



Catrin Howell, *Hound (Bestiary Series)*, 2011

Clay

The word ceramic comes from the Greek word κέραμος (*keramos*) used to describe potter's clay, tile or pottery.

Ceramic: made of clay and permanently hardened by heat (adjective)

Ceramics: pots and other articles made from clay hardened by heat (noun) – Oxford Dictionary

Fragments of ceramics, found by archaeologists suggest that humans have been making pots and figurines since before the Neolithic period: figures were discovered in the Czech Republic dating to 29,000BCE and vessels in Jiangxi, China from c.20,000BCE. These early examples were made from clay, sometimes mixed with other materials, and then hardened by fire or baked in the sun. Later pots were decorated, either before or after firing, and glazed to create smooth surfaces that were more durable and resistant to liquid. Ceramics today include not only domestic objects, but also industrial and building products, such as bricks, tiles, sanitary ware, disk brakes, dentistry and advanced engineering.

Different types of ceramics

- Earthenware: pottery made from clay, often mixed with silica, quartz, feldspar etc. It needs to be glazed in order to make it watertight.
- Stoneware: heavy, opaque pottery fired at high temperature. It is non-porous so does not need to be glazed.
- Porcelain: A hard, white ceramic made by firing a pure clay (usually in the form of kaolin) and then glazing it – often called 'china' after its place of origin.
- Bone china: soft-paste porcelain composed of bone ash, feldspar and kaolin.

Clay in Contemporary Art

Clay is one of the easiest materials to model with and most children have played with it at some time, even to simply form 'snakes' by rolling the material between their hands. Sculptors often make their 'maquettes' or models in clay before translating their designs into a more durable material such as stone or bronze. Since the late 20th century, clay has been elevated from its humble crafts associations, to a material favoured by radical artists. Pablo Picasso was partly responsible for this renewed interest in ceramics when he set up a pottery studio in Madoura in the South of France following WW2. Other artists who work with clay include, Antony Gormley, Andy Goldsworthy, Emma Rodgers, Catrin Howell.

Tasks

Discuss different uses for pottery in everyday life. How do shapes and materials reflect their uses? Make a list of as many examples you can find in your home. Make sketches or take photographs.

Collect images of ceramics from magazines, leaflets and websites. Why do you think different countries or regions produce different styles of pottery? Compare and contrast examples of Peruvian pottery, Mexican, Celtic, Greek, Egyptian etc. What can pottery tell you about the period when it was produced? Discuss different objects – what were they used for? How were they decorated?

Find out about different types of glaze and what they are made from (eg iron black, feldspar white, and copper green).

Make a pot from coils of clay and decorate it with your own design. Look at ceramics on display at Ruthin Craft Centre and in books or magazines for inspiration. If you do not have a kiln, use air-dry clay such as 'fimo' or 'das'. Experiment with different tools or pressing objects into the clay to create patterns and textures.

Look at installation photographs of Antony Gormley's 'Field' in its various locations, worldwide. Make your own version by filling a corner or your classroom with clay figurines.

Further Resources

Groom, Simon, *A Secret History of Clay – from Gauguin to Gormley*, Tate Publishing 2004

Leach, Bernard, *A Potter's Book*, Faber and Faber, 2011

Mattison, Steven, *The Complete Potter: The Complete Reference to Tools, Materials and Techniques for all Potters and Ceramicists*, Apple Press, 2003

Cooper, Emmanuel, *Ten Thousand Years of Pottery*, The British Museum Press, 2002

Cooper, Emmanuel, *Contemporary Ceramics*, Thames & Hudson, 2009

Handbook of Pottery, Longman 1970

www.vam.ac.uk/page/c/ceramics/

www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/a-to-z-of-ceramics

<http://www.antonygormley.com/projects/item-view/id/245>

www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk/archive-exhibitions/

Work in Focus: Claire Curneen

St Sebastian 2008

Born in County Kerry, Ireland, Claire Curneen has lived and worked in Wales since completing her MA at Cardiff in 1992. At the 2001 National Eisteddfod she won the Gold Medal in Craft and Design, in 2005 she received the Arts Council of Wales' Creative Wales Award and in 2012 the Creative Wales Ambassador Award.

Her figurative ceramics explore themes of human experience, such as birth, death, desire, fears, pain and compassion. They frequently make reference to religious iconography from the early Italian Renaissance, in particular representations of Christian martyrs bearing the evidence of their gruesome deaths.

St Sebastian is a favourite subject which Claire has revisited many times throughout her career. This version from 2008, shows the saint from the torso upwards and stands 65cm tall. It is constructed from flattened patches of white porcelain clay which has been fired and then details have been picked out with touches of coloured glaze.

The choice of material plays an important role in conveying both the silent suffering of the martyr and his steadfast resilience. The hard, brittle surface of the porcelain suggests strength and permanence which contrasts with the soft, cracked clay beneath. This is not the smooth bronze or marble of traditional icons, but a scarred and pitted body, covered with the artist's fingerprints. These marks reveal the process and material, and also a human touch. The texture of the hollowed clay figure reminds us of the fragile, vulnerable condition of the human frame. Arrows pierce Sebastian's body with drops of gold lustre in place of blood to suggest the magnitude of his sacrifice.

'I get very passionate about things holding some meaning. It has to be important'

Claire Curneen



Claire Curneen
St. Sebastian,
65cm x 30cm, 2008.
photo: Dewi Tannatt Lloyd

Tasks

Research St Sebastian in art. Compare and contrast examples by Donatello, Botticelli, Mantegna, Pollaiuolo, Bernini, Caravaggio etc. Discuss the different artists' interpretation of the subject

Discuss other representations of St Sebastian by Claire Curneen. Talk about scale, materials, processes, colour, texture etc.

Make your own models in clay and attempt to convey emotion through your treatment of the material – try ripping the clay, scarring it, pitting it, pressing objects into it to make different textures. What other materials could you use?

Create an abstract artwork to convey emotions such as love, hate, anger, pity, fear, happiness etc. Which colours, textures and materials do you associate with these emotions?

Visit an art gallery or museum and make notes and sketches of figurative works noting their materials. How have representations of the human body changed throughout history?

Further Resources

Ruthin Craft Centre (Catalogue) Claire Curneen: *Succour*, 2008

Ruthin Craft Centre (Catalogue) Claire Curneen: *To This I Put My Name*, 2014

www.clairecurneen.com

www.ceramics-aberystwyth.com/curneen-claire.html

www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk/archive-exhibitions/



Claire Curneen, *To this I put my name* exhibition, 2013