



Taking pottery online

The demise of Britain's potteries has been well documented in the media – at the same time as ceramic art has been losing out on column inches. But all that's beginning to change. **Jem Collins** takes a look at how social media has allowed artists to own their own story.

“Ceramics was my first love. I did clay at school, and that's where I fell in love with it.” There's a genuine warmth to the way Halima Cassell talks about pottery, and from the first few words she says to me from her studio in Shropshire it's clear that she's in love with the medium. And her enthusiasm is infectious.

The 43-year-old has been making pottery ever since secondary school, creating pieces from the geometry found within both nature and architecture. “I love the process of a flat design,” she continues, “which is then taken into mapping it onto the form. [It] takes the design into different dimensions, and then carving it in... For me, that's exciting, and makes each new piece that I do really exciting. Each new piece I do is a new exploration.”

Listening to Halima talk about her own journey with ceramics is enthralling, and it's a far cry from the traditional narrative surrounding pottery in the UK. Over the past few decades media has told a different story, one of an industry in decline and an artform which isn't truly appreciated. And it's true that pottery in the UK has certainly had a rough ride in recent history.

Stoke on Trent, often thought of as the capital of the British ceramic industry, was home to more than 2,000 kilns at the end of the 19th century, with more than 100,000 people working in the factories. Even in living memory, and as late as the 1970s, there were still almost 53,000 people working in the trade, with some 200 factories producing wares to be sent



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worldwide. By 2011 this number had dropped to just 30, with more than 20,000 people losing their livelihoods between 1998 and 2008.

In the art world, ceramic artists also faced struggles, with their work often sidelined or shunned. Gillian Lowndes, who died in 2010, is just one example of a “radical, whose works were years ahead of their time” who only found recognition after her death in 2010. Infact, it wasn't until 2018 that the Arts Council Collection finally purchased a piece of her work. “It's taken until the last, maybe, five or six years, for people to actually begin to appreciate how innovative it was,” says Dr Helen Walsh, Curator of Ceramics at the York-based Centre of Ceramic Art.

And this isn't an isolated incident,



01 Statuary marble sphere, 2014. Photography by Jonathan Keenan

02 Virtues of Unity, 2009-Ongoing. Photography by Jon Stokes

03 A photograph of Melanie by Grayson Perry

04 York Art Gallery, center of Ceramic Art. Photography by Giles Rocholl

05 Photograph of Robyn Cove's ceramics for a stall at a makers market

06 Photograph of Stella Baggots workspace with pots ready to be painted & fired

07 Photograph of Stella Baggots final products, with their statement faces.

08 British Ceramics Biennial in the China Hall of the original Spode factory site. Photo Joel Fildes



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with Helen also recalling the tale of celebrated studio potter Gordon Baldwin. After being invited to a gallery in London to show his work during the 60s, he was greeted with an exclamation of "oh my god it's pots!". And the phenomena doesn't end there. "I once had someone say to me, when he saw the price of my work, 'but it's only clay!'" Halima recalls. "And I thought, that's really bizarre, that's only a tube of paint. This was a very educated guy in art, who mainly dealt with paintings, but people don't give [our work] the artistic credit that it deserves."

It's an odd notion, especially for an artform that's been around almost a long as paintings themselves. Just like the drawings found on the walls of the caves our ancestors used to inhabit, pottery has journeyed with us as a species. Often mixed with straw or sand to improve the quality of the finished piece, early humans began firing and painting clay vessels as soon as they discovered fire itself. From its early beginnings around flickering campfires, to the rise and fall of mass production in the UK, it's a material that has endured. But British potters in 2019

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have a revival tool their predecessors didn't - the internet.

Leanne Kemp started the 'Pottery & Ceramics UK Selling New and Preloved' Facebook group four years ago, after struggling to find a place to buy and sell. "I knew of a few specialist groups," she explains to Akin, "such as for Emma Bridgewater, but nothing for other manufacturers as well. I love all things pottery and collect different ones, so set up the group."

Today the group has more than 2,300 members, with new requests and sales coming in daily. "I never really thought it would get big at all," adds Leanne. "I do wonder how [pottery] has become so popular recently, and I can only put it down to contemporary manufacturers hitting the mark when it comes to designs and appealing to the market. I think social media has played a part too, as people are accessing it easier."

But the internet isn't just a tool for those looking to find pottery online, with a growing community of artists themselves setting up on Instagram and Facebook. On Instagram alone, there are more than eight million posts using the hashtag ceramics, and almost seven million using the word pottery. The mesmerizing videos

and stills of the pottery wheel have even graced the lofty viral heights of BuzzFeed listicles.

For Robyn Cove, a 32-year-old potter based in Cardiff, it was a friend who first suggested using Instagram. "I didn't do anything about it for a while, then when I started making pots I thought it was a good time to start showing my work. In many ways both Facebook and Instagram have made my career. The Instagram grid is a visual portfolio that can showcase whatever you want it too," she explains.

Robyn's posts, which are also littered with snaps of her cats, aim to tell her story. She documents everything from her lifestyle to the making process, talking about the pace of her work, the inspiration behind it, and is honest about her successes. And it's an approach that's paid off, with individual buyers, collectors, and top-end galleries all reaching out to her on the platform.

Similarly for Stella Baggot, a 42-year-old potter from Brighton who has amassed more than 40,000 followers on Instagram, it was about being to "introduce my work to new people across the world without leaving the studio". However, as with all things, she points to the internet's downsides, talking about the



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"hurtful and heartbreaking" experience of seeing her vintage inspired designs being ripped and mass produced, or stolen by aspiring ceramicists claiming the work as their own. However, despite this, she still points to social media as one of the driving factors behind the "massive revival in pottery".

"I think illustrators have claimed pottery more than they ever did," she continues. "On Instagram I see so many illustrators using clay as a way to bring

their drawn characters to life." Similarly, for Robyn, social media is a chance to make a human connection with potential buyers. "Within certain groups, social media can make anyone famous," she adds. "People decide if they like me before they meet me, and, as well as buying my pots, they are buying into the idea that they have of my lifestyle. They feel a personal connection."

Speaking to potters like Halima, Robyn and Stella it might seem like the pottery



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revival is simply an online trend made up of artfully shot photographs. But online statistics aside, a new generation focused on the aesthetically pleasing has also seeped through more traditional avenues - with real world impacts.

Shows like the British Pottery Throwdown, first launched in 2015 and set to soon return to our screens on Channel 4 saw audiences of more than three million people, while Google searches for pottery spiked by almost 50 percent when the series was aired. Speaking to Stoke-on-Trent Live, professionals from across the industry hailed the show's real world success. "We have been waiting for a long time for the announcement that it is returned," says Hannah Ault, sales and marketing director at Valentine Clays. "We are really excited, it is a real positive for the industry."

And, for brands capitalising on this new trend, a simple message "of choosing quality over the quantity of



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overseas ceramics" has led to a real story of "success and renaissance", according to Burleigh Pottery retail manager and historian Jemma Baskeyfield, also writing for Stoke-on-Trent Live. It's a trend also echoed by Emma Bridgewater, whose continued success saw sales rise by 13 percent in the last financial year, with pre-tax-profits also up by 22 percent. "If we are going to make it here in Stoke-on-Trent, then we need to make it well," she told The Telegraph. "I'm not interested in making the cheapest mug."

And there have been big moments in the arts world too. This year marks the tenth year of the British Ceramics Biennial, hailed as a "flagship cultural project for Stoke-on-Trent City Council" and a "catalyst for regeneration", and 2020 marks the fifth anniversary of York's Centre for Ceramic Art, which covers the entirety of the British studio ceramics movement. Speaking to Akin, Helen explains how the collection has grown from "three little cases at the bottom of a stairwell" to the UK's largest collection.

During her 15 years at York Art Gallery she explains how "really, really good reactions from our audience" and increased donations of collections helped birth the standalone gallery in 2015, which is continuing to change perceptions. "The way we've displayed our collection has really opened people's eyes to the variety and flexibility of clay," she continues, "We didn't want to just do chronological displays, with all the things lined up, we wanted to be a bit more creative. So we designed it to be a rainbow."



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"I think there's definitely more awareness about it now and there are less of the barriers between fine art and craft" she adds, pointing to Grayson Perry's 2003 Turner Prize win as a "watershed moment". It was the first time the prestigious prize, established in 1984, had ever been awarded for pottery, though Grayson himself was keen to keep the lines blurred. A prominent social media force in his

own right, the potter has also helped to propel the art form to his 100,000 Twitter followers, and tens of thousands of views on YouTube - not to mention his appearances in the traditional press and on TV networks. "I do see it changing," echoes Halima. "It's been more overcome over the last ten to fifteen years and I think people like Grayson Perry are responsible for that."

While British Pottery will most likely never return to its industrial heyday of the 1800s, that doesn't mean it's declining as an industry. In a new world of Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook, there's more opportunity for ceramics to find new audiences than ever before. British pottery hasn't gone, it's just added a few more filters to its face.

Jem Collins

*You can see Halima's solo exhibition *Electica - global inspirations* at Manchester Art Gallery until January.*

The Centre of Ceramic Art is also hosting the York Ceramic Fair, their annual lecture by Alison Britton and the Day of Clay on the weekend of November 23.