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The New “It” Potters

As markets continually shift, the handmade has once again come to define luxury as terms like “hand crafted” and “bench made” make their way back into luxury advertising. This has a trickle down effect, as luxury markets do, but finds a meeting place in the middle as the maker movement continues to rise, buoyed from its origins in the nineties to its current popularity and market saturation. At the apex of the luxury market and the maker movement, at the height of fashion, simultaneously accessible and aspirational, is a sort of contemporary pottery, seemingly centered around New York City and a modernist aesthetic. Ceramics has suddenly become the height of hip, as a slightly elitist activity that requires specific skill, still requires an aspect of grunge or laidbackness, and can be transported and networked into homes as symbols of one’s good taste for quality and simplicity, simultaneously elegant and edgy. Ceramic’s fashionable moment, however, is just that. It’s related to the fashion of the commodity of ceramics, and finds itself detached from the reality and history of studio ceramics in this country. While these highlighted practitioners would certainly disagree with this assessment, the fact remains that studio ceramics is still held at a remove from the art world, the fashion industry, and the larger markets, and while the fashionable pottery trend in New York is encouraging, it does not reflect a nationwide trend in the field of studio ceramics. Situated firmly in “fashionable goods,” the pots produced have a kind of essentialist, ceramic aesthetic, employing the language of midcentury masters with a hipster, internet lean. Removed from the history of the last 50 years

of ceramics, which *haven't* been considered by the fashion cycles, we find ourselves looking to the language of twentieth century Japanese potters, Bernard Leach, and aesthetics of modernism. What makes this work contemporary, however, is its playful sensibility, driven by meme culture and the curatorial lens of internet image sharing platforms. While recognizing the ephemeral nature of fashion, the inclusion and prominence of ceramic objects in fashionable, mainstream media content providers offers hope for the enduring relevance of the handmade.

The handmade is at the roots of luxury markets, as Deyan Sudjic writes, “Luxury was the pleasure to be found in understanding the quality of material things that were thoughtfully and carefully made. It was the aspect of an object’s nature that allows us to share the pleasure that it gave to its designer or its maker.”¹ This however, changed in the 20th century, as objects of industrial production began to be considered luxury objects for their rarity, expensive materials, or technical innovation. The physical materiality of luxury is constantly in flux, as antiqued and weathered barnwood has become as expensive and in-demand as the hardwood of ten years ago. Crafted objects have long been signifiers of luxury, as they typically require noteworthy skill, attention to detail, and extensive labor. They are also differentiated from mass produced products by their individuality and uniqueness. An object made by hand is inherently rare, as it contains both temporal and personal uniqueness and unrepeatability, even though the maker may produce several similar products. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact ebb and flow of the popularity handcrafted objects but we do know that fine, handcrafted objects hold a somewhat sturdy position in luxury markets since the 20th century. In terms of our particular subject, pottery, the idea of handicraft is somewhat complex. Given the extreme value of Chinese and Japanese

¹ Deyan Sudjic, “Luxury,” in *The Language of Things: Understanding the World of Objects* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 80.

porcelain in the European markets, the quest for European porcelain dates back to the fourteenth century. These early producers of European porcelain dictated the luxurious nature of their products, as “all of these porcelain works produced prized luxury tableware and modelled figures, not for a market, but for a king and his court.”² As European porcelain production increased, the wares became standard for the upper middle class as Maxine Berg details in her text, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth Century Britain* eventually become so commonplace as a “new modern luxury good,”³ that influenced the rituals of the table, the decor and display of a household, and was routinely shipped around the European continent and its expanding empire.

The luxury status of pottery, particularly porcelain, is not to be taken lightly and remains relevant in the western world, even as bone china has become cheaper and more accessible. It is still largely produced in a factory model, and individual potters do not account for a meaningful share in the western or global market. The handmade vessel carries complex notions of luxury as an object that is precious, but unenforced by the hierarchies of consumerism. An impeccable example of a potter’s skill could take the form of an elaborate and decorated platter, or the form of a humble pitcher. The skills involved are not any better than the other, simply different approaches to a complex material. Since the individual potter cannot produce at the level of industrial ceramics, and as mass-produced bone china has become the pinnacle of luxury in tableware, the potter is somewhat marginalized in the luxury market, despite their impeccable skill, the quality of their materials, and the uniqueness of their products. That is, until recently. I would argue that in the last ten to fifteen years, the luxury of ceramics has turned its focus to the

² Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 127.

³ *Ibid.*, 152.

potter. I feel as though this is due, in part, to the rise of the maker movement in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The maker movement (or DIY) movement after 1989 is closely linked to a few different cultural phenomena. First of all, post modernism and the destabilizing of material hierarchies in the fine art world, as well as the continued project of second wave feminists in the 1970s allowed for diverse and gendered practices to be equally considered as means of cultural production and valued labour, such as domestic labour, fibre crafts, handicraft, gardening, and the like. The maker movement was driven, as well, by the efforts of third wave feminists, intent on reclaiming their own making power as a way to express individuality, distance themselves from mass produced culture, and reclaim domestic labour as feminist in the nineties and early 2000s. The maker movement often cites the domestic labour of its foremothers, the feminist ethos of reclaiming craft of the 1970s, and the punk revolution of the nineties to attempt to synthesize its current incarnation.⁴ While these motivations demand considerable attention (and have received it), the impacts and scale of the maker movement as an economic and consumer force also merit investigation, particularly as it leads us to our contemporary moment, as luxury and maker markets collide in contemporary ceramics.

While the maker movement's initial motivations were philosophically driven, this movement is not without economic motivation as well. Indeed, the peak of the maker movement seemed to appear in the moments preceding and certainly *after* the spectacular housing and economic crash of 2008. Paul Greenhalgh, timely in 2003, writes that, "whenever the industrial society appears to tip into an especially consumerist phase, real or imagined, and particularly

⁴ Faythe Levine, "Preface," in *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*, ed. Faythe Levine and Courtney Heimerl (New York: Princetown Architectural Press, 2008), IX.

when respected thinkers identify the age as decadent and greedy, craft and design are wont to reveal themselves as the forces of anti-Mammon.”⁵ The craft economy represented an opportunity for fulfilling, non-alienated, personal labour to be rewarded in the greater market, whether as a hobby, an activist act, or full time employment as the online market Etsy encouraged users to “Quit Your Day Job.”⁶ The reality, however, was more complex and although it offered economic stability for some, the majority of economic revenue came in the form of craft support (such as supplies, retail space, and marketing) and was garnered not by individual makers, but by platforms and corporations masking themselves behind the maker's’ efforts. Not to overshadow the scope of the maker movement, however, as the “third wave of craft” grew, the craft and hobby industry saw an over 2 billion dollar revenue increase from 2007 to 2009, Etsy saw a 106% revenue increase from 2008 to 2010, and Craft Organization Development Association found that “50 million Americans made artisan crafts with five million earning part of their income from crafts and 30,000 to 50,000 Americans selling crafts as their main income (Craft Organization Development Association, 2011).”⁷ The economic consequences of the maker movement have not been fully fleshed out, particularly as it is continually in flux and movement within the greater creative economy. We can say, however, that the maker movement has forced the handmade object into greater consideration within the western, consumer consciousness.

⁵ Paul Greenhalgh, *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 9.

⁶ “Quit Your Day Job | The Etsy Blog,” The Etsy Blog, accessed December 8, 2015, <https://blog.etsy.com/en/tags/quit-your-day-job/>.

⁷ Doreen Jakob, “Crafting Your Way Out of the Recession? New Craft Entrepreneurs and the Global Economic Downturn,” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy, and Society* 6 (2013): 131.

It is at this juncture, between the luxury of handmade goods and the ubiquity of the maker movement, that ceramics finds itself firmly situated as a fashionable good. This is not to say that all studio ceramicists (and by studio, I would mean professional craftspeople, for a better explanation of that position, please look to Sandra Alföldy's *Crafting Identity*), have found fashionable success in their work. There is, however, a noticeable, fashionable trendiness that has emerged around ceramics in the last year. Consider, in 2015, that the *Vogue* content producers (both online and in print media) wrote more than *six* articles relating to the fashion, function, and lifestyles associated with ceramics. The most notable, perhaps, is the inclusion of the, rather lengthy, article "Earth, Spin, and Fire," in *Vogue*'s September print issue⁸. This is significant for a number of reasons. The September issue is the largest *Vogue* issue of the year, certainly the most coveted, and this year's cover was graced with Beyonce, an established fashion icon. Furthermore, the article focused specifically on female, Brooklyn ceramicists, the key demographic of this particular inquiry.

Sullivan's article begins with a definitive fashion assertion about the state of ceramics. "Ceramics is having a moment," he says, acknowledging the history of the discipline, briefly, before continuing, "but still, this one feels big."⁹ The article features the author's wife, Suzanne Sullivan, and her "comrades-in-kilns" Romy Northover, Rebekah Miles, Isabel Halley, Brooke Winfrey, Helen Levi, Francesca DiMattio, and Cassie Griffin, and discusses the recent boom of opportunities for ceramicists in New York City, particularly for this hip group of women hailing from all over the U.S. The article, complete with images of brightly colored pots and remarkably lovely and put-together potters demonstrates a marketable popularity that bridges the mainstream

⁸ Robert Sullivan, "Earth, Spin, and Fire," *Vogue*, September, 2015, 572, 574.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 572.

of the maker movement with the luxury fashion of the Vogue audience, name dropping “projects” with Calvin Klein, Shino Takeda, and Steve Alan. The pots featured, with the exception of Francesca DiMattio’s wonky handbuilt work, are functional, with simple wheel-thrown or pinched forms and basic surface treatments of stripes, line drawings, and blobs of color. Sullivan credits (some) of their success to the use of social media platforms like Instagram, “which [are used] both to troll for ideas and to market the wares that result, while still marveling at [their] medium’s ancientness.”¹⁰ While all of these makers have personal websites, it is image sharing platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr that generate the most interest in their work as “followers” are granted an “inside look” that pairs well, aesthetically and ideologically, with the marketing of the lifestyle associated with these fashionable pots.

Helen Levi, for example, has 109,000 followers on her Instagram populated by images of her pots, process, and puppy. While this may seem a modest number for Instagram, consider that the Pots In Action Instagram, an account that is run for and by the studio ceramics community and its supporters, only has 25,000 followers. The sorts of makers profiled by Vogue are the “It-Girl”s of contemporary ceramics, celebrity makers whose status is informed by fashion and fashionable markets. The pots by Helen Levi and her compatriots have a remarkably consistent aesthetic, one that seems to be proliferating this fashionable moment for ceramics. The pots produced have extremely simple forms, typically thrown, cylindrical vessels with straight walls and rounded bottoms or simple, wide pinched bowls. The handles are a marked and basic “C” shape with little nuance. The unique touches to these vessels are in the surface treatment, although the trends are similar there as well. Many, such as Levi, choose to marble clay bodies

¹⁰ Ibid., 574.

together [Image 1], while others, such as Lena Dunham pal and Twitter subject Isabel Halley [Image 2] and Romy Northover are enamored with the shiny effects of gold and palladium lustres.¹¹ For the most part, these pots are minimal and functional and do not engage with the decorative trends or techniques available in the greater ceramics community. I will touch on this point later.

Two other articles published by *Vogue* in the last year further these aesthetic trends. “One-Of-A-Kind Ceramic Tableware, Perfect for Summer Gifting,” profiles fashion to ceramic convert Amanda Shine, who has launched a “new customizable ceramic concept,” entitled *The Setting*.¹² *The Setting* appears to be a sunny Soho loft where Shine both produces ceramic works and “private events, appointments, and spontaneous gatherings.”¹³ Not to condemn the whimsical and idealistic vision of Ms. Shine, which describes embodied and meaningful interactions with pots performing various functions, the pots are largely non-unique, stoneware vessels with glazes I’ve seen in every institutional environment [Image 3]. Like the pots in “Earth, Spin, and Fire,” these are basic, functional vessels with minimal glaze and unnuanced forms. Another *Vogue* article, “The Latest Trend in Fashion? Mixing Clothing and Ceramics,” features the paired work of fashion designer Maria Cornejo with Bridget Ann Clark’s ceramic vessels.¹⁴ Clark’s vessels have a carved exterior wall, in contrast to the previously discussed pots, but still have relatively simple forms, no handles, and deal in ubiquitous black and white glazes [Image 4]. I should note

¹¹ On March 3, 2014 at 10:11 PM Lena Dunham tweeted about Isabel Halley’s work, “My oldest and best @YoungIsabel designed the Sedar plates that NO ONE CAN PASSOVER! get it?” and later, on June 8, 2014 at 1:13 PM tweeted, “Just found a note to myself to “tweet about the indie ceramics renaissance that is happening NOW”.

¹² Rebecca Stadlen, “One-Of-A-Kind Ceramic Tableware, Perfect for Summer Gifting,” *Vogue*, July 22, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/13287155/customized-ceramics-the-setting/>.

¹³ “The Setting,” *The Setting New York*, accessed December 7, 2015, <https://www.thesettingnyc.com/>.

¹⁴ Laird Borelli-Persson, “The Latest Trend in Fashion? Mixing Clothing and Ceramics,” *Vogue*, March 12, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/12414228/fashion-ceramics-rachel-comey/>.

that the aesthetics of these works, and others, are not displeasing or without merit. They do, I argue, conform to a specific, historical aesthetic of pottery, albeit one that is not considered contemporary among the greater community of professional ceramicists. The particular, fashionable position of these ceramicists privileges the history of fashion, first, the accessibility of pottery, second, and, finally, the internet sharing platforms that best benefit their markets.

The aesthetics of the ceramic “It-Girl”s, are historically based. Notions of simplicity and function in ceramics are most often attributed to the philosophies and works of Bernard Leach, credited with the bringing of Japanese aesthetics to western pottery. Leach is considered one of the most influential potters of the twentieth century. The works of Bernard Leach are almost mythical in the ceramic canon, as he became the prophet for Japanese aesthetics, buoyed by the support of Yanagi Sôetsu and the Kenzan pottery dynasty. While his actual involvement in Japanese culture is complex, the impacts of his aesthetic prophecy to the west are undeniable.¹⁵ Bernard Leach championed the meaningful and functional, positioning his work counterculturally to the aesthetic concerns of modern art, writing that “I consider the mood, or nature, of a pot to be of first importance.”¹⁶ Function and accessibility were ethical concerns for Leach, and informed not only British Studio ceramics in the twentieth century, but set the tone for much of North American production in the forties and fifties as well. Other Modernist makers such as Lucy Rie and Hans Coper also produced austere, simplistic work, albeit some that was more sculptural than Leach’s. Often referred to as “lumpy brown pots,” a phrase that has been conversationally attributed to Garth Clark, although I cannot find evidence of that, Leach’s aesthetics of pottery privileged the experience of a vessel over its aesthetics. This new,

¹⁵ Edmund de Waal, “Homo Orientalis: Bernard Leach and the Image of the Japanese Craftsman,” *Journal of Design History* 10:4 (2007): 355-362.

¹⁶ Bernard Leach, “A Potter’s Book,” in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson (New York: Berg, 2010), 184.

fashionable school of ceramics attempts to cut through its trendiness by employing a traditional, international style of pottery, referring to a Modernist past that many studio practitioners have long abandoned.

These pots are almost ahistorical, carefully avoiding the past developments of studio ceramics in the last seventy years. The aesthetics of Leach and the Japanese school of pottery are, at this point, well known, whereas the successes and techniques of more modern studio potters are less so. Developments in making techniques and styles are monumental in the face of such simple pots, and I would argue, that with revolutions in design, the contemporary studio ceramic vessel is almost *more* functional. If you take, for instance, a Doug Peltzman or Julia Galloway [Image 5] mug handle and compare it to the “C” handles of these pots, you can immediately see how much more *comfortable* they would be in your hand. Outside of the fairly insular, studio ceramics community, however, these potters have received limited acclaim, regardless of their technical mastery. It is the simplicity of a recognizable, visual language that lends itself to the popularity of these pots. We immediately recognize them as something simple, functional, and *good*, as the language and mythology around Leach and his contemporaries has seeped into the collective consciousness of fashion, as works of the Modernist era that were considered luxurious, expensive, and rare.

In a recent article condemning modern pottery as dull, Jonathan Jones urges consumers and makers to return to the vivid and wild history of pottery, leaving the “oatmeal puritanism” of Leach behind.¹⁷ This, however, will not be probable in the fashionable ceramic moment. If we

¹⁷ Jonathan Jones, “Modern Pottery is Tasteful, Simple, Clean Lined, and Dull. Please Don’t Revive It,” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/nov/05/modern-pottery-leeds-bbc-the-great-pottery-throw-down>.

look, again, to a recent *Vogue* article on “The New Look of Traditional Japanese Ceramics,” we can see the disconnect between the realities of the technical advances of studio ceramics and the willingness, or ability, of mainstream media to recognize it as “fashionable.”¹⁸ While the first paragraph of Luckel’s article addresses a new exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design entitled “Japanese Kogei: Future Forward,” it does not mention a single maker in the exhibition by name. Shocking, considering both the relative success and technical prowess of those included in the exhibition, such as Katsuyo Aoki, Kairagi Shino, Takashi Ikura, and Takuro Kawata. The second paragraph, however, quickly moves to more accessible ceramicists who are “focusing on Japanese pottery today emphasize individuality in their creations,” mentioning Jen Kuroki and Shino Takeda’s work by name. Both Kuroki and Takeda make functional work, perhaps in contrast to the “fine art” of the Kogei exhibition, and both partake in a simplistic, functional vocabulary with minimalist forms and simple surface design. The willingness of publications, such as *Vogue*, to label more approachable, less technically proficient works as “fashionable,” asserts a modernist aesthetic as contemporary, desirable, and luxurious.

Not to be entirely pigeonholed into the Leachian canon, these New York makers *do* exhibit signs of contemporaneity. While speaking a language of minimalist, functional modernism, these pots and their makers are responding to an interconnected, internet era. The pots they produce at once refer to the language of the internet and are made to be marketed on online, curated, image based platforms such as Pinterest, Instagram, and Tumblr. They participate in other, fashionable trends that are easily communicated via image. The images of these pots are typically distributed in calculated, trendy aesthetics, whether the “authentic,”

¹⁸ Madeline Luckel, “The New Look of Traditional Japanese Ceramics,” *Vogue*, October 20, 2015, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/13362462/japanese-ceramics-kogei-mad-museum/>.

hipster vibe of warm instagram filters, wool blankets, and wooden utensils or the flashy and plastic aesthetic of strong, graphic colors, artificially arranged backdrops, and flat perspectives. These potters reflect contemporaneity in both their marketing and their small twists in the modernist aesthetics. While these pots may speak the language of functional modernism, with simple forms and decoration, it is most often spoken with a wink, or via text message. That is to say that these pots often contain small aesthetic clues to their culture of production, one that is fashionable, internet influenced, and young.

The question remains, “Is ceramics having a moment?” or is it suddenly more fashionable than it has been before?¹⁹ I would argue that this fashionable moment is happening *outside* the greater ceramic community in the western world. While potters have been joking about their own reality show, or Martha Stewart handmade line for years, 2015 is the year that it happened. Suddenly, ceramics felt visible in a way that it previously hadn’t. Due to the meeting of luxury and mainstream maker markets in a fashionable place and time, ceramics are somewhat of an accessory to the lifestyle that Vogue and other publications seek to promote. Ceramic objects are, at once, utilitarian, expensive yet attainable, and simultaneously timeless and new in the hands of this group of “It” potters. It’s optimistic, I think, for the craft world to be considered trendy. For while it can undermine the romantic ideologies associated with craft and increase craft’s appropriation from the neoliberal, capitalist model (craftwashing), visibility for craft (and, microcosmically, ceramics) is a necessary advancement for the field. One can hope that, despite the quick cycles of fast fashion, the work represented in mainstream media will begin to more fully explore the technical and conceptual mastery of contemporary ceramicists.

¹⁹Sullivan, “Earth, Spin, and Fire,” 572.

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Image Index

Image 1



“@helen_levi : Back in the studio after a weekend away, sizing up some round cloud mugs and new lil creamers”

Levi, Helen. Instagram Post. November, 2015. <https://www.instagram.com/p/-KHL5yPSz1/>

Image 2



Isabel Halley, "Sedar Plate." Photo by Rachael Scharf. Accessed December 7, 2015.
<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/165103/check-out-this-seasons-most-stylish-seder-plate>

Image 3



Amanda Shine, "sea foam mug," accessed December 7, 2015.

<https://www.thesettingnyc.com/products/sea-foam-mug-871#show-product-section>

Image 4



Bridget Ann Clark, "Small White Carved Porcelain Vase," accessed December 7, 2015,
<http://www.bridgetannclark.com/shop/medium-vase>.

Image 5



Doug Peltzman, Mug, accessed December 7, 2015. <http://objectiveclay.com/doug-peltzman/>