

Potters on Pots



Sarah Dunstan creates slab-built pieces that contain nostalgic childhood memories. She shares how a souvenir teacup has influenced her oeuvre

ABOVE: Souvenir cup
RIGHT: Sarah in her studio



I grew up in Cornwall in the 70s and 80s in a household where everyone in the family was either making things or drawing. As a child, my favourite TV programme was an art show called *Take Hart*. My mother was a dressmaker, so floral and chintzy fabrics were always scattered on the sofa ready for the next project. My older brother, who was a naturally brilliant draughtsman, was constantly filling sketchbooks with amazingly detailed drawings. We played tea parties with a Clarice Cliff tea set where I was drawn to its vivid orange decoration.

I loved art at school and making things in woodwork and metalwork classes, so going to art school was an obvious path for me. It wasn't until I discovered the ceramics department on my foundation course at Falmouth University that I had a clear idea of the direction I wanted to take. I was being strongly encouraged to choose fine art, but just before making my degree application, I rebelled and changed to ceramics. I was completely unprepared for my BA in ceramics at Cardiff, but I loved it and have never regretted my decision.

Early in my student days, I discovered slab building and this has been my construction method ever since. I use flat sheets of stoneware clay as a 'canvas', painting the surface with coloured slips. Then, working from images collected in my sketchbooks, I make intricate 'fretwork' transfers that are individually carved from a thin layer of porcelain slip that has been painted onto newsprint paper. This is transferred to the prepared slab and the surface is worked on further, with the decoration being completed while the slab is still flat. When the piece is constructed, there is a moment of magic as the composition is transformed when it becomes a vessel.

I am usually drawn to hand-built pots where the surface is all-important. During my degree, we went to a talk by the potter Alison Britton and I was fascinated by how she decorated her slabs before constructing her wonderful painterly slab-built vessels. I also love Petra Reynolds' slab-built work, where she uses complex paper templates to create her pots. She decorates them once constructed using various techniques, including mono printing with slips, creating beautiful abstract marks.

In my work, I explore ideas around the distant memories and impressions that persist from my childhood. These include vintage wallpapers and fabrics, the stylised narrative of my mother's Willow Pattern plates, or the familiar shape of an opened sardine tin. In the home I grew up in, there was a window in the kitchen with a wooden pelmet above it. Peering up as a small child, I could just see glimpses of gold, lustre and the delicate shapes of handles – this was where my mother kept her collection of china teacups.





I was especially drawn to a small, white porcelain souvenir teacup with a delicately scalloped rim and an elegant handle. The decoration is an ornate gold flower in relief with the words 'A present from Porkellis' in faded gold lustre. Porkellis is a tiny mining and farming village in rural Cornwall where my father was born, and this was one of the treasured teacups kept safely out of reach on the kitchen shelf.

This was not an important or expensive piece when it was made. On the contrary, these souvenir cups – made in Germany, where the expertise in porcelain manufacture had spread widely after Meissen's original breakthrough – were imported in huge numbers from the late Victorian period. Like picture postcards, these little teacups with the lettering 'A present from...' would be displayed in the window of almost every village shop in Britain, however tiny or remote. Some would be sold as souvenirs to occasional tourists, but most would be bought by local families to be given as gifts and mementos, perhaps at an engagement or christening, or to visiting relatives.

As the Cornish tin and copper mining industry declined towards the end of the 19th century, thousands of Cornish miners moved abroad in search of work, as some of my own family did from Porkellis. I can imagine these little cups being sent all over the world to remind them of home. The trade in German porcelain ended abruptly with the outbreak of war in 1914.

Although the fine porcelain and gold lustre would have made these cups seem precious at the time, mass production made them affordable. Almost every household must have had at least one on the mantelpiece or in a china cupboard – each with its own story to tell. Mine, inherited from my mother when she moved into a care home, sits quietly on the windowsill of my studio.

During the first coronavirus lockdown, when I was working alone, the gold relief flowers on this tiny cup started to appear on my own work and previously smooth rims became scalloped. At a time when my only contact with my mother was through her care home window, it somehow came to represent a connection between us. I believe that even the humblest of pots, jewel-like and permanent (as all pots are), can carry a value that goes far beyond money.

A few years back, a woman came up to me at the *Oxford Ceramics Fair* and told me she had been feeling low after being made redundant when she fell in love with a piece of my work she saw in a gallery. It was bright yellow with the word 'sunshine' on it. She told me how her husband went back and bought it for her as a surprise and it really cheered her up. I hope she still has the pot and that it still brings her joy. 

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