

Exploration and research into Clay; working with form and function

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Introduction

Regarding ceramic art, pieces like figurines, tiles and tableware made from clay and other materials are considered a part of the 'visual arts' relative to the telling of history. While some pieces are regarded as 'Fine art' most are regarded as decorative, industrial, objects of applied arts, or artefacts in archaeology. There have always been those who enforce boundaries between craft and art, the practicality of clay can be used to create useful tools that can then be used to complete certain tasks or make them easier and therefore it is often difficult to establish if it ought to belong under the category of art. I wish to explore this idea stated on the Springfield museums website "Perhaps *intention* is the key to the difference between craft and art" (Springfield Museums, 2018). It is my belief that the intention of the artist then dictates the function of ceramic arts which goes on to influence the form, whether that be used as intended by craft or revered and acknowledged as art.

In order to establish an educated understanding of form and function, I will be investigating how form and function has evolved over ancient civilisations, with a brief look into the main focal points of ceramic history. This independent inquiry into ceramic works consists of three chapters. Within Chapter one I will discuss form in regard to work made in clay, specifically the examination of form from past civilisations and comparing them to contemporary potters and ceramicists that work with both craft and art. In the second chapter, I will investigate the different and evolving functions of the visual arts with a focus on ceramic domestic wares. It is important to acknowledge the physical functions as well as the metaphorical functions as they both complement each other in a contemporary practise. In the last chapter, I will be looking into a specific chosen artist, Edmund de Waal, a British

ceramic artist, and author that works most often with porcelain. I will focus on three exhibition pieces of de Waal, *a thousand hours* (2012), *some winter pots* (2020-2021) in London, and *Cold Mountain Clay* (2020-2021) in Hong Kong, as they most deviate from his normal installation work and as I believe demonstrates his further thoughts into how the purpose influences the form of the porcelain.

This independent inquiry will go on to inform my own practise with clay and the creating of vessel forms in a contemporary practise.

Chapter One: Form

In this chapter I will be discussing the forms of clay that have existed through different civilisations over the course of human history and comparing them to modern day ceramic forms and shape. When discussing forms throughout this Independent Inquiry, it is important to clarify that I will be discussing form regarding ceramic and pottery vessel shape as defined by Peter Lane a ceramic installation artist based in New York.

The main elements determining the form and character of an open pottery vessel are the foot; the length and directional changes of profile and the rim, lip, or final 'horizon line'. (Lane, 1998)

However, it is important that I address Peter Dormer's opinion that decoration is an integral part of the form as he states "Pottery is a synthesis of form and surface. One cannot, except artificially, separate the two" (Dormer, 1994). While I agree that texture can contribute to ceramic form as well as additions to the original form i.e., handles, lids, and protrusions. I consider decoration to be the external painted or drawn, patterns, symbols, additions to form that do not cause the existing shape of a vessel to change. With that in mind, I understand the importance of decoration and

how it has evolved over the centuries and influenced different cultures, but I do not consider it to be a part of the 'form' and therefore will not be focusing on it in such depth during this Independent Inquiry.

Encyclopaedia Britannica states the physical body of clay is built up of soil particles that are less than 0.005mm in diameter; or rock that is made up mostly of clay particles. It is because of the fineness of the particles that allow for clay to have such a multitude of uses within the modern world (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). When water is added to a clay body the wetness allows for the clay to become more plastic, meaning individuals can move and shape the clay into various forms. As said by Lane "clay has no form of its own" as it is the individuals that work in the medium that give the clay a form in order for it to be used in everyday life or used in general. Due to its "polyamorous nature" clay can be moulded into an infinite number of permutations to fit in with each singular individual's preference of vessels (Lane, 1998) (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - Akio Nukaga - 'Pleated' Clay with black and white contrast, pleated blue glazed vase, pleated brown glazed bowl

Not only is clay polyamorous, but it is also durable. Archaeologists can navigate civilisations based on pottery and construction material that date as far back as more than 20,000 years old (which is the oldest pottery fragment in recorded history) (The Guardian, 2012).

Not only does pottery and clay work transcend time, but it also transcends culture. There are numerous recorded uses of clay around the world over the course of human civilisation, with the style, form and relationship to the materials adjusting and evolving, depending on specific cultures and use of each individual vessel.

For example, in Africa and the Middle East, specifically in Egypt, where it is believed the earliest use of the pottery wheel was discovered, a vast number of jugs for the purpose of storing food and transporting liquid were made (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - Ancient Egyptian Clay Vases

In Babylon, Clay was used to create building materials like bricks (see Fig. 3). In Persia, tiles were made and constructed into mosaic ceilings, floors, and walls (see

Fig. 4) and in Mesopotamia it was used to make decorations for the home (see Fig. 5).

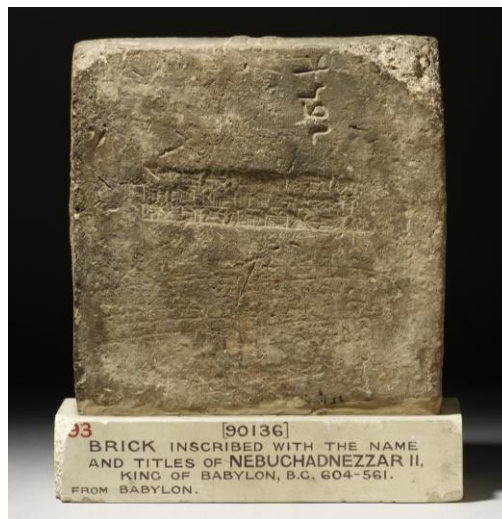


Fig. 3 - Babylon clay bricks



Fig. 4 - Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque in Isfahan - Mosaic Tile



Fig. 5 - Plaque depicting a harp player – Clay – Mesopotamia

Similarly, to Africa and the Middle East, Europe also made vessels for storage and transporting liquid, but due to the elaborate decoration on the vessels, it is believed that a majority of vessels, made from clay during the period of the Roman Empire and ancient Greece, have a deeper desire to express their love of architecture and art. The Greek potters preferred red clay, known as Samian ware, to make their vessels. The vessels were then painted with gods, heroes, or specific events of the time with a black glaze (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 - Greek psykter depicting revealing satyrs – Clay

Terracotta was then used for figurines that would become home decorations, ornaments, or toys for children. Similar to the Greeks, the Romans had red clay, but they also had black clay that they called Etruscan ware, which were made into tiles to be used for mosaic pieces of work (see Fig. 7) as well as typical vessels for storage and transportation of liquids (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 7 - Mosaic Etruscan Clay



Fig. 8 - Etruscan clay pottery

Dissimilarly in Asia, China took a different approach, creating vessels and pottery on a mass-produced level and inventing their own clay now known as Porcelain (China) (see Fig. 9). As Described by Britannica porcelain is a “vitrified pottery with a white, fine-grained body that is usually translucent” (The Editor of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). Porcelain, unlike normal earthenware clays, is fired at a higher temperature which results in a smooth surface and translucent piece of pottery even before glaze is put on it.



Fig. 9 - Porcelain ware clay pottery

China is not only notorious for their skills of mass-producing pottery. The incredible feat of mass-production, regarding clay in China, is the terracotta army made in 246 B.C. The army consisted of over 7000 pottery sculptures in total, depicting clay soldiers, horses, chariots, and weapons, each sculpted individually, under the rule of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, which took 11 years to make in entirety. The sculptures were buried with the emperor as, upon his death, the people under his rule believed they would protect him in the afterlife (Fig. 10). (Lubow, 2009)



Fig. 10 - Terracotta Army - China - 246 B.C

Evidently pottery has always considered the needs of everyday life (function) as the main basis of form. Alison Britton is a British ceramicist that states “The bulk of pottery throughout history has been down-to-earth, necessary stuff...” that have been derived from our “...eating habits...” and “...past rituals...” (Dormer, 1994). This makes sense when considering the storage of foods from past civilisations and how the traditional shape of bowls, plates and cups have remained the same for centuries. It is theorized by Lane that the shape of open vessel pottery came about “naturally” as the round shape provides “greater physical strength” that is in turn more durable than any other shape of pot stating “It possesses a level of completeness” (Lane, 1998). Of course, when throwing on a pottery wheel it is difficult to make any shape other than round which is why many modern ceramicists opt for hand building, pinch pottery, or slip casting to create a different shape or a different texture than what is considered the traditional.



Fig. 11 - Madeleine Preston - Little Deaths (sculptural sacred objects) - 2016 - Terracotta - Augmented Glaze with silicon carbide on ironstone slip

For example, Madeleine Preston is a ceramic artist that creates elaborate structures using a coiling hand building technique (Fig. 11). Coiling is a technique where an individual creates a long thin cylindrical piece of clay and wraps it similar to how a spring is shaped, which in turn creates a vessel. Preston also works with slab building which is where an individual uses a slab – flat plate or slice of clay – cut into specific shapes and joined together to make the desired form. Her work is made to challenge ideas around “good taste and preconceived notions” about the art world (Bell, 2017). As we have progressed in our ability to create, especially after the industrial revolution, we have more than enough traditional mass-produced domestic wares to last a lifetime. With that in mind, we can move forward past the traditional concept of shape and introduce new ideas, to which some might appear more ‘absurd.’ According to Peter Lane it is “natural and inevitable” that the forms would change over time, due to the necessity of functional objects becoming easier to obtain, not only that but from those who set to challenge tradition “new ideas and

fresh opportunities” emerge to work in ways that best suits those individual needs of the potter. These new vessel shapes that are perceived as unusual can often be met with uncertainty and distaste due to their form being misaligned with this self-imposed idea of traditional shape that people are used to, however Lane goes on to say, “There is no room for dogma in ceramics because there has never been a ‘correct’ way of working with clay” (Lane, 1998).

To conclude this chapter, I believe that Anna Lerinder states it best “Clay represents timelessness, it’s old and modern, and if you don’t break it, it will last for hundreds, maybe thousands of years” (Bell, 2017). Clay, over culture and time, has proved useful in everyday life due to its consistent durability and multitude of uses. Now with a more in depth understanding of form and shape, we as artists can now experiment and push the limits of what we consider traditional into new and inventive forms to satisfy the self-expression of the potter as well as the needs of the user.

Chapter Two: Function

In this chapter, I will be discussing how function of domestic wares has evolved through modern contemporary ceramics, as well as a look into the function of the Japanese Tea Ceremony and how culture changes function of domestic wares.

As established in Chapter One, the main uses of clay during early stages of civilisation considered a utilitarian approach where vessels made for storage and transportation were made without any consideration of how it looked but only how well it worked. While modern-day pottery still strives for a form that allows for easy use, there is more consideration now on how to make forms more interesting to look at, how to make vessels easier to use and an exploration into how far form can be pushed before the question ‘is it still functional?’ can be asked.

In regard to modern handmade pottery, function goes beyond a utilitarian purpose as the function impacts upon the vessel form itself. Modern day handmade pottery needs to consider the efficiency of vessels, ease of use, comfortability in the hands, and an added consideration into the pleasure that is gained from owning a hand-built vessel. Many potters put copious amounts of time, thought and care into their vessels with the hopes that those who go on to own them will connect with them on a deeper emotional level. After the industrial revolution, the advancement of technology allowed for pottery to be made much more efficiently in a larger mass-produced fashion, but many potters agree that the level to which pots, mugs, bowls, and cups are made now lack any form of individuality. People now are seeking pottery with a bit more soul. This is a sensation known as 'phenomenology', a study of consciousness in relation to objects that inspire a direct experience. Alison Britton states "some of this desire is romantic: Handmade things are 'nicer' more virtuous than industrially made things" (Dormer, 1994) as opposed to industrial ceramics that, according to Lane, "suffer from a degree of shallowness and superficiality."

Modern-day handmade pottery can be separated by two categories: Production pottery and Studio pottery. Production pottery is defined as "...batches of useful domestic wares for sale..." while Studio pottery is defined as "...objects made on a one-off basis as a form of art..." (Dormer, 1994). Works made by Studio pottery are made to be seen, looked at, enjoyed without a necessity to be 'functional' in the physical sense of being used for a specific purpose i.e., Drank from, eat off of, store for later dates etc. Dormer states "In fact one way and another function has remained either as an actual or as a metaphorical component of the majority of contemporary work." Majority of potters and ceramicists attempt to give domestic ware vessels both a physical and metaphorical function, a physical function of being

used to store or carry certain types of food or liquid, while the metaphorical function is to be viewed and appreciated as something beautiful (Dormer, 1994).

Not only are ceramic vessels useful, but many individuals use clay vessels as a tool for spirituality. From the making to the using, there is an equally calming and relaxing quality to working with clay as there is to using handcrafted clay vessels. As described by Rob Barnard when a handmade ceramic vessel is used for a purpose over being displayed to be viewed the user of said item becomes part of the aesthetic process, this means all of the physical senses are addressed “It is the physical senses after all that inform the spiritual” (Barnard, 2022). Barnard goes on to talk about the experience of a sunset, where it is not only a retinal experience centred around the changing of the colour.

“We feel the temperature of the air and the smells that are carried by the breeze. Our body registers the sensations of heat or cold and the physical comforts or discomforts of our surroundings” (Barnard, 2022)

It is the impact of that moment that removes us from mundane reality and allows us to “connect with some part of ourselves that we are unable to reach through purely intellectual reasoning.”

“Significant pottery does more than merely function, it causes the user to become more aware and receptive at the moment of use than they might ordinarily be in the overstimulated world in which we live” (Barnard, 2022)

Because functional pieces of ceramics offer a similar multi-sensory experience. We touch it, drink from it, smell whatever is inside, see it, hear the sound of the hardened clay. However, when items are placed in exhibition spaces they are kept behind glass, not to be touched, handled, or held, which is the primary purpose of ceramic vessels, this may be the reason ceramic pieces are not common in exhibition

spaces. When placed in an exhibition space behind glass, to the viewer it becomes a 2D piece of work, without the ability to walk around it or touch it, it becomes difficult to fully engage in a piece that understates its tangible features. Dormer claims “You cannot use pottery without touching it, and touch – experience of the particularities of surface as well as generalities of form- is part of the familiarity of pottery” (Dormer, 1994). Touching a made object can inform the holder of the process of how it came to be, often potters leave slight finger marks as an indentation or signature that they in fact made it.

A significant contribution to the spiritual aspects of ceramics is the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Also known as chanoyu, sado or ocha which translates to English as ‘the way of tea,’ ‘way’ meaning right or proper way to spiritual awakening and peace of mind. According to the Kimono Tea Ceremony Maikoya website tea has a long history with Chinese tea traders. Japanese monks brought back tea during the Chinese Tang dynasty (618 AD – 907 AD) and the Japanese Nara period, only used by the monks in rituals and specific occasion. The Tea ceremony is especially important in Japanese culture as the practise throughout history was solely by elite zen monks and noble warlords (Acar, 2021).

The Japanese tea ceremony consists of a preparation stage, where participants are silent. This contributes to the meditative aspect of the ceremony as it encourages respect for the host who is preparing the tea. When the host then serves the tea, the host does not drink as the ceremony is intended for those participating not those operating. It is said that only three sounds ought to be heard during the ceremony, the sound of the lid being taken off and put back on the kettle, the tea bowl hitting the mat and the sound made by the tea bowl and the teaspoons. The main function of a Japanese tea ceremony is to create a bond between host and guests with the added

benefit of gaining some enlightenment to inner peace (Acar, 2021). The teapots used are known as Kyusa which simply translates to 'teapot' (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12 - Stone Grey Kyusu – Teapot

They are made mainly from fired volcanic clay of high quality and only deviate from a traditional western teapot with having a handle on the side opposed to directly opposite the spout. The side handle is believed to reduce the strain of pouring, minimising the effort needed to pour with an added level of elegance to the movement as most uses would come while in company with others, the handle and the pour then becomes more visually appealing to guests.

To conclude this chapter, I have found reason to believe that ceramic pieces of work when allowed to be used for their intended purpose can be reminiscent of pieces of artwork. While the function of art today is to be stored behind glass to commemorate a history or to simply be viewed as something beautiful, the beauty of ceramic art comes not only from the viewing of the pieces but also the personal relationship we develop when using, allowing ourselves to become an extension of the piece rather

than merely an observer. Being a part of the process allows for a more spiritual accomplishment that follows along with the Japanese tea ceremony promoting stronger bonds and inner peace.

Chapter 3: Edmund De Waal



Fig. 13 - Edmund de Waal – Artist

In this Chapter I will be discussing and analysing specific works from the artist, Edmund de Waal (Fig. 13), while also considering the philosophies that drive his critical thinking and practise.

Edmund Arthur Lowndes de Waal is an English contemporary ceramic artist and author. Known best for his large-scale installations using porcelain vessels forms. His porcelain pieces are often the artists responses to collections and archives or particular places that have a historical background that inspires him to create these simple porcelain vessel forms. De Waal's pieces do not often stray from the simple forms and simple glazes, but by sheer quantity of work creates elaborate installations that are uncomplicated but extraordinary. (Waal, 2021)

During the 1990's De Waal's practise became heavily influenced by modernism, specifically modernism specified by the Bauhaus movement, where the merging of art and technology becomes emphasised by mass production. From this Waal theorised that the materiality of porcelain would cause an agreement between the east and the west traditions i.e., the song dynasty has similarities to the modernist ethos of the Bauhaus. (Waal, 2015)

Edmund de Waal's work is fascinating, his pieces are often derived from a metaphorical function while still containing a level of utilitarianism, using what he wants to convey to dictate what he makes and the form his pieces take without necessarily considering making them look aesthetically appealing. His works often still have his finger marks left on the porcelain from the process of making which gives the pieces a little more character than if he were to clean up the outsides. His fascination with shape and how he goes about displaying his pieces in such an expressive way truly emphasises how much thought and spirit goes into his critical thinking.



Fig. 14 - A thousand years - 1000 thrown porcelain vessels, some glazed in celadon and white, some unglazed, within a pair of aluminium vitrines with transparent and translucent acrylic - 243.5 x 75 x 210 cm each, 243.5 x 210 x 210 cm overall

A thousand hours, 2012, (Fig. 14) is a large-scale installation comprised of a pair of identical, free-standing vitrines, containing 1,000 pots. Described by de Waal as being "anti-monumental, a work with real architectural presence and scale but that isn't a monument since the viewer can move through and around the work" (Cristea Roberts Gallery, 2012). The concept of *a thousand hours* explored a notion of containing a large amount of time in a single space. Each pot made by de Waal needs time to wedge, cut, throw, turn, fire, glaze and re-fire, each pot representing a certain amount of time that was put into its making. This in turn emphasises the quantity of time contained and held still within these standing vitrines. De Waal's constant blurring of the line between Fine artist and potter remains to be the most enlightening part of his practise. He simply makes for the joy of making and watching him talk about his work is equally inspiring and insightful to how he perceives himself as a modern contemporary artist/potter. (Cristea Roberts Gallery, 2012)



Fig. 15 - *Some Winter Pots* - (2020) - Porcelain, lead, gold, and red pigment

De Waal's most recent work, *some winter pot* (B10), 2020, (Fig. 15) was a little different to the works he had made in the past. On December 3rd, 2020, to January 30th, 2021, in Davies Street, London, the Gagosian building exhibited De Waal's piece that deviated from his usual installation work, typically placed behind glass to be viewed as part of a classic exhibition, he now demonstrated single works not part of any installation but made for the purposes of being held and touched in hand. De Waal states, "I was alone in my studio and silent and I needed to make vessels to touch and hold, to pass on" (Waal, 2020-2021). The open vessels De Waal displays demonstrate his longing to connect. He explains that they were all made during the spring and early summer of the Coronavirus lockdown, likely also why it was placed in the building by the front window for the whole street to see. Some of the pots have cracks and breaks, instead of removing them he in a sense fixed them by patching on folded lead and gold, inspired by two Song Dynasty bowls that he keeps in his studio. Repaired using the Japanese art of 'Kintsugi' (Waal, 2020-2021). De Waal says

Kintsugi is not an art of erasure—the invisible mend, the erasing of a mistake—but rather a way of marking loss. Both these bowls were central to the making of this work. (Waal, 2020-2021)



Fig. 16 - Kaolin, gold leaf, graphite, compressed charcoal, and oil stick on ash, in aluminium frame

Although this is a deviation from his typical works it is not the first. An interesting exhibition by de Waal is his 'Cold Mountain clay' (Fig. 16). Taking its title from the famed 'Cold Mountain' poems, verses by the monk Hanshan. A man who is said to have lived as a recluse during the Tang Dynasty (617-907 CE). Hanshan was known for having his writings over tree trunks, cave walls and rocks – places where the writings would fade over time. De Waal took inspiration from this as his piece made in this particular exhibition were "made through a cycle of inscription and effacement." Beginning with coating wood in liquid porcelain clay known as 'slip.' Writing on the slip, once dried, with Hanshan's poetry in graphite, charcoal, and oil. Then brushing more slip over the writing and repeating the process over and over again producing what he called a 'fugitive poem' "an ethereal palimpsest of text that emulates the haze of memory." (Gagosian , 2020/21)

To conclude this chapter, de Waal's work effortlessly demonstrates both considerable thought into both form and function. It is through reading about his work and his ideas that we can see that while the forms of his pieces are quite simple the purpose of each individual pot, bowl or vessel has a significant story to tell as part of the collective, and watching de Waal talk about his work shows true passion for the timeless medium of clay. (Waal, 2021)

Conclusion

Clay is a timeless medium to work in, the plasticity allows for a multitude of uses which makes it the best for making domestic wares but also allows it to be used in sculpture, tiles, and construction. This research concludes one definitive fact, that intention is not the only driving force of ceramic art. Through my research, I have discovered that there are many variables that contribute to functionality and therefore

the form of ceramic works. A potter, someone who focuses on making simple domestic vessels for the purpose of being used, may not consider any elaborate shapes and will often remain with a traditional form. However, when simple familiar domestic items, like those made by potters in a traditional manner, are elevated through ceremony and ritualistic practise the form does not necessarily change but the function of said item does (as discussed in chapter two with regard to the Japanese tea ceremony), same form but used for different functions. Similarly, contemporary ceramic artisans have experimented with basic forms, like Edmund de Waal, as well as more complicated forms, like Madeline Preston. These vessels are not used for practical wares and are made to be viewed as pieces of artwork, even if they might have the capacity to be used in the practical manner. Different forms but the same function. It is no question that the polyamorous nature of clay allows for individuals in the art world to experiment and create incredible pieces that are equally functional and impractical, but still useable. As I continue in my research, I hope to continue this discussion of function and form. This discussion will go on to inform my physical practise and inform how I go about creating and improving my work in the future.

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