

Modern Artefacts

Potter Duncan Ayscough's refined, sawdust fired vessels combine historical references with seductive techniques

Article by Peter Bodenham

Engaging with Duncan Ayscough's pots is a sensuous and multi-layered aesthetic experience. Formal and material contrasts are clearly evident as voluptuous full bodies extend into long elegant necks and strongly delineated forms contrast against complex surfaces. An intensely defined relationship exists between the dark exterior and the jewel-like apertures that lead into the exterior spaces of the vessels. On closer investigation an extended list of intellectual contrasts and contradictions are evident. Duncan has an obsessive need to control the making process, but then consigns his work to the chaos of sawdust firing. He enjoys unpretentious and utilitarian ancient artifacts as a source, but imbues his work with sophisticated aesthetic and cultural discourses. He is a socialist who makes non-utilitarian pots for people with disposable incomes and an eye for resonant, beautiful objects. In a sense some of these contrasts and contradictions are shared by many craftspeople of the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

You could say it is anachronistic to produce 'hand-made' pots in Wales or any other Western industrialized culture today. The successful market-driven economy we enjoy has, built into it, many social and cultural contradictions and distortions. Duncan's pots, as other exemplary highly crafted objects, provide questions such as what is the meaning, function and value of the 'hand-made' today?

After studying three-dimensional design in Manchester and subsequently a master's degree in Cardiff in 1994, he now works from his studio near Llandovery. Starting his love for the making process at the age of thirteen, he has a long association with the potter's wheel. Truly a ceramic anorak, Duncan would undoubtedly score highly on *Mastermind* in his specialist subject. An extensive knowledge and understanding of the long and varied histories of ceramics clearly informs his work, from Islamic fluid drop-like forms, to echoes of ancient British vessels. A conversation with Duncan is always culturally far ranging, engaging and invariably funny. Duncan and the former potter turned comedian Johnny Vegas share a similar sense of humour and comic timing, though thankfully Duncan has a more classical appearance.

Recognition of his work is gathering pace following his first solo show at the White Gallery in Brighton in 2000, another major exhibition at the Maltby Gallery in Winchester in 2001 and his contribution to the excellent *Modus Operandi* exhibition at Ruthin Craft Centre in North Wales, 2002. The purchase of his work

by the National Museum of Wales for their collection clearly signifies the importance of Duncan's work.

One of the most revealing and interesting aspects of an artist/craftperson's creative practice is gaining an insight into their sources of inspiration, their mentors and methods of production. One of Duncan's ceramic heroes is Hans Coper, the truly original twentieth century German potter who came to Britain as a refugee in World War II. He shares an interest with him in ancient material culture, pointing me towards a quote by Coper, describing a simple amphora:

'A predynastic Egyptian pot, roughly egg-shaped, the size of my hand; made thousands of years ago it has survived in more than one sense. A humble, passive, somehow absurd object – yet potent, mysterious – ensues. It conveys no comment, no self-expression, but seems to contain and reflect its maker and the human world it inhabits, to contribute its minute quantum of energy'. (Hans Coper, 1969)

This quote reveals the considered nature of Coper's interest in ancient artifacts. Similarly Duncan is fascinated by the potential of artifacts to gather a wide phenomena of meaning around them.

A more diffused influence on his work must be the Iron Age hill fort of Garn Goch viewed through the studio window. The fort was used by indigenous peoples and the Romans: many 5,000 year old artifacts have been found in the area. As well as ancient pottery and Neolithic stone tools, fossils and natural forms feed into Duncan's work. Shells and seed pods function as a rich resource, providing a vocabulary of form, texture, colour and line. On a recent visit to the studio when Duncan and I discussed sources of inspiration, he placed before me a polished fossil retrieved from a beach.

'When looking at the stone you are aware of its geological make up, the ammonite imbedded within it, which you register as a once-living creature. The dynamism and history of these elements is present if you engage with the stone. I would hope people might be inspired to adopt the same level of investment in my work'.

Primarily he develops his ideas through the making process but occasionally sketches or refers to his photographic sources to feed into and help critically define his three-dimensional forms. All his pots are essentially one-off pieces, however they exist in series, themes or groupings. Surfaces are constructed using layers of fine clay slips (terra sigillata). These slips are prepared by separating out the finest particles of clay, a technique first used on ceramics by the Greeks and Romans. The mottled patina to the surface occurs through processes Duncan has developed which involve firing the pots in sawdust over several days; through lengthy processes the pots acquire intensity and depth of surface. Gold leaf is used as a final stage in order to heighten the visual impact

of the interiors and act as a contrast to mottled reds, greys and black exterior surfaces.

For the viewer, Duncan states, the making process is similar to watching paint dry; a meticulous process involving throwing, drying, assemblage, turning, application of slips, prolonged firing, then finishing with precious metals and waxes. One of the most captivating elements of these vessels is the complex reflective surface. Through the vessel's surface, the viewer can see subtle aspects of the making process: spiraling crazing revealing evidence of the dynamism of the potter's wheel, the complex landscape of carbonization embodying the firing process.

Duncan currently teaches part-time at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and occasionally at the West Wales School of the Arts in Carmarthen. Teaching, he says, is fundamental to his creative practice, and he enjoys the creative exchange with students as well as the economic and creative balance a portfolio working week engenders.

On one level it is impossible to turn Duncan Ayscough's pots into the written word: they are the language which speaks to us. Formalist theory goes some way to explaining why abstract art, or in this case great pots, can deliver an aesthetic experience or 'wow' factor. On a formal basis we do have classical proportions or the geometric craft employed by the Islamic tradition to work from. However, the sense of a vessel being 'right', why some forms, shapes, colours, lines hit the mark is, essentially, still a mystery. In an increasingly mechanistic and rationalist world people like Duncan Ayscough are, thankfully, driven to make beautifully crafted pots. I am not talking about the decorative here: the 'hand-made' pot, produced in our time and space, can still be a culturally significant object.

This is a revised version of an essay written for *Modus Operandi*, Ruthin Craft Centre and Gallery, 2002.