# Three by One

A selection from three public craft collections by Alison Britton

# Introduction

**Alison Britton**

The nub of this project is the bringing together of objects from three different public collections of craft, seen through one pair of eyes. The exhibition is a synthesis, a visual exploration of mixture, as well as a view of history and fabrication. Each collection has developed in its own way, objects have been acquired for exhibitions, through committees, bought, donated; sedimentary layers of taste and decisions. This book echoes the exploration of synthesis with essays from five authors, voiced from each collection and from museological and critical contexts in the wider frame. For this reason the composite photographs of several objects, combining the collections, are true illustrations of the exhibition’s aims; and the different calligraphic titles of essays reveal the notion of bringing a range of opinions together, and emphasize that books are also made things.

Picking my way through hundreds of objects in the online archives of the British Council, the Crafts Council and the Crafts Study Centre last summer raised at first a sense of the absurdity of the task - myriad paths could be plotted through them, thousands of permutations - what was I to aim for? I had been given the wonderful brief of following my own judgement, not the obligation to assess and analyze the underlying strengths of each collection. Shelving an anxiety that my personal taste is of no general interest, I plunged into the great pool of possibilities. I wanted to arrive at visual coherence in an unobvious way, hoped to surprise myself as well as the audience, and to juxtapose differences and connections to illuminating effect. Making is intrinsic in the language of all these objects, my task was to respond to the stuff and skill and bravado of them and then to make a whole out of their random parts. To find a sense of a realisable order, something of subtlety and clarity to show.

My working process across all fields, in making a pot, planning a lecture, writing a text, curating a show, has in common my need for a casual beginning. It is the opposite of a strategy. I want to *not know* about it, to suspend forethought and conviction. Browsing with apparent idleness, like window shopping, sidling up to the ideas, keeping it open-ended; once a fresh thought, a point of entry, has been sensed, then it is much simpler to build the substance of the project and bring it to completion. Not unlike the animal in Ernst Gombrich’s introduction to *A Sense of Order* who ‘must seek its goal in a complex and flexible way’.[[1]](#endnote--1) And order, a discernible pattern or an evident thread, is what is wanted in the end for every pot, essay, lecture or exhibition made.

The limbo phase at the start of an act of making is a slide into a kind of mental wilderness, perhaps to see cleanly what the point is, from a new angle. Making meaning is the real point, optimistically, in the manipulation of ideas, writing, or things.

I started to shortlist from each website with the background idea of building

a personal object language. There were some constraints. I found some objects I would have chosen were already out on loan. And in the case of some favourite artists, the particular pieces I could choose from were not what I wanted. How could I make meaning out of the whole exhibition if each selected object did not mean something to me? Many pieces I already knew, which helped the early stages. Unknown ones I checked out in other ways, in books and catalogues, artists’ websites. A few I have borrowed before, for a British Council exhibition for instance that I curated in the former Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. A few things in the Crafts Council collection I had helped to purchase as a committee member many years ago. Long lists had to become shorter lists - I was aiming to end up with about thirty objects from each collection. The confidence to pare down my selection was based mainly on gut reaction and decades of the visual appraisal of solid things. I knew there would be a good range of pots in the synthesis, because it is my home ground, but I also knew that comparing materials, craft disciplines, and types of work is the focus of interest in a show like this. In pursuing my own pot-making work in the studio many useful historical sources for me are not ceramic. I am intrigued by the translation between materials, and respond to the decorative and formal conventions that distinguish clay and stone, clay and metal, or glass, or textile.

The online trawl was followed by visits to see the actual objects and face the real decision making. The Crafts Council selection was the first to be firmed up, which gave me a core group of major 1980s *New Ceramics* pieces as well as contemporary metal and glass and the most recent jewellery and textiles. The great range of scale in my selection was suddenly apparent, from the long horizontal Ruston Aust textile hanging to the Hans Stofer ring with a glass bottle end in it. The Crafts Study Centre collection was less familiar to me and I took the chance to explore in particular the wonderful hoard of early printed textiles, such as Enid Marx and Barron and Larcher, and works on paper. At the British Council I found objects I wanted at both the domestic end of the spectrum and the large and spectacular. All these chosen objects communicate to me, the vitality or imaginative life in an object is its most important quality and works differently for two and three-dimensional things. The sense of touch is another part of the aesthetic experience that makes us perceive and connect with 3D things. The subsequent task is to make things speak to each other. Like words in a sentence, it is the relationships between objects that make them mean more to the eye.

I have collected postcards of art objects since I was a child; museum going was first induced in me because my father worked very near the British Museum and my sister and I used to be left to wander in there from an early age. With a pile of diverse cards, I started a brown envelope filing system, labelled with what I thought at the age of nine were sensible categories. Before I knew much art history, or even geography, which envelope to put things in was an issue; and I struggled with cards that could belong in more than one envelope. That doesn’t change – in fact there is always a choice of envelopes to file objects into. The process of categorization and the emergence of exhibition themes from a loose beginning, the cluster of objects one has responded to, is, as for Gombrich’s wild animal, another goal to be sought in a complex and flexible way.

I like the image of treading water for the inchoate stage of an artefact, such as an exhibition of a hundred things, that must become decisive and be put in a defined space. Imagine all the short-listed things in a watery medium, so that things can flow in many directions at first, a pool of possibilities. In running your mind over images of the chosen, shoals form, correspondences, maybe in more than one direction. Some of these are a surprise to the curator.

The shoals I began to discern within the mass in the categorization process included alphabets, yellow things, plates, bobbles, little touches of gold, very old things, hints of the body, reflective surfaces, basic colours from metals like iron and copper, and everyday history in cups and saucers and tube signs. Certain times seemed to stand out, such as the 1930s and the 1970s/80s, both periods with stresses which have perhaps spurred change and creativity.

To sum up the contents of the show, it is emphatically an exhibition of craft objects but it touches the sides of fine art and design, as you might expect. The very big jug made by Bruce McLean in 1987 belongs arguably alongside the rest of his work in fine art and performance, and the small jug with a sepia print of garden tools by Eric Ravilious, manufactured by Wedgwood in 1939, is a design on a factory shape. The decorative fluency of the print is close in spirit to the hand-painting on the blue and white tile of an eighteenth century gentleman walking downstairs, attributed to Ravilious in the 30’s. Other pieces I have chosen hover on the borders of production on one side and sculpture or painting on the other, and, as ever, a definition of the craft boundary as permeable is preferable.

A great reward in working on this exhibition has been the chance to engage with historic objects. I had not expected to find and draw on the collections of inspirational objects owned by the craft pioneers Ethel Mairet and Bernard Leach. These two so clearly demonstrate the Modernist urge to seek out new sources, roots and essences, across the world to invigorate a revision of thinking about the hand made and its place in an industrialised society. The 13th/14th century ‘Pot with pricked strap handle’ from Leach’s collection is a sober greyish piece with a wild splash of green glaze on it, and is the oldest in the exhibition. A group of braids from the former Yugoslavia and India from Mairet’s own collection vividly represent artists’ need to widely research and learn from folk traditions. This was fresh and acute in the formative Modernist period, and matters still. A need for historical sympathy, an impassioned connection with how things looked in the past, is inherent in the production of all art that is able to avoid arrogance. What we get, as artists in an engagement with historic objects, are sounding boards, measuring sticks, echo chambers; referential reflections of other systems of meaning from other times in other places. Craft moves forward through its uses of history, looking and comparing, in pursuit of a skilful contemporary relevance.

The exhibition began to set when the objects were installed. Placing the stuff is another part of making its meaning, ideas were defined by filtering it piece by piece into the gallery space. The fit of forms in space is the underlying thing, how we meet the ideas and the aesthetic proposal. In the process, there are more facts to respond to, the exact dimensions and types of case, the overall context of plain wooden surfaces and glass shelves, and the relatively large number of objects to locate. I mentally tried out groups beforehand that considered type of object but also size and colour.

The fixed furniture in the gallery was a boon not a constraint. It also helped to complete the selection; the way one sees things inside the sequence of high flat archive cases running down one side of the room made me decide to include the woven braids, and to treat some of the more graphic plates and tiles rather as images.The3D jigsaw puzzle of arranging all the work in the cases, low plinths and on the walls was a process of finding a shape, to look right but also drawing out categories and themes, from an array of possibilities. The shape inherent in my choices was finally expressed by their display.

I decided to start with the three Bernard Leach drawings that show his thinking about pots rather than the pots themselves, though a simple coffee pot nearby is part of a varied group of tableware, which I see as the basic alphabet of ceramics. Alphabets on paper follow the Leach drawings on the same wall, including the original artwork by Edward Johnston for the typeface for the London Underground drawn in 1916; and is the typeface used in this book.

Colour was crucial in deciding the display; so many of the historic and modernist pieces are either brown or white, ‘natural’ colours so-called, and many kinds of each. One of the most recent objects is Tord Boontje’s Screen which is white *and* brown, the laser leaving a brown edge on the branching foliage cut in white silk.

Iron and deep blue indigo feature strongly in the palette of 1930’s textiles too, powerfully basic as printed on unbleached grounds.

I had chosen pieces with vibrant colours which brought in essential patches of brightness here and there. The yellow glaze on a mug, or the yellow-dyed goat hair of a carpet, green copper glazes on ceramics or as the patinated surface of metal, turquoise glass, a crimson silk lining inside a jacket. The synthetic colours of deck chair canvas are part of the vivid composition of Aust’s wall hanging, and resonate more strongly in the calm context of the dominant palette.

I decided to illustrate this introductory essay with a few black and white photographs of artists’ studios, or workshops, from the 1930’s to the present.

I wanted to allude to the determined fabrication, the hands, tools and materials, cold buildings and long hours, the doing that has brought into being this entire exhibition.

Think of the actionsrevealed in the work included here: drawing, cutting, painting, printing, creasing, weaving, press-moulding, modelling, glazing, beating, soldering, carving, grinding, scrumpling, gilding, trailing, stitching, threading, slabbing, inlaying, coiling, blowing, scorching, turning, laser-cutting, dying, knotting, spinning, sawing, tying, pattern-cutting, pricking, throwing, scratching, pouring, dipping, engraving, incising, patinating, spraying, scrubbing, assembling, and so on ….

In these times when people increasingly sit in front of screens clicking through their intangible contents, you could read this list as an invigorating invitation and reminder to *do* something with stuff you can feel.

1. *The Sense of Order. A study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. Phaidon 1979 [↑](#endnote-ref--1)