

Pour Me 18 March – 7 May 2017

‘Whether you listen to a piece of music, or a poem, or look at a picture or a jug, or a piece of sculpture, what matters about it is not what it has in common with others of its kind, but what is singularly its own.’

Basil Bunting, English modernist poet, 1900 -1985

The manufacture of tools and ‘household’ items is one of the human attributes that sets us apart from all other species. Humans have been making vessels from various materials ever since we realised that eating off a surface free from mud and grit was not only preferable and less likely to make us ill, but also much more practical. It’s a short leap of the imagination to then understand that storing foodstuffs and liquids in vessels and other containers enables a whole range of activities that would otherwise not be possible. Travel, for instance, can be far more ambitious if you set off armed with supplies. Preserving food, and keeping it safe from pests and predators, is also an evolutionary leap. Food and drink are the stuff of life and therefore precious. Containers are the way to store and minimise waste.

As nomadic hunter/gatherers gave way to more settled, agrarian civilisations, making vessels became ever more technically sophisticated and varied. New production methods and specialist, skilled makers, who had a range of materials available to them, could let their imaginations take flight. ‘Fashion’ entered the realm of what was once practical, precious and essential.

Long gone cultures and civilisations are described by what they leave behind, not just the buildings, sculpture and texts (if there are any), but the domestic objects too. The Ancient Greeks are known for their philosophers, mathematicians and art but the smaller things, their vases, jugs and bowls tell us about their daily lives, how they looked and what they admired or made jokes about.



This image shows a Corinthian olpe (pitcher) dating from c.600BCE. It is painted with rows of carefully drawn animals in red, black and cream, the typical colours and style of Corinthian pottery, which took over the market and was widely exported throughout the Mediterranean at the time.

Fast forward two-and-a-half thousand years to the late 19th century and 'Design' had become the subject of academic discourse with institutions such as the Government School of Design in London feeding into a wide range of manufacturers across the world. The image (*right*) shows a silver plate and glass claret jug (c.1878) by Christopher Dresser, widely regarded as the first industrial designer. Dresser was influenced by objects from all over the world although he stressed the



importance of abstracting the essence of design to its most basic linear form. He worked to produce affordable, functional, well-designed objects and, in contrast to his contemporary William Morris, Dresser saw the industrial revolution as a positive thing in terms of the production of domestic utilitarian objects. He designed specifically for the growing consumer market whereas Morris and his colleagues were only interested in the hand-made.

There is something about jugs, their shape and their purpose, that makes them appealing. They appear in art and literature as metaphor and symbol, and ceramic and metalwork history contains an astonishing diversity of jugs, flagons, flasks and pitchers.

Johannes Vermeer's painting, *The Milkmaid* c.1657, is perhaps one of the most well-known paintings in the world. Much has been written about Vermeer's intended symbolism in the work. The girl is modestly dressed; is Vermeer showing the virtues of domestic work or its drudgery? However one chooses to read the imagery, it's clear that the jug and its stream of milk are the focus of the painting. The girl is pouring the milk slowly and carefully; apparently she is making bread pudding, so perhaps Vermeer is highlighting the simple efficiency of a spout, made in a couple of seconds by the potter's fingers, a device that allows a measured stream of liquid to be accurately poured.



This particular jug can be described as iconic. Made as a self-



portrait just after Gauguin witnessed the beheading of a murderer and experienced his friend Vincent Van Gogh cutting off his own ear, Gauguin has depicted himself with a severed ear and rivulets of blood running down the jug. His eyes are closed. The jug, seen as an object and not just an image, is reputed to have a considerable impact on the viewer. The critic Laurel Gasque wrote, 'This macabre image, fired at very high temperature literally and figuratively, fuses life, myth and history into an unforgettable emblem of a ravaged man.'

Jug in the form of a head, self-portrait, Paul Gauguin, 1899

Jugs can also be subversive. The Exeter Puzzle Jug, so named as it was found in an Exeter drain in pieces, was made in France around 1300CE. The jug was restored in the 1930s at the British Museum and is now on show at RAMM in Exeter. The figures on the jug are reputed to be naked from the waist down and represent bishops, musicians and dancing girls. This makes the jug a pretty risqué object for the time as its poking fun at the powerful, medieval clergy. The ‘puzzle’ of these jugs is to find either how to put the liquid in or where it is going to come out. The form contains hidden spouts and the jug’s complicated construction was recognised as a measure of the potter’s skill.



The Exeter Puzzle Jug, C.1300

It would be interesting to know what a future civilisation would make of us if presented with the selection of jugs on show in *Pour Me*. The bark jugs by Jane Bevan, made from natural, found materials, echo an ancient, pre-tool culture whereas Tavs Jorgensen’s extruded jugs are the result of experiments into the use of 3D printed extrusion dies designed using a computer programme. They could not be more different in terms of the making process, yet they are both recognisable as jugs and in both cases the materials used to make them dictate the outcome in tandem with the intentions of the maker.

Influences from different traditions can be identified within the exhibition, from the animated exuberance of Amanda Popham’s narrative jugs to the quiet beauty of Rhian Malin’s porcelain pieces. As Amanda says, ‘the figure jug is found all over the world

throughout history. From pre-Columbian vessels, medieval jugs with little bearded faces, Toby Jugs, Martin Brothers and so on.'

The exhibition affirms the jug as a most expressive form in almost any medium and, stripped of function, as in Helaina Sharpley's wire jugs or Janine Partington's paper jug, no less beautiful. There is also at least one cheeky jug in the show and some serious conceptual jugs; there are sturdy functional jugs, made to last and to pour perfectly and sculptural jugs with form and flair. There are silver jugs, paper jugs, glass jugs, large jugs and tiny jugs made by our forty-four different exhibitors, each making their own version of a jug, all different, 2D and 3D, but all singularly their maker's own.

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Further images and information on *Pour Me* exhibitors' work can be found on the Devon Guild website www.crafts.org.uk and will feature on our social media platforms:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Devon-Guild-of-Craftsmen/65969175737>

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Our venue offers **Discover the arts** level support for **ARTS AWARD** students and advisors, with these activities for participants:



- attend a workshop, an artist's talk or demo
- review/record exhibitions, performances or festival events
- use our knowledge about craftmakers and cultural opportunities
- find a basis for skill-sharing and project-leadership

We run regular hands-on workshops in a wide range of art, craft and design subjects, delivered by skilled workshop leaders. These include printmaking, ceramics, textiles, willow, paper, recycled materials, natural materials and mosaic. (See www.crafts.org.uk for more information.)