

The UK Crafts Council Collection

Article by Paul Bailey

FOR FULL-TIME CERAMICS MAKERS, THE NEED TO GAIN a national standing for their work has never been more important. Added to this is the possibility of work being purchased for the nation, which is compelling.

Step forward Christina McGregor, Keeper of Collections at the Crafts Council UK. Who are they? What do they do? Well, she and her colleagues support and promote ceramics makers amongst other crafts. Keeping them alive, and looking for the cutting-edge of the creative spirit which is the strength of the UK's arts and crafts market.

So, HOW DOES IT WORK?

From their fashionable headquarters in north London, McGregor works with Exhibitions & Collections colleagues on promoting the Crafts Council Collection both nationally and internationally. This includes one new national touring exhibition each year in which makers are asked to lend work for the duration of the tour.

Then, should she and the advisory committee decide that a particular maker has reached a pivotal point in his or her career or ceramics practice, they might decide to purchase the work for the permanent collection, in this way continuing a custom of professional support that started back in 1972. For the maker, inclusion in the collection carries the prestige of national and international recognition. It is a critical meeting of the skills needed by master makers with their moves into more fine art periods of their work.

McGregor explains the system as being a way of growing the permanent collection, which is then available to museums and galleries for lending.

Today there are some 568 ceramic pieces in the collection. It is not a survey of ceramics, however, but has to be ambitious and innovative. A panel of specialists advise the Council on 'current trends'.

The work featured here is just a small overview of what is held in the permanent collection, and is McGregor's personal choice focusing on acquisitions from the last decade.



Above: Grayson Perry. *Mad Kid's Bedroom Wall Pot*. 1996. 44 x 43.1 cm. Photo by Todd-White Art Photography.
Below: Stephen Dixon. *Their Finest Hour*. 2004. 66 x 31 x 34 cm. Photo by Todd-White Art Photography.
Facing page: Edmund De Waal. *Arcady*. 200. 140 x 30 x 30 cm. Photo by Heini Schneebeli.



GRAYSON PERRY

Made in 1996, this work by Perry, *Mad Kid's Bedroom Wall Pot* was purchased in a moment of brilliance by the then Curator, Amanda Fielding, as Perry was on the cusp of international fame and just about affordable by the Council at the time. In the tradition of both 18th century artisan pottery and the satire of Hogarth and Gillray, this pot depicts a teenager's bedroom. He says of the work, "the sense of menace of this macabre isolation of a country adolescent boy is offset by the mawkish sentiments of the text." It remains one of the most popular pieces in the collection and one which McGregor could have out on loan all year due to demand.

STEPHEN DIXON

Their Finest Hour was made by Stephen Dixon back in 2004 and subsequently purchased by the Council in 2013. There is more to his career as both distinguished academic and artist-maker. Dixon continues a long tradition of political commentary through ceramics in a similar vein to Perry, says McGregor.

The images on this piece make references to war and conflict and, following the Iraq war, the title refers to the then UK government of the day's appropriation of Churchill's famous "Battle of Britain" speech. The form of the vessel comes from oil drums and petrol cans.

It should be noted that the Crafts Council itself is a non-political organisation. Both this and the work by Perry are currently enjoying a successful UK tour as key pieces in their touring exhibition *Hidden Agenda: Socially Conscious Craft*.

EDMUND DE WAAL

Purchased in 2008 this work marks a transition for De Waal, as he moved from pure ceramics into a fine-art ceramics period. Called *Arcady*, it was his first use of metal to provide a framework for the work. It is a reference to a melancholic Poussin painting by the same name and to not being able to touch. In this case the porcelain pieces cannot be touched within the case.

Since the 1990s he has moved from domestic objects towards installations of multiple pots, exploring colour. *Arcady* is an illustration of this development and was part of an important body of work created for Kettles Yard in Cambridge but not shown in London until being acquired by the Crafts Council.

MICHAEL EDEN

The story of Michael Eden is an example of a major career turning point, which the Council champions. After 20 years of working as a traditional maker of slip decorated earthenware Eden undertook a MPhil research project at the Royal College of Art. In doing so, he became interested in the new opportunities that digital technology offer. The result was an investigation into how the Wedgwood *Tureen* could be transferred and re-interpreted using the new technology. He redesigned it in such a way that it could be manufactured using conventional methods. But for Eden it was not just a case of the maker pressing a button, he had to choose the most appropriate materials, tools and processes. *Wedgwoodn't Tureen* was made and acquired in 2010.





Above: Michael Eden. *A Tall Pink Round Wedgwoodn't Tureen*. 2010. 41 x 26 cm. Photo by Todd-White Art Photography.
 Below: Katharine Morling. *Morling and the Hoard*. 2012. 37 x 57 x 59.9 cm. Photo by Todd-White Art Photography.



KATHARINE MORLING

She had been on Crafts Council's radar for some time before winning first prize at the *World Crafts Council Second European Triennial* in 2010.

As one of the most exciting makers today, her work titled *Morling and the Hoard* represents a time of change in her career. The *Hoard* refers to the ancient Anglo-Saxon treasure found in Staffordshire. She made 10 large-scale ceramic sculptures of mythological godlike creatures that represent the deities that the Anglo Saxons might have worshipped. Each was made in her signature black and white style. As part of the final exhibition Morling developed a stop motion digital animation of the work in progress to re-imagine the story.

The piece was acquired during the development of *Real to Reel*, a Crafts Council touring exhibition with makers whose practice incorporates film, and was an opportunity to acquire both work and film together.

JULIAN STAIR

Stair is representative of the growing numbers of contemporary makers exploring their practice through installation and multimedia formats. Comprising jar, plinth, slide-show, film and audio it is one of the largest installation pieces owned by the Crafts Council, explains McGregor.

Reliquary for a Common Man is a memorial to his uncle-in-law, Leslie James Cox (1926–2008). It was also the anchor piece in Stair's 2013 solo show *Quietus: The Vessel, Death and the Human Body*, a collection of ceramic vessels in which he addressed the containment of the human body in death. An intensely personal work, *Reliquary* is an embodiment of the themes of the exhibition through the incorporation of Leslie Cox's cremated remains within the artwork. Stair has substituted the ox-bone element of bone china with Cox's remains. This piece marks the culmination to date of a long and personal development of themes by Stair, and is a great example of the Crafts Council acquiring work at a pivotal moment in a maker's career, a view that was shared by the Art Fund who supported the purchase of this work.

CLAIRE CURNEEN

Curneen had already been known to the Crafts Council, but the award of first prize in the sculpture category of the 1999 *Ceramics Monthly* international competition was the catalyst for initially acquiring her work for the collection. As well as developing her work and showing consistently at *COLLECT*.

The Council wrote to Curneen in 1999 to congratulate her on the prize and to ask her about acquiring work, which it subsequently did. *Guardian* was purchased in 2014 as an addition to this earlier acquisition.

She is influenced by the early Italian Renaissance painting by Piero Della Francesca called *Baptism of Christ*. After spending time studying the collection at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, she later



Above: Julian Stair. *Reliquary for a Common Man*. 2012. 16.6 x 17 x 106.7 cm. Photo by Sophie Mutevelian.

Below: Claire Curneen. *Guardian*. 2011. 54 x 28 x 30 cm. Photo by Relic Imaging Ltd.

developed her ideas back at her base in Wales at the Fireworks Studios. Her figures live in a world filled with narratives and their own sorrows. Curneen is interested in how materials can have a visceral effect on the viewer – the use of the cobalt blue flower decoration is a reference to the short lived richness of a flower in bloom – the running glaze blurs the image and creates a tension. Curneen exhibited a pair of figures treated in a similar way at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2013.

WHAT MAKES A KEEPER OF COLLECTIONS?

Organising exhibitions and cataloguing collections is not for the faint hearted but McGregor has a track record with St Paul's Cathedral, Victoria & Albert Museum and the Wallace Collection among other achievements. This is on top of the acquisition of new work and constant research, plus the demands to make the collection available for lending to organisations world-wide from the Craft Council.

One of the biggest exhibitions in London in May each year is COLLECT. It is designed and produced by the Crafts Council and shown at the Saatchi Gallery. It is now in its 12th year. She describes it as the international showcase for makers selected by the Crafts Council, commercial galleries, national museums, and collectors from around the world. It is a golden opportunity to make contacts and promote sales of work. International links are something that the Crafts Council wants to develop further with exhibition exchanges to showcase UK makers worldwide. During this year alone she will have worked on exhibitions in Dubai and South Korea.

If there is one overriding philosophy behind her work, then it is to ensure that the collection is a living body of work ready to go out on loan in the UK and internationally. One can only be re-assured that such a positive intervention policy is alive and well, with the skills of the makers being complemented by those behind the scenes who make it all happen.



Paul Bailey currently writes on current ceramics makers and designers in the UK. His belief in the ability of both young makers and established craft studios is a mission to gain greater international recognition in the media. He currently represents the Aylesford Pottery in the UK.
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