thenewceramics

trends+traditions

PETER DORMER

the new ceramics

trends+traditions

PETER DORMER

the new ceramics

trends+traditions

with 234 illustrations, 86 in colour

THAMES AND HUDSON

Illustration Acknowledgments

Numerals indicate Plate Numbers unless otherwise specified
Agnalt, Terje 104; Crafts Council, London 11, 16, 18, 42, 46, 52, 61, 77, 156–7; *Crafts Magazine* 139; Cripps, David 1, 19, 33, 37, 76, 78, 93, 114, 155, 178, 183; Dean Powell, Andrew 69–70; Dobbie, Ian 18, 42, 52, 77; Ficdencks, Roger 105; Frisse, Courtney 111, 133 (Everson Museum of Art); Garth Clark Gallery, New York 36, 38, 39, 54–5, 69–70, 73, 116, 120, 124, 126, 137, 140, 143, 147, 152, 161–2, 181–2, 188; Hancock, Grant 98; Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia 7, 24–6, 57–8, 67–8, 82–5, 101, 107–9, 134, 148–50; Hill, Tim 27, 56, 117, 122, 142, 177; Knispel, Andreas 145; Myers, Steve 54–5, 148–50; Renwick Gallery, Washington D.C. 59, 127, 179, 192; Rose, Bruce 143; Schnebeli, Heini 167; Schopplein, Joe 36; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 10, 64–6, 71–2, 118–19, 166; Stillings, Jamey 9, 57–8; Storey, John 97; Tate Gallery, London p. 117 (right); Teigens Fotoatelier 144; Tosch, Randall 7; University of Iowa Museum of Art 7, 14, 53; Victoria and Albert Museum, London p. 114 (left and right), p. 117 (left), p. 121 (left); Ward David 86–9, 103; Webster, Eric 11; Wilson, Bengt 193; Wright, Roger 21–2, 32; Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart 3, 8, 123

Printed and bound in Japan

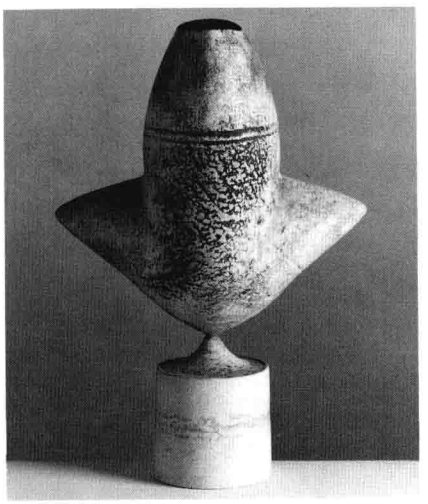
CONTENTS

Special acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following people and organizations for their considerable help: Patrick Johnson, Italian-based critic; Annemie Verbeek-Boissevain, owner and director of the Galerie De Witte Voet, Amsterdam; Professor Fredrik Wildhagen, design historian, National College of Art and Design, Oslo; David Williams and his staff at the Crafts Board of the Australia Council; Barbara Perry, Curator of Ceramics, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; the University of Iowa Museum of Art; Joan Mannheimer; staff of the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Dr E. Klinge, Hetjens Museum, Düsseldorf; Hans-Ulrich Roller and Heribert Meurer of the Württembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart; *Crafts Magazine*, and the Crafts Council of England and Wales. Notwithstanding the inestimable guidance given by these individuals and my editorial advisers, the responsibility for the final choice of material rests with me.

INTRODUCTION

Alison Britton



Form. Hans Coper. Stoneware. h. 16cm. UK, 1972

There is prose and there is poetry. In pottery there seems to remain a possibility for providing both, sometimes in the same object. Pottery can be about design or about art, and occasionally both. Pots succeed because they move the spirit, like art, or because they exactly fill a requirement, like design. That one discipline can straddle both areas with dual emphasis is distinctive.

Being a potter is absurd in modern times. As Hans Coper wrote in 1969: 'Practising a craft with ambiguous reference to purpose and function one has occasion to face absurdity. More than anything, somewhat like a demented piano-tuner, one is trying to approximate a phantom pitch.' In part the irrelevance of the role is blanketed by the fact that people do seem to keep on wanting pots, to use and to look at. Some of this desire is romantic: handmade things are 'nicer', more virtuous, than industrially made things – they are unique, marked by the erring human hand, more particular. Then there is the prestige of having something that cost more than mere utility required, and ultimately there is investment in 'good' names and rocketing values. Pots are easy to live with and don't need explaining; they are more accessible to many people – conceptually, financially and in scale – than contemporary fine art.

The bulk of pottery throughout history has been down-to-earth, necessary stuff, descriptive of past eating habits and past rituals, and essential, because of its capacity to survive, to archaeologists and to social historians. This gives it a strong position in our sense of culture and history. But clay is an extraordinary substance: very plastic and malleable, it can also be poured

as a liquid or carved and scraped in a dry state, and finally, it is very durable and hard when fired. This versatility has been exploited in the imitation of other materials and other things for centuries, and since the beginning clay has been used to make things beyond the needs of daily life, for entertainment. You could say that as a material it is prone to metaphor, and practical objects have been formed in some disguise or other for ages. There must have been humour in a Greek scent bottle being shaped like a foot in a leather sandle, and wit in drinking out of a ceramic animal horn rather than a real one. Clay has been used for toys as well as oil lamps, and chandeliers as well as urinals. Both daily life and fantasy/luxury have been served by pottery from earliest times, which leaves little room for some of the recent outrage at departures during the last decades from the purist dominance of the Anglo-Oriental school in studio pottery, where beauty exists only in utility. Just as early in this century some of those hostile to abstraction would have you believe that previously painting and sculpture had *always* been about faithful presentation and the values of the Renaissance, so in this generation some critics would have it that pottery of worth has *always* been simple, natural, primarily functional, and wheel-made.

Most pots have indeed been round and shiny and upright, and with good reason. (Rapidly constructed on a wheel, easy to clean and stack). But there have always been some pieces, constructed in the same spirit perhaps, but for some reason elevated above the batch as more vigorous, or full of life or poise or beauty, that have been destined to an ornamental rather than a useful life. With that as an acceptable fact, it is not surprising that other pots should follow that did not spring up with an overt function in their maker's mind, but with the intention only to decorate. There have been some revealing examples in the course of history – Hispano-Moresque dishes, elaborately painted with lustres on tin glaze in the 14th century, were exported to Italy and thought to be far too beautiful to be plates; they were stuck into the walls of churches. The dish/wall-plaque dual role is very well established, even without the cement, through Palissy and Thomas Toft in the 16th and 17th centuries to Picasso and Miró in our own. Were the Della Robbias making gigantic plates in sections? A well-trodden path of pots made for looking at allows also for pots to be constructed in elaborate rather than economic ways, and allows them then to be made off the wheel, and in all manner of eccentric shapes. And just as a dish can also be a painting hung on the wall, or propped on a shelf, it follows that a pot can be a painting that travels round an entire object, smoothly in the case of a circular or spherical pot, and with interruptions and related planes in the case of a slab-built or angular pot.

The fact that pots are three-dimensional has misled people into making claims for modern not-so-useful pots being sculpture, when the more essential connections are with painting. However elaborate or unusual a pot is in its form, the degree to which its existence depends on 'containing', actual or suggested, and on the expression of one particular material, disqualifies it

from the broad concerns of sculpture. The American painter George Woodman, in an article called 'Ceramic Decoration and the Concept of Ceramics as a Decorative Art', discussed the relationship of pots to both painting and sculpture. 'In the undecorated pot, all there is to see is a contour or silhouette; it has no particular identity except at its edges.' This at once separates vessel ceramics from sculpture. And he goes on: 'A sensibility to the organization of surfaces in relation to their contours is not really the province of construction and space, but of the visual organization of fields' (*American Ceramics*, 1982). With pottery there is a separate concern for the surface, and what occurs on the surface is crucial to a sense of completion.

And what does a Modern Pot look like? Tendencies that I have been most aware of, and been a part of, in the 1970s and 80s, could be generalized like this: many potters are handbuilding rather than throwing, even when they are making regular curvaceous forms. The consistent silhouette of the round upright and shiny traditional pot has been interrupted – pots are demanding to be approached from different viewpoints because of asymmetry or flattening or complex multiple forms. Pots can lie down as well as stand up. Pots may have a clear sense of position, a stance, an obvious front side and back side perhaps, or variable ways of resting on a surface, offering different moods. The anthropomorphism of neck, belly and shoulder that is an established part of the language of pottery is not lost, though the figure may not be vertical. Colour and pattern are complicated and important, and surfaces are often dry or matt rather than glossy, as changing planes are masked by high sheen. Colour and pattern may be incorporated in the making process at an early stage, and sometimes glaze is done away with altogether. There is contrast and discord rather than harmony and a blending in with nature. Pots are often descriptive of a jangled urban life rather than serene rurality. Stimulus comes from far and wide and not just from the traditions of pottery. Techniques are elaborate and varied.

Does this represent an end, or a beginning? There is something to be gained from a comparison with Mannerism, which followed the Renaissance. Mannerism has been perceived either as the decadent petering out of a great creative surge, or as an important initiation of a heightened self-awareness in art, with the central concept of the work of art as 'absolute', as an enduring virtuoso performance. The term derives from the Italian word *maniera*, meaning style. In the 17th century it was always used positively, and did not include the negative aspect of 'stylization' or stereotyping. Mannerists also had the concept of 'difficulty' as a high aim; virtue lay in the conquest of difficulty. Mannerist works of art are complex rather than economic, and consciously refer to art itself: as John Shearman has written, 'it was common for Mannerist artists to adapt artistic forms or compositional devices, originally invented with expressive function and to use them in a non-functional way, capriciously' (*Mannerism*, 1967.) Shearman also observes: 'The capacity of artists to manipulate for their own ends forms invented in a

different spirit is one of the facts of life that helps to explain how Mannerism grew out of the earlier Renaissance.' This self-consciousness is what brought me to the analogy: the Leach school was the Renaissance – Leach was not solely responsible for the eruption of Studio Pottery early this century but he was a tremendous catalyst both practically and theoretically – and my generation have consumed this energy and are now posed on top of it like Mannerists, reversing the normal relationship of form and content.

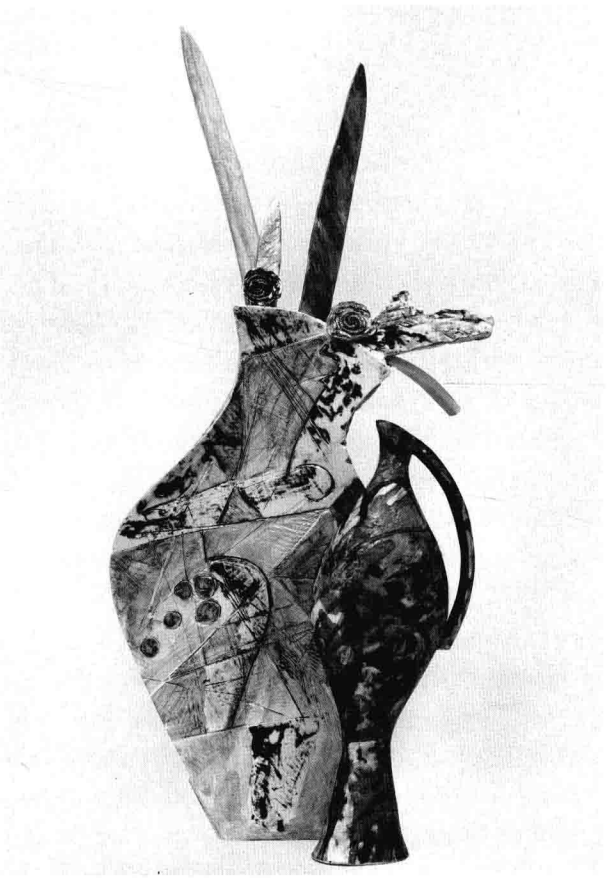
I have written about self-consciousness before (and I do not use the word derogatorily), primarily in *The Maker's Eye* catalogue. (Crafts Council, London, 1982). 'Function, or an idea of a possible function, is crucial, but is just one ingredient in the final presence of the object, and not its only motivation. . . . A "modern" novel (after Proust and Joyce) is both made of, and about, language. Some objects are similarly self-referential, that is, they perform a function, and at the same time are drawing attention to what their own rules are about. In some way such objects stand back and describe, or represent, themselves as well as being. In the analogy with the novel "function" stands for "story" as the central content'. I went on to suggest that these objects can be seen as another link in the traditional chain of 'practical objects in disguise'. The function of the Greek scent bottle is not impaired by the caprice of the foot disguise, a Martin Brothers Bird Jar is dominated by its decorative disguise but it is still a jar. In these new pots a jug can also be a representation of a jug without losing the function. The input of still-life painting into this way of thinking is considerable, clearly demonstrated in the work of the British ceramists Andrew Lord and Elizabeth Fritsch, in very different ways, she by flattening forms into two and a half dimensions, and he by a Cubist reconstruction of the way an object is defined by the light falling on it.

The critic and historian Philip Rawson is one of those who are dismayed by recent developments. 'The creator's proper job is to lead the spectator's attention to dwell in a space which is not that of the common world . . . Not all sexy silhouettes give good central presence and imply strong volumes. What matters is the way the pot surface and the volumes which it promotes move positively and generously towards you at its focal place to give a valid sense of "being there". So chillingly often we are nowadays given pots that retreat, flattening themselves and huddling back into diagrams.' I would argue that pots such as I have described are not huddling into diagrams but gliding towards paintings, which is not cowardice but a selfconscious (and Mannerist) bravura. They are playing with the gap between the expectation of use and the actuality of contemplation, and such gaps can be entertaining, and 'transporting', in the way that Rawson requires, out of the common world.

Some potters are dealing first of all with formal ideas and a kind of commentary, and others are dealing first of all with practicalities. For those who enjoy ambiguity there are all the things in the middle with a double presence, prose and poetry, that intrigue most.

1

THE NEW ROLE OF THE POTTER



Jugs. Sue John. Stoneware. h.45cm. UK, 1982

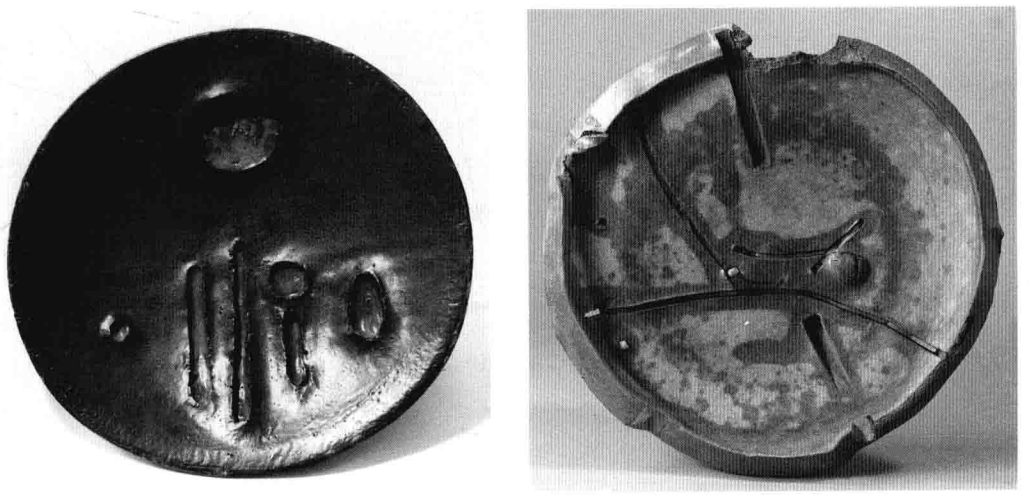
The Contemporary Pot

Studio pottery is currently more exuberant, more experimental and sometimes more anarchic than ever before. At the same time, it is also conservative and a guarantor of decorative tradition. The tension between these extremes, together with the diversity of work along the way, give contemporary ceramics its special flavour and interest. Ceramics, as an applied or decorative art, is also valued more highly today than it has been for many years. This change in interest has come about in part because the decorative arts and decoration generally have been rehabilitated by society's tastemakers – designers, architects and critics. Yet there is another reason. Since the last World War the applied arts, and ceramics in particular, have become more attractive to the ordinary householder. Ceramics has become a popular art form – expressive, domestic in scale, familiar in form, but often with sufficient variety to engage the mind as well the eye. To call studio pottery a populist art form is not to imply that everyone should or could practise it, but to indicate that the best and most innovative of pottery's modern practitioners keep faith with pottery's domestic roots.

The development of and interest in studio ceramics will gather pace during the rest of the 1980s because the diversity of object that is now being provided parallels the new diversity in the design of other consumer objects – a diversity made possible by the extreme flexibility of new technology.

A glance through the pictures in this book reveals that the emphasis rests heavily upon the ceramic vessel – in all its variety. On the whole, I believe that ceramics is about pots and that ceramic sculpture should usually be considered alongside other sculpture. Sculpture, broadly speaking, is concerned with a much wider metaphorical and conceptual range than is normally expected of or possible in pottery. Pottery is judged by a number of criteria – but metaphorical and conceptual content need not be among them. My general (though not total) exclusion of sculpture is based on the practical assumption that it is sounder to compare like with like. Modern pottery is, in any case, rich and surprising enough to merit its own discussion.

Modern handmade pottery falls broadly into two categories: production pottery, in which a potter makes batches of useful domestic wares for sale; and studio pottery, objects made on a one-off basis as a form of art. The status of this pottery art is one of the subjects of this book, but increasingly the two categories are becoming blurred as the century progresses.



Left, Dish. Ruth Duckworth. Stoneware. d.29cm. UK, 1962
Right, Untitled. Peter Voulkos. Stoneware. d.45cm. USA, 1980

The emergence of modern studio pottery dates from the 19th century in Europe because, like handcraft in general, it was a way of opposing the tendencies of industrialization. John Ruskin and William Morris tried very hard, as did Viollet-le-Duc in France, to revitalize interest in the craftsman. The variety of arts and crafts movements and ideas that engaged France, England, Germany and the USA in the early 20th century became focused for a while on one institution – the Bauhaus. Everyone knows that the Bauhaus became Europe's most important art school, initiating ideas which shaped the style of architecture, industrial and graphic design, but it also, by default, influenced the design world's attitudes towards the crafts.

The craft element in the Bauhaus philosophy was at first a part of the core of the art school's curriculum, but craft was downgraded when the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1925 and Gropius redefined his aims. Gillian Naylor's study, *The Bauhaus Reassessed* (1985), explains how the workshops became 'laboratories', and worksmanship became a means of prototyping for the machine. Educationally, handwork was seen more as a way of sensitizing designers to materials than as an end itself. It is interesting that the ceramics workshops established in Weimar were not moved to Dessau, though elsewhere the idea of craft as an end in itself persisted, despite the way in which the crafts were shunted off by the art and design world into a small kingdom of their own.

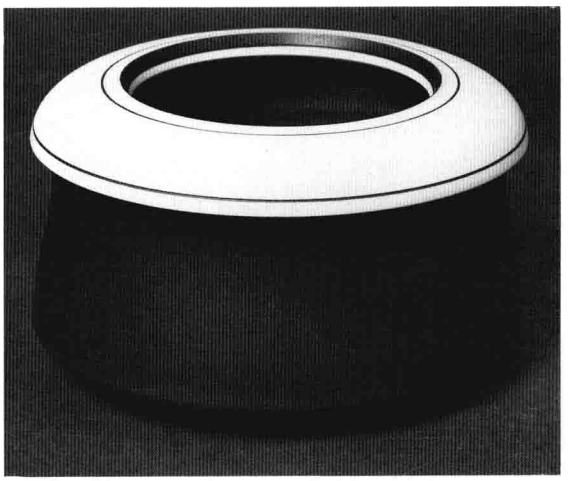
Nevertheless, within its own territory pottery is not always parochial. By tradition it has been an activity in which imitation of styles taken from other applied arts or other countries has been rife. The art historian and artist, Philip Rawson, says in his seminal book *Ceramics* (1971) that

during the 18th century European ceramic shapes, such as coffee pots, together with similar items made in China and Japan for the European market, accurately reflect changes of fashion in silver tableware. And a characteristic of the modern studio potter in the last two decades has been an ability to use art or design for craft ends. At the same time, among the studio potters in particular, there has been a growing spirit of internationalism.

Between the World Wars a number of potters emigrated from Continental Europe to the United States and Britain. Finnish-born Maija Grotell emigrated to the United States after studying at the School of Industrial Art in Helsinki and doing postgraduate work there with the Belgian-born Alfred William Finch – one of Europe's most important pioneers in studio pottery. She had a major impact in the USA and among her pupils featured in this book is the ceramist Richard DeVore. Frans and Marguerite Wildenhain, graduates of the Weimar Bauhaus, came to the USA from Germany in 1939, Gertrude and Otto Natzler from Vienna in 1938. Ruth Duckworth, perhaps one of the most influential of modern potters, was born in Germany, emigrated to Britain shortly before the Second World War, and in 1964 went to Chicago; in Britain she had helped to make English potters aware of sculptural possibilities in clay. And, lastly, two potters of crucial importance to the development of British pottery – Hans Coper (Germany) and Lucie Rie (Austria) – were both refugees from Nazism.

The influence of these émigrés since 1945 has been profound. However, this has also been a period of dominance in pottery by the USA, which has resulted in a division between English-speaking countries (together with those where English is widely spoken) and the rest of the Western world. Since the early 1970s there has been an exchange of ideas through books, magazines and lecture tours on a circuit which includes North America, Great Britain, Australia, Scandinavia and Holland. Meanwhile, France, for example, while it has produced such outstanding ceramists as Claude Varlan and Claude Champy, has not been to a large extent internationally involved in the development of contemporary craft pottery. By contrast, it has generated some of the most interesting fine art using clay as a medium – the painter Edouard Pignon, for instance, has created several large tiled monuments. Indeed, France has continued the tradition of accepting that its painters and sculptors will make forays into the applied arts – a flexibility that is seldom found in the Anglo-American art world. Thus Tamara Preaud and Serge Gauthier's book *Ceramics of the Twentieth Century* (1982) shows us tile pieces by Matisse and ceramic sketches by Raoul Dufy for garden works. By comparison West Germany has maintained a consistently high standard, but unlike the experimental attitude seen in much of the American pottery world, here the work is restrained, with the excitement resting not in form, but in the glazing. Among a number of very good West German potters are Karl and Ursula Scheid, Antje Brüggemann-Breckwoldt and Renate and Hans Heckmann. East German work tends to be more radical again – seen, for example, in the expressionist pots of Karl Fulle.

197, 198
p. 24
121, 151
123, 173
174, p. 15



Above, Figure. Karl Fulle. Stoneware. h.40cm. East Germany, 1985

Above right, Bowl. Ursula Scheid. Porcelain. d.15cm. West Germany, 1985

Right, Jar. Liebfriede Bernstiel. Stoneware. 18cm. West Germany, 1985

Certain countries, such as Britain or Australia, have tended to respond like sponges to outside influences – unlike West Germany and France, which have gone their own way. Britain, for example, swallowed Oriental influences between the two World Wars and especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was followed in turn by a marked Scandinavian input and a dose of Americanization. Today, Britain and Australia together are demonstrating a rampant pluralism and eclecticism. As things have turned out, both countries have gained immeasurably by being open to different influences and new ideas. In Britain – which continues to occupy an important place in the development of 20th-century studio pottery – the range currently includes the refined craftsmanship of David Leach's Anglo-Orientalism, Elizabeth Fritsch's beautifully painted vessels and Wally Keeler's perverse, almost medieval, salt-glazed functional pottery.

p. 33; 33
136, 155
27, 56

One can identify certain national characteristics. Ceramics in Holland owes little to a craft ideology and much more to design, whereas in Britain pottery, especially functional pottery, is frequently nostalgic or, at the very least, borrowing from the past. Scandinavian pottery exhibits the colour range and proportion in its decoration that one finds in Scandinavian architecture and textiles. And American potters, irrespective of whether they are making 'art' or teapots, are frequently inclined to make it big and to make it in a rough but very sound, workmanlike way. Obviously, these are generalizations, but they should not be surprising since, as an applied art, to some extent pottery is bound to reflect a culture's dominant aesthetic. For a quick, but instructive, reference, look at the work of Geert Lap (Holland), Jane Hamlyn or Richard Slee (UK), Ingrid Mortensen (Norway) and Kenneth Ferguson (USA). Finally, by way of further confirmation of national characteristics look also at Matteo Thun's work in Italy: utterly confident design, post-modernist, challenging and chic – Italian from top to bottom. As for the pluralism of Australia – we have only to take note of what Dr Peter Emmett has to say in the catalogue to the 1984 'Mayfair Ceramic Award', in which he identifies all the following contemporary references: Japanese folk art; Oribe; Sodeisha; Islam; pre-Columbian; Art Deco; contemporary painting; primitive art; and textiles.

13, 60
122, 163–4
67, 124
43–4, 47–8

Generalizations apart, contemporary craft pottery owes much of its current practice and theory to two men – Bernard Leach (UK) and Peter Voulkos (USA) – though this is not to say that they are necessarily the best (or the only) innovators, or even the most original potters of their respective generations. Certainly Leach (1887–1979) was the most important figure in handmade pottery in the 1940s and 1950s; Germany, France, Denmark and the USA, as well as Britain and other countries, felt his impact at different points. Leach did not invent studio pottery, but he was able to formulate a philosophy justifying what he did, and it was so persuasive, so rich in its appeal to puritan aesthetics, that it captured the craft pottery movement's imagination. One publication did the trick – *A Potter's Book*, published in 1940.

Leach began his ceramics in Japan, where he lived from 1909 to c.1920. On his return to England he set up a pottery in St Ives, Cornwall. *A Potter's Book* begins with an opening essay called 'Towards A Standard', in which the following judgment is typical: 'The upshot of the argument is that a pot in order to be good should be a genuine expression of life. It implies sincerity on the part of the potter and truth in the conception and execution of the work.' The rest of the book is full of prescriptive recipes for making good, honest pots and lays down an approach which later endorsed several generations of plain, crinkly, brown pots wearing their humility on their surface.

Eventually, humility as a style went out of fashion – and for many potters it never was in fashion, because it was a style that cut them off from the modern world and its art. *A Potter's Book* tries to repudiate the effect that modern art and design had had on the crafts and design