

Kneaded Knowledge

The Language of Ceramics

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Space01



Kunsthhaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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The Language of Ceramics

Kunsthau Graz

Universalmuseum Joanneum

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Some of the earliest artefacts to be made were ceramics, prized since time immemorial both for their usefulness and their aesthetic appeal. Today, while pots are still produced from this ancient material, the way in which it is handled is constantly being changed and reinterpreted. Ai Weiwei and Edmund de Waal both have a long and deep preoccupation with this material—and yet their artistic approaches are very different. At the Kunsthau Graz, the two artists act as curators and artistic partners in the exhibition. Through a highly personal view, they reveal the broad diversity of ceramics.

Meissen

The white tea service at the beginning of the exhibition appears a little wonky and less than perfect, yet it still has something wonderful about it. It is a very early example of European porcelain production. Around 1700, porcelain was still known as 'white gold'—mainly imported from China and Japan, it was destined to be used as a statement of prestige and status in aristocratic circles. The items dating from the first half of the 18th century illustrate more than just an upper-class commodity in this exhibition, however. They also reveal that knowledge and the spirit of inquiry have always managed to overcome cultural boundaries, finding their tangible expression in material. Many of the early examples produced from 1710 on in Meissen near Dresden, and soon afterwards in Vienna, were direct copies of Chinese originals—this is why porcelain became known as 'china'.

Early Asian Ceramics

The display of early Asian ceramics was chosen by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. He himself collects these ancient witnesses to a distant era in his country's history. For him, they are not only the symbol of a very old culture that had a profound knowledge of technique and craft, but also his continuous preoccupation with it. A link to the long history and tradition of his own culture, at the same time they become emblematic of a collective cultural identity whose loss Ai Weiwei demonstrates in various ways in the form of ceramics too. These examples come from the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne. This collection of early Chinese ceramics (dating from around 3000 BCE) includes earthenware, proto-porcelain, stoneware and grave pottery with lead and ash glazes and also actual porcelain from the late Tang dynasty (9th century CE), representing the early phase of Chinese art that Ai Weiwei has often reworked to integrate into his own works.

Ai Weiwei

Artist and actionist Ai Weiwei is one of China's most renowned and respected contemporary artists. A continuous exploration of Chinese ceramics runs throughout his oeuvre. His provocative early work of 1995, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, has already been shown twice at the Kunsthau Graz. With his barbarous destruction of a historical urn, Ai highlights the destruction of historical objects—through to entire city districts—happening regularly in China. The artist does not view his painting over a neolithic vase with the Coca Cola logo, or dipping other equally antique vases in colour glazes (*Colored Vases*, 2006), as the destruction of these historical objects. Rather, he considers his reworkings as transferring them into the present day, a process of covering during which something new emerges. For Ai Weiwei, creation and destruction are closely related—destruction often brings about the creation of something new, while the creation of something new can lead to the destruction of what already exists. In the display here, the collected teapot spouts in *Spouts* can be seen as

symbolic of this. The work *Stones* was commissioned in 2011 by the Universalmuseum Joanneum, and shows casts of stone age archaeological finds. These have been discovered since 1947 in the Replust Cave north of Graz and identified as having been made by humans. Ai Weiwei had the artefacts (around 930 of them) reproduced in porcelain in China. Due to the firing process, they came out roughly a third smaller than the originals. This installation raised awareness of working conditions in China during his imprisonment in 2011. A continuation of this approach can be found in his 2015 work *Remains*. Here, casts were made of human bone fragments found at a work camp set up under Mao Zedong. Currently, one would often associate the 'Made in China' label on porcelain with cheap goods mass-produced in Jingdezhen. One would rarely think of the fine craftwork demonstrated in these items, or in the thousands of *Sunflower Seeds* that caused a sensation at Tate Modern in London in 2010. Ai Weiwei also has his ceramic works made in Jingdezhen—a centre of production with over 1000 years' tradition of porcelain casting.

Edmund de Waal

Edmund de Waal is a potter, artist and writer. He learned his craft among other places in Japan during a residency, then went on to study English literature in his home country of England. His work is shaped by his profound love and appreciation of a material that is rarely the centre of attention in the wider art world. Like Ai Weiwei, he is interested in historical examples, although less in terms of his own cultural history. His focus lies instead on the material and the handling of it in itself, the transformation during its forming, the three-dimensional expression of different pots. How do form, function, design and use relate to one another? What roles are played by installation, space, presentation or representation? Edmund de Waal's ceramics concentrate on the material and its formation. While his works *cargo #1*, 1997, three tall lidded jars, 2006 and *water, salt*, 2007 focus on the vessel, in his latest works such as *I speak nothing else*, 2015 or *A Berlin chronicle* or *Irrkunst* (both 2016) he develops architectonic installations that place the delicate ceramic forms in relation

to the cases protecting them. The hermetically sealed black cabinets used in his installation *Irrkunst*—a homage to the philosopher Walter Benjamin—are the opposite of the transparent display case that in other instances protects the sensitive, fragile objects. The solid cabinet looks heavy yet allows through-views, inviting a restrained discovery of the exquisite pieces hidden deep inside. Edmund de Waal's works are very minimalist in their form, concentrating the gaze puristically on the earth taking shape. As artworks, they are withdrawn from daily use; as functional objects, on the other hand, they play with representative, aesthetic, practical and ultimately economic values. Within this scope, de Waal also takes a look at the history of ceramics, investigating what is possible with clay as a material in terms of form and meaning. He does so without focusing on historical lines of development, instead tracing a certain continuity in the quality of craft across the ages. The examples chosen by him for the exhibition, dating from the turn of the 20th century through to the present day, offer an insight into this spectrum.

Associated with the fine arts since the beginning of the 20th century, ceramic objects have been liberated from the limitations of being seen as a craft and the stigma of being purely decorative. At least since the Art Nouveau era, ceramics were absorbed into a concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) that emerged most clearly in the 'Wiener Werkstätte'. Here there was a concerted effort to counter the anonymity of craftspeople and to create ceramics for presentation in (private or museum) show-cases. Born in 1902 in Vienna, **Lucie Rie** defined her art in these surroundings, finding support and success until she was forced to flee from the Nazis. In London she set up a studio, and during the 1950s was joined there by German émigré **Hans Coper**, with whom she jointly produced and experimented with materials over many years. While Lucie Rie's pots are characterised by the extraordinary surface structure produced by their glazing prior to being fired, Coper's works are striking due to his interest in archaic ceramics.

Kasimir Malevich—along with Paul Gauguin and the German Expressionists—also made an important contribution to the emancipation of ceramics at the beginning of the 20th century. His teapot is a good example of how he aimed to extend the Suprematist art movement into the concrete, real-life world. In its abstract language of form, the pot is more reminiscent of a building than of a practical utensil. Around the middle of the century, the leading figures in art working with clay were above all Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Lucio Fontana and Isamu Noguchi. As early on as the beginning of the 20th century, Japanese-American artist **Isamu Noguchi's** austere, minimalist works greatly helped to broaden the concept of sculpture and challenge the limits of use for ceramics. For him, being a potter meant exhausting one's hands in the earth. **Joan Miró** and **Pablo Picasso**, two of the most influential Spanish painters of classical modernism, also found a connection to their home region of Catalonia in their ceramics. Miró saw pottery as a magical process of transformation, while Pablo Picasso was fascinated by

the material: over his lifetime he made around 3000 ceramic works.

Produced around 1950, the works of **Lucio Fontana** and Asger Jorn communicate a very gestural expression in the material. As the writer of the *Manifesto Blanco*, Fontana demanded that the continuation of the Italian Futurists should aim for the merging of artistic forms of expression such as painting, sculpture, music and poetry and should also embrace the use of materials not often seen in art, so promoting a dynamic approach. His newly devised spatial concept, 'conchetto spaziale', also defined his ceramic works, which extend like landscapes. Fontana did not see himself as a potter but instead as a sculptor, and so considered his works to be sculptures rather than ceramics. Danish artist **Asger Jorn** was a founding member of the group COBRA in 1949. They regarded their experiments with clay as a kind of liberation from the restrictions of established art. Jorn encouraged a direct approach to the material, creating flat reliefs and figures that are marked by the traces of kneading hands. They were

beaten and scraped into shape, often handled very roughly and left as they were or painted with bright colours.

Some of **Peter Voulkos'** works are relatively big. He ran his own ceramics studio in Los Angeles, where he was able to fire on a remarkable scale for this material. Influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, his work soon leaned in the same direction—the pots he created on the wheel were highly successful. Even his plates and vases composed of different pieces of clay do not avoid their original functional intention, although their sheer size pushes the limits of what is possible.

Lyndia Benglis, Marit Tingleff and Alison Britton are practitioners of modern ceramics whose diversity illustrates the wide range of possibilities for giving form to fired earth. American artist **Lyndia Benglis** sees her work as an expression of the space produced by her own movement around the material, but also captured by her very freely modelled sculptures themselves, sometimes reminiscent of formless, flowing fabrics. The gestures in the kneaded material arise from a direct physi-

cal connection. Her sculptures have something inherently painterly about them, an impression heightened by the choice of colours and their application. English artist **Alison Britton** considers the function of a pot crucial, but at the same time just one ingredient in the shape-giving process of potting. The form taking shape motivates her to push boundaries and to challenge it right through to its painterly surface. Norwegian ceramic artist **Marit Tingleff** takes ordinary, everyday functional objects as the basis for her work, altering their shape and colour to transform them into expressive, individual ceramic works.

Accompanying programme

Themed tours

*The Language of
Ceramics*

with Christof Elpons

Fri, 21.10.2016

Sun, 30.10.2016

Fri, 4.11.2016

Sun, 20.11.2016

Fri, 2.12.2016

Sun, 4.12.2016

Fri, 10.02.2017

Sun, 19.02.2017

3.30pm (in German
language)

3Family Day

Entrance free for 3customers and
their families!

Sun, 09.10.2016, 10am-5pm

UNI KUM! Students Day 2016

Wed, 19.10.2016, 2pm-8pm

www.studierendentag.at

UNIQA-Family Day

Entrance free!

Sun, 30.10.2016, 10am-5pm

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