

Lifting the fortunes of the ceramics industry

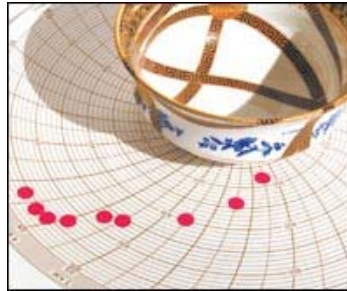
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Two hundred and fifty years ago, Stoke-on-Trent, a small town in the English Midlands, became the crucible of a revolution in taste, manufacture and marketing. Master potter Josiah Wedgwood helped transform a crude local trade into a wealth-spinning industry, manufacturing luxurious ceramic wares for sale across the world. From the kernel of Wedgwood's own business, an urban landscape and an entire community grew up dominated by "ovens and chimneys", as the novelist Arnold Bennett had it in his 1908 work *The Old Wives' Tale*.

Wedgwood was not the only inspired entrepreneur – Josiah Spode and Thomas Minton were among several others – but his creative energy also encompassed art patronage, social reform, philosophy and scientific inquiry, making Stoke as much a hotbed of new ideas as the engine room of a commercial empire.



Intricate work by CJ O'Neill

For the past half-century, however, Stoke has epitomised post-industrial despondency. The seemingly terminal decline of the potteries, their products out of fashion and their skilled workforces globally uncompetitive, has accelerated in parallel with the demise of local coal mining, tyre production and steel manufacture. The collapse this year of Waterford/Wedgwood, in the latter's 250th year (and despite the mitigating Art Fund prize to the Wedgwood Museum) seemed the final blow to a city that was already reeling.

From October 3, however, Stoke is hosting a new venture. The British Ceramics Biennial is a 10-week festival of contemporary ceramics, kick-starting a five-year programme of fellowships, commissions, education and new ceramics business start-ups. This unexpectedly ambitious series of events, exhibitions and long-term investment has grown out of a much more modest ceramics festival, held annually between 2005 and 2008 to boost the tourist profile of the city. The creative directors, Barney Hare Duke and Jeremy Theophilus, plan a bold mix of initiatives, aiming to break down barriers – barriers between artists and industry; between an older generation of skilled artisans, whose whole lives were intertwined with the fortunes of the potteries, and a younger generation growing up without that sense of purpose and identity.

Theophilus and Hare Duke have enlisted some of today's most thoughtful ceramic artists and designers. Neil Brownsword, Philip Eglin, Stephen Dixon, Robert Dawson and CJ O'Neill, all artists whose work is inspired by the history of pottery and the ceramics industry in Britain, have been commissioned to work on substantial projects. Brownsword's family have worked at Wedgwood since the early 19th century, and he himself started there as an apprentice at 16. He has invited three international ceramic artists to join him at the largest brick clay quarry in Europe, at Ibstock Brick Ltd.

"We are going to work with a shovel and a bucket. We are making a sculpture – I've no idea how it will turn out," he says. "People have been coming here since well before the industrial era for its seams of red clay. I just want to engage people with this wonderful stuff. My first experiences growing up were of digging my hands into Etruria Marl behind my parents' house in Newcastle under Lyme."



'Prometheus' by Stephen Dixon

As part of a series called "Guerilla Ceramics", O'Neill has worked with young people and a graffiti artist to create a ceramic wall and a range of tableware. In contrast, there will be a display of 300 water pots and ceremonial dishes made by four Indian pottery families from Gujarat and an installation of ceramic work by leading Spanish designer Jaime Hayón.

The future is not entirely bleak: as Theophilus says, "there are more ceramics companies operating in Stoke today than there have ever been – it's just they are all small and medium-sized enterprises." Clare Twomey, an artist shortlisted for the One-Off Ceramics award, says some of her large-scale installations – of birds modelled from Wedgwood blue jasper or of broken Royal Crown Derby fine bone china – depended on a collaboration with the ceramics industry. "These projects made me realise what a factory is about," she says, "it is a skills base."

Such dialogues have been happening on an informal basis for almost 10 years. Artists such as Charlotte Hodes at Spode, Julian Stair at Baggeridge Bricks or Peter Ting at Royal Crown Derby have seized the opportunities afforded by vast kilns, prodigious archives and technical expertise. And where at first these projects perhaps only benefited the artist, some companies, too, have begun to recognise a new opportunity: this year Royal Crown Derby has introduced two new lines designed by Ken Eastman and Peter Ting. As managing director Hugh Gibson says, "I have always been interested in projects like this – like Eric Ravilious's work with Wedgwood. You get a bit of kudos for helping artists, and then occasionally you hit on something magic you can put in your production line." While it is unlikely that these encounters can turn around an entire industry, it is undeniable that Josiah Wedgwood's original success was rooted in a similar creative daring.

www.britishceramicsbiennial.com

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