National College of Art & Design
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'Twentieth Century Abstract Painting on Ceramics'

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Twentieth Century Abstract Painting on Ceramics

Introduction

The difference between the abstract painted plate and the abstractly painted painting is tangible. Alison Britton expresses it with the eloquent viewpoint; 'Craft is a means to an end and is not really anything in itself. It consists of doing something properly and is the basis of recognition of values and skills and methods and knowledge of materials. it has no real substance or meaning without leaning toward art and design. The design world and the art world have equal need for it..'[1] Ceramics has an equal need for art also. Throughout this century we have seen the glazed surface allude to the painted surface. Artists have crossed over form traditions in painting and sculpture to use this plastic material – many with very pleasing results. For myself the strongest results in this material are born out of abstraction. The freedom of such pieces is what excites the viewer as well as the energy that can be captured in something that has been fired.

The repetition made possible by the Industrial Revolution made us lose a lot of the possibilities of choice and variation as the machine works essentially as a duplicator. one of the results was that the earliest ceramic artists of this century were pre-occupied with the revival of the traditional craft movement. Bernard Leach wrote, 'not only has the hand-craft been ousted by machinery, but folk-art, that delicious expression of genuine and naïve feeling has silently departed.'[2]

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[1] Dormer & Cripps, 1985, p. 1.
[2] Leach, 1978, p. 127.

At the beginning of this century, with the advent of a new era in travel, there began to be an interblending of cultures and a crossover within art and craft. Bernard leach, the English potter and one of the main protagonists in this movement to revive craft said, 'My belief is that we are slowly feeling our way toward a criterion of the good act corresponding more or less with the unwritten principles by which we judge other forms of art. Nothing, in my opinion, is so important as such a clarification of this period of expansion or interblending. in this century, the potter, for the first time in history is stretching his horizons from village, or town, or country, to the whole world.'[3]

As the potter's horizon has been stretched, so too has the mind of the fine art painter. The twentieth century has seen many movements in art deal with the idea of 'abstraction'. The ripples of these movements, of course, have altered other aspects of the loosely termed 'art' world, craft being no exception. Although the craft artists is ever careful not to be tarnished with the same brush as the fine art painter. Alison Britton has said: 'The craftsman who is leaning towards art does not want to be judged alongside fine art. A craftsman's ornament and decoration may be pleasurable, pretty, humorous and these same adjectives may be applied as appropriately as a Vermeer or a Donatello. However, in the craftsman's care, these adjectives are all that can be applied and all that he expects to be applied, whereas in the case of a Vermeer or a Donatello they are only a beginning.'[4] Pottery has of course always served as a vehicle for painting. The painted pottery produced in ancient Greece strictly followed the precepts of the painting of the time in both quality and style. Whilst, more recently in the last five centuries, the pottery of Japan has often been freer and in advance of

[3] Op. Cit, p. 121.
[4] Dormer & Cripps, 1985, p. 2.

the painting of the time. it even anticipated modern western abstract approaches. Abstract painting in this century has expanded the vocabulary of abstract decoration and given fresh meaning to the accidental effects of dripping, dipping, pouring, brushing and splattering glazes, oxides, slips and stains on pots in the round. Ceramics alludes to painting but also shares with it the necessity for spontaneity, and the joy that emanates from that. Working with a sense of immediacy is necessary when working with clay. It is plastic only when it is wet, and it must be worked as it soon dries and hardens. The painter treats paint as if it were wet plastic clay – a soft, wet, viscous material that is responsive to the touch. Paint, like clay, can be brushed, poured, dripped, squeezed, pinched, scraped, incised, scratched and moulded. The pot-form has more recently been used as a 'canvas' upon which the clay itself is used like paint. This paint-like clay can be used in a three-dimensional way to enhance or deny form. The surface decoration can either work in harmony or disharmony with the existing pot.

At the beginning of this century, Bernard Leach was exploring the possibilities of surface decoration. Pablo Picasso took great interest in this plastic form of expression and applied painting to clay in the middle years of both his life and this century. Whilst Alison Britton approaches clay today with her own unique skills. Each has or had an interest in painting and this evidently plays its part in their work in clay. It feeds directly into their respective approaches to glaze and surface decoration.

CHAPTER 1

BERNARD LEACH AND ABSTRACTION, HIS INFLUENCES, HIMSELF AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Those painting on ceramic is have 'borrowed' parts of fine art painting. Decorated surfaces have often alluded to work by the abstract painter. At the turn of this century, Bernard Leach (Fig. 1) was the initiator of such 'borrowing' practices, fusing his western art with borrowed eastern ideals. leach admired the characteristics of Japanese art, he recalled that: 'the art had not dynamism, but the development of the exquisite decorative concept.'[5] Born in Tokyo in 1887, Leach studied art in England, he later travelled back to Japan where he trained as a potter. He is not acclaimed for his mastery of pottery, rather his ability and skill at introducing new forms of decoration to the west. He wrote of this time in Japan: 'Japan is a potters heaven, all the wares of far Easter culture have broken upon its shores. Pots are understood through the lenses. From the outset people even bought mine.'[6]

Leach who trained under the well respected Japanese potter Tomimoto in Abiko, Japan also said that, 'The background of zen and tea provided a highly developed perceptively of truth and beauty, and there was n hard dividing line between arts and crafts. Lying behind Japanese cultural life were magnificent achievements of Chinese and Korean potters of the Sung, T'ang and Yi dynasties, setting the noblest standards the word has known.'[7]

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[5] Leach, 1978, p. 128.
[6] Op, Cit, p. 128.

The Japanese have always had a very rich tradition in ceramics, where even peasant craftsmen have produced so-called 'high-art'. These unknown craftsmen were engaging in the process of what were to become world-inspiring objets. leach, alongside fellow potter Soetsu Yanagi and another craftsman Shoji Hamada, began looking at why these pots were so important. Travelling west, they began trying to inspire and convert craftsmen into reviving their lost craft traditions, which they believed were fundamental to pottery making. What they were really doing was importing Orientalism into America and England. Since trade had been re-opened with Japan by the 1860's the west had been critically receptive to Orientalism. Enthusiasm for Chinese and Japanese art and design was at an unprecedented level and, in the art world this was directly linked to an emergent modernism and interest in the primitive. Leach was strongly influenced by the post-impressionists in Europe. in particular by Pablo Picasso. The reason for this interest lay in the fact that, the eminent twentieth century painter was beginning to appreciate primitive Negro sculpture. In 1900, Maurice de Valminck, the painter, discovered quite by accident a small African wood carving in a Parisian curio shop. Picasso later saw it and was fascinated 'by its simplified forms, it's distortion for religious or expressive purposes, by the tremendous vitality that infused it, but most of al for its perfection as abstract design.'[8]

Leach notes: 'It was Picasso who introduced us to primitive art, which as with the art of children consists not so much in an attempt to represent what the eye sees, as to put coloured line round conceptions of the seen object. Like the primitive artists, picture

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[7] Ibid, p. 128.
[8] Ibid, p. 121.

drawn by children are often extraordinarily expressive in this way. The influence of primitive art is a cause of the abandonment of representationalism of past centuries.'[9] And representationalism continued to be abandoned in this century. Leach believed 'the primary and highest function of art is communication between the spirit of man and man . . . Drawing, painting, form, colour, proportion, may be unlike nature. The question is whether the spiritual communication is expressed.'[10] In Japan around 1919 Leach was producing pottery from porcelain, Stoneware and Raku with some overglaze enamel decoration inspired by Japanese porcelain. (Fig. 2) some of the pots Leach was producing were showing the influences of early Chinese work, like the Sung dynasty wares from the years 960 to 1279 which were concurrently being exhibited in Tokyo. Leach started to glaze some pots in Celedons and deep iron-black glazes as a distinct response to those pieces. Others were raku fired. The edges of the dishes that he was producing at this time were decorated with small cross-hatching (Fig. 3) He had discovered English slipware. Up until this time Leach had been excited only by Oriental pots and a few old delft and German pieces that he had seen in the museums of Tokyo.

There were many reasons why Leach began to look to English slipware from the 1800's. It gave him a sense that there were some decorative artists from an English tradition who were concerned with the same crucial ideas as himself. These artists had been concerned with placing central decorative images on pieces and hence avoided making patterns in the round. It also gave value to lettering which was something that up to this point Leach was practising, but did not feel altogether comfortable doing. (Fig 4) A reporter wrote when commenting on one of Leach's exhibitions in 1919

[9] Ibid. p. 121.
[10] Ibid, p. 120.

'from painting and etching [Leach] has been drawn in late years to the crafts and many promising experiments have come from this in Abiko.'[11] (Fig. 5, 6, 7).

Leach's sophistication in mark making was matched by his sensitivity to the surface qualities of clay. In his earliest experiments with Scgraffito decoration Leach showed less than exemplary results. Hamada's Sgrattito bowls, produced at the St. Ives pottery, which the two co-founded in 1920 in Cornwall, were more fluent in their execution. However, Leach soon caught up, and became capable of producing a wide range and variety of marks which allowed him a more robust interaction with the surface of the clay. 'His judgement about when to leave parts of pots unglazed to reveal the colour and texture of the unfired clay becomes increasingly fine.'[12]

Leach became so enthralled by the process of decoration that the function of the piece was often negated. The pots were too decorative for everyday use. He continued to employ a wider range of glazes which were of different tonal values and gave different textural effects. Leach also employed the technique of combing the clay and applying sprigs to glazes (Fig. 8).He also used his fingers in the glazes to get different marks. Those very marks can be seen on the ceramic piece *'Slipware dish with grey-green to olive-brown glaze.*

Leach's fascination with brushwork led him to watch a native American Indian in her hometown of Santa Fe produce a paint brush from a leaf. Leach, who had travelled to America with fellow potter Hamada, was intrigued to find a ceramicist who did not have access to either a kiln or a potter's wheel, manage to make the brush from the

[11] Ibid, p. 246.
[12] De Waal, 1997, p 74

mere leaf. She chewed away the pulp, leaving the veins which, when dragged across a piece of pottery, left marks which 'could be of a beautiful curvature or a close clean parallel.'[13] This pottery was then Smoke-fired by its maker.

Throughout Leach's time at Abiko where he trained, then Tokyo and at his own pottery in St. Ives, pots were thrown from him to decorate. Because of the initial training Leach received as an art student and due to his natural inclination, Leach was more interested in the dynamics of mark-making than in the idea of form. Drawing, engraving, etching, painting, slip-decorating, combed decoration into clay, Sgrattito and fluting were all of priority. The graphic work which he produced in his earlier life, those innumerable etchings and wash sketches fed constantly and inspired the decorative work he produced on the pots. All of the preliminary sketches leach made for ideas of new forms were drawn two-dimensionally on paper and not three-dimensionally on the wheel.

Leach is generally believed to be too conservative to be relevant to younger potters. It is difficult to see how this reputation has arisen, for Leach was no cautious late Edwardian. Apart form his many activities in other areas of creativity, his sheer range of shapes and techniques belie this image. He engraved, faceted, trailed, painted, pressed, slabbed, threw and cast made raku, earthenware, porcelain, saltglaze, enamels, stoneware both oxidised and reduced in updraught and downdraught single chamber and multi-chamber, oil and wood fired kilns.

[13] Leach, 1978, p. 247.

Shoji Hamada, who had initially came to St. Ives, Cornwall in 1920 to work for Leach, soon became a collaborator with the English potter and then a friend. In fact some saw in Hamada a better potter and decorator than Leach. Hamada produced a show of stoneware in 1923 to great critical acclaim. The art critic, W. McLance saw the show at the English based Patterson Gallery, and hence made a revealing comparison between Leach's and Hamada's work. McLance describes Leach as: 'a potter with a bias towards painting . . .he coaxes the masses of inert clay . . . works delicately with his fingers.'[14] While Hamada had more of a bias towards sculpture compelling the clay 'by pressure, into aesthetic equilibrium . . uses his hands more as a whole'.[15] McLance concluded by expressing 'Mr. Leach's [pots] have more grace Mr. Hamada's more power.'[16] When comparing the two potter's use of surface decoration, McLance perceptively remarked 'in this superaddition of pattern to form, pottery differs from either painting or sculpture. Mr. Hamada has adapted the same basic pattern to a variety of shapes. it becomes a new pattern and integral part.'[16] During the three years Hamada worked at St. Ives, he embodied the current phenomenal interest in Orientalism and authenticated the artistic ideals of this period. He was one of a group of revolutionary artists introducing the idea of abstraction into craft. (Fig. 10)

William Staite-Murray was another artist-potter working in England after the first world war. He also developed an abstract style of brushstroke and incised decoration. Staite-Murray had met Leach, and the two were aware of each other's designs. At one time, the two were meant to share hours teaching at an art college. This only resulted

[14] De Waal 1997 p. 18.
[15] Ibid, p. 18
[16] Ibid, p. 18.
[16] Ibid, p. 18.

in some bitter correspondence and the arrangement was never properly resolved. in later years Leach reputedly admonished the designs Staite-Murray had produced in earlier years. Hamada, however, embraced the friendship offered to him by Statie-Murray. When Hamada was working in St. Ives, he showed Staite-Murray how to make footrings for pots ad how to hold a decorating brush in an Oriental manner.

At St. Ives in Cornwall there were the startings of a group of soon-to-be well respected English abstract artists, known as the St. Ives painters. The main protagonist, Ben Nicholson, had lived most of his life in this small English fishing village. Born in 1894, Nicholson attended the Slade School of Fine Art in 1910. This was the same college Leach had attended and the two were likely to have suffered the same sharp tongued criticisms that it's teacher, Henry Tonks, was prone to administer. Nicholson, however only lasted three months and hence was largely self taught. He enjoyed painting still lives and landscapes with highly textured surfaces where the paint was constantly scraped back and incised. He painted in a manner informed but not dominated by cubism. In 1931 Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, another abstractionist, exhibited together among side William Staite-Murray the potter. His work made reference to Nicholson's as the decoration he was producing began to grow into more autonomous abstract compositions.

During the following years, Nicholson came into contact with many leading abstract and cubist painters. Juan Miro, Georges Braque and Hans Arp were just three of these who made an impact. Pablo Picasso was considered one of the most important contacts. It was considered important as Nicholson had started to organise 'space' within the paintings. He wrote of the time: 'About space construction: I can explain

one aspect of this by an early painting I made of a shop window in Dieppe though, at the time, this was not made with any conscious idea of space but merely using the shop window as a theme on which to base an imaginative idea. The name of the shop was '*au Chat botte*' and this set going a train of though connected with the fairy tales of my childhood being in French, and my French being a little mysterious, the words themselves also had an abstract quality but what was important was that the name was printed in very lovely red lettering on the window – giving one plane – and in this window were reflections of what was behind me as I looked in, giving a second plane – while through the window, objects on a table were performing a kind of ballet and forming the 'eye' or life-point of the painting giving a third plane. These three planes and all their subsidiary planes were interchangeable so that you could not tell which was real and which unreal, what was reflected and what unreflected, and this created as I see now, some kind of space or imaginative world in which one could live.[17] (Fig. 11).

This organisation of space or feeling for pictorial space was important to all of the abstract painters. The surface of the canvas was a priority and due to the treatment of this surface, pictorial depth was often negated. The purity of Nicholson's work endows these paintings with an almost metaphysical quality. Nicholson stated: 'As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding or realisation of infinity – an ideal which is complete with no beginning, no end and therefore all things for all time.'[18] Leach, when living in Tokyo had acquired the Ba'hai faith and was unequivocal about the fact that art had its roots in spirituality. The idea of automatism – of letting go and

[17] Lewison, 1991, p. 13.
[18] Op.Cit., p. 16.

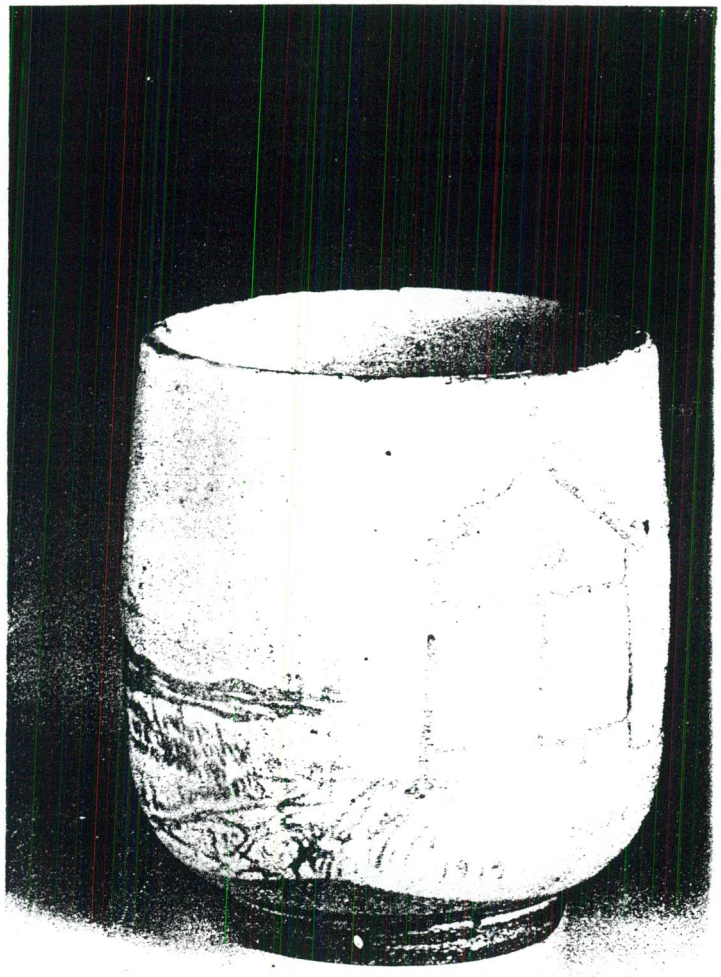
seeing what the unconscious would deliver was a term used by abstractionists. Leach and his fellow ceramists were practising this after the 1920's at the St. Ives pottery.

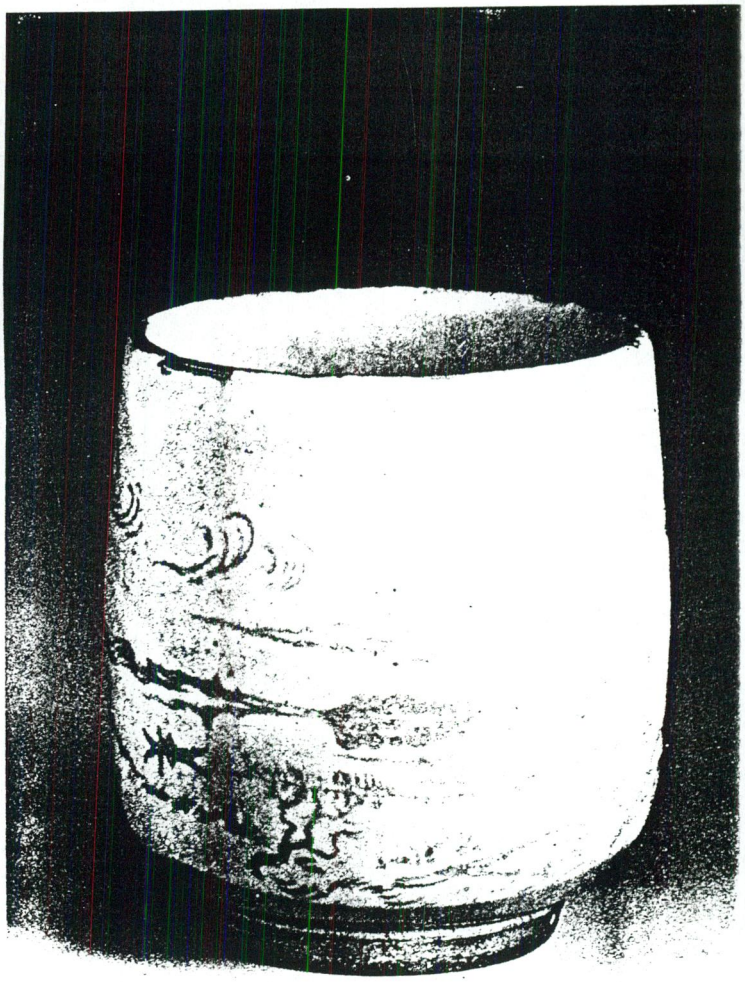
Another important local artist at this time was the painter Peter Lanyon. He was born in 1918 into a family with long Cornish ancestry. He studied at the Penzance School of Art in 1936 and went on to develop his own style of painting. He abandoned perspective and deep space in favour of intense painterly activity on the surface of the canvas. He replaced direct description with allusive references to reality embedded in the texture of the paint. He was an abstract painter on account of the obvious gulf between his art and perceptive reality, that is to say the canvas could not easily be read. However, he was a realist in the way that he took personal experience as a starting point. Langan made contact in the late thirties with the leading abstract artists, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepwroth and Naum Gabo, who were all residing at St. Ives. He then went on to paint under Nicholson's supervision. landscape painting in England, at that time, was dominated by surrealism, but Lanyon's training was in abstraction. The work he did in the late thirties ultimately laid the ground for what became the landscape – informed abstraction of St. Ives painting in the fifties.

It is interesting to note that the painters of this time in St. Ives were concerned with decorating the surface of the canvas and were not concerned with achieving levels of depth in their work. The St. Ives potters were only interested in surface decoration also, where they borrowed Oriental motifs and placed them on occidental pots. Attempting to change their forms with this decoration was not a concern. The painters were very concerned with the space which they were dealing with. So too were the potters, who concentrated on producing 'central images' when working in the round.

The abstract artists working at the time were treating paint as clay, scratching it etc. and then, according to McLance, Leach was accused of treating clay like paint. There is a cross-over again as regards what are the spiritual reasons for making work or what spiritual elements the work contains. The painters promote the act of automatism which can be spiritual whilst the potters have learnt that all pots have to have a spiritual content to be of aesthetic worth. Most of the painters were painting from personal feelings and not from something concrete or real, while the work the potters were making concentrated on abstract motifs and other non-representational marks. Both lacked realism whilst there were references to nature in both painters' and potters' work.

(fig. 1) Bernard Leach.

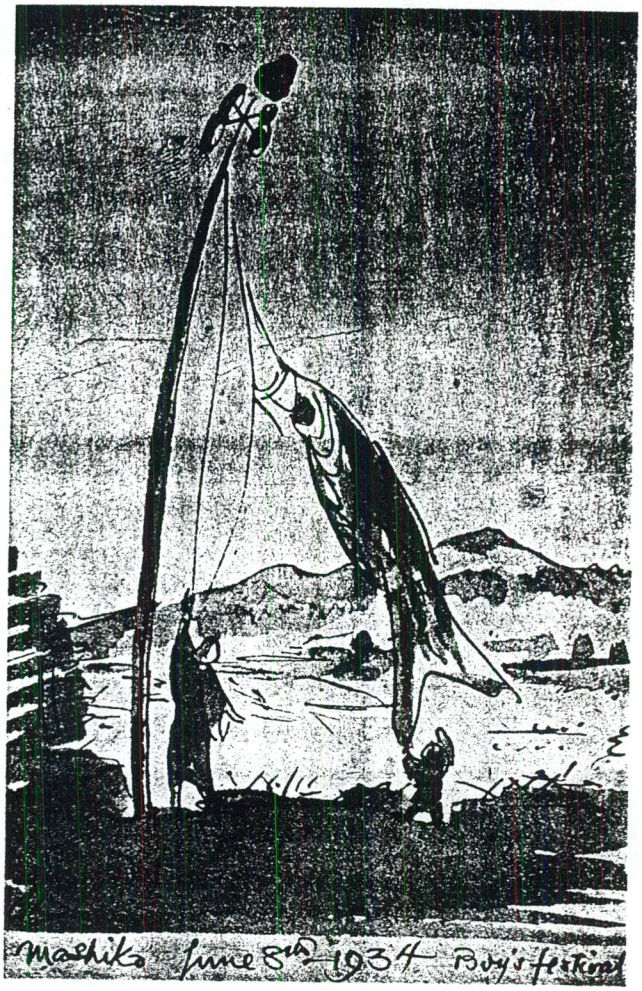




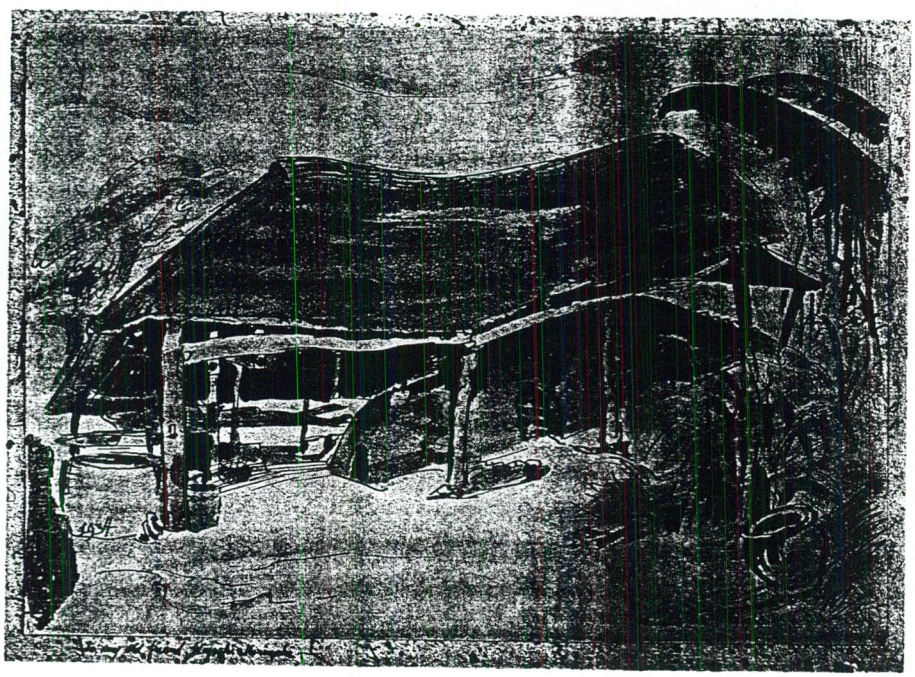
(fig.2) Examples of Bernard Leach tea bowls.

(fig. 3)'Hare Dish'1919,an early examp
of a plate with a centraly placed image
and cross-hatching border with writing

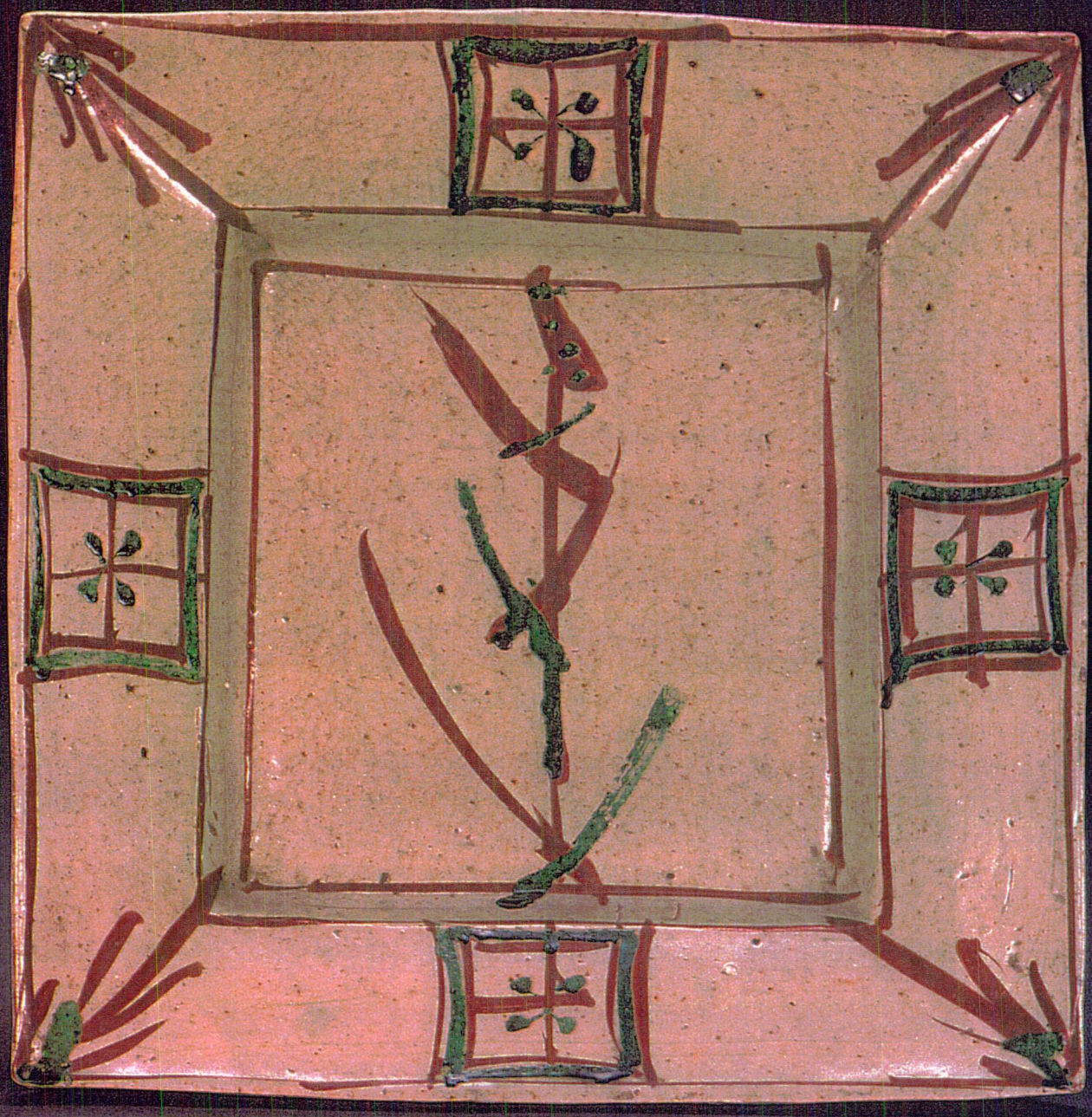
(fig. 4)'Griffon' Dish 1929,an earthenware
dish with abstract slip decoration.



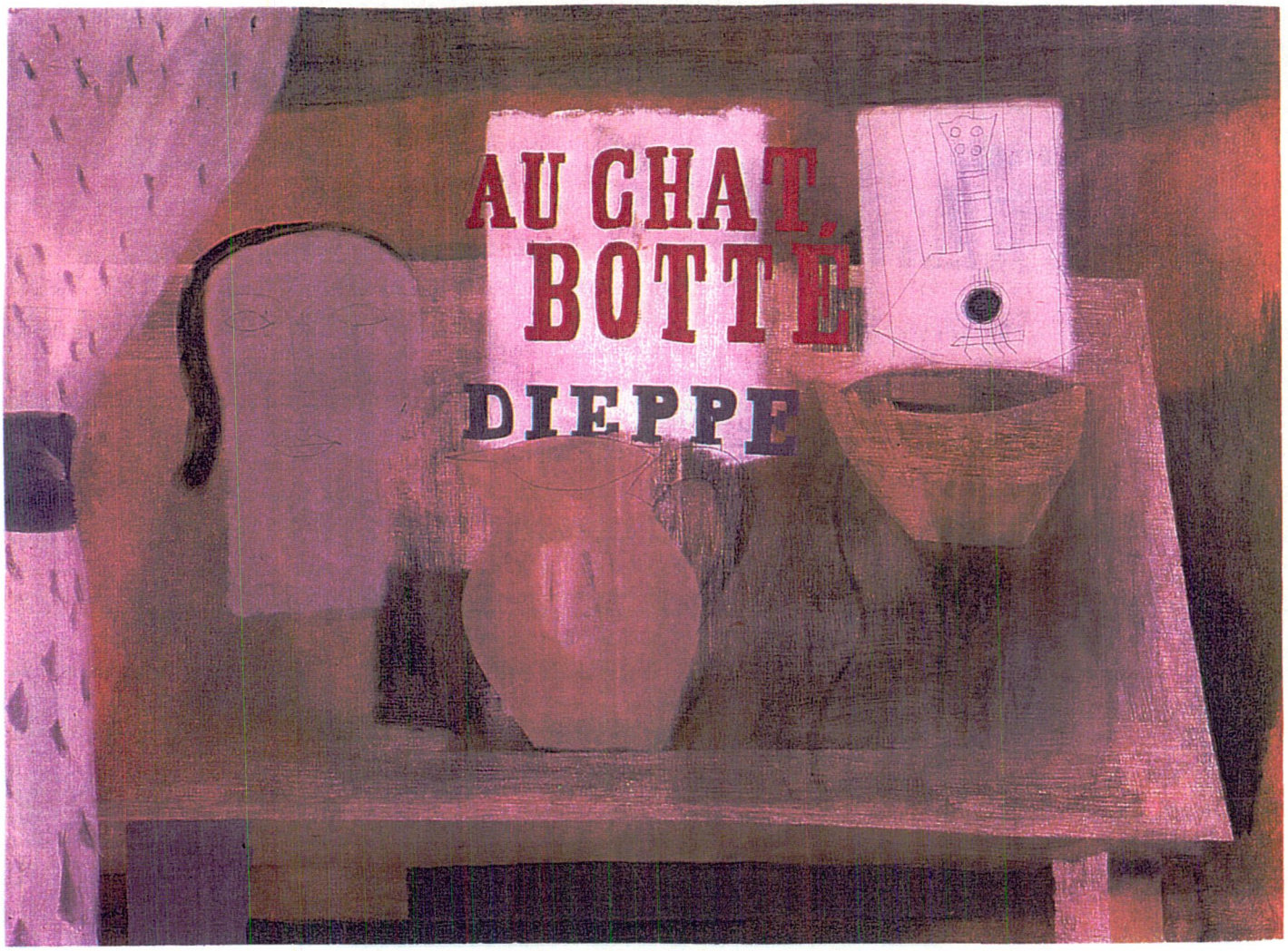
(fig. 5,6&7)Examples of the abstract wash drawings that Leach made which constantly fed into his ceramic work.



(fig. 8)Picture of Bernard Leach changing the surface of a pot on the wheel with some tied together twigs.



(fig. 10)Square dish is an example of Hamada's absractly decorated stoneware work dating back to 1940.



(fig. 11)'Au Chatt Botte' painted
by Ben Nicholson in 1932.

CHAPTER 2

PABLO PICASSO: THE MASTER ABSTRACT PAINTER, MAKING POTS

Before Picasso, ceramics was always considered a minor art, an art reserved for a few effette initiates, finicking aesthetes drooping over a past definitely completed. To tell the truth nobody paid it any attention . . . And then all of a sudden, this imp of a man took it into his head to devote himself heart and soul to this form of plastic expression and to take an interest in all its possibilities.[19] Pablo Picasso's time at the Johthern French pottery in Vallouris with his hosts, the Ramie's proved to be more than a mere flirtation with a new material that the artist was trying to master and win over. Instead it was a slow learning process and a successful venture that produced well in excess of 3,500 abstract painted pieces. Unfortunately, the fired pieces were not catalogued in their entirety at the time of their making so it is difficult to estimate the exact quantity. The middle aged Picasso, carried away by his vital need to discover all, suddenly succumbed with infinite delight, to penetrate the mysteries of fire and earth.

The years of suffering under the Nazi occupation were finally over and from 1946 onwards heralded a new phase in all of Picasso's work. He began painting Mediterranean subjects, still lifes of marine subjects, fishermen and mythological scenes including the mural *'La Joie de Vivve'* which was completed in 1946. both a sense of freedom and a new zest for life were evident in this scene of centaurs, goats and female nudes, reflecting the archaic Mediterranean past. Interestingly, clay was the most widespread functional medium of ancient classical times. He plunged whole-

[19] Ramie, 1985, p. 18.

heartedly into decorating this medium. This was a courageous act by all accounts. According to Claude Ruiz Picasso one of Pablo Picasso's sons, this venture was like 'somersaulting into the unknown, it takes guts to risk one's name everyday'.[20]

This acrobat or gingerbread man as Bernard Leach likened him to, was switching allegiances form his customary canvas and was dealing instead with large rotundities of clay. In an extension of what he tried to achieve in cubism earlier in the century, Picasso continued his exploration of multi-dimensionality using clay. A series of ceramic spheres provided the master with a chance to truly paint in the round. This was considered a counterpart to cubism which could be termed spherism. Although sometimes, as with his plates and tiles, he treated a sphere as if it were flat. Painting was used to enhance the third dimension or, paradoxically, to negate tri-dimensionality altogether. Picasso reportedly said to his friend, the sculptor Henry Laurens in 1948: 'You ought to go into ceramics! It is amazing! I made ahead. Well you can look at it from all angles. it's flat it has been painted. I made it appear flat form all sides by painting it!. What does one expect and look for in a painting? Depth and as much space as possible! With a sculpture one must try to make it look flat for the spectator seen from anywhere. I did something else too I painted on curved surfaces, balls for instance, it's amazing you paint a bottle and it runs away from you. It slips around the ball.'[21]

Picasso dared himself to redefine the shapes that he worked on, endlessly seeking a new dimension to the same pictorial problem. Where Bernard Leach could be accused

[20] Ruiz-Picasso, 1994, p. 224.
[21] Op, cit, p. 226.

of merely decorating the surface of a piece, Picasso was trying to change the piece entirely with the decoration.

The early years of Vallouris coincided with Picasso's close involvement with the French Communist Party. Picasso began to make art that could reach a wide audience. Through industrial manufacturing at the pottery, his ceramics could be made available under the label 'Edition Picasso'. The process of industrial ceramics allowed Picasso the opportunity to concentrate entirely on decorating and painting the pieces. John Berger, the art critic, was scathing with his remark that Picasso 'decorates pots and plates that other men make for him. He is reduced to playing like a child. but it has also been said that Picasso's ceramic pieces are characterised by their inventiveness and humour.'[22] Maybe Berger's comments weren't such wild accusations, although it could be more correct to say that Picasso was not so much 'playing lie a child but playful as one'[23] He definitely was aware of the novel painterly possibilities of clay.

From the late forties onwards, Picasso was producing plates, tiles, vases and pots. Those were embellished with the mark-making techniques that he had by now mastered. he experimented with the reserve technique, blocking some areas in paraffin, as you would with varnish in etching. Intaglio was brought into play. Plaster matrixes or shapes were prepared by employees in the pottery, which Picasso engraved. Proofs were then pulled in clay and left to dry in the sun, the surface of which would have a raised pattern which was to be enlivened with metal oxide glazes and slips.

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[22] Willis, 1988, p. 46.
[23] Op. cit., p. 47.

Picasso had trained as a painter, so working with the colourless metal oxides was often a problem. Ceramic odours generally only reveal their true quality under the action of temperature changes. Claude Ruiz Picasso remembers his father decorating the plates, pitchers and sculptural shapes with the grey substances where it was impossible to tell an colour from another. 'It was joy and happiness for me to watch as the ceramics came out of the kiln. Bright shiny colours sensational for a child, and for my father the highly expert painter.'[24] Upon the plates that he began to concentrate on, the former cubist again became pre-occupied with depictions of the face. Georges Ramie writes of the abstract master, 'Picasso was conscious of all the different types of faces he could transcribe onto the clay surface – real or mythical they were recounted through infinity as he made his way through the twisting tunnels of his fabulous labyrinth.[25] (Fig 2.2).

These plates also suggested other motifs. Ceramic sauce-pots acquired human features to become masks, while dishes were requisitioned as two dimensional still lives, their surfaces overlaid with clay fish a bunch of grapes or an aubergine, cleverly pre-empting the food for which they were originally intended (Fig. 2.3).

The fabulous bull-fighting plates produced in July of 1959 are also exciting. The long years spent in the pottery studio had paid off. These abstract circular plates are depictions of matadors and bulls in relief on white faience clay. The blocks of colour are vivid in hue, burnt orange, cobalt blue, bright sun yellow, with a grey brown colour to set off the shapes of the individual plates. Picasso never failed to attend the bullfights held in Nimes or Arles and for days after he would recall the hours spent at

[24] Ruiz-Picasso, 1994, p. 223.
[25] Ramie, 1985, p. 18.

these intense dramas. He felt obliged to translate their absorbing quality onto clay. The elliptical shapes of the plates on which these images are depicted enable the interior of the building to be seen in perspective with all the spectators on tiered seats the bull and bullfighters in the centre. The idea of using the plate, which is oval, to relate to the shape of the bullfighting ring is clever. (Fig. 2.4).

Picasso is said to have expanded the possibilities of ceramics. He began to rely on his deft hands and his newly acquired technical skills. The plasticity of the material meant Picasso was able to give inert matter life. When Picasso had finished a piece to his liking he would exclaim excitedly 'It breathes'. Those sculptural pieces were originally conceived in sketch form. once the process of modelling began, he began to work spontaneously. Vases and bottles became reminiscent of the female figure and titled 'tangras' after the Greek term for figurines. These stylised primitive forms were often provided with arms and dressed with abstractly applied slashes of glaze. Ceramics gave Picasso a chance to work with a new flexibility both in form and surface decoration. The plasticity of the clay allowed ample scope for bending, twisting and incising whilst his new found interest in decorating 'in the round' enabled him to produce exciting new results. Picasso was an abstractonist at heart, he is said to have founded Cubism with his 1906 production of the painting *'Demoiselles D'Avignon'* (Fig. 2.5). this painting heralded a new era in art in the twentieth century. 'It remains the major turning point in Picasso's career and the most important single pictorial documented that the twentieth century has yet produced.'[26]

[26] Harrison 1974, p. 175.

There are elements in it drawn from Greek vase painting from archaic sculpture and from Egyptian art. It is also said to have been inspired by African art. This so called 'primitive' art made aesthetic sophistication a reality. It led to abstraction naturally. The cubists were to produce art that was mere purely abstract than any western movement that had preceded it. In subsequent years, these painters employed a sense of pictorial devices which not only added a new richness to the quality of the canvas surface but also re-affirmed the abstraction that already existed, making it harder for the viewer to read the picture. Picasso was well versed in the language of abstraction and this directly fed into his ceramic work.

Many important twentieth century painters took note of what Picasso was doing and decided to try their hands at ceramics. Juan Miro was one of these. Mavc Chagall, the painter, began to work in the medium in 1948. His success in painting also showed itself in ceramics, he declared that 'Art cannot be performed and practised according to a theory, one paints and makes ceramic with his hands and with his heart.'[27]

Ferdinand Leger and Andre Matisse were using ceramics as a medium to show off their painterly skills. Salvador Dali, Jean Arp and Andre Masson were among other artists who showed an interest in the material. Braque and Miro joined forces while working at the workshop in Artigas, France to produce collaborative editions in clay.

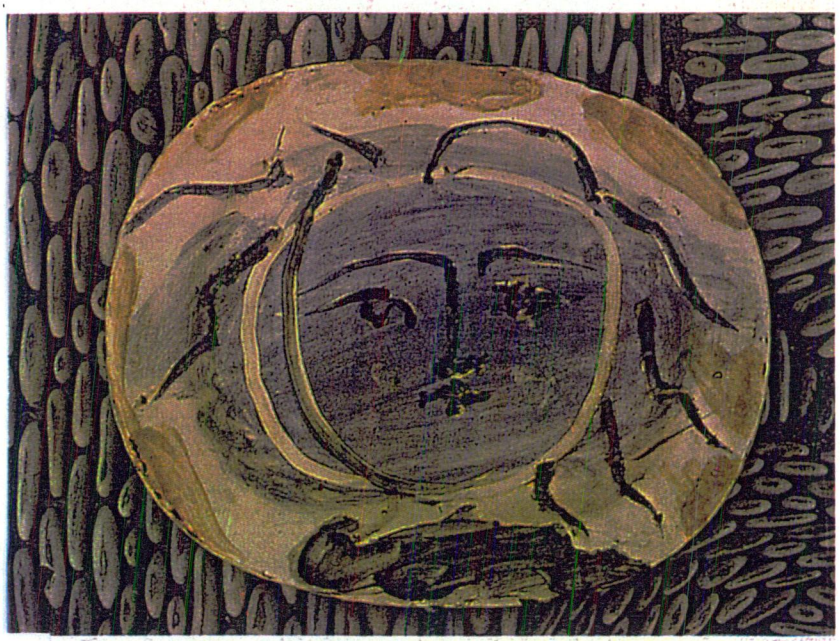
After the Second World War a new movement in painting arose out of Paris and New York. The key year was 1947, which coincided with the beginning of Picasso's ceramic career. in this year large retrospective exhibitions were being held in Paris by

[27] Ramie, 1985 p. 16.

the master Picasso, Brauqe and Leger. Interest in the Communist Party was becoming more widespread and with that a disillusionment with what had occurred before and during the war. A new form of non-representational art was born out of this, namely 'lyrical abstraction', whose principal means of expression was an entirely automatic pictorial script which resulted from the movement of the hand or body creating a sort of 'psychogram' – a plastic representation of a dramatic or emotional state. These paintings showed either a violent and hectic explosion of lines twisting and whirling around on the surface, or a delicate mesh, woven lightly and as if in a trance out of a fine network of brushstrokes and spontaneously placed areas of colour. Paintings by Paul Klee best demonstrate this act, (Fig. 2.6) an act similar to that which the St. Ives painters would have practised only to achieve different results. Picasso would have been aware of this and is quoted as having painted in a similar way. 'Painting makes me do what she wants'.[28] The same applies to sculpture and every category of art, as all Picasso's work is fused as a total life experience. Picasso's interest in 'Primitivism' alongside his enjoyment of art in general naturally led him to produce abstract art in all fields. That combined with what was taking place around him, when he was producing this art, encouraged him to persistently pursue this endeavour and gave us some of the most 'exciting' ceramics of this century. in all fields of art, people are beginning to realise how important these pieces are, as vibrant, vital and spontaneous displays of Picasso's indulgence in working 'in the round'. 'Spherism' as it was termed, is an extension of what the very important twentieth century master had achieved in the cubist movement. Picasso was managing to change the shape of the pots that he decorated with the surface decoration and this was an important achievement.

[29] Ruiz-Picasso, 1994, p. 224).

(fig. 2.1)Pablo Picasso painting glazes onto ceramic ware.

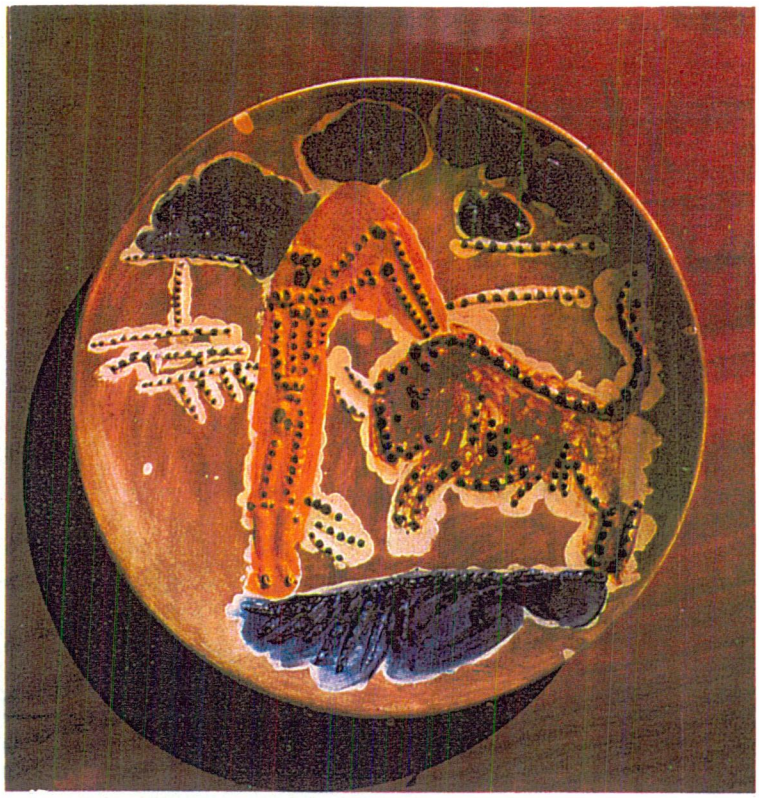


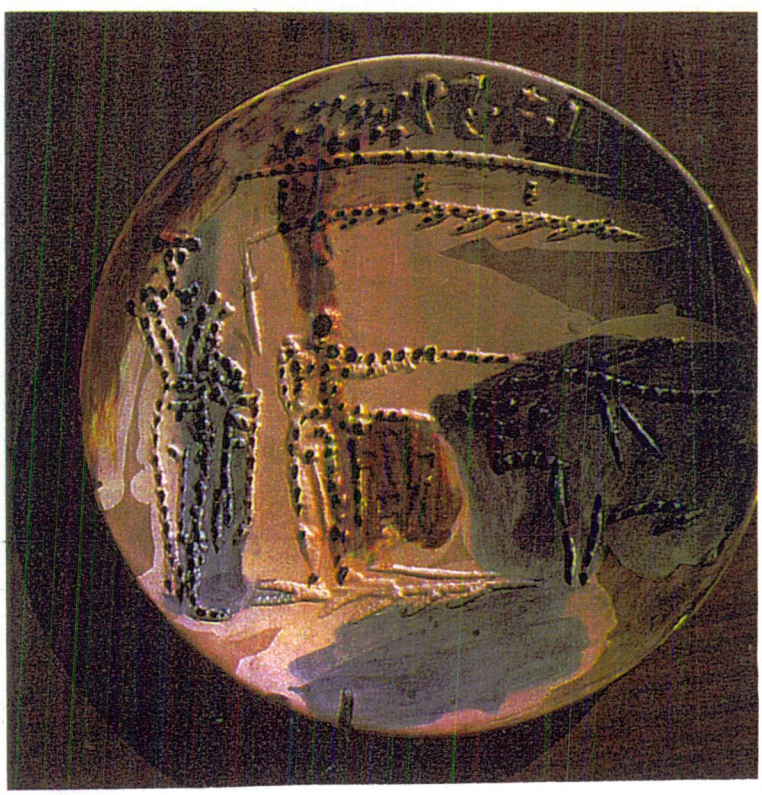
(fig. 2.2)Examples of different abstractly glazed plates depicting faces.These plates were made in 1947 and were 32x38 cm in size.

watermelon with knife and fork.

(fig. 2.3)Black pudding and eggs,

(fig. 2.4 a)Earthenware bullfighting plates inspired by the dramatic bullfighting displays he saw in Nimes and Arles.

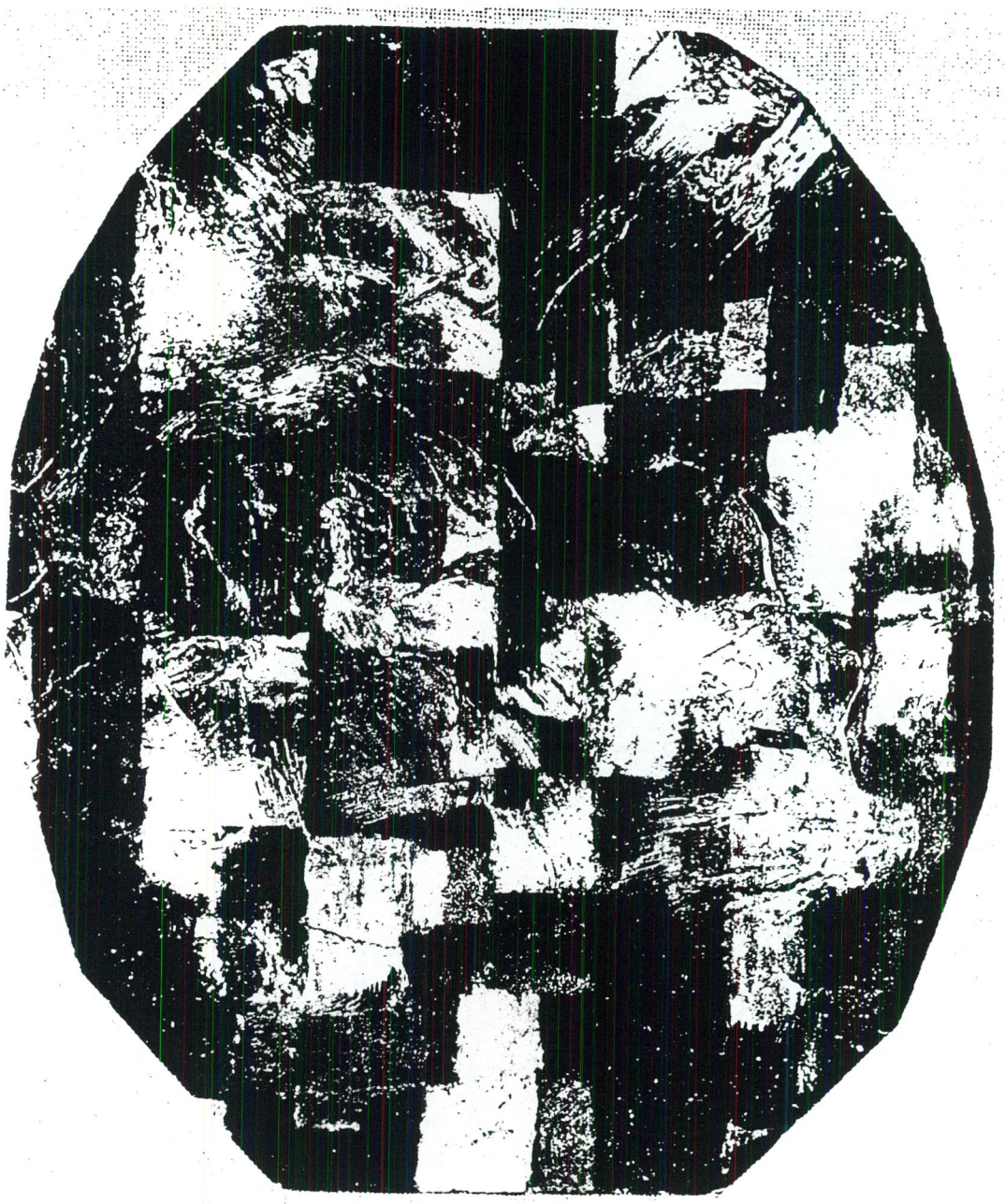




'Goat' a plate made by Pablo Picasso
exhibited in The Glebe gallery in Donegal.

'Bull-fight' a ceramic plate made by Pablo Picasso
exhibited in The Glebe gallery in Donegal.

(fig. 2.5) 'Desmoiselles D'avignon' painted in 1907.



(fig. 2.6)Example of Paul Klee's earlier work titled 'Hommage a Picasso'painted in 1914.

CHAPTER THREE

ALISON BRITTON: A LOOK AT THE CONTEMPORARY CERAMICIST AND HER ABSTRACT INFLUENCES

Both Bernard Leach and Pablo Picasso were accused of merely decorating wares that other craftsmen had made for them, even though the way in which they decorated the clay was of importance. Alison Britton (Fig 3.1) foregoes this very gender specific role of pot decoration, to enjoy the making and subsequent decoration of her own pots. Born in London in 1948, Britton was encouraged at a very early age to produce quite analytical drawings. She later attended the Royal College of Art where she was attracted to making plaque tiles painted with animals, birds and figures. These were all narrative based but then, in the 1970's she began to introduce form. She produced jug shapes without being overly concerned with function. 'I don't take much notice of whether they pour well or not and I would be surprised if many people wanted to use my pots as jugs'.[28] (Russell-Taylor, 1979, p. 6). Her work from 1980's onwards is hand built, high fired earthenware with painted slip decoration. These pots are then covered with a clear matt glaze. Before, almost all of her work followed similar methods of making. She would take a piece of clay that would govern the scale of the intended pot and then cut shapes from it. From these cut pieces, she would assemble the pot and then it was decorated. Though the phase of work that she embarked on during the eighties the decoration would be applied during the making of the pot. At the stage of rolling out the clay slab, she impressed random works of clay of other colours, into the still flat surface.

[28] Russell-Taylor, 1979, p. 6

She might also paint the surface of the slab by randomly spreading slips onto areas, in a manner similar to the way in which Jackson Pollock, the Abstract Expressionist painter did. During this period her relationship with form was becoming more bold and complex. The decoration at the same time was become more diverse and abstract, a darkening thicket of pollockish trails was being produced.

Interestingly, Britton was also looking to the American Abstract Expressionist painter Richard Diebenkorn who was involved in exploring the framework and the boundaries of the picture space of his canvases. His idea of how to construct a picture from what we see 'seems parallel to Britton's interest in how a pot is made from not only slabs of clay and coloured brushmarks, but from how we construct pots from ideas of pots.'[29] Britton also looks to Giorgio Morandi's still lives and lithographs for inspiration. However her strongest attraction is to clay. Her reaction to the material produces exciting results. She enjoys and learns from her mistakes. She never sets out with a clear idea of what to make in her head, this she feels would only set herself up for disappointment. Unlike Leach or Picasso, she rarely does preparatory drawings prior to the making of a piece. Instead, she works out her problems as she encounters them.

In pieces like *'Big Green Pot'* (Fig. 3.2) produced in 1983, we see Pollockish references. This pot is just one of a series, which cannot be read visually in one take. Pollock and the Abstract Expressionist painters were concerned with 'pictorial space' and also how they dealt with the canvas surface. Pollock moved very far away from

[29] De Wael, Ceramic Review 173 p. 18.

three dimensionality, there was no illusion to depth within his paintings, there were only lines and particles lying on the surface of the canvas. Britton through her technique of slab building asymmetrical pots, begins to construct shadows and silhouettes in the pieces. 'Her move in the early 1980's from a technique of decorating a surface that had been completely constructed, to painting slabs of clay that were subsequently formed into a pot, has always been seen with a deepening seriousness, a move from the slightly debased world of 'decorating' into the grown-up world of 'constructing'.[30] The difficulty in being able to read Britton's pots from one perspective is considered a hangover from 'Cubism and from Modernist literature: the invoking of different viewpoints or different voices within the same work of art.'[31] There is the sense that when Britton is making these pots she is exploring the medium in which she is working and this then becomes evident as we explore the pot when trying to read it. Good examples of this type of work seem to be *'White pot Yellow painting'*, made in 1998, (Fig. 3.3)/(Fig. 3.4) and also *Brown Apron Pot,* also made in 1998.

The work of the late eighties produced by Britton is visually very stimulating and exciting. The freedom of the surface decoration, coupled with the abstract profiles of form, react together in both harmony and disharmony to produce pots which seem alive. It is interesting that the paintings which a lot of these pieces allude to and borrow from are also very alive and fresh, even after five decades. Not only did she look towards the New York abstractionists from the middle of the century, she also looked further back to the St. Ives painters. She is said to belong to this tradition of painting; however, she has carefully distanced herself from the St. Ives tradition of

[30] Op. cit. p. 16.
[31] Ibid, p. 17.

pottery. She was one of those young potters who had broken with the tradition of the orthodox Leach style pot, whose rules and conventions were the criteria by which studio pots were judged. She has said it surprised her how little she brushed with the Leach tradition at any stage in her training. 'The Leach tradition was nowhere in sight'. However, in a sense, the adoption of abstract expressionist gesture is a continuation of the British potter's fascination with the Oriental brushstroke, which Bernard Leach and his followers used for the decoration of their pots. Two of the Abstract Expressionists working in New York, after 1945, were interested in creating large black and white canvases which alluded to Oriental Sumi-ink calligraphy namely Kranz Kline and Robert Motherwell. (Fig 3.5 and 3.6). In fact all of the Abstract Expressionists were concerned with making a visual impact so the size of the canvas was important. Jackson Pollock in particular enjoying working on huge canvases. The directness of the way in which he worked alongside the huge size of the canvases contributed to a sense of immediacy. His wall-sized pictures engage the viewer and impel the viewer to respond as an active participant, rather than as a passive observer. Pollock was probably the most important artist working at this time. He relied on the strength of his body especially his waist when pouring or bleeding paint from canisters to produce non-separable areas of interactive paint. These free, painterly marks yielded unified pictures full of energy, drama and passion (Fig. 3.7), (Fig. 3.8) Others: William De Kooning, Esteban Vincente and Hans Hoffman ventured down this way of working also. These gesture painters relied on 'inner necessity' to produce these unpremeditated paintings. These were similar to the 'lyrical abstraction' paintings produced in the twenties in Europe by artists like Paul Klee. The gesture painters usually incorporated more explosive movement and rarely had any representation within the images. Motherwell wrote 'perhaps I feel happiest

when during the creative process, I simply let the work pour out, so to speak, without critical intervention or editing'.[33] The images that were created through this process of letting the unconscious drive the painting would embody what one was feeling at the time of painting. 'If you meant it enough when you did it, it will mean that much.'[34] Robert Motherwell saw his work in terms of a dialogue between the conscious (straight lines, designed shapes, weighted colours, abstract language) and the unconscious (soft lines, obscured shapes, automatism) resolved into a synthesis. Pollock's paintings mainly spoke through the unconscious. He worked very spontaneously and therefore was the ultimate abstractionist although the Abstract Expressionists from New York as a whole believed that formal procedures and spontaneous procedures were not irreconcilable.

Britton has adopted what Pollock had produced earlier on in the century and made it her own by pushing the third dimension into her work. Earlier, it was noted that Picasso achieved this by pushing the ideas of Cubism into ceramics. It is interesting to note that Picasso was someone whom the Abstract Expressionists admired. Pollock in particular seemed to be obsessed by *Guernica* which was painted in 1937 as an artistic anti-fascist gesture by Picasso. Picasso was seen by most of the New York painters as more or less omnipotent. One of the painters remembers 'we used to practise a clandestine kind of automatic drawing . . . Stuart Davis and Leger were big influences in those days. But Picasso was God. Picasso influenced all of us.'[35]

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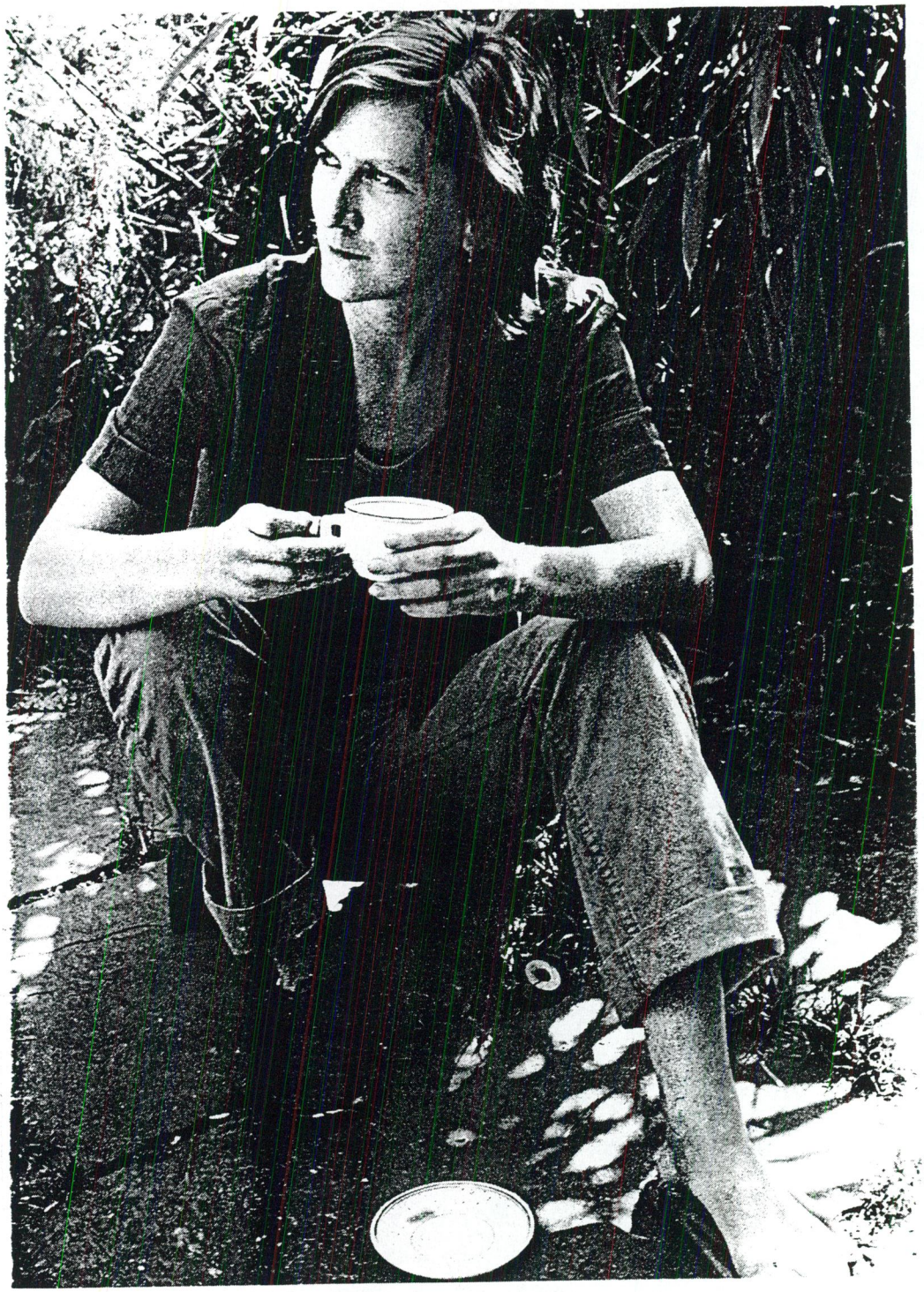
[33] Playnett, 1989, p. 72.
[34] Playnett, 1989, p. 64.
[35] Harrison, 1974, p. 175.

Alison Britton was also influenced by Leger. We can see that most of her influences lie in painting yet her superior skill and intellectual approach applied to her plastic art forms have produced these pieces of parodying spontaneity and precision.

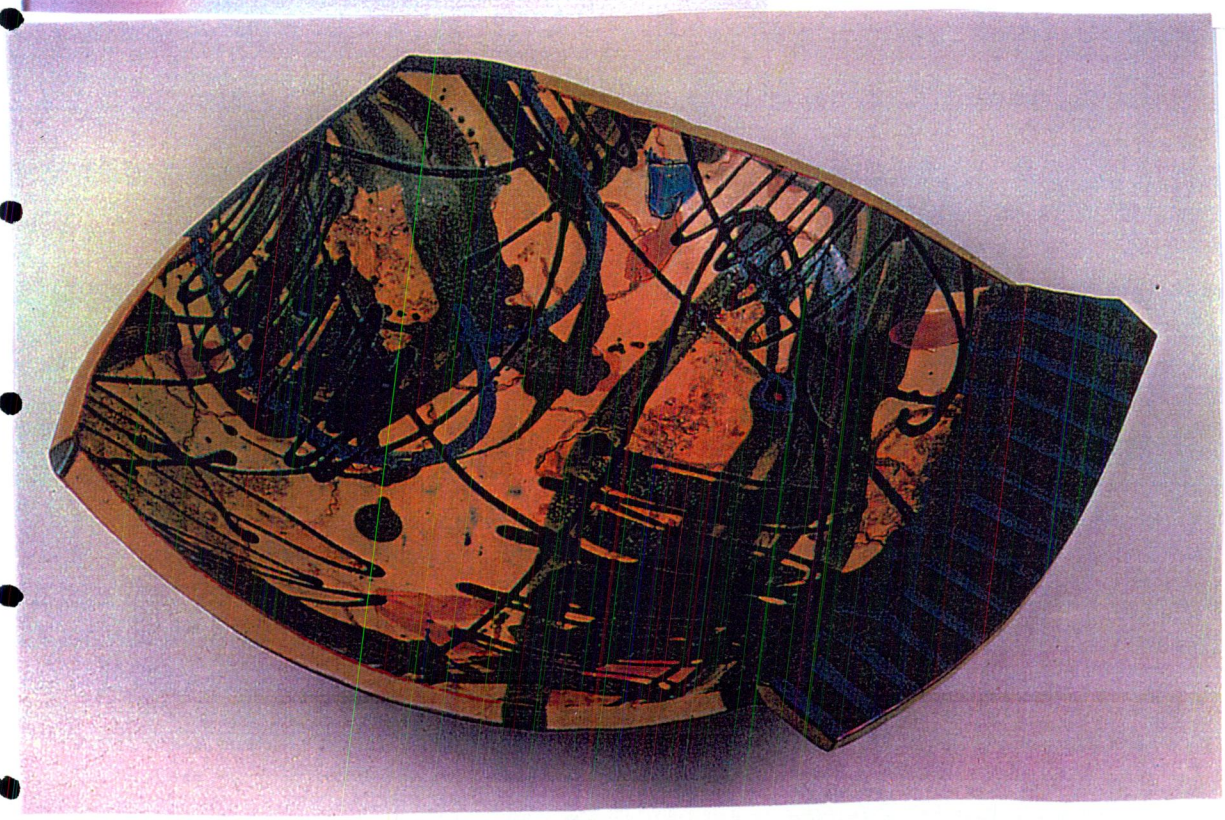


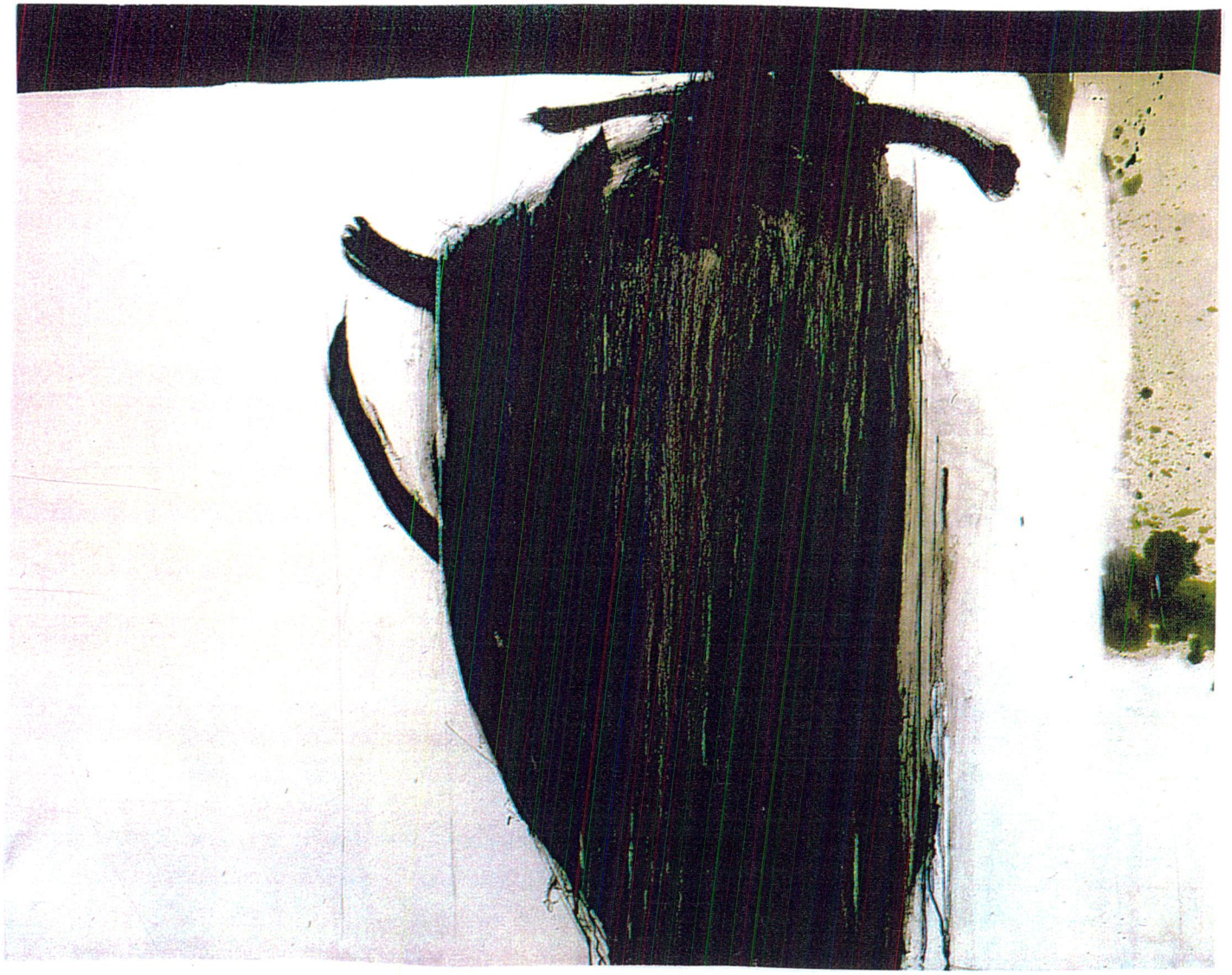
(fig. 3.1) Alison Britton.

(fig. 3.2)'Big green pot'was constructed by the maker in 1983.

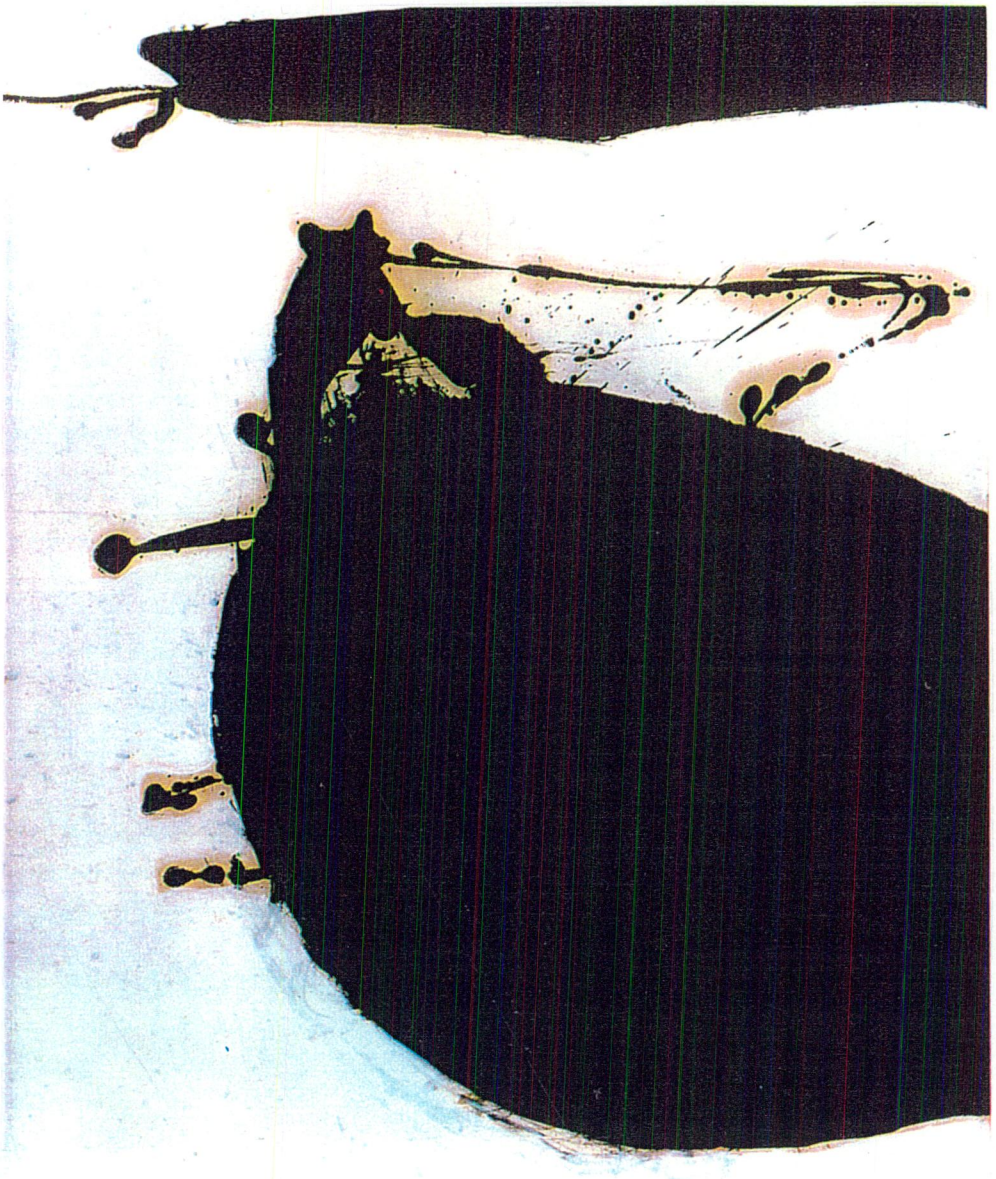
(fig. 3.3) White Pot,Yellow painting made in 1998 with the dimensions 35x24x26cm.

(fig 3.4)Brown apron pot,also constructed that year with the dimensions 41x35x23cm.

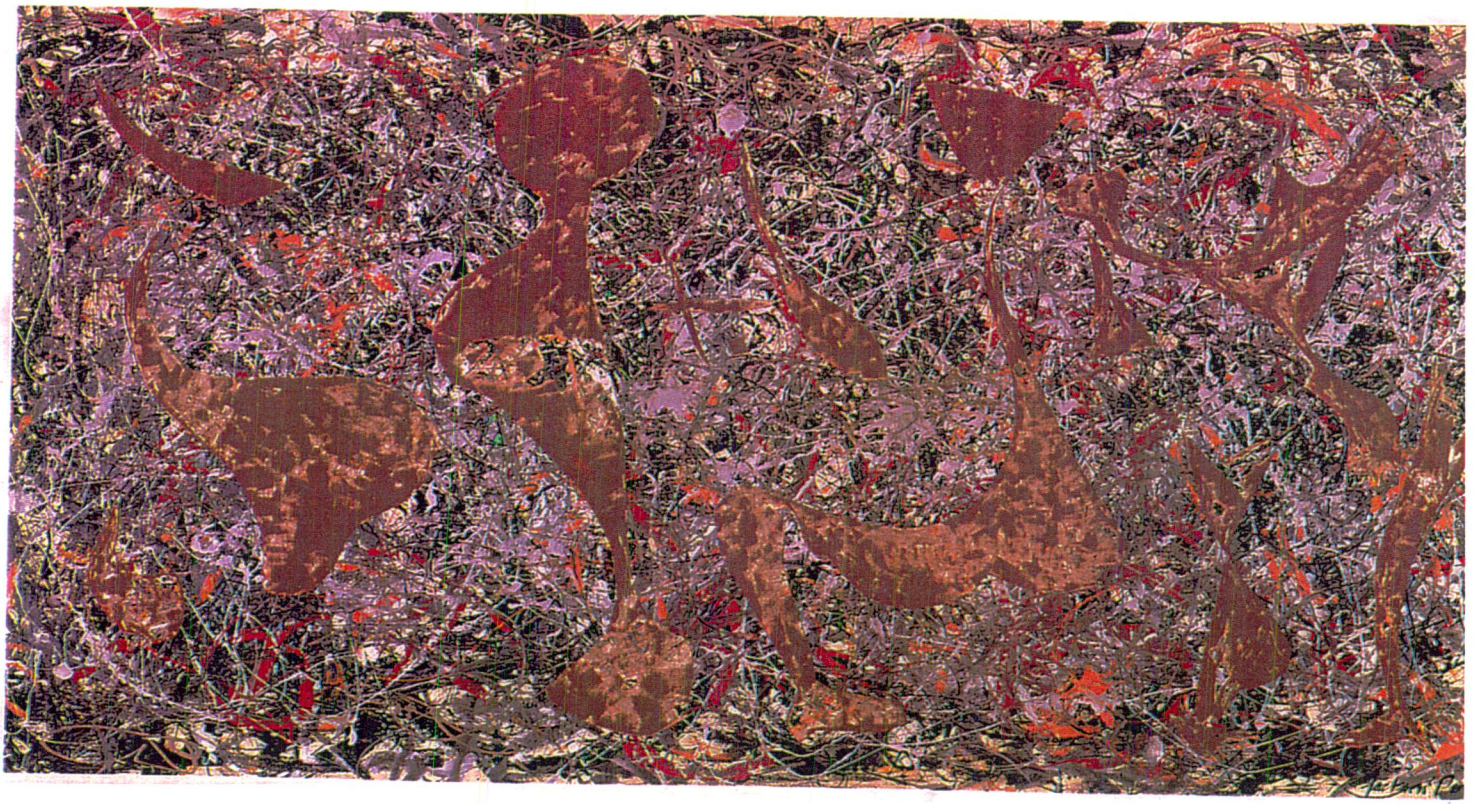




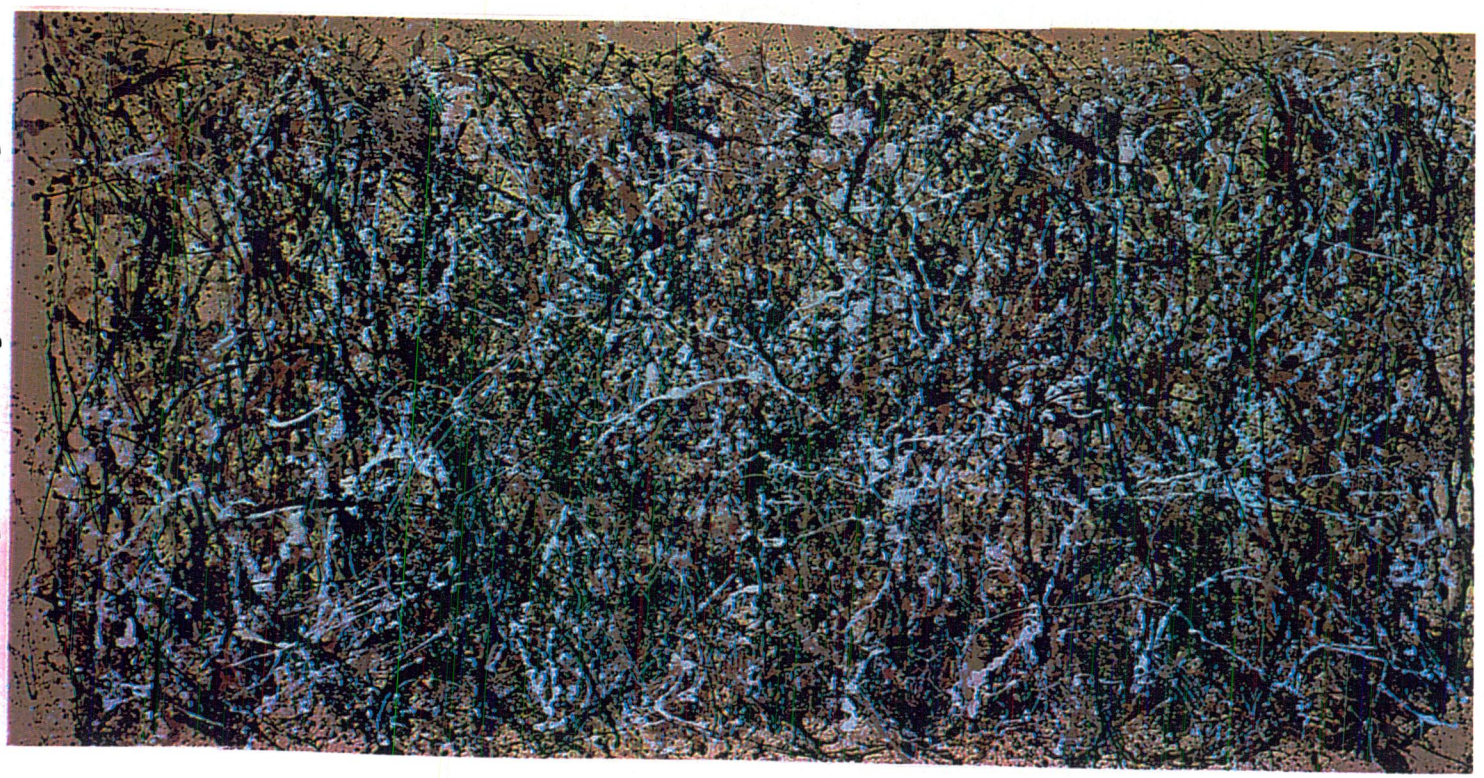
(fig. 3.6a)'Totemic figure' painted by the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell in 1958.



(fig. 3.6b)'The black sun'painted by the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell in 1959.



(fig. 3.7)These two paintings by the abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock exhibit the dramatic painterly effects that he achieved on the surface of the canvas.



CONCLUSION

'The transfer of images created by fine artists from one medium, or even one dimension, to another, is so much a part of everyday life that we taken the process for granted..' Christopher Freyling who wrote this, goes on to cite examples of such processes. 'An oil painting becomes a chocolate box, a Mondrian turns into a rock video, An Henry Moore drawing turns into a carefully worked tapestry. This process was predicted by Walter Benjamin, some thirty years ago. In the work of Art in the age of mechanical reproduction. He believed that the 'aura' of the original work of art would be challenged by it, and that the function would be to remind us of all those synthetic images which were derived from them. However, when an artist moves from one medium or one dimension, to another, we experience a different kind of unease. This is due to the fact that there is still a dichotomy existing between what is perceived as 'high art' and 'low art'. Even the question 'what is art?' begs to be answered. The philosopher-critic Arthur Danto believed that art could be anything at all. This was made clear when Marcel Duchamp first exhibited the fountain. it was extraordinary that he was able to exhibit a mere plumbing fixture and for that to be understood as art when in an everyday context, it would not be considered so. His ability to do this was through his already firmly established credentials as an artist. This made the cross-over from the use of one material to the use of another easier to digest for the public. When Picasso chose to paint onto ceramic it was under the same premis. He was an established painter turning his hand to try a new medium. An established ceramicist would not receive so much attention changing from ceramics to painting. This is due to the fact that the 'crafts' do not have the same status as the 'fine arts'. Even up until three centuries ago the world 'craft' was used to describe

political acumen or shrewdness. It was not related to a particular way of making things. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Arts and Crafts movement was set up. At this time the decorative arts were being divorced from the fine arts. With this arose the question is art a concept that can be applied to any manufactured object? For many craft practitioners the idea that a piece would be functional or that it would have a certain utility was important. There emerged in the 19th and 20th century a number of art theories that precisely identified art as the opposite of utility. An artwork is an artwork in as much as it is useless. operating under this dubious premis may have led in part to the belief that a hand-crafted object might be guaranteed a fine art status by virtue of being non functional.

The separation of craft from art and design is one of the phenomena of late Twentieth Century Western culture. This separation has led to the separation of 'having ideas' from 'making objects'. Enough people have wanted to go on making these objects for craft to continue to exist. The makers of pots have many understanding admirers. However they have not found themselves admired perhaps as much as the artist is. Instead of borrowing and alluding to other forms of art, I think the status of ceramics could be raised by creating pieces which do not allude or make reference to anything else. It would be ideal if the ceramicist could make clay pieces, either functional or not, that did not borrow from other forms of art.

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