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Salience and technological change in contemporary hand-thrown pottery

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on procedures of making with a systematic analysis of craft processes based on the concept of salience. The study of changes in technologies, processes and materials involved in making pottery can inform the discussion on the reinvention of technology in other well-established disciplines as well as in emergent craft practices.

The findings emerge from a practice-based doctoral study of contemporary professional potters making commercial tableware by hand on the potter's wheel in the UK. Handmade pottery in British post-industrial society is appreciated for physical qualities unattainable in industrial products, and narratives associated with traditions, localities, makers and their values. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in long-established pottery workshops (Leach, St Ives; Maze Hill and Ewenny) to record videos of processes and extensive interviews with the potters. Direct experience of making pottery 'in the manner of' the practitioners observed complements the analysis of the entire sequence of operations required to produce tableware.

This paper aims to contribute to the craft debate by addressing questions such as "Which making operations are responsible for the qualities we appreciate in craft objects? How does the use of tools and machines affect physical qualities and narratives associated with handmade products?"

The study employs the concept of 'salience' (as developed by archaeologist Olivier Gosselain) to analyse the actions of contemporary potters and their cultural interpretations. Through ethnographic treatment of all material, the research discusses the relative importance of a given making operation to create visible qualities in the ware (i.e. 'manufacturing salience'), or to influence narratives associated with it (i.e. 'cultural salience').

In line with the findings from recent studies by social scientists, the research indicates that phases such as clay preparation and initial forming of pots do not generally influence the narratives associated with the handmade process or qualities appreciated in the ware. At the same time, relatively overlooked operations such as centring or ribbing can in fact be indicative of a potter's philosophy of making, and often originate in his or her initial training.

Evidence from the study shows the key role design plays in accommodating technological change introduced by factors such as the operations in the workshops, the potters' skill levels and their individual approach to making. The study shares an interest in craft activities and research methods with recent social scientific research, but maintains a focus on design and manufacturing procedures which is proper of craft and design studies.

The presentation will include synchronised videos of potters at work, process matrices and other visual material. The impact of hand tools and machinery (ribs, pugmills and electric wheels) will be discussed and illustrated using practical examples derived from the extensive ethnographic material collected on site.