

Jason Wason



The Circle is Unbroken

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ELEMENTAL CLAY – THE WORK OF JASON WASON

To get a true sense of what Jason Wason is about, you probably have to see where he lives and works. There is no more dramatic location I know of for a potter's studio, a crow's nest high on a hillside in Cornwall with a panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean, and, between him and sea, a broad coastal landscape punctuated by old, broken down, mine workings. Behind him a tall radio mast attracts lightning on an alarmingly regular basis, and the wind and rain buffets this wild place. It is difficult to think of anywhere more elemental, on Britain's western-most coast: 'a land suspended between sea and sky', between earth and oblivion. Wason's austere ceramics seem imbued with this bony terrain, as they are by his wider travels and his appreciation of the art, pottery and landscapes of far-flung cultures too – from Africa to the Mediterranean to New Mexico.

This remote base is perhaps symbolic in other ways. Wason has always struck me as something of a loner, an outsider in British ceramics, never really part of the 'pottery scene'; but one who shows more with fine art galleries, a reflection of the sculptural nature of his work. While he has made his fair share of more conventional functional pieces, by the late eighties he was concentrating increasingly on bigger, more ambitious, vessel shapes. They were objects which drew in part on the great ceremonial wares of the past and his absorption of nature to explore containment in powerful new ways, forms that he has been developing to this day – broad deep bowls, jars (some like tall amphorae), pouring vessels, disk-like containers, lidded jars and big dishes. They suffuse elements of form taken from the disparate places he has seen and his appreciation of the long history of

ceramic art, as well as the direct, ever-present, light, colour and texture of his Cornish home.

Wason's nomadic independence, the sense that he works away from the main creative limb of clay, is perhaps due to an in-born separateness. He is essentially self-taught, not a product of the art college system, and had a good deal of experience at the wheel before he went to a workshop. He learnt the basics at a crafts co-operative he helped to establish in Scotland in the early 1970s. But before this time he had already travelled extensively, in North Africa, Asia and Europe. By buying jewellery and other ethnic objects from some of the places he visited, exporting them home to raise finance for further travel, he was developing that keen visual sensibility, a potter probably more indebted to other artistic traditions than our own – though there is clearly an innate feeling for our earliest native pots and relics and their primordial landscapes.

In 1976 he and his young family settled in Cornwall and Wason joined the team at the Leach Pottery in St Ives. He had found and begun to renovate an old farmhouse in the country around St Just near Penzance, once a great mining area and a place he had fallen in love with several years before and was determined to return to. Following the rules of the Leach workshop, he again began to make pots from scratch and consolidated his technical knowledge through batch production for the pottery and his own work in the evenings. Yet, despite his admiration for Bernard Leach's aesthetic, and his indebtedness, in part, to Eastern form (and Wason now has a close working relationship with Japan), it was clear when he left the pottery in 1981 that he would move in a radically different direction.

Soon he would be developing structures, which, with their signature black finish, were primarily concerned with the architecture of form, incising, turning, carving and using applied clay decoration, integral to surface. He did not paint or glaze in the Leachian manner. Wall pieces made in the mid eighties resembled little else being made in Britain at that time, recalling the spirit of eleventh and twelfth century Mimbres bowls but with a minimal and effective abstract design of Wason's conception, clearly showing how he was able to absorb and transform his influences into modern objects for modern life. Yet, despite his economy, what is also evident is the precision

and attentiveness of his time – consuming craftsmanship and finish. These objects are beautifully wrought. Yet they are not, with their abraded and textured contours, pieces of easy ornamentation. They challenge the viewer. They have a presence that will sculpturally shape a room, that centre and define space.

Layers of oxide create surfaces of great variation, some drier and revealing of the underlying clay (Wason also uses a white body, creating rich silvery greys), others are more metallic and lustrous. The echoes of history are various. One may be reminded of Chinese bronzes or burnished African pots, the clay sometimes braided or scored like the designs of tribal jewellery or the geometric patterns found on shields and textiles (think of his zigzag dishes and scaled forms, or the black and white wall pieces). Wason's inventive, playful eclecticism reminds one a little of the late Ian Godfrey, but Wason makes bolder statements, and is not concerned with Godfrey's more intimate whimsy. His work is more succinct. Yet, for all its brevity, there is still a great sense of treasure and discovery. Look for example at his Presentation Boxes, solidly constructed, made to contain all manner of offerings – fossils, skulls and crystals for instance. Here, in Wason's rich archaeology, his ritualistic world, we sense a potter raiding some ancient burial chamber, imaginatively drawing on forgotten ceremonial languages and the land around him to say new things about the vessel and the lessons of time.

Wason's work makes no concession to popular taste. His deep investment in the clay is about his dialogue across the centuries, to civilisations where man made art for very functional purposes, and where he was in far more accord – in step – with the earth and its cycles. This work, aside from its celebration of clay, has an underlying political and ecological message too, one that comes out of its equilibrium, its balance and poise, the fact that it makes us pause and think about the world in which we live now. Out of its clear sense of history and its stillness, we realise how much this potter has to say beyond the flux of contemporary life.

David Whiting. February 2007

David Whiting is a writer and curator. He is a member of the International Association of Art Critics.

I tend not to use any orthodox glazes. I have always preferred to play around with the surface of the clay itself. I augment those surfaces with various mixtures of oxides, some of which I get from the old mine workings on the cliffs down below my workshop. For economic and environmental reasons, I rarely fire above 1,100 degrees C. Sometimes, I use post-firing techniques with pine needles, gorse, hay from the fields or seaweed to generate random marks.

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Red and gold jars
54 x 28 cm 2006

Low vessel
16 x 52 cm 2006





Lidded jar
20 x 15 cm 2006

8



Nine stud bowl
17 x 20 cm 2006

9

Black and gold vessel
36 x 50 cm 2006





Gold bowl
 $23 \times 16 \text{ cm}$ 2006

12



Low vessel
 $14 \times 45 \text{ cm}$ 2006

13



Pouring vessel
20 x 25 cm 2006



Nine stud bowl
26 x 44 cm 2006

Black and gold vessel
40 × 40 cm 2006





Zig-zag fragment dish
57 cm 2006

18



Incised bowl
16 x 54 cm 1997

19



Preservation box
 $14 \times 60 \text{ cm}$ 2000

20



Zig-zag bowl I
 $11 \times 48 \text{ cm}$ 2006

21

Black and gold vessel
43 × 48 cm 2006





Black and red bowl
17 × 56 cm 2001

24

Ancestor jar
60 × 23 cm 2006



25



Preservation box
28 x 30 cm 2006

26



Large studded bowl
31 x 51 cm 2006

27

Vessel

26 x 44 cm 1998





Pouring vessel
 $24 \times 20 \text{ cm}$ 2006

30



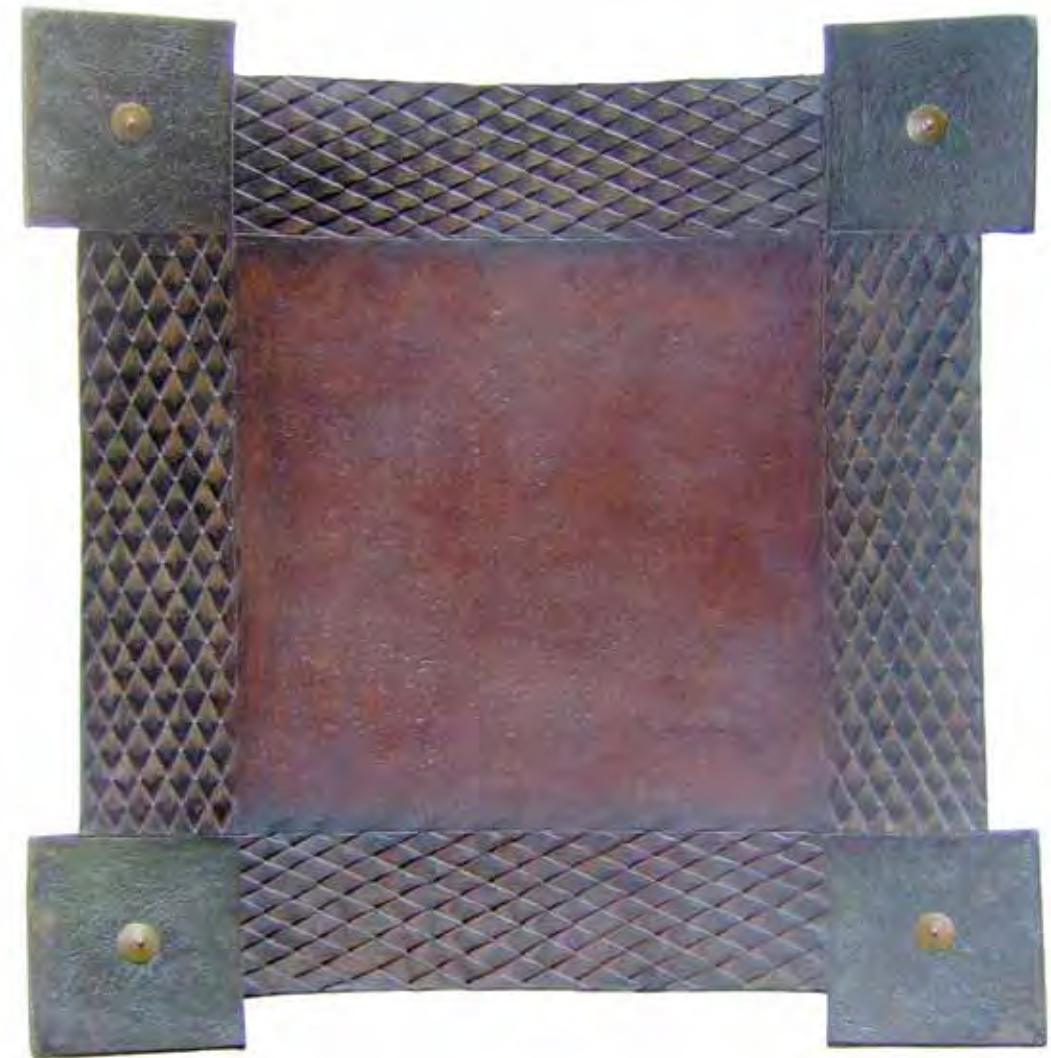
Red and gold vessel
 $36 \times 43 \text{ cm}$ 2006

31



Guardian vessel
26 × 50 cm 2006

32



Scaled square dish, copper studs
50 × 50 cm 2006

33

Preservation box
11 × 33 cm 2000



Low black vessel
50 cm diameter 2006



JASON WASON

Born 1946 Liverpool
1964-1974 Travelled Europe, North Africa, Middle East, Asia.
1974-1976 Set up crafts community in Dumfrieshire, built a kick wheel from the back wheel and half shaft of a Morris 1000 van, and learnt to throw.
1976-1981 Leach Pottery, St Ives.
1981- present Own studio, St Just, Cornwall.

Exhibitions

1990 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
National Museum and Gallery, Liverpool.
1992 Maruzen Department Store, Tokyo, Japan.
1993 'Excavation Series', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
1994 Raku exhibition, Tate Gallery St Ives.
Andrew Usiskin Galery, London.
1995 'Ten Pieces', Tate Gallery, St Ives.
'Japanese Connections', touring show.
'Textiles and Ceramics', Rufford Art Centre, Nottingham.
Cornish Crafts Association, Truro Museum.
Gallery Gilbert, Dorchester.
Gallerie Inart, Amsterdam.
Boymans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam
Vincent Gallery, Exeter.
'Playing With Fire', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
Six Chapel Row, Bath.
Joanna Bird Gallery, including Leach, Hamada, Cardew, Rie.
1998 Running Ridge Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.
Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
1999 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
Cobra and Bellamy, Chelsea, London.
2000 Six Chapel Row, Bath.
Worked for two months with Yasuo Terada at Seto, and firing anagama kiln at Seihoji Ancient Kiln Park, Aichi.
'Japanese Connections', C Square Gallery, Nagoya Japan.
'Jason Wason, David Leach, Shinsaka Hamada, Tatsuzo Shimaoka', Dartington Hall, Devon.
2001 British Studio Ceramics, Clay Studio Philadelphia, USA.
'SOFA Expo', sculptural Objects and Functional Art, Chicago.
2002 Gallery Bizen Seto Shi, Aichi, Japan.
'Ceramica International', including Bernard Leach, Janet Leach, Penlee Museum, Penzance.
'Potters from the Treasure House', Jason Wason, Yasuo Terada, Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
Seto City Cultural Centre, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, exhibition of work after two months' residency.
'Japanese Connections', Seto Glass and Ceramic Centre, Japan.

2003 'Body and Form', Joanna Bird Gallery, London.
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
2004 Collect, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
'Jason Wason Ceramics', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.
Kusakabe Folk Museum, Gifu Prefecture, Japan.
Maruzen Department Store Nagoya, Japan.
2005 Austin Desmond Fine Art, Bloomsbury Square London, summer show.
Harlequin Gallery, London, mixed show.
Seto City Art Museum, Japan.
2006 London Art Fair (Lemon Street Gallery)
'The Circle is Unbroken', Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.
2007

Appointments

2001 Appointed Project Officer, Japan 2001, to invite Yasuo Terada, to UK and together to build a Raku kiln at Leach Pottery St Ives.
2002 Appointed Project Officer for Ceramica International Festival of Ceramics, run by Tate Gallery, Newlyn Orion Gallery Truro Museum.
International artist in residence, for Seto City, Aichi, Japan.
2005 Appointed member of committee for Seihoji Ancient Kiln Park, Aichi, Japan.
International artist in residence, for Seto City, Aichi, Japan.

Awards

1990 South West Arts Council, grant to open European Connections, Holland in particular.
2005 South West Arts Council, grant to work at EXPO 2005, at Seihoji Kiln Park, Seto Japan.
1992 Installation at British High Commission, Dhakar, Bangladesh.
1997 Lecture tour of Israel, funded by British Council.
1998 South West Arts Council, grant to work and study, New Mexico, USA.

Publications

1992 *In Their Element*, film by Television South West.
Dictionary of British Potters, Pat Carter, Scholar Press.
1998 *Ceramic Review*, exhibition review, issue 173.
2004 *Journey to St Ives, Kinship between East and West*, published by Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Arts.
'Mimbres Potters', article written by J Wason, *Ceramic Review* 18.
2005 *Crafts*, exhibition review of Six Chapel Row show.
Raku, Tim Andrews, first edition.
2006 *Raku*, second edition by Tim Andrews, published by AC Black.
Ceramic Review, profile, July 06
The Leach Legacy, second edition, Marion Whybrow, published by Sansom and Co.



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Cover:
Scaled vessel 36 × 52 cm 1999

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