

C E R A M I C
S E R I E S •



joe finch

potters from wales

CANOLFAN Y
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Joe Finch makes pots for day to day use in the home: dishes, bowls, jugs and plates for cooking and serving food, vases for flowers. Practical, unassuming, stoneware ceramics. He is a potter who works in what is known as the 'Leach tradition'. whereby the humble utilitarian pot can have a philosophical, even spiritual significance. "...although pottery is made to be used, this fact in no wise simplifies the problem of artistic expression; there can be no fullness or complete realisation of utility without beauty, refinement and charm..." (Bernard Leach, 'A Potter's Book' First published 1940.)

Bernard Leach (1887-1979) has been credited with re-inventing British studio ceramics, with rescuing pottery from the quagmire of the industrial process, thought to have led to a debasement of both aesthetic and functional standards. Born in Hong Kong but educated in England, Leach revisited the Far East in 1907 and studied pottery in Japan, a country with an ancient, yet still vital, tradition. When he returned to England in 1920 he started his own pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall. The pots he made embodied his understanding of Oriental ceramics, transferring it to an English context. They were still are-extraordinarily influential.

The circumstances of Leach's life gave him an unique inter cultural viewpoint. His stylistic and philosophical synthesis of East and West came as a revelation to other potters. A great believer in ceramics' of the people, for the people', he advocated a merging of aesthetic and functional qualities, declared that "the art of the craftsman is intuitive and humanistic..." (A Potter's Book) and taught his students to understand and respect every stage in the production of their pottery, from the raw clay to the final object.

A genealogy of studio potters that begins with Leach would place Joe Finch in direct line of descent. His father, Ray Finch, whose skills he greatly admires, worked under Michael Cardew, Leach's number one student and disciple, at Winchcombe Pottery in Gloucestershire. At Winchcombe Cardew revived the English tradition of domestic earthenware with slipped¹ decoration. Eventually Ray Finch took over the pottery; under his direction it went on to produce the more commercially viable stoneware for which it is acclaimed. Nowadays it is run by his son Michael Finch with Ray's continuing involvement.

Joe Finch trained at Winchcombe for 4 years, from 1964-1968. Apart from the more obvious skills such as throwing, glazing and firing, he acquired a high regard for form as linked to function, and the flexibility to produce pots that people will both want and be able to afford. All these factors are still paramount in his work.

He has led an adventurous life. In 1968 he travelled to Lesotho where he remained for 18 months. There, with finance from a local business man, he set up Kolonyama, the country's first ever studio pottery, in conditions which would have discouraged all but the most determined of people. In October 1969 he was joined by his fiancee.

Trudi Pickford; she had studied at Farnham College, and specialised in ceramic decoration. Her delicate Japanese influenced brush painted designs still embellish many of her husband's pots.

On their return from Africa in 1970 the couple worked at Winchcombe. Then in 1973, encouraged by a Highlands and Islands development grant, they moved to Appin in North West Scotland, where they set up another pottery from scratch. The proximity of a sawmill enabled them to experiment with wood as fuel, and they changed from the more conventional two firings (a lower temperature 'biscuit' firing followed by a hotter glaze firing) to the once only, 'raw glazing', wood-fired method which is now characteristic of Finch's work.

For him raw glazing means that he never loses contact with a pot. A fluid and graceful thrower, with an accuracy that looks beguilingly instinctive, but which he ascribes to his Winchcombe training, he often applies coloured slips while the pot is still on the wheel, and from the outset he envisages how the finished article will look. When quantities of ware are being produced, twice firing calls for the potter to adopt a rather mechanical operation. First of all the wheel work is completed, then the pots disappear into the kiln to re-emerge hardened and blank, requiring to be decorated and glazed in batches, ready for the second firing. The process according to Finch's method allows a certain spontaneity, it is more satisfying, and has a softer, more organic feel to it. The pot that leaves the workshop is completely formed, it only remains for the kiln to bestow the qualities of function.

There is always an element of unpredictability in firing, especially so when one is dealing with the effects of wood

(1) Slip is liquid clay, it often has a colour added to it, and may be applied in different ways, such as by painting, dipping or pouring

ash. Although the pots have been slipped and glazed the ash will interact with the treated surfaces in subtle, often unforeseen, ways, and will also produce beautiful coloured blushes on unglazed areas. Raw glazing maintains the excitement of firing. Finch describes himself peering with a torch through the spyhole as his kiln cools, and unpacking it far too hot in his eagerness to get at the contents.

Despite the commercial success of the Appin pottery, the Finchs left Scotland. Joe cites rain and midges amongst the primary motivations for the move. They relocated to Wales in 1984. At first they lived in New Radnor, Powys, and then in 1989 they settled in their present home, at Aberporth, outside Cardigan, Dyfed. They converted a set of stone farm buildings into a pottery workshop, sales gallery, and a studio for Trudi, who, although she continued with ceramic decoration, had by now become equally interested in painting.

The pots are fired on the premises, under cover of an open barn. For those with a technical interest, Joe Finch uses a 70 cubic feet capacity adaption of an Olsen design fast-fire kiln, with twin under-floor fire boxes and central flue. At the International Potters Camp of 1995 he successfully built, packed, fired, unpacked and dismantled such a kiln in just three days, an episode which he remembers with fondness.

"I've done crazy things in my life," he says, "but I think this must be one of the craziest!"

Sometimes working within the boundaries of a grand tradition can lead to what is termed 'mannerism'. The product loses vitality, it becomes merely an exercise in skill and principles, or at best a 'masterclass'. Whilst keeping within the broad parameters of the Leach tradition, Joe Finch has avoided a slavish adherence to any set of rules. His work displays a lightness of touch, a brightness and an exuberance which is irresistible.

He has trained many potters. As a teacher, passing on his knowledge, he has carefully considered his own activities and clarified his aims. Over the years his working practice has taken on a natural rhythm, within which he has developed a distinctive robust style that is always open to experiment. He explores the subtleties of different glaze effects and produces many variations on his chosen forms. Despite his intention to produce utilitarian ware, it is clear that his work is equally capable of sustaining an 'aesthetic' function. Look at the flare of his cut and joined bowls, at his slender elongated jars, his classic jugs and his range of surface effects. His pots can be found in several national collections, including the Scottish Craft Collection, The Paisley Museum and the Stoke City Museum.

To handle, Finch's work can be surprisingly light. This is a sign of his throwing ability, and of his expectation that his pots will be in daily use. "Nobody wants to stagger to the sink burdened down with plates," he jokes.

I think there is more to it. It seems to me that I can tell something about the spirit in which they were made as soon as I pick up on of his pieces. It was Leach, of course, who said:

"Pots, like all other forms of art, are human expressions....their natures are inevitably projections of the minds of their creators." ('A Potter's Book')

Joe Finch's pots exhibit a freshness which is a true reflection of his own delight in making them.



Jo Dahn 26 May 1996



C Y F R E S
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G E R A M E G

joe finch

crochenyddion o gymru



CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH

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Mae Joe Finch yn gwneud llestri i'w defnyddio o ddydd i ddydd yn y cartref: dysglau, powleni, jygiau a phlatiau i goginio a gweini bwyd ynddynt a ffiolau i ddal blodau. Crochenwaith caled ymarferol a dirodres. Mae'n gweithio yn 'nhraddodiad Leach' - traddodiad sy'n rhoi arwyddocâd athonyyddol, neu ysbyrdol hyd yn oed, i'r potyn mwyaf distadl ac ymarferol. "although pottery is made to be used, this fact in no wise simplifies the problem of artistic expression; there can be no fulness or complete realization of utility without beauty, refinement and charm" (Bernard Leach, 'A Potter's Book' 1st published 1940.)

Bernard Leach (1887-1979) sydd wedi cael y clod am ail-ddyfeisio serameg stiwdio ym Mhrydain, am achub crochenyddiaeth o gors y broses ddiwydiannol y credir iddi arwain at ostwng safonau o ran aestheteg a defnyddioldeb. Ganed Leach yn Hong Kong a'i addysgu yn Lloegr. Ym 1907 dychwelodd i'r Dwyrain Pell i astudio crochenyddiaeth yn Japan lle roedd y traddodiad hynafol yn dal yn fyw. Pan ddaeth yn ôl i Loegr ym 1920, cychwynnodd ei crochendy ei hun yn St Ives, Cernyw. Roedd ei lestri'n ymgorffori ei ddealltwriaeth o serameg y Dwyrain mewn cyd-destun Seisnig. Yr oeddent - ac y maent o hyd - yn eithriadol o ddylanwadol.

Oherwydd cefndir Leach, roedd ganddo safbwyt cyd-ddiwylliannol unigryw. Roedd ei ffordd o gyfuno arddull ac athoniaeth y Dwyrain a'r Gorllewin yn agoriad llygad i crochenwyr eraill. Credai'n gryf mewn crochenwaith 'gan y bobl, ar gyfer y bobl', roedd o blaidd cyfuno aestheteg a defnyddioldeb, credai fod "celfyddyd y crefftwr yn reddol ac yn hiwmanistig" ('A Potter's Book') a dysgai ei ddisgyblion i ddeall a pharchu pob cam yn y broses o gynhyrchu eu crochenwaith, o'r clai amrwd i'r llestr gorffenegid.

Mae Joe Finch yn un o ddisgynyddion uniongyrchol Leach yn llinach y crochenyddion stiwdio. Bu ei dad, Ray Finch, yn gweithio o dan Michael Cardew, prif fyfyrwr a disgybl Leach, yng Nghrochendy Winchcombe yn Swydd Gaerloyw. Yn Winchcombe, llwyddodd Cardew i adfywio'r traddodiad Seisniog o wneud llestri pridd wedi'u haddurno â slip. Ymhen amser, daeth Ray Finch yn berchen ar y crochendy ac aeth ymlaen i gynhyrchu'r crochenwaith caled y daeth yn enwog amdano ac a oedd yn well o safbwyt masnachol. Ray a'i fab Michael Finch sy'n rhedeg y crochendy ar hyn o bryd.

1 Clai gwlyb yw slip. Ychwanegir lliw ato'n aml a gellir ei ddefnyddio mewn gwahanol ffyrdd, er enghraift drwy baentio, trochi neu arllwys.

Hyfforddwyd Joe Finch yn Winchcombe am bedair blynedd, 1964-68. Yn ogystal a'r sgiliau amlwg fel llunio, gwydro a chrasu, daeth i ystyried pwysigrwydd y cysylltiad rhwng ffurf y llestr a'r defnydd a wneir ohono a phwysigrwydd bod yn ddigon hyblyg i gynhyrchu llestri y bydd pobl yn dymuno'u cael ac yn gallu eu fforddio. Mae'r holl ffactorau hyn yn dal yn ganolog i'w waith. Cafodd fywyd anturus. Ym 1968 aeth i Lesotho ac aros yno am 18 mis. Gyda chefnogaeth ariannol gan ddyn busnes lleol, sefydlodd Kolonyama, crochendy stiwdio cyntaf Lesotho, o dan amodau a fyddai wedi torri calon pawb ond y mwyaf penderfynol. Ym mis Hydref 1969, ymunodd ei ddyweddi, Trudi Pickford, ag ef. Bu hi'n astudio yng Ngholeg Farnham gan arbenigo mewn addurno serameg. Mae'n dal i addurno llawer o lestri ei gŵr a'i haddurniadau cywrain a baentir â brws ac sydd â dylanwad gwaith o Japan arnynt.

Pan ddaethant yn ôl o Afrika ym 1970, bu'r cwpwl yn gweithio yn Winchcombe. Yna, ym 1973, cawsant eu temtio gan grant datblygu'r Ucheldiroedd a'r Ynysoedd a symud i Appin yng Ngogledd Orllewin yr Alban gan gychwyn crochendy arall o ddim. Gan fod melin goed gerllaw, penderfynwyd arbrofi â defnyddio coed yn danwydd ac fe newidiwyd o'r dull dau daniad arferol (taniad ar lai o wres i ddechrau ac yna taniad poethach i wydro) i ddim ond un taniad 'gwydro amrwd' gyda thân coed. Dyma sy'n nodweddiadol o waith Finch erbyn hyn.

Mae'n hoffi'r dull gwydro amrwd oherwydd nad yw'n colli cysylltiad â'r llestr. Mae'n llunio llestri mewn ffordd lyfn a gosgeiddig sy'n edrych fel petai'n reddol ond sydd, meddai ef, i'w phriodoli i'r hyfforddiant a gafodd yn Winchcombe. Yn aml, bydd yn gosod y slipiau lliw pan fydd y llestr yn dal ar y droell ac mae'n rhagweld o'r dechrau sut y bydd y llestr gorffenegid yn edrych. Wrth gynhyrchu llawer o lestri, mae'r crochenydd yn gorfad defnyddio dull sydd braidd yn fecanyddol os yw'n tanio ddwywaith. Yn gyntaf, gorffennir y gwaith ar y droell ac yna mae'r llestri'n diflannu i'r ffwrn. Dônt oddi yno'n galed a di-liw ac mae angen eu haddurno a'u gwydro fusel tipyn yn barod i gael eu crasu eilwaith. Mae dull Finch yn galluogi'r crochenydd i fod yn fwy naturiol, mae'n rhoi mwy o foddhad ac mae'r llestr yn feddalach ac yn teimlo'n fwy organig. Mae'r llestr yn gyflawn pan fydd yn gadael y gweithdy a'r unig beth sydd ar ôl yw ei grasu fel y gellir ei ddefnyddio. Nid oes modd rhagweld yn union sut y bydd y llestri'n edrych ar ol eu crasu, yn enwedig wrth weithio gyda lludw coed. Er iddynt gael eu slipo a'u gwydro, bydd y lludw'n adweithio ag wyneb y llestri mewn ffyrdd cynnil ac annisgwyl yn aml gan roi

Iliw hyfryd ar fannau na chafodd eu gwydro. Mae'r broses wydro amrwd yn golygu fod canlyniadau'r crasu'n gyffrous: sonia Finch amdano'i hun yn syllu drwy'r twll sbio â fflashlamp wrth i'r ffwrn oeri ac yn ei dadlwytho a hithau'n dal yn rhy boeth am ei fod mor awyddus i weld y canlyniadau.

Er gwaethaf llwyddiant masnachol Crochendy Appin, gadawodd Joe a Trudi'r Alban - oherwydd y glaw a'r gwybed yn bennaf, yn ôl Joe. Daethant i Gymru ym 1984 gan symud i Faesyfed, Powys yn gyntaf ac yna, ym 1989, i'w cartref presennol yn Aberporth, ger Aberteifi. Aethant ati i droi hen adeiladau cerrig yn weithdy crochenwaith, oriel werthu a stiwdio ar gyfer Trudi sydd, er ei bod yn dal i addurno crochenwaith, wedi datblygu diddordeb mewn paentio. Caiff y llestri eu crasu yn y fan a'r lle o dan do ysgubor agored. I'r sawl sydd â diddordeb technegol, mae Joe Finch yn defnyddio addasiad o ffwrn tanio-cyflym Olsen sy'n dal 70 troedfedd giwbigr, ag iddi ddaau flwch tân o dan y llawr a simnai ganolog. Yng Ngwersyll Cydwladol y Crochenyddion ym 1995, llwyddodd i adeiladu, pacio, tanio, dadbacio a datgymalu ffwrn felly mewn dim ond tri diwrnod. Mae wrth ei fod yn sôn am hynny: "Dw i wedi gwneud llawer o bethau gwallgo - ond mae'n siwr mai dyna un o'r pethau mwya gwallgo!"

Weithiau, gall gweithio o fewn ffiniau traddodiad mawr arwain at yr hyn a elwir yn "ddarddulliaeth". Mae'r cynyrch yn colli ei egni, mae'n troi'n ddim ond ymarferiad mewn medr ac egwyddorion, neu ar y gorau'n 'ddosbarth meistr'. Er iddo aros y tu mewn i ffiniau bras traddodiad Leach, mae Joe Finch wedi osgoi glynú'n slafaidd at unrhyw set o reolau. Gwelir rhyw ysafnnder, disgleirdeb ac afiaith sy'n eithriadol o atyniadol yn ei waith.

Mae wedi hyfforddi llawer o crochenyddion. Wrth drosglwyddo'i wybodaeth i eraill, mae'n rhoi ystyriaeth ofalus i'w waith ei hun ac yn egluro'i amcanion. Dros y blynnyddoedd, daeth rhythm naturiol i'w waith a datblygodd arddull gadarn sy'n nodweddidiadol ohono. Mae bob amser yn barod i arbrofi â'i arddull gan dalu sylw i'r mân wahaniaethau a geir wrth ddefnyddio gwahanol ffyrdd o wydro a chynhyrchu llawer o amrywiadau ar y ffurfiau a ddewisir ganddo. Er ei fod yn cynhyrchu llestri ymarferol, mae'n amlwg fod i'w waith nodweddion aesthetig hefyd. Edrychwrh sut y mae ei bowlenni torri-ac-uno yn ymledu a sylwch ar ei jariau main, hir, ei jygiau clasurol a'r amrywiaeth o effeithiau ar wyneb y llestri. Gwelir ei llestri mewn amryw o gasgliadau cenedlaethol yn cynnwys Casgliad Crefftau'r Alban, Amgueddfa Paisley ac Amgueddfa Dinas Stoke. Gall gwaith Finch fod yn rhyfedd o ysgafn i'w drafod. Dyma arwydd o'i allu i lunio llestri a'r ffaith ei fod yn disgwyl iddynt gael eu defnyddio o ddydd i ddydd. "Does neb eisiau gwneud ei ffordd yn drwmlwythog i'r sinc, yn gwegian o dan bwysau platiâu," meddai gan chwerthin. Rwy'n credu fod mwy iddi na hynny. Rwy'n teimlo 'mod i'n gallu dweud rhywbeth am yr ysbryd y gwnaed y llestri ynddo cyn gynted ag y codaf un o'i ddarnau. Leach, wrth gwrs, a ddywedodd:

"Pots, like all other forms of art, are human expressions ... their natures are inevitably projections of the minds of their creators." ('A Potter's Book')

Gwelir rhyw ffresni yn llestri Joe Finch sy'n adlewyrchu'r pleser a gafodd ef wrth eu gwneud.

Jo Dahn 26 Mai 1996

