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Question 3 – Materiality of Surface

Materiality of Surface

An object's external boundary is not passive decoration but the primary, active zone of cultural and existential meaning. This perspective is fundamentally rooted in the phenomenological rejection of the mind-body split, best encapsulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's dictum: "The world is not what I think, but what I live." Applied to Material Culture Studies, this idea demands that we shift focus from the conceptual function of an object to the embodied, sensory knowledge it generates. The materiality of surface is profoundly linked to sensory experience, acting as a primary interface that attracts, repels, or subtly influences our emotional state. What draws us to certain materials is their visual texture, which speaks to us before we even consciously register the object's function. Pallasmaa (2005) argues that this is because surfaces "mediate and structure our experience of the world", suggesting that materials speak a primal, sensory language that triggers embodied memories and reactions, making the surface a critical element in the aesthetics of human emotion. The surface, defined by texture, color, and finish, is where the human hand, eye, and body encounter the world. This essay will trace this principle from antiquity to the contemporary era through the lens of ceramic practice. We begin with the prehistoric Japanese Jōmon Period, where the defining cord-marked surface was a haptic signature, grounding ritual and subsistence activities in the rough texture of low-fired clay. This tradition of valuing the material reality of the everyday was later championed by the 20th-century Japanese Mingei movement, which sought spiritual authenticity in the honest, imperfect surfaces of anonymous folk craft, prioritizing the beauty of use over intellectual design. Finally, the essay will compare two contemporary British ceramicists: Magdalene Odundo, whose meticulous burnishing and smoke-firing create dense, lustrous surfaces that evoke diasporic human form and tradition; and Adam Buick, whose practice of incorporating site-specific earth and stone into his surfaces transforms the ceramic vessel into a geological canvas.

The concept that the surface of an object is shaped by its location and period is fundamental to understanding cultural history and material culture. The surface is the primary interface between an object and its environment, reflecting not only the technical skills available but also the aesthetic values, social needs, and resource constraints of a specific community. This relationship means that surface treatment often serves as a cultural marker, whether in style, technology, or social meaning, allowing archaeologists to easily place artefacts in their proper spatio-temporal context. By acting as a visual shorthand for shared ritual practices or societal norms, surface treatments encapsulate the cultural processes and ideologies of their time (Hodder 1988)

The location and period in which objects are made directly determine the materials and techniques used for surface treatment. Environmental factors dictate the available raw materials, for instance; iron-rich clay gives ceramics in some regions a naturally red or orange hue. Access to materials such as cinnabar and cobalt yields region-specific pigments and glazes. Technological developments, for example, the potter's wheel, produce thinner, smoother, and more symmetrical surfaces, as evident in Greek pottery, while earlier hand-built wares are typically coarser (Boardman 1974). Later, innovations like high-fire kilns led to durable glazed surfaces, marking important shifts in ceramic technology (Rice 2015).



Figure 1 - Jomon period, an introduction (smart history n.d)

The Jōmon period (c. 14,000 BCE to 300 BCE) stands as one of the longest continuous cultural traditions in world history, spanning over 10,000 years. The name "Jōmon" literally means "cord-pattern" or "cord-marked," a direct reference to the distinctive surface decoration on their pottery (Department of Asian art 2002). While they are often classified as Neolithic, they represent a highly developed culture of complex hunter-gatherers, characterised by an exceptionally high degree of complexity and stability (Barnes, 2011).

The Jōmon period is largely defined by the world's earliest known pottery tradition. All Jōmon vessels were built by hand, typically using the coiling method (building the pot up in coils of clay), as the potter's wheel had not yet been invented.

Over the 10,000-year span, the surface treatment evolved dramatically, reflecting changes in social complexity and aesthetic focus. The earliest surfaces were typically

plain but quickly began to feature simple cord-markings on deep, bullet-shaped cooking vessels. The materiality was primarily utilitarian, focused on cooking and supporting a semi-sedentary lifestyle enabled by the ability to boil and store food.

During the Jomon period, surface materiality reached its peak with the extravagant, three-dimensional designs of the "Flame-style" pottery (Habu, 2004). While the pots still functioned for cooking, the rims and surfaces were covered with elaborate, sculptural appliqués (raised lines, spirals, and zoomorphic/anthropomorphic motifs) that often transcended purely functional needs. This shift in materiality from simple texture to high-relief artistry is linked to the Middle Jōmon period's high population density, expanding exchange networks, and likely an increase in ceremonial or ritual practices.

In the later stages, a clearer dichotomy emerged in surface treatment. Some pots were increasingly plain and rough (for continued daily use), while others featured highly polished, burnished, and lacquered surfaces. This distinct difference in materiality suggests a growing specialisation, with polished, decorated, or lacquerware being reserved for ritual, burial, or prestige objects, differentiating them from rougher, everyday wares.

In essence, the materiality of the Jomon surface from the practical cord-mark to the elaborate sculptural appliqué and the refined lacquer finish provides a chronological and social map of the culture, reflecting the technical skill and shifting values of a complex hunter-gatherer society.

Moreover, the surface of Japanese folk crafts, particularly those championed by the Mingei movement and appreciated through the aesthetic lens of Wabi-Sabi, is fundamentally tied to an appreciation for natural processes, humility, and the trace of the human hand. The surface is not merely an exterior layer but the primary medium through which these philosophies are expressed, making it a crucial aspect of the object's materiality. The surface matters because it functions as a textural archive, a place where the object's making, use, and history are recorded and made visible.

Mingei, coined by philosopher Sōetsu Yanagi in the 1920s, translates to "folk craft" or "art of the people." This movement championed the beauty found in everyday, utilitarian objects made by anonymous craftspeople. For Mingei, the surface of an object is a direct testament to its authenticity and origin. Material imperfections embody the object's

honest dialogue with the firing process, the clay's properties, and the craftsperson's skill, highlighting the surface's role in conveying process over product. Yanagi himself argued that the surface must reflect the object's origin: "The most basic point of departure for Mingei is the surface of the work, the direct contact of material with the hand and mind of the anonymous craftsman" (Yanagi, 1972)

imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete (Andrew Juniper 2003). The surface, therefore, is cherished precisely because it shows the natural decay and wear that symbolise the object's history and usefulness. This can be seen in the patina of oxidised bronze, the cracks on a tea bowl, or the fading of natural indigo dye. These scars of use are not ignored; they are celebrated as physical evidence of the object's lived experience.



Figure 2 - Adam Buick 2022

Adam Buick's work is profoundly defined by the materiality of its surface, transforming the pure, simple form of the Korean Moon Jar into a geological map and narrative embodiment of the Pembrokeshire landscape where he works. His approach to surface texture and colour is not decorative, but integral to the concept, directly correlating the fired ceramic body to the natural environment.

Buick's signature style comes from his intentional use of unrefined, locally sourced materials from the Welsh coast and moorland, which act as "inclusions" in the clay body or glazes. He uses clay dug from nearby moorlands, such as Waun Llodi clay, blending it with commercial stoneware or porcelain or applying it as a slip. This immediately roots the final object in the geography of its making. He forages for stones, quartz, slate, and coarse black sand (often from Abereddi beach). These materials are crushed and sprinkled into the glaze or embedded directly into the ceramic body. He also collects seaweed from the coast for use in his glazes.

The wood-firing process is crucial to the final surface. Firing to stoneware temperatures in his downdraft kiln creates a subtle earthiness on the pieces through direct contact

with ash and flame. The unpredictable nature of each surface is caused by the mineral inclusions and their metamorphosis during the firing (Buick, n.d.). As the foreign materials melt, they can cause a reaction that creates a localised 'rupture' in the smooth porcelain, resulting in pitted or heavily textured areas. The mineral deposits from the inclusions melt and bleed, often staining the typical pure white porcelain with crimson, deep blue, or bitter rust-coloured drips. The final surface becomes rich with the detail of happenstance, forming a unique, unrepeatable patina.

Buick often uses smooth porcelain as its primary material, and the intentional inclusion of rugged, gritty materials like stone and sand creates a surface tension. He notes that this tension between the rugged and soft speaks to the "human condition" and the ways the landscape shapes us.

His project, 'Rolling Clay,' where he rolled a ball of raw clay around a one-mile circuit to embed pieces of the landscape (twigs, stone, sand) into its surface, is a direct illustration of the surface of the clay acting as a physical record of his journey and relationship with the terrain. The textures and colours record his physical and metaphorical journeys through the Pembrokeshire landscape with varied textures that encourage the viewer to read it as a narrative of the land.



Figure 3 - Magdalene Odundo (West, C. 2019)

Magdalene Odundo's ceramic vessels serve as a powerful testament to the materiality of the surface, where her artist's journey and layered cultural symbolism are articulated through meticulous process. Her practice intentionally avoids the potter's wheel, relying on the slow, hand-built coiling technique, a labour-intensive method that makes the finished form a physical record of her deep engagement with the material. The vessel's signature look is achieved by first burnishing the leather-hard clay, a repetitive, meditative act of polishing with a stone that compresses the material to a high sheen without glaze. The final colour, either a bright red-orange or a deep, lustrous black, is determined by ancient firing methods: the red through an oxidising atmosphere and the black through a smoke-filled, reducing atmosphere, a technique referencing historical African and Nile Valley ceramics (Smarthistory, n.d.). This refined, unblemished surface enhances the vessel's powerful anthropomorphic quality, emphasising its connection to the female body, fertility, and the skin. The smooth, simple form, rooted in traditional African pottery (such as that of the Gbari women) yet in dialogue with classical antiquity, allows the surface to serve as the primary medium for transcultural symbolism. Regarding the intentional ambiguity of the form, Odundo has asserted, 'I do not see the difference between a figurative sculpture and a figurative vessel,' highlighting her deliberate blurring of the boundaries between functional craft and fine art sculpture.

(Ceramic Review, 2019). By uniting these diverse world styles into a single object, Odundo's work embodies a postcolonial aesthetic, demonstrating how the material surface can carry profound, universal, and historical narratives. Her pieces engage with postcolonial discourse by challenging and reinterpreting cultural influences through her unique artistic lens. They contribute to the conversation on global art history by merging African traditions with Western practices, creating a dialogue that questions historical narratives and celebrates cultural hybridity. Odundo's work not only showcases a mastery of craft but also acts as a vessel for exploring identity, cultural exchange, and the intersection of tradition and modernity.

Ultimately, the trajectory from the prehistoric cord-marked vessels of the Jōmon period to the contemporary conceptual practices of Adam Buick and Magdalene Odundo confirms that the ceramic surface is never merely a passive boundary or a decorative afterthought. Instead, it functions as a sophisticated membrane that negotiates the relationship between the object's internal essence and the external world. As explored through the varied lenses of archaeology, folk craft, and fine art, the surface acts as a repository of cultural intelligence, recording the specificities of time, place, and human intent.

Returning to the phenomenological framework established by Merleau-Ponty and Pallasmaa, the case studies presented illustrate how the "materiality of surface" bridges the gap between the physical object and the sensing body. In the Jōmon period, this bridge was foundational, transforming the struggle for subsistence into a tactile language of cord impressions that evolved into complex ritual markers. The Mingei movement later reclaimed this tactile language, stripping away the artist's ego to reveal the "honest" surface, a textural archive where the imperfections of the material world are not flaws but ethical statements on the beauty of use and impermanence.

Contemporary practitioners have expanded this dialogue by transforming the surface into a site of specific narrative inquiry. Adam Buick's practice proves that the surface can be a geological map, dissolving the separation between the vessel and the landscape from which it is born. His inclusion of raw minerals creates a surface that is physically active, rupturing the smooth porcelain to reveal the earth's chaotic reality. Conversely, Magdalene Odundo demonstrates that the surface is a carrier of transcultural memory and corporeal identity. Her burnished, unglazed skins do not mimic the human body; they embody its presence, synthesising African traditions and modernist aesthetics into a universal visual language.

In conclusion, the materiality of surface dictates how an object is understood, not through intellectual categorisation, but through embodied encounter. Whether through the rough grit of a Jōmon cooking pot or the lustrous sheen of an Odundo vessel, the surface remains the primary zone where the human hand touches the world. It is within this thin, fragile layer that the abstract concepts of culture, history, and emotion are rendered tangible, proving that to touch the surface is to touch the very fabric of human experience.

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