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Ceramic homewares that fire the imagination

Modern updates to ancient craft techniques help creators produce desirable objects



Daylesford's Quince Garden collection © Martin Morrell

Jessica Salter JUNE 4 2022



Humans' love of ceramics has endured for millennia. They fill our galleries and museums, as well as our homes. From simple earthenware cooking pots to classical Greek amphora and delicate tin-glazed faience, styles have evolved and dipped in and out of fashion.

But what unites them, and their crafters, says Éléonore Trenado-Finetis, owner of the Greek gallery Mon Coin Studio, is "this feeling of continuity and unity, spanning from the most ancient times to the present day".

For the past couple of decades, the love of the craft was "let's say abandoned", says Trenado-Finetis, as mass-produced ceramics dominated the market. Now, she says, Greek ceramics are in demand once again.

In fact, across Europe crafters and galleries are reporting a resurgent interest in their work. Globally, the ceramic tableware market has grown from \$59.1bn in 2017 to a forecast \$75bn by the end of this year, says a report by Marketresearch.com.

In part, the demand has been spurred by the desire among younger buyers to post perfectly styled scenes on Instagram: #ceramics has more than 17mn posts and retailer Matchesfashion.com reports that ceramics and tabletop items are the best-selling items in its homeware category.

Trenado-Finetis suggests it is the craft's rich history that is attracting interest. While many think of ceramics in Europe as starting with the classical Greek and Roman periods, the earliest pieces discovered date from 29,000 to 25,000BC, found at a site at Dolní Věstonice in the Czech Republic.



Pottery on the island of Sifnos, Greece, 1950 © Sifnos Potters' Union

Even within Greek history, Trenado-Finetis is keen to celebrate work from a period before the classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BC) — specifically the potters, or *tsikalades*, on the island of Sifnos, in the Cyclades islands. Her exhibition, *Ceramic Journey Around Greece: Sifnos*, opens this summer.

“The tradition of Sifnos in pottery dates back to 2500BC, to the Cycladic period, and has been passed through the generations, nonstop, until today,” she says. There are now 16 modern-day workshops still working using traditional techniques.

Sifnos is not alone in being proud of its ceramic history. Puglia, in southern Italy, prides itself on its maiolica pottery, a tin-glazed earthenware technique produced in the region from about the 14th century.

One family-owned brand, Ceramiche Fasano, comes from a line of potters based in Grottaglie in Puglia. The business is now on to its fifth generation, and has luxury clients around the world, including the director Francis Ford Coppola.

Techniques that at first glance seem European have often migrated across the world: maiolica originated as a lead-glazed pottery in ancient Assyria. It arrived in Spain — via the Middle East — in the 10th century, before migrating to Italy in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The Italian town of Faenza became particularly famous for the style, and ceramics from the town are known as *faience*. After an Italian monk took the technique to France, it became popular there, too, particularly after it was used in the court of Louis XVI (and gallicised as *faïence*).



Coralla Maiuri's blossom vase © Artemest



Cerasarda's Le Pavoncelle vase © Artemest

Today, the remote village of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie in Provence, which has a population of 720, is known for its faience craftsmanship, with ateliers supplying global clients including Tiffany, Bergdorf Goodman, Takashimaya and Hermès.

Historic techniques and design are an important reference point for modern ceramicists. Myrto Zirini, a ceramicist based in Athens, says she has “found some pieces in the archaeological museum that have been the inspiration for a series of mugs”. Spanish artists Canoa Lab, meanwhile, say they found inspiration at the Museo Prehistòria de València.

But what really excites them, and their customers — is the modern reinterpretation of their craft.

“Many of our artisans add a modern twist to traditional patterns and techniques,” says Ippolita Rostagno, creative director of Artemest, an online emporium collating the works of more than 1,300 Italian craftspeople.

Sardinian ceramicists Cerasarda use hand engraving on clay to rework local themes such as the *pavoncella* — a typical Sardinian symbol of peace — into decorative plates. Roman artist Coralla Maiuri creates veritable works of art, mixing fine porcelain with hand-painted lapis lazuli and gold details.

Even the clay itself is up for modern reinvention: Paola Paronetto, a ceramicist born in Pordenone, north-east Italy, has an innovative technique that involves blending paper and clay to create a unique texture with a delicate and tactile quality. “Its composite nature requires the slow work of additions and layering,” she says.



Ceramic platter by Simos Atsonios for Peristeriona



A Ceramiche Fasano plate © Grace Sisters

It is not just the makers who spot ways of updating traditional ceramics for a modern audience — homewares buyers who love the craft are doing so, too.

Natalie Sytner, a former fashion buyer for Browns and Net-a-Porter, founded her ceramics brand Bettina Ceramica last August, inspired by her Italian mother's knack of decorating their home with traditional artisan ceramics.

One of her surprise hits has been a range of ceramic *acquasantiere*, small vessels for holy water placed by the door. "They have been made for millennia," she says, "and traditionally they are in places of worship, but my mum always had them hanging in our home, where she would have keepsakes, like photographs, or fresh flowers."

It took Sytner months of searching throughout lockdown to find a maker; eventually she found one in Venice "who literally dusted off samples from their loft," she says. "They hadn't made them in so long, and couldn't believe that I wanted to bring them back to life."



Ranuncoli vases, Paola Paronetto © Studio Auber

Sytner has reimagined more designs for a modern audience, including “traditional horsemen candlesticks”, a handcrafted ceramic Pomo di Puglia, a traditional good luck charm, and a new range of traditional-looking terracotta bowls, but in muted colours. She has five makers around Italy, based in Venice, Florence and Puglia.

“I mostly deal with the grand or great-grandchildren of the original artists,” she says. The descendants are incredibly protective of their family heritage, she adds.

“Some wouldn’t sell to me until we had met in person a couple of times and had dinners together; it’s not a modern way of doing business, it has ancient vibes. But it makes it a very personal journey.”

It was a familial journey that inspired Zoë de Givenchy to create a line of tableware. She was inspired by the tastes of her late uncle-in-law, Count Hubert de Givenchy, founder of the house of Givenchy. He regularly travelled to Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, bringing his niece along for research trips as he furnished his 16th-century Château du Jonchet in the Loire Valley.

“His passion and extensive knowledge of French *métiers d’art*, including French ceramics — porcelain and faience — was extensive,” Zoë de Givenchy says. “It was a captivating education for me that spanned from his table to the ateliers, where he personally introduced to me the many families of artisans with whom I work today.”



Canoa Lab's Romaine decanter © Edouard Sanville/Juliette Abitbol



Bettina Ceramica's acquasantiera

Continuing his heritage, she now commissions Provençal ateliers to make a range of tableware pieces from plates and bowls to faïence apothecary jars, inspired by ones used during the reign of Louis XVI but updated for a modern audience.

“We wanted to lean into the historical reference of the Moustiers blue so emblematic of the region, and juxtapose it with a modern concept,” she says.

Moustiers-Sainte-Marie was also the inspiration for a new range of tableware for Lady Carole Bamford, co-founder of Daylesford, who has a home in the south of France. Last year she asked Atelier Soleil, led by master craftsman Franck Scherer, to make her range of faïence serving ware using centuries-old techniques of embossing, throwing and moulding by hand.

“It is an incredible process to watch,” says Rebecca Malyon, head of homeware product development at Daylesford, who visited the atelier recently. Videos on his website show Scherer shaping a plate on his wheel, pinching the edges of wet clay with his hands like the edge of a pie. It is hypnotic.



A Zoë de Givenchy plate © Billal Taright

It is precisely this tactile connection that has made the millennia-old craft so enticing to a modern audience more used to tapping a phone, according to contemporary makers.

Trenado-Finetis believes handling a piece of ceramic art — even if only a sculpture of a mug — gives people an “authentic connection to other people and with art”, she says.

“A handmade piece of pottery carries not only the energy of the maker [and] an imprint of their soul, but [their] attention, [their] love and respect for the material and for the beauty of life.”

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