

JANET LEACH

WILLIAM MARSHALL

JASON WASON





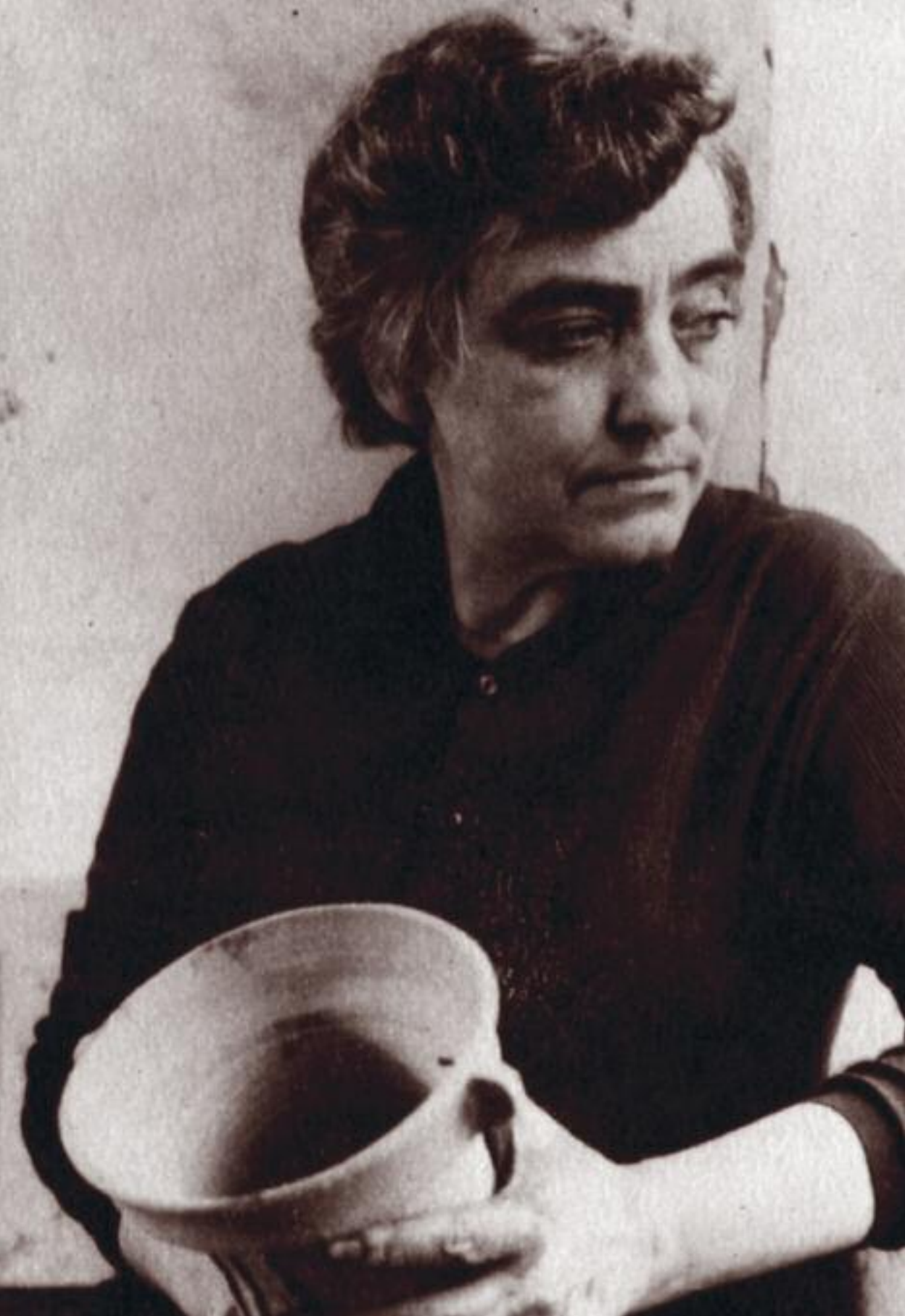


In 1996 I arranged the *Out of the Dark* ceramic exhibition at our Bloomsbury gallery; it featured work by eight leading British based studio potters. Included in the show were a group of beautiful slab built pots by Janet Leach, it was to be the last time she exhibited new work before her death in 1997. In the subsequent years Janet's work has become increasingly sought after, she has been the subject of various exhibitions, most recently at the Leach Pottery, St Ives. The biography *Janet Leach: A Potter's Life* by Emmanuel Cooper was published in 2006.

Janet's work is again at the heart of this exhibition. It sits alongside work by William 'Bill' Marshall, the first apprentice employed by Bernard Leach at his pottery, and Jason Wason – the last apprentice taken on during Leach's lifetime. For a brief period in the mid to late 1970's these three potters worked together in the close confines of the Leach Pottery before Marshall, and then Wason left to establish their own studios. Their individual work developed in different ways; however the three will always have a shared history.

I would like to thank the three contributors to this catalogue. Jo Wason was both studio assistant and amanuensis to Janet Leach for the last ten years of her life; her introduction will hopefully soon be expanded into a more comprehensive and personal study of this fascinating individual. David Whiting is a writer/curator; his piece on William Marshall was not a straightforward task as the potter was at times shy and reticent, preferring his pots to be self-evident. Michael Bird is an author and art historian, his insightful introduction to Jason Wason is based on conversations with the potter made during visits to his Botallack studio.

David Archer, June 2011  
Austin Desmond Fine Art



# JANET LEACH

by Jo Wason

An only child, Janet Darnell was born in 1918 in Texas, where her pioneering grandparents had settled as smallholders, having travelled there in covered wagons from Missouri. Janet's family background ensured that from her earliest days self-reliance was deeply and permanently ingrained in her character.

Her earliest artistic endeavours began as a child, carving animals in soap and crate wood with knives her grandfather gave her. He also gave Janet her 'first gun' and taught her how to use it when she must have been very young, as he died when she was ten.

In 1938, aged nineteen, Janet took the bus from Texas, which she later described as having 'no art' and went to New York. The Museum of Modern Art had just opened and many prominent European artists had recently gone there to escape Nazism; it was considered the artistic centre of the time.

In New York she attended sculpture classes, reasoning that "it was the Depression; there were no jobs, so you might as well study art." She nevertheless found work with Robert Cronbach who engaged her to enlarge and cast his large-scale sculptures for public architectural projects. She worked for him for a total of ten years, before and after the war. She also worked on her own commissions.

During the Second World War Janet became a Navy Certified Welder at Bethlehem Steel Shipyard on Staten Island, working on a total of ten destroyers over a period of three and a half years.

Reflecting on the post-war period, Janet said "Sculpture was proving hard to sell and hard to store." Meanwhile she saw potters beginning to earn a living, and so her interest in pottery began. She visited Aimee Voorhees' Inwood Pottery in NYC to learn to throw, "as a kind of therapy".

Later Janet said "Pottery seemed a step down. Nevertheless I got tremendous satisfaction when I made a bowl and someone put potatoes in it."

With characteristic pragmatism Janet provided herself with a workshop, first by organising a pottery at Rockland State Hospital, one of New York's largest mental hospitals where she taught the patients and staff, made her own pots, and held annual selling exhibitions of everyone's work, and then by establishing a pottery at Threefold Farm, a Steiner centre in upstate New York.

In 1952 Janet attended a seminar with pottery demonstrations given by Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. This was a pivotal experience for her. Hamada's loose approach on the wheel made her realise she had been 'treating the wheel like a lathe'. His lively working methods were a revelation. She said Hamada seemed to stop making a pot just before it was ready.

Janet and Bernard danced 'squares' in the evenings at Black Mountain. After the seminar Janet asked Bernard to seek permission for her to work at Hamada's Mashiko pottery, saying she had thought of little else, and would give her heart to it if permitted to go. On Bernard's recommendation Hamada invited her; and so in May 1954 she became the first Western woman to work in a Japanese pottery.

To finance her journey Janet worked on designs for light fittings for the Luxor Lighting Company based in the Empire State Building. She took the train to Seattle where she boarded her ship for Yokohama. Bernard met her off the ship and they spent a week in Tokyo, sightseeing and meeting his old friends.

Once she was alone in Mashiko, Janet was enchanted by the soft architecture and landscaped gardens. She was given the thatched gatehouse to sleep in. She arrived to witness the intense industry of Hamada's workshop, which was in the throes of glazing and packing pots for the eight-chambered kiln for firing the next day.

At Mashiko her work included making thousands of press-moulded porcelain buttons in a busy workshop. She was never allocated her own wheel, and after four months she moved to the Ichinos' smaller, quieter pottery in the mountains of Tamba, spending two years immersed in this very rural and seasonally freezing situation. Bernard, who visited her there, admired her good-natured fortitude, and later wrote about her time there, concluding that "she became really loved in that valley."

During visits to Bizen and Shigaraki, Janet saw pots being heaped into the kiln, glazed if at all, with local stone, local clay, wood ash and rice straw ash, which produced variegated surface characteristics, by chance. It was Janet's experiences in these traditional Japanese country potteries which informed her work for the rest of her life, and it was her extraordinary strength of character and her imagination that got her to Japan from Texas with its 'no art' in the first place.

Whilst in Japan Janet typed out 'A Potter in Japan' for Bernard from his manuscript. Their friendship developed and they planned to marry and settle near Kyoto, but management worries at the Leach Pottery necessitated their move to St.Ives instead.

A newcomer to Britain, Janet arrived in St.Ives straight from Japan in January 1956. For the next forty one years, until her death in 1997, she managed the daily running of the Leach Pottery workshop and made her own extraordinary pots there. She used a Japanese wheel, to achieve her fluid shapes, or as she put it 'my baggy pots' and when she could no longer throw because of a bad leg, she made her exquisite black slab pots with a characteristic white slash of glaze.

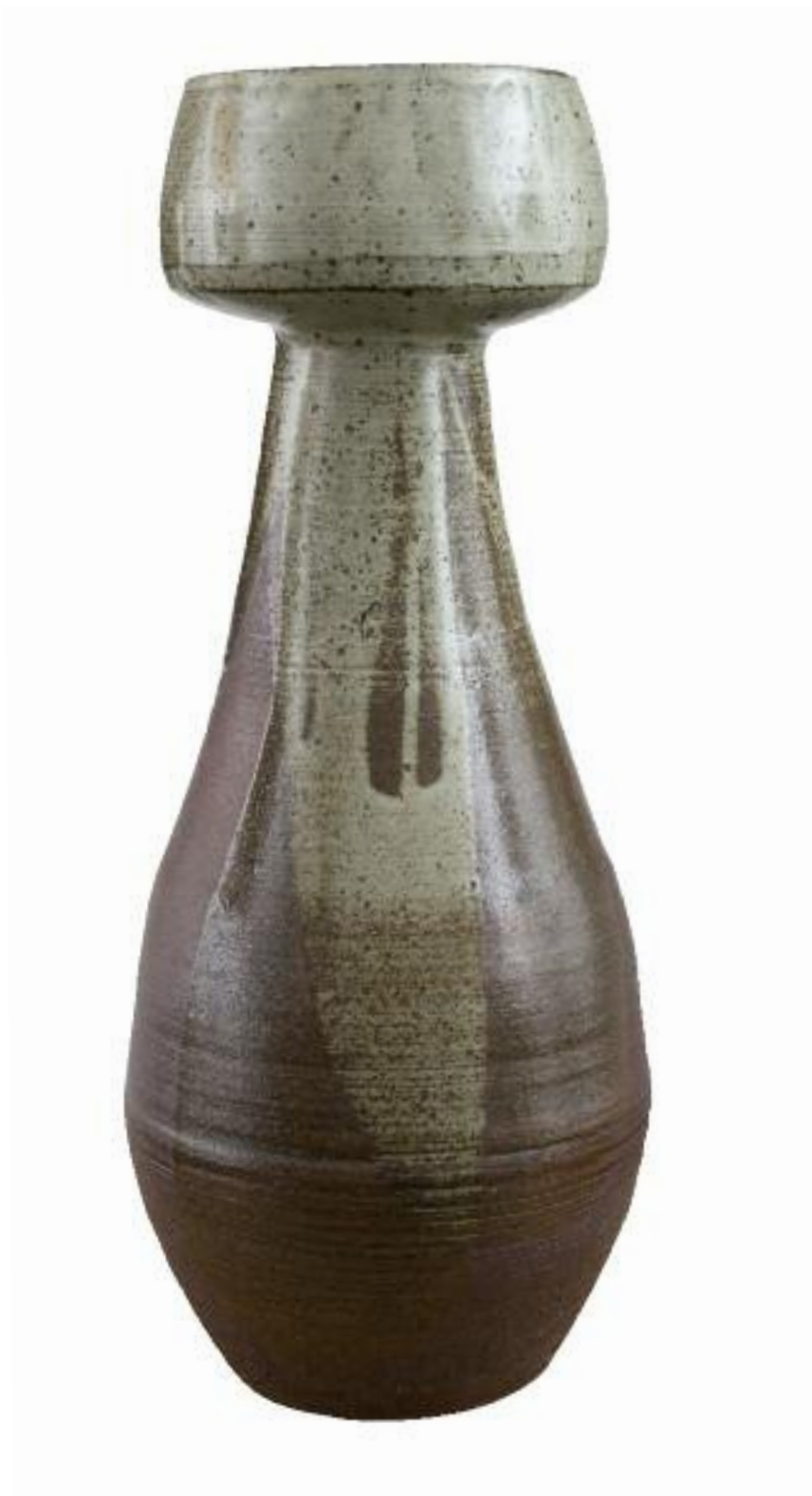
During these years, particularly towards the end of her career, Janet searched for equivalent Cornish materials to continue her experiments with the surfaces and forms that she so enjoyed during her time in Tamba. Local stone, various wood ashes, seaweed and charcoal all found their way into her work. This exhibition represents work from various stages of Janet's intensely varied and interesting career with clay.

In Janet's Guardian obituary David Whiting wrote "She was one of British pottery's most vivid and remarkable characters" and I agree with him.





Vase with Loop Handles 25.4cm



Monumental Collared Vase 57cm



Squat Cut Vessel 13cm



Green Glaze Faceted Stoneware Vase 14.5cm



Stoneware Vase with Lugged Handles 15.5cm



Vessel with Hooped handles 16cm



**Small Stoneware Vase** 18cm  
Provenance: The Diana Stafford-Smith Collection



Small Bowl 7cm



Pot with Small Lugs 12.2cm





# WILLIAM MARSHALL

by David Whiting

William Marshall (1923 – 2007) was an exemplary potter and a Cornishman through and through. His considerable reputation is still growing (coinciding with this exhibition is a welcome retrospective at the Leach Museum in St Ives) because Marshall, indebted though he was to traditional taproots, from medieval England to the Far East, made work of considerable originality. I remember the first time I properly handled a Marshall pot, a small yunomi in a mixed exhibition in Bath in the 1980's. Thickly potted with the foot freely turned, a thin slip revealed the coarseness of the underlying clay. There were pourings of green copper pigment for decoration. Though I was the son of another potter who had worked in the 'Leach tradition' it was nonetheless quite new and fresh to me, this object. It had an expressive rawness that set it apart from the more familiar 'glaze' pots, the more controlled finish of say Harry Davis and David Leach, or indeed Marshall's old mentor, Bernard Leach.

Marshall may have been a loyal member of the Leach pottery team and famously became Bernard's right-hand man, but he remained artistically independent, his mature pots quite distinct from anybody else's. Such creative ambition is not however to be confused with the need for personal recognition, and Marshall, even in later years, working on his own, had little interest in critical attention or publicity. When I and others approached him about articles, he would politely decline, always preferring to let the pots speak for themselves. And yet I have rarely met a man who was more engaged, more excited by the world around him, not only in pottery, but in a broader visual culture and the beauties and complexities of nature. He was a great conversationalist, with an extraordinary accumulation of knowledge and ideas about a wide range of subjects. It was Marshall's strong sense of search and enquiry that made his pots so invigorating.

David Leach took the initiative to employ locally-born Marshall, then aged fifteen, as the first pottery apprentice in 1938 (Kenneth Quick and Scott Marshall, his gifted cousins, successively followed in 1945 and 1951). They needed a reliable workforce to produce the new standardware, a range intended to stabilise the pottery fortunes. He soon learnt the rudiments, and the repeat shapes of Leach tableware enabled Marshall to build up his skills as an outstanding thrower (a far better one in fact than Leach), as well as the future foreman of the workshop. Nonetheless his progress was interrupted by war service in the Royal Artillery and then by long recuperation after illness, only returning to the pottery in 1948. As foreman, Marshall supervised the standardware, allowing evenings for his own work. He was also, by the late 40's, throwing some of the larger and more complex forms for Leach, which Bernard would then finish and decorate.

Meanwhile, by the mid 50's, Marshall's own pots were already confident and bold. Muriel Rose's *Artist Potters in England* (1970 edition) illustrates a 1956 saltglaze jug with an impressed 'feather' motif, a pot that had a material directness quite different from Leach's more lyrical shapes and decoration. On the opposite page a stoneware lidded jar from a decade later is particularly characteristic, clearly about the quality of the clay and the rich creaminess of the applied slip, decoration completed by rapid short strokes of the brush. Early porcelain too, far from being refined and delicate, was thickly potted and often loosely cut, much in the spirit of early Korean porcelain. Marshall essentially bypassed modern, often over-crafted approaches to throwing, turning and glazing in favour of his own looser handling, and Bernard Leach quickly noted his foreman's expressive powers.

Through Hamada's son, Atsuya, who worked at the pottery in the late 1950's, and Sono Matsumoto, a friend of Leach's and a regular visitor to St Ives, Marshall was able to learn about and form his own partly imaginary notion of Japan, all the more intense for being a very personal perception of a country he would never visit. Through Matsumoto he learnt about the work and ideas of Kitaoji Rosanjin, the maverick Japanese potter. Roundly disapproved of by Leach, Rosanjin's hybrid reinterpretations of tradition made a big impression on Marshall's experimental nature. He also loved Hamada's free abstract decoration, looked closely at early North American wares and, closer to home, old Cornish pitchers and native swelling jars known as 'bussas'. Such work helped to give Marshall's pots their strong Cornish edge, with textures and colours redolent of the rugged mossy-stoned landscape. Many of his pots had an almost granite-like quality, with layers of glaze and slip evoking the natural weather-exposed forms and surfaces of the Cornish coast, and spontaneous brushwork invoking the wild grasses and flowers he knew and loved. Of all the pots to emerge from the Leach workshop, Marshall's had the most potent sense of place. And his admiration for a local painter like Alfred Wallis partly lay in Wallis's untutored quality, a style that captured the essence of location, the substance of the paint and improvised surfaces he used. There was that same material empathy. And though a consummate craftsman, Marshall had no interest in slick formulae.

By the 1960's he was emerging as a major potter in his own right. He was sharing exhibitions with Bernard and Janet Leach at Liberty and Primavera in London and was included in the *Engelse Pottenbakkers* at the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam (1960) and in the Arts Council travelling shows. Public collections began to acquire his work, including the Victoria and Albert Museum. By the 1970's the work was at its most fluid and assured, making as he was a varied range of bowls large and small, platters, lidded jars, jugs and bottles. In 1977, two years before Bernard's death, Bill set up his own workshop at nearby Lelant. Here he built, with the help of his son Andrew (also a fine potter), a large oil and woodfired kiln, a structure so large it could only be filled and fired infrequently, but it still supplied a run of successful late exhibitions. Thrown or press-moulded and glazed in deep ashes and irons, dolomites and hakemes, each pot looked like a new adventure. Amongst the most characteristic were the cylindrical and squared bottles with prominent necks, big expansive dishes with broad pourings of tenmoku or copper, and arguably the best traditional jugs produced by any British studio potter. Then there were the intimate and tactile yunomis and teabowls, as well as cobalt and iron-decorated porcelain of great sensitivity. Marshall's deep engagement with his environment and materials meant there was no creative let-up, even in his eighties. That sustained energy gave us pots which had, at their finest, an almost elemental strength and force.



Saltglaze Stoneware Yunomi 8.5cm



Stoneware Yunomi 9.5cm



Glazed Stamped Bowl 8cm



**Stoneware Jug** 27.5cm

Provenance: The Reggie and Heather Hyne Collection



Six-Sided Vessel 35cm



**Porcelain Lidded Pot** 14.3cm  
Provenance: The Richard Curtis Collection



Large Stoneware Bottle Vase 33cm





Stoneware Rectangular Bottle Vase 30.5cm



Cream Stoneware Vase 24.2cm



Large Stoneware Shallow Bowl 41.5cm



## JASON WASON – Contained Spaces

by Michael Bird

I assumed until recently that the first objects ever fashioned from clay must have been vessels, the moist earth kneaded, flattened and cupped in the palm to hold food or drink. It would soon have been discovered, obviously, that if you left clay in a fire it became usefully waterproof. Wrong, as it turns out. The oldest ceramic objects by a long way are crude Palaeolithic figurines from central Europe – ritual items, perhaps, or toys (one bears a child's fingerprint). We don't know why they were fired. It may have been a magic practice in which transformation by flame was more important than the improved durability of those little objects left in the cooling ashes. Thousands of years were to pass before anyone thought of adapting this process to make pots.

Drums were the first things Jason Wason made from clay, on the commune in rural Scotland he helped to set up in the early 1970s after eleven years of youthful wanderlust had kept him on the move, mostly out east. Drums are vessels of a kind, though ones designed to sing out rather than hold in. They are vessels in which you hear as much as see the shape, since imperceptible variations in the drumshell's dimensions and thickness register in the sound it produces. 'Vibration' is one of those useful metaphors that translate works of art into experiences, as when Kandinsky spoke of the 'spiritual vibration' of colour. But a Kandinsky will never vibrate the way drums do, or as the pots on Wason's studio shelves look as though they want to. As you enter by clambering off a ladder through a small trap door, it's as though someone had mysteriously secreted a surround-sound gamelin orchestra in this outbuilding on the edge of the Penwith moors. Where have they come from, and what are they for, these big-voiced pots with generous curves or steep, angled sides braceleted by ridges?

If I had one at home I can imagine wanting to listen almost more than look, as the perfect circular mirror at the bottom of a well makes you want to hear the echo of a stone dropped into it. Their ribbed, studded and patinaed surfaces resemble bell-metal, invitingly tactile yet armoured against intrusion. Wason's pots are not really for putting things in, as you

might happily fill a Leach standardware bowl with green tea or apple crumble. He talks instead about the importance of 'contained space', and containment of one kind or another is a theme that runs through the names he gives his vessel types: 'Mother's Bowl', 'Guardian Vessel', 'Reliquary'; these names contain respectively the growing child, the protected contents and the sacred relic – not to mention 'Devil's Box of Tricks', an earlier rectangular piece cast in bronze with a central well containing fossils. 'Lidded Jar' sounds a note of more practical domesticity, that is if you don't think first of *genii* or opium.

After moving down to Cornwall in 1976, Wason worked at the Leach Pottery in St Ives, the last of a distinguished line of student-assistants to be taken on before Leach's death in 1979. Under Bill Marshall's supervision, he learned to throw standardware; Leach himself had retired from the workshop two years earlier, leaving his wife Janet to run the business, but he occasionally looked in to hold impromptu hearthside seminars. Wason's debt to the Leach ethos isn't immediately obvious in his work, but he is adamant about the practical value of long hours at the standardware wheel – 'I had the opportunity to fine-tune my throwing and develop my eye' – and its liberating creative effect: 'After five years at the Leach, I allowed "that which had spoken to me during my own travels to have a voice within my work".'

Leach's glazed vessels don't resonate. The spaces they contain, as distinct from the outward forms they offer so satisfyingly to hand and eye, are neither here nor there. Leach did, however, teach that studio pottery drew on histories and traditions every bit as deserving of study as fine art. It was at the Leach Pottery that Wason came across a book on Mimbres ware, the decorated pottery produced by an obscure culture that flourished in Mexico in the 1100s. Mimbres ceramics were made by women potters and decorated with sharp-focus black-and-white figural and geometric designs. Many of the excavated vessels have holes punched in the base. They were placed over the heads of corpses; the hole, it is thought, allowed the soul to take flight. These vivid funerary ceramics came from a ritual context very different to the folk-craft *raku* party in Japan at which Leach experienced his Pauline conversion to the potter's craft. They led Wason to the realisation that there was more than one way in which he could set about making 'significant things in clay'.

Wason has lived in Cornwall now for thirty-five years, travelling is a big part of his life's work. He recalls the constant international traffic of the Liverpool docks where his father had a timber-importing business, the many places he visited during his own *années de pèlerinage*, and the trips to Japan, where his exhibitions are frequent and successful enough to justify maintaining a studio. If Bernard Leach's pots are about bringing the East home to the British kitchen dresser, Wason's have a sense of heading outwards and away, of not wanting to be pinned down to particular uses. Writing of the megalith called Lanyon Quoit on the high moors near his house, he observed, 'The spiritual function that led to it being placed there is now vague and barely understood, but what excites me is the fact that this has sat quietly on the moors for 5500 years.' He wanted, he said, 'to make a pot that may have a feeling of age to it but which has a potent presence in the here and now'. In Wason's studio there are vessel-shapes that look like water-jars to be carried on the head, grain stores, divination trays or funerary urns. Empty, they are freed from function. But through their physical presence they take you travelling. They've come from different times and places, however quietly (provided you don't touch them into sound) they sit in the here and now.



Red and Gold Vessel 52cm



Gold Vessel 30cm





Studded Bowl 24cm



Reliquary 28cm



Small Red and Gold Jar 18cm



Small Studded Handled Bowl 14cm



Zigzag bowl 14cm



Low Slung Vessel 16cm

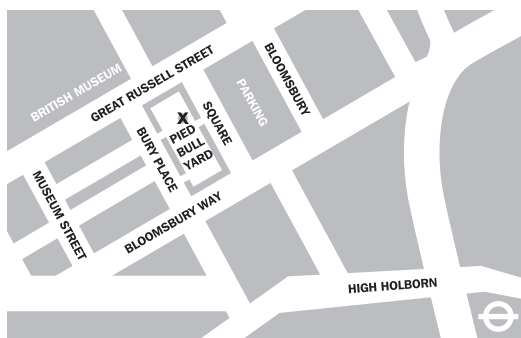


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