

# Expanding the Ceramic Field in the Long 19th Century

**Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth**, Visiting Lecturer, V&A/RCA

**Anne Anderson**, V&A Course Director and Tutor

**Rachel Gotlieb**, Gardiner Museum, Toronto

This session examines the current scholarly field of ceramics in the long 19th century. It seeks to explore alternative narratives within art, decorative art and design histories and material culture and thus move beyond the tradition of connoisseurship and the cycles of production and consumption. We maintain that ceramics in the 19th century had a profound and pervasive presence: a rare Kangxi vase or a Chelsea figurine, a popular blue transferware plate or a humble china cup spoke to multiple actants – collector, dealer, consumer, designer, for example – and thereby contributed to the 19th-century's tangled and often fraught social and intellectual networks. This period also bore witness to an increase in scholarly publications relating to the cultural history of ceramics, intensified by museum exhibitions and the rising art market for these objects, and culminating in a second Chinamania. Building upon Cavanaugh and Yonan's seminal publication on 18th-century porcelain (2010), we ask: How did pottery and porcelain operate as agents of culture, conveying social, psychological and symbolical meanings in the 19th century?

## Speakers and Abstracts

### **Ceramics as a Vehicle of Protest and Spiritual Enlightenment**

*Neil Ewins (University of Sunderland)*

Over the years, there have been considerable changes in the ways in which ceramics have been discussed and analysed by scholars. The early emphasis on ceramic attribution has been broadened to examine the degree to which sophisticated marketing techniques impacted on ceramic consumption (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 1982). Also, in recent times, it has been proposed that, guided by middlemen, ceramic production could be a response to national or international demand (Brewer and Porter, 1993). Either way, and not unreasonably, both interpretations are based on the assumption that they occurred as ways to maximise profits.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interesting example of an early 19th-century American importer whose strategy of ordering printed ceramics from Staffordshire increasingly reflected his own views on religion, politics and anti-slavery. Such cases are worth recognising since they demonstrate how English manufactured goods were not always produced to appeal to popular ceramic demand, and how the motivation of importers was not entirely profit-seeking. Press reactions to what he commissioned and sold were mixed. Perceived in this way, some ceramics in American museums and collections must, in part, be interpreted as embodying the ceramic importers' own anxieties and sense of morality. Thus, it is concluded that some industrial ceramics were more marginal objects, rather than greatly mass-produced commodities, symbolising a desire to use design to influence American culture and society.

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### **Conrad Dressler: England's Della Robbia**

*Charlotte Drew (University of Bristol & Henry Moore Institute)*

Frederic Lord Leighton once famously referred to his contemporary, George Frederic Watts, as 'England's Michelangelo'. Indeed, whether out of respect for artistic accomplishment or as an acknowledgement of a borrowed style, comparisons have often been made between Victorian artists and their Italian Renaissance predecessors. The sculptor, or more correctly 'sculptor-potter,' Conrad Dressler might be considered the 'della Robbia' of the Victorian era: he followed the Quattrocento artist's vibrant aesthetic closely and made important innovations in the mass manufacture of ceramics. Yet his polychrome ceramic sculptures have never come under serious scrutiny by modern sculpture historians, despite the huge popularity of Luca della Robbia in Dressler's own time.

After training as a sculptor, Dressler co-founded the Della Robbia Pottery Company in Birkenhead in 1894. Here, he sought to disseminate his modernised version of della Robbia sculpture throughout the industrial towns of Britain, applying it to architectural relief and domestic wares for public buildings and private interiors. This paper considers how his colourful ceramic sculptures were integrated within modern artistic practice of the day, infiltrating movements such as the Arts and Crafts movement, Aestheticism, late Pre-Raphaelitism and the New Sculpture. I reintroduce Dressler into the canon of Victorian sculpture as 'England's Della Robbia', a figure who occupies an important overlap between the expanded fields of both sculpture and ceramics that has yet to be thoroughly explored: how does viewing sculpture from a ceramic perspective, and vice versa, blur the typological histories of the 'New Sculpture' and challenge the boundaries between art and craft?

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### **Between Aestheticism and Hygiene: E W Godwin and ceramics**

*Richard Hayes (Independent Scholar, New York)*

Victorian architect E W Godwin (1833–86) was an aesthetic polymath whose multi-faceted career encompassed buildings and furniture, stage and costume design, dress reform, architectural journalism and theatrical criticism. Nothing could be more emblematic of the Aesthetic Movement than Godwin's sideboards and hanging cabinets, and when Godwin drew these he almost always showed vases, bowls, jars, and plates on them. Consequently, ceramics were essential to Godwin's interior design schemes. An enthusiast for the arts of China and Japan, Godwin was one of the first figures in England to assemble, during the late 1850s, a collection of Chinese blue and white porcelain. Casting a jaundiced eye on excesses of the Aesthetes, Godwin was both forerunner and critic of the Chinamania that flourished in Britain during the second half of the 19th century.

Concurrently, Godwin was preoccupied with hygiene and cleanliness in the domestic interior. My paper enquires into the extent to which Godwin's use of ceramics occupies a fraught, intermediate space between aesthetics and hygiene. Godwin assiduously designed toilet sets, or jug-and-basin sets, which typically consisted of four items: a jug or ewer, basin, soap dish, and shaving dish. Godwin's toilet sets complemented the simple, hygienic washstands he devised for cabinet-makers like William Watt. Using his own home as a case study in articles like 'My Chambers, and What I Did to Them' and 'My House "In" London', Godwin emphasised the need for sanitary enhancements since 'cleanliness I take to be the first consideration in all domestic design'. Foremost among his hygienic concerns was the design of spare and calm bedrooms. In such interiors, where sanitary concerns led to a minimal use of decorative embellishments, ceramic ware took on a heightened role as artistic agent and hygienic component. Situating these concerns in their 19th-century context is the subject of my paper.

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### **Gendered, Moulded, and Hollow: The little girl and the *Jumeau* doll**

*Sophie Handler (Liverpool John Moores University)*

Originating before the Neolithic period, ceramics are one of the oldest human inventions. Whilst from the very beginning the material has taken many shapes, its most common form is probably the vessel; something which contains something else. Indeed, for whatever mould ceramics take, their oftentimes shallow appearance conceals deeper meanings contained within. This is particularly true of the new ceramic form which swept across France in the late-19th century; the *Jumeau* doll. Twin by name and twin by nature, these uncannily humanesque bisque dolls became the perfect image of girlhood within a culture obsessed by normative gender conceptions, and as with many toys, the ideal acculturation tool by which to transmit these social and cultural ideals. Immaculately styled, with bright unflinching eyes, soothing mutism, and reassuring stillness, the *Jumeau* doll was the perfect and placid model daughter. As the popularity of the doll soared, prescribed fashions and behaviours amongst little girls became increasingly doll-like, and technological developments afforded progressively more human-like dolls, resulting in a profound conflation which rendered girls little more than the most basic ornamental collectibles from which their ceramic models had advanced. Corresponding to the ongoing magnification of appearance over depth and façade over truth which characterised this period's attitude to children and gender, it is this commodification, control, and ultimate debasement of the little girl enacted by this particular ceramic form and its artistic representations on which this paper focuses, exploring the manifestations of this undoing of personhood and in turn how it ultimately undid itself.

## **Old and New, Southern and Not: Lycett Studios China and Newcomb Pottery**

*Elyse D Gerstenecker (University of Virginia)*

Though aesthetically divergent, the ceramics produced by the Lycett Studios of Atlanta, Georgia and the Newcomb Pottery of New Orleans, Louisiana in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were both strongly associated with the identity of the American South. However, they often imitated popular design motifs from the Northeastern United States, Europe, and beyond. This paper probes the ornament employed by the two firms in relation to the unique social, economic, and cultural context of the turn-of-the-century South in order to excavate the meanings of these emulative designs and their implications for emerging regional identities. I contend that the Lycett Studios' use of extensive gilding and naturalistic floral decoration in its hand-painted china allowed an emerging local entrepreneurial class to prove its cultural fluency to Northeastern industrial capitalists, while simultaneously carrying forward the taste associated with the antebellum planter elite, much like this same class touted an industrialised 'New South' while mourning the 'Lost Cause' of the Civil War. Concurrently, the Newcomb Pottery's rendering of local flora upon its earthenware in a flattened, linear manner signalled comprehension of the languages of industrial design reform and japonisme popular in the Northeast, while it also offered up abstracted imagery of the South that conflated the region with a culture often viewed as ancient and exotic. These selective processes of emulation bespeak a thorny relationship between a peripheral region and increasingly powerful cultural centres.