationals, and his books are acknowledged as standard texts. The reputation of Devon-based ceramic artist Tim Andrews is riding high – a master of stoneware and porcelain techniques, and one of the world's foremost practitioners in the demanding and slightly scary discipline of raku.

"I always say I'm a professional potter who's thinking of taking it up for a living," he jokes. After 30 years in the business, at the age of 50 Andrews can look back on a career that began with the making of functional, affordable objects for the home in the English studio tradition, and has evolved into the creation of one-off ceramic artworks that sell for thousands of pounds.

He is often asked about this transition from craftsman to artist, but he clearly doesn't find the question – and its attendant debate about the definition of art – especially relevant. "The Leach tradition had this ideal of the anonymous craftsman," he says. "Although that didn't stop Bernard Leach signing his pieces. But we don't live in that world any more. You can't pretend to be anonymous, or consciously be naive. I'd like to think that my best pieces show the personality of the maker. The best work must have integrity – where the spirit of the piece matches that of the maker."

Whether he is a potter, craftsman, artist or sculptor is, he feels, for others to determine. Having come up through the ranks of potters



making things that people needed – jugs, bowls, mugs, dishes – he now makes things that people want. Yet in the journey from simple, handcrafted objects to complex, meditative sculptures his work is starting to come full circle. In a sense, he is back where he started.

A schoolboy who collected English Staffordshire ware, at the age of just 18 Andrews won a coveted, year-long apprenticeship with David Leach, one of the giants of post-war British pottery. "I was paid £20 a week," he says, "so some days I didn't eat, but it was fantastic training: full-on, one-to-one, nine hours a day. I probably made 10,000 pots that year, including pieces that sold in galleries in New York."

His output today is not quite so prolific. After becoming dissatisfied with his work in the conventional studio idiom – "I didn't feel it was my own," he confesses – he turned to the smoke, flame and essential unpredictability of raku.

As developed by Andrews, a process which to most potters is quick and simple, if spectacular, has become unusually exacting. Many of his more recent pieces, such as the large, globular

'humbugs' – ridiculously pleasing objects, organic and tactile in their appeal, which look more like polished, veined marble than ceramics – require a good deal of assembly after firing as well as painstaking preparation beforehand.

His latest sculptural explorations – complex, multi-sectioned towers in a variety of finishes, capped by nests of bowls of different colours and textures – were inspired by a recent visit to China, and the ancient kiln sites of Longquan. The key to each piece is the glossy porcelain bowl nestling in the top, its gleaming glaze contrasting with the rough, smoked finish of its raku cousins – much as the lustrous Longquan vessels must have shone out from within the coarse, protective saggars they were fired in. The master potters of the Song dynasty must have longed for such a sight every time they opened up the kiln.

Of course Longquan's classic, green-glazed wares became a much imitated inspiration to 20th-century studio potters. So Tim Andrews' arresting, decorative sculptures could be said to mark not just a visit to China, but a revisiting of his roots – and those of studio pottery itself.



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