

BRINGING TO-
GETHER A DOZEN
ESSAYS AND NEWLY
COMMISSIONED
TEXTS, THIS
READER TRACES
THE CHANGING
SHAPE OF
THE CERAMICS
STUDIO FROM *

WHAT CONTINUOUSLY THINKS

THAT CONTI-
NUOUS THING:
ARTISTS AND
THE CERAMICS
STUDIO * 1920
- TODAY BY
SARA MATSON
+ SAM THORNE



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FACTIVE PLASTICITY:
THE ABSTRACT POTTERY OF
WILLIAM STAITE MURRAY (2013)
JULIAN STAIR

The essay abridged here was originally published to accompany the exhibition *Art and Life: Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis, William Staite Murray, 1920–1931* at Leeds Museums and Galleries (2013–2014), which toured to Cambridge and Dulwich until September 2014. Julian Stair highlights key contributors to the evolution of British studio pottery, alongside Bernard Leach, and examines how the status of ceramics was integral to developments in modern art in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility, by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone. Pottery is pure art... pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence.¹

William Staite Murray emphatically positioned himself as an artist who made pots. He regarded pottery as a genre that offered possibilities for exploring three-dimensional form and its graphic treatment, a new discipline, he argued, that was the interface between painting and sculpture. As he stated in a BBC interview in the 1930s with his friend and colleague John Piper,

‘Pottery stands between Painting & Sculpture in the plastic arts, it inclines to either and includes both.’²

Murray was part of a dynamic craft movement that emerged during the 1920s as a result of a developing modernist discourse in British art. This group of potters, weavers, letter cutters and others abandoned the iconography and style of John Ruskin and William Morris for an artistic agenda that valued expression, vitality and reductive form, adopting the same neo-vernacular modernism that had radicalised painting a decade earlier. Authorship became paramount; idea and execution were channelled through an individual sensibility instead of conforming to the division of labour between design and artisanship that marked most craft practice prior to this – ‘The brain which conceives the pot controls the making of it also.’³ Murray saw no difference between his approach as a potter and that of his associates Ben and Winifred Nicholson and Christopher Wood who, as painters, were also exploring ideas of abstraction through a modernist interpretation of vernacular primitivism and truth to materials.

A defining feature of Murray’s career was his immersion in London’s artistic avant-garde and association with painters and sculptors from an early age. Born in Deptford, London in 1881, Murray grew up in a comfortable family of seed

and bulb merchants.⁴ His childhood included some conventional schooling but at twelve he was sent to study with two cousins, traditional professional painters who had occasionally exhibited at the Royal Academy. He began his ceramic career by taking pottery evening classes at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in 1909 after which he also continued to paint. From 1915 to 1919 Murray worked with the vorticist painter Cuthbert Hamilton at his Yeoman Pottery in Kensington and between them they produced a range of glazed earthenware pots decorated with colourful and schematised abstract designs. Murray then joined the Arts League of Service, an organisation of ‘long haired men and short haired women’⁵ formed in 1919 to support young artists and actors and foster ties between contemporary art and the British public. The League included the leading vorticists Frederick Etchells, Edward Wadsworth and Paul Nash who endorsed the group as a ‘National Necessity’.⁶ Murray again took part in mixed exhibitions with painters such as Cedric Morris and the sculptor Frank Dobson. As he later recounted, ‘Experiments of that time in abstract painting and sculpture interested me.’⁷

Murray’s formative years as an artist took place during the time which Anna Greutzner Robins has described as when ‘virtually the entire canon

of modern art⁸ was exhibited in London. This period also encompassed the peak of the curator, writer and artist Roger Fry's interest in pottery. He was the first modern critic to re-evaluate early Chinese pottery after the Burlington Fine Arts Club's exhibition *Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain* in 1910, the first exhibition of Sung and Tang pots held in Britain. Significantly, Fry also became a part-time potter, learning to throw and manage the production of tableware for the short-lived Omega Workshops 1913–19. Much has been written about Fry's seminal exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* – 'The Art-Quake of 1910'⁹ – and the introduction of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne to the British public. However, the majority of art historians have overlooked his inclusion of nine 'majolica'¹⁰ pots, commissioned by the dealer Ambrose Vollard and painted by the Fauve artists, Derain, Vlaminck, Gireud, Friesz and Matisse. Fry's all-inclusive post-impressionist rationale offered a universal critical framework for appreciating visual art, from painting and drawing to sculpture and pottery. As Charles Harrison argues, 'it was not merely a question now of what was going on in art, but of what criteria were to be considered appropriate in the modern period for identifying an endeavor as a work of art in the first place.'¹¹

[...] Murray's first major exhibition was held

at W.B. Paterson's Gallery in 1924. The premise of pottery as abstract art had recently come into focus through the publication of Bernard Rackham and Herbert Read's book *English Pottery*.¹⁶ Read, a young curator in the ceramics department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, argued that pottery was equal to painting and sculpture as a means of artistic expression. In the heated drive to abstraction of the early 1920s, Read even boldly concluded that pottery had a greater potential than sculpture, which was limited by its figurative past:

Sculpture, whether glyptic or plastic, had from the first an imitative intention, and is to that extent less free for the expression of the aesthetic sense than pottery, which may be regarded as plastic art in its most abstract form.¹⁷

From 1924, critics started to view the pots of Murray and the other leading potter Reginald Wells as integral to the contemporary art world, and on an equal footing with painting and sculpture. In the catalogue essay for a group exhibition including Murray, Wells, Winifred Nicholson, Paul Nash and Jacob Epstein, the art critic of the *Observer* P.G. Konody wrote of the 'consistent purpose of the artists' and how 'the union of these several schools will enhance

the reputations of these several artists and of the whole modern movement in English art.’¹⁸

[...] Murray quickly became established as the leading English potter through his annual exhibitions at Paterson’s Gallery, but the period from the mid 1920s also saw him become a significant figure in the wider contemporary field, in part through his association with many of its leading artists. In 1925 he took part in the mixed exhibition *Pictures, Sculptures, & Pottery by Some British Artists of To-Day* that included Paul Nash, Jacob Epstein, Reginald Wells and Winifred Nicholson. P.G. Konody, author of the exhibition catalogue, noted the group’s shared interests.²¹ He acknowledged that ‘the modern movement in art is based on a broad foundation’ and argued that ‘the union of these several schools will enhance ... English art.’ Murray’s relationship with the Nicholsons flourished and in 1927 Ben proposed him for membership of the Seven and Five Society with Ivon Hitchens seconding. Murray became a stalwart of the society, exhibiting in all of its group shows, becoming a member of the hanging committee in 1931 and Honorary Treasurer in 1934, before the society disbanded in 1935.

Murray and Ben shared their first exhibition in 1927 with Christopher Wood who had joined the Seven and Five in 1926. Charles Marriott of

The Times reviewed this and the adjoining exhibition of paintings by Winifred Nicholson together as creating ‘an engaging air of youthfulness which the ancient wisdom expressed in the stoneware pottery by Mr W. Staite Murray countenances but does not dispel.’²² It was H.S. (Jim) Ede who summed up the commonality of aims in an article the following year to accompany an exhibition shared between Ben, Winifred and Murray at the Lefevre Gallery. In content, approach and final placement of the artwork, they were, he observed, ‘curiously synthetic’.²³ There were paintings of domestic spaces populated with still lifes of cups, plates and flowers that were metaphorically and literally interchangeable with the actuality of Murray’s pots. The tension between disrupted pictorial space and perspective in Ben’s interiors was echoed by Murray’s use of graphic motifs on the surfaces of his pots and a sense of pictorial space heightened from working on surfaces in the round. All three artists kept the material qualities of their medium prominent whether using paint or glaze, just as they did with direct mark making and the texture of their surfaces. Murray’s aim of integrating pottery and painting was famously realised later by Ede in Kettle’s Yard but was already evident in correspondence with the Nicholsons about how they incorporated Murray’s pots in their

private and professional lives. Winifred used, bought and borrowed pots for her home – ‘the one you gave me, which has had so much life with my pictures’²⁴ – and requested a loan for her 1930 Leicester Gallery exhibition, while Ben actively sited Murray’s pots alongside his work in the Seven and Five shows.

By the late 1920s Murray’s work had lost its overt historicist edge and displayed a forceful character of its own. In a confident assertion of his right to articulate abstract volume, Murray amplified familiar and archetypal forms such as jars, bottles and bowls to the point of disruption, and often to the point of ungainliness. Dark textural glazes with mottled and subdued earth-based colours flowed and streaked down the pots, the glaze arrested at the highest point of its liquid melt (illustrated in works such as in *Bowl* 1927). These rich, heavy glazes contrasted with pots painted with bold calligraphic brushwork in dark pigment over light grounds. Abstraction was a flexible term during this period, referring as much to the idea of distortion or manipulation of imagery as to an absolute rejection of representation. Murray’s graphic approach ranged from the conventional use of linear banding to establishing panels or ‘framed’ space on the pot’s surface for painted motifs to using a more ambiguous ceramic space where stylised references to plants, flowers

and animals floated between the concrete nature of three-dimensional form and implied or pictorial space of the two-dimensional surface (an example of this is *Cadence* 1927). East Asian ceramic precedents still underscored his approach to potting, as a series of atypical pots featuring European imagery but employing the Korean technique of *sanggam* where light and dark inlay is inscribed into pots revealed (*Roundabout* 1926 uses this technique). And, in a move away from the convention of describing a craft object descriptively or by materials, Murray titled his pots as a painter would, using poetic terms suggestive of mood and character.

Murray received widespread recognition for his work from many leading fine art and ceramic critics including Frank Rutter, Bernard Rackham and in particular his long-term champion Charles Marriott, who wrote thirteen reviews of Murray’s work for *The Times* between 1924 and 1935, claiming that Murray was ‘one of the most distinguished artists in Europe... [and] has now made pottery a complete form of emotional expression, combining the more abstract possibilities of sculpture and painting.’²⁵ After five successful annual exhibitions at Paterson’s, Murray left to show at the more prestigious Lefevre Gallery in 1930 with the exhibition *Pottery, Paintings and Furniture*.²⁶ Having moved studios in the previous year,

and built a bigger kiln, he was able to throw a series of new elongated and anthropomorphic pots of which *The Bather* is the most iconic. As a mark of his respect for Murray, Herbert Read allowed his unpublished essay 'The Appreciation of Pottery' to be included anonymously in the exhibition catalogue a year in advance of its inclusion in his seminal book *The Meaning of Art*. Murray had come of age and Charles Marriott's review reflected his new status:

If Mr Murray's pots aspire to the condition of sculpture the new works by young British artists, in the room upstairs, may be said to aspire to the condition of pottery. Not, in the case, by the way of utility but by putting the emphasis upon the abstract appeal of form and colour. Mr Henry Moore, the sculptor, takes the lead in interest.²⁷

In many ways, the 1930 Lefevre exhibition was the zenith of Murray's career. He exhibited with Winifred Nicholson in 1930 at the Leicester Galleries and at the Bloomsbury Gallery in 1931 with Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, before his separation from Winifred. His relationship with Ben was still positive, as correspondence from Ben about his 1931 exhibition reveals:

Such a lovely show of yours, really it is very very fine progress you have made and that big thrown pot is one of the finest things I have ever seen, I expect everybody is thinking the same, certainly Harry [Henry Moore] and Barbara did.²⁸

Murray became particularly active in the Seven and Five Society and took part in their exhibition at Zwemmer Gallery in 1935, the first completely abstract exhibition in England. However, the tide of modern art was changing, from what Harrison described as a 'poetic or insular modernism' to the internationalism of the Modern Movement. The Seven and Five Society disbanded, Ben Nicholson looked to Paris and the Association Abstraction-Création for fresh interpretations of abstract art, critics like Geoffrey Grigson challenged ideas of handicraft in favour of manufacturing and Herbert Read published *Art & Industry* in 1934, a new utopian vision for the useful or material arts. Even Clive Bell acknowledged the changing tide in 'What Next in Art?'. Writing of post-impressionism's contribution to English art he admitted it 'has... run its course. It is complete.'²⁹

In 1935 Murray was 54 years old, well established, and with a prestigious teaching post, but he was working in what was at best a discipline on the margins of accepted artistic

practice – with no likeminded contemporaries for support. Ben Nicholson was 41, in a new relationship with Barbara Hepworth and, with his white reliefs, was ready to redefine his practice along with an emerging generation of younger English artists. Murray was losing the peer group that had been so important to him over the previous twenty years. In an extraordinary twist of fate he went to visit relatives in Rhodesia with his wife in 1939 and became stranded in Southern Africa for the duration of the war. Meanwhile, Bernard Leach had published *A Potter's Book* in 1940. A new generation of aspiring potters flocked to St Ives from around the world, and the idea of the rural based self-sufficient studio potter was born, validated by Leach's prolific and revisionist books and writing. William Staite Murray stayed in Southern Rhodesia, became a Trustee of the National Arts Council, formed a Buddhist society and wrote poetry, but never made pots again.

and glaze; in throwing and in a striving towards unity, spontaneity, and simplicity of form, and in general the subordination of all attempts at technical cleverness to straightforward, unselfconscious workmanship. A strict adherence to Chinese standards, howsoever fine, cannot be advocated, for no matter what the source and power of a stimulus, what we make of it is the only thing that counts. We are not the Chinese of a thousand years ago, and the underlying racial and social and economic conditions which produced the Sung traditions in art will never be repeated; but that is no reason why we should not draw all the inspiration we can from the Sung potters.

BEYOND EAST AND WEST?

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- 2 BERNARD LEACH, 'A Potter's Outlook', *Handworkers' Pamphlets*, NO.3, London 1928.
- 3 JOHN SPURLING, 'Sermons in Stone', *New Statesman*, 18 March 1977.
- 4 GEOFFREY GRIGSON, 'In search of English Pottery', *The Studio*, November 1935, pp.256-63.
See also BERNARD LEACH, 'A Potter's Reply', *The Studio*, February 1936, p.119.
- 5 PATRICK HERON, 'Submerged Rhythm', *The Changing Forms of Art*, Routledge & K. Paul, London 1955, p.64.
- 6 Grigson 1935, *ibid*.
- 7 LEONARD ELMHIRST quoted in *Dartington Conference: The Report*, typescript 1954.
- 8 HENRY BERGEN, letter to Bernard Leach, 7 July 1937, BLA 3181.
- 9 EDWIN MULLINS, 'Leach as Author' in CAROL HOGBEN (ed.), *The Art of Bernard Leach*, Faber and Faber, London 1978, pp.15-19.
- 10 SŌETSU YANAGI in BERNARD LEACH, *A Potter's Book*,

Faber and Faber, London 1940, p.XIV.

- 11 LEACH 1940, p.37.
- 12 GEORGE WINGFIELD DIGBY, *The Work of the Modern Potter in England*, J. Murray, London 1952, pp.25-6.
- 13 BERNARD LEACH, *The Potter's Challenge*, E. P. Dutton, New York 1975, p.19.

FACTIVE PLASTICITY: THE ABSTRACT POTTERY OF WILLIAM STAITE MURRAY

SEBASTIANO BARASSI, JOVAN NICHOLSON and JULIAN STAIR, *Art and life: Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis, William Staite Murray, 1920-1931*, exh. cat., Leeds Museums and Galleries 2013. Toured to Cambridge and Dulwich until September 2014.

- 1 HERBERT READ, 'The Appreciation of Pottery', *Pottery, Paintings and Furniture by William Staite Murray*, exh. cat., Alex Reid & Lefevre, London 1930, p.3.
- 2 WILLIAM STAITE MURRAY, interview with John Piper, BBC television, 10 March 1937.
- 3 DORA BILLINGTON, *The Art of the Potter*, Oxford University Press, London 1937.
- 4 For full details of Murray's life see Malcolm Haslam's biography, *William Staite Murray*, Crafts Council, London 1984.
- 5 ELEANOR ELDER, *Travelling Players: The Story of the Arts League of Service*, F. Muller, Ltd., London 1939.
- 6 PAUL NASH, 'The Artist and the Public III', *New Witness*, VOL.14, NO.342, 23 May 1919, reprinted in ANDREW CAUSEY (ed.), *Paul Nash: Writings on Art*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 2000, p.39.
- 7 HASLAM 1984, p.10.
- 8 ANNA GRUETZNER ROBINS, *Modern Art in Britain 1910-1914*, exh. cat., Barbican Art Gallery, London 1997.
- 9 DESMOND MACCARTHY, 'The Art Quake of 1910', *The Listener*, 1 February 1945, pp.123-9.
- 10 Tin or white glazed earthenware painted with coloured pigments.

- II CHARLES HARRISON, 1996
[...]
- 16 BERNARD RACKHAM and HERBERT READ, *English Pottery: Its Development from Early Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, E. Benn, Ltd., London 1924.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 PAUL GEORGE KONODY, *Pictures, Sculptures & Pottery by Some British Artists of To-Day*, exh. cat., Lefevre Gallery, London February 1925, p.4.
[...]
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 CHARLES MARRIOTT, 'Beaux Arts Gallery', *The Times*, 21 April 1927.
- 23 H.S. EDE, 'Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson and William Staite Murray', *Artwork*, NO.16, 1928.
- 24 WINIFRED NICHOLSON, letter to Murray, n.d., Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts, Farnham.
- 25 CHARLES MARRIOTT, 'Stoneware Pottery', *The Times*, November 1928.
- 26 Lefevre Gallery, London, November 1930. Murray was known to make and exhibit paintings, furniture, etchings and tile panels.
- 27 MARRIOTT, November 1931.
- 28 BEN NICHOLSON, letter to Murray, 1931, Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts, Farnham.
- 29 CLIVE BELL, 'What Next in Art?', *The Studio*, VOL.109, NO.505, 1935.

PETER VOULKOS AND KEN PRICE

GLENN ADAMSON, *Thinking Through Craft*, Bloomsbury, London and New York 2013

- 13 On Voulkos and other potters at Black Mountain, see MARY EMMA HARRIS, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987. On the Archie Bray Foundation, see 'The Bray at 50', *American Craft*, VOL.61, NO.2, April/May 2001, pp.56-61.
- 14 Cheryl White has persuasively argued that to align Otis clay directly with Abstract Expressionism is not a way to

legitimate it, but rather a codification of its marginalization as a 'regional version of the mainstream.' CHERYL WHITE, 'Towards an Alternative History: Otis Clay Revisited', *American Craft*, VOL.53, NO.4, Aug./Sept. 1993, pp.120, 125. Also pertinent here is Garth Clark's work on Voulkos's circle, in which he calls the phrase 'Abstract Expressionist Ceramics' into question. Clark points out, for example, that Voulkos's close personal connections with the New York School did not develop until the Otis program was two years underway. See GARTH CLARK, 'Otis and Berkeley', in JO LAURIA (ed.), *Color and Fire*, exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles 2000.

- 15 ROSE SLIVKA, 'The New Ceramic Presence', *Craft Horizons*, VOL.21, NO.4, July/Aug. 1961, pp.31, 32, 36.
- 16 Ibid., p.34. For related arguments see BERNARD PYRON, 'The Tao and Dada of Recent Ceramic Art', *Artforum*, VOL.2, NO.9, March 1964, reprinted in GARTH CLARK (ed.), *Ceramic Art: Comment and Review, 1882-1977*, E. P. Dutton, New York 1978, pp.143-52.
- 17 Voulkos had images of Picasso's pots hanging on the walls of his studio. See GARTH CLARK and MARGIE HUGHTO, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978*, exh. cat., Everson Museum of Art, New York 1979, p.135. See also GEORGES RAMIE, *Picasso's Ceramics*, Viking Press, New York 1976. It should be noted that Peter Selz, the key early curatorial champion of Voulkos's work, disputes Slivka's viewpoint: 'I do not think that Voulkos was really so much concerned with the optical aspects of his painted pots. Certainly, when I decided to give him a show at MOMA and when I sent his work to the Paris Biennial, it was the tangible, sculptural aspects of his work which was at issue.' PETER SELZ, letter to the author, 1 May 2007.
- 18 Soldner and Voulkos described one such pot, entitled *Love Is A Many Splendored Thing*, as a breakthrough piece in Voulkos's oeuvre. See 'Ceramics: West Coast', *Craft Horizons*, VOL.26, NO.6, July 1966, p.26.
- 19 The *Craft Horizons* review of the *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics* show was typical in this regard: 'The Los Angeles potters had no program ... They respected no rules, not even utility; rather, they impressed their wills on the material