

Arts And Antiques

The Victoria and Albert's Stunning New Ceramics Galleries

by Abby Cronin

A magical atmosphere pervades the new ceramics galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum. After more than five years in the planning and construction, the refurbished galleries opened in September 2009, funded by several private donors. Now the public can enjoy a stroll through a chain of seven galleries which tell stories about centuries of ceramic history, diverse cultures and techniques of production. The collection is organised chronologically in Rooms 140 to

French Stoneware Vase by Delaherche 1892
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Installing Edmund de Waal's ceramics in the rotunda beneath the dome - Gallery under construction.
© V&A Images

145 and features 3,000 of the museum's finest pieces. Take the lift to the 6th floor above the Brompton Road entrance and begin your journey. The stunning domed ceiling sets the scene and houses an original installation, Signs and Wonders, by the contemporary British potter, Edmund de Waal (pictured). As you enter, look up and feast your eyes on de Waal's 450 simple monochrome pots resting on the circumference just below the dome.

Vase: 'Artist at his Easel' Painted by Picasso, 1954
France © V&A images



Move on into the larger rooms which benefit from renewed roof glazing so that natural light heightens the beauty of the shapes and glazes in this remarkable collection. Architect Stanton Williams worked with a team of experts and together they have created elegant and spacious quarters for the treasured pottery together with a working studio and a demonstration workshop.

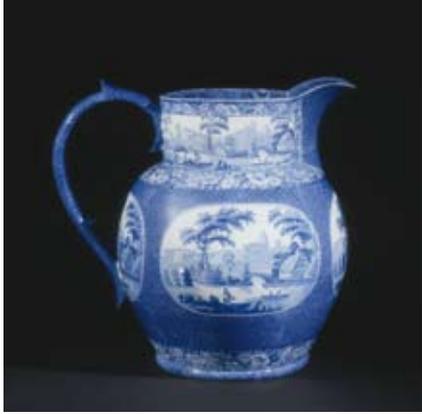
Since 1909 the V&A's ceramics collection was housed in purpose-built galleries on the top floor. During the Second World War it was packed away and in the post-war period was reinstated in what came to be regarded as out-of-date Victorian and Edwardian rectangular cases. Formerly the ceramics were arranged geographically with Middle Eastern at one end and Chinese at the other with European and English galleries in between.

But curatorial interpretation has moved well into the 21st century and after a great deal of consultation with scholars and pottery experts, the new galleries have assembled these unique pieces in bespoke glass cases with minimal but clear interpretive labelling. The stories embedded in the collection are presented in a 'Masterpieces Timeline' which traces the evolution of world ceramics from the earliest Chinese pottery dating from 3500BC, through centuries and diverse cultures ending with contemporary ceramic art. This timeline highlights potting traditions from across the globe and explains how they interrelate. Most important are how trade and cultural interchanges have shaped their histories.

There are many stories to tell about china, pots, figurines, studio ceramics, tiles, architectural ornaments and dishes produced for all occasions. One of the many glorious pieces on display is the massive Thirty Gallon Jug (pictured). Made in 1830, it illustrates the technique of transfer-printing on an enormous scale. Described as a tour de force, this is an archetypal product of 19th century Staffordshire British pottery - blue and white transfer printed earthenware. In the 19th century gallery you will find a case which explains the stages involved in transfer-printing methods of production. We can see how designs were engraved onto a copperplate which was then printed onto a medium of transfer such as paper or a thin sheet of gelatin. Next the transfer was placed on the ware itself. Since many transfer-printed wares contain multiple designs, the process was repeated until the sur-

Tea set, 1775 Sevres Porcelain Factory France © V&A images





Thirty Gallon Jug Lead-Glazed earthenware, transfer-printed. Staffordshire c 1830 © V&A images

face decoration was ready for the kiln. As more sophisticated methods evolved, cobalt blue was used because it survived the heat of glaze firing. This technique enabled Staffordshire potteries to compete with imported Chinese painted wares in the world market. A great deal of blue and white transfer-printed platters, bowls, dinner services and commemorative wares, were decorated from the drawings English artists made while travelling in America, and exported to the United States. Today some of the most valuable pieces from this period can be seen in ceramics collections in American museums. As methods of production became more varied, the potteries produced vast quantities of multi-coloured transfer-printed pieces which are also on display.

The cultural importance of the teapot is a subject for discussion in its own right and you will see several unique teapots throughout the ceramics galleries. Do not miss the 'Teapot & Jug', circa 1936 by the acclaimed potter, Dame Lucie Rie (1902-1995). Perhaps one of the most extraordinary examples is the Chinese Yixing pot, dated 1700-1720 (pictured). This exquisite teapot deserves closer scrutiny. It appears to have survived in perfect condition – looking like it only came out of a kiln yesterday. Modelled in the shape of sheng, a Chinese musical instrument, it looks like a group of bamboo tubes of different heights. "In Yixing potters discovered deposits of clay known as 'purple sand' that fires to a variety of rich brown colours.....it needs no glazing and remains slightly porous, allowing unpleasant smells from the boiled water to evaporate..."(1) This remarkable design was exported in some quantity to Europe where it influenced potters in Delft, Meissen and Staffordshire.

Stoneware Vase with crackled glaze by René Buthaud c 1928-30 © V&A images



French pottery and porcelain have always enjoyed a reputation for excellence. We see here (pictured) a Tea Set of Sevres Porcelain, 1773, created for the luxury market. This delicate service is located in the final gallery where there is a temporary exhibit of Objects of Luxury: French porcelain of the eighteenth century. Seemingly fragile, porcelain or 'white gold' was produced for a fashionable clientele and used for banquets and in boudoirs. Its properties allowed colours to fuse deep within its soft, wax-like glaze. In sharp contrast to porcelain,



Teapot China Yixing c 1700-1720 © V&A images

there is a dramatic sculptural stoneware vase by Auguste Delaherche, circa 1890 (pictured). This is a monumental example of innovative developments in late 19th century French ceramics. Here Delaherche has succeeded in controlling the effects of copper-based flamme red glazes in extreme kiln conditions. This 66.5cm tall vase suggests a more organic form and was perhaps influenced by traditional Japanese ceramics. It bears a close resemblance to its British Arts and Crafts contemporaries.

The twentieth century has seen ceramic scholarship gain in prestige by collectors, curators and also in the market place. It is surprising that it was not until the 1920s that scholars recognised Ottoman Iznik ware by Turkish potters as an expression of some of the world's most striking designs. And the artistic and technological techniques in Peruvian and Mexican pottery have come to be regarded as among the finest examples of early civilizations in the Americas. Several examples are displayed in the galleries. Many innovative designs emerged throughout the 20th century. One of the best known is the Art Deco style from the 1920s. It was popularised internationally when work was shown at the Paris International Exhibition of 1925. A superb example of the spirit of the Deco age is seen in the vase by René Buthaud, 1928-30 (pictured). The design is constructed in stoneware with a crackled glaze and incorporates African



Central Gallery with masterpieces dating from 2500BC © V&A Images

art together with simple geometrical forms. Picasso also worked in clay. Here is his painted vase entitled 'Artist at his Easel', 1954 (pictured). Picasso's art in clay helped to overcome the prejudice fine art connoisseurs felt about the status of ceramics within the decorative and applied arts. Today ceramicist Grayson Perry, Turner Prize winner in 2003, has easily bridged this artistic gap. And throughout the 20th and into 21st centuries, more attention has been paid to the work and increasing importance of studio pottery. British potter, Walter Keeler, is well-represented in the new Ceramics galleries where several of his pots, mugs, and jugs together with his iconic teapot are shown. You will gain a fuller understanding of Keeler's techniques of production if you stop by the case where the individual pieces of his teapot are laid flat before they are assembled, fired, glazed and made ready for a final firing. His work shares the stage alongside mid-20th century studio potters Michael Cardew, Colin Pearson, Bernard Leach, Hans Coper and Elizabeth Fritsch.

Well done for the V&A's magnificent new galleries! This extraordinary collection tells stories of old and new world cultures and helps us to understand how art and craft are integrated. But wait! Phase 2 is due to open in 2010 and will house a further 26,000 objects. So, there is even more to come. ■

Notes

1. Masterpieces of World Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Edited by R. Liefkes and H. Young. V&A Publishing 2008. p.88

Should you wish you can research each piece in more detail by going to the V&A's ceramics website. (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/galleries/145/index.html>) & Ceramics Features A-Z>

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