

# The Way We Live

**PERSPECTIVE** – As times change, function is worth re-examining, says **JOANNA HOWELLS**.

PHOTOGRAPHY – JOANNA HOWELLS



When selling a teapot recently I mentioned that I take care that my teapots should pour really well. 'I'm not going to use it. I use a teabag in a mug,' was the response, which prompted a number of reflections on the divide between those who view pots as uncertain adjuncts to sculpture, or 'honorary artworks', and those who measure a pot's worth in terms of its success in performing a function. Neither extreme is entirely satisfactory. Teapots become display objects in cabinets, but in retreat from the changing, tactile, three-dimensional relationship in use. In our culture the teapot is often regarded as the archetypal functional pot while in reality it is fast becoming a vessel for display, reduced to a symbol for function. Similarly, jugs become vases while the milk stays in a carton.

At the same time it is not uncommon to come across galleries that advertise their allegiance to 'non-utilitarian' work yet include pieces that are clearly of the teapot, vase and bowl variety. Can it be that some potters make functional vessels that allude so strongly to bygone ritual or tradition that they somehow transcend function? Or is it rather that confusion abounds, as Philip Rawson has it, 'about the whole nature of humanity's pottery which is unequivocally utilitarian whilst also being expressive'? [1] What, in studio ceramics, is happening at the utilitarian end of the aesthetic-functionalist spectrum? While not trying to promote a functionalist programme, I have been prompted by my client's comments to tug on that end of that continuum to see just how elastic it is.

One might argue that modern life precludes lengthy ritual, thereby replacing the tea set with an electric kettle, a

mug, a teaspoon, a soggy teabag and any convenient surface. Yet why should we be content with either one or the other? Is there not room for some thoughtful design which could accommodate both aesthetics and function?

One result, for me, is *The Busy Person's Teabag Dunking Kit*. This is admittedly a slightly frustrated response to teapots for display only, but one which prompted a further exploration of design within my chosen medium of thrown and altered porcelain. Why not take the same approach to certain standard items of tableware and see where this led in terms of the way we live now? There is, for example, something irritatingly inconvenient about most butter dishes. They are bulky, contain more butter than you need and the greasy lid needs putting down somewhere else on a cluttered surface. Silversmith Bernadette Ripley and I conducted some initially tongue-in-cheek market research but the feedback suggested that our own reservations were well justified. Our final product is a porcelain base, large enough for half a standard pat, with a hinged lid, and butter knife that stays with the dish.

A foray into any supermarket quickly confirms that disposable packaging has been well thought through. Cardboard dimple trays separate and preserve fruit for as long as possible. Interpreted in porcelain they can perform the same function in the home more successfully than a bowl and with no less aesthetic appeal.

TOP: *No Time For A Break?*, porcelain, 'glued' together with a mixture of egg white and sugar, H16cm ■ OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: Butter dish, porcelain, H9cm.





One reason jugs are pressed into service as vases, buyers reveal, is that they do not fit the compartments in fridges. Hence the limited edition *Joanna-paks* are echoes in porcelain of standardised milk packaging. They meet the criteria of fitting into the fridge door tray and one's hand, with the added advantage of stability to prevent spills. The prototype *Joanna-pak* was mischievously given as gift and experiment. Sure enough, it serves not as a milk jug but as a vase. The owner has chosen to emphasise the aesthetic over the functional just as others I know do the reverse in using their valuable Meissen plates for daily meals, then placing them in the dishwasher alongside inexpensive tableware. Neither preference is in any way problematic. I simply note that careful attention to either function or aesthetics cannot necessarily proscribe use and that is one of the fascinating aspects of ceramics.

Another echo of contemporary use defines the *Stay Home* dishes, which are designed around the elementary functionalist criteria of takeaway containers: size, shape and stackability. Transferring these requirements to porcelain produces surprisingly satisfying pieces, and visitors to the studio are drawn to the early versions.

Broadening the canvas, the globalisation of world cuisine has dramatically changed the range of foods we eat, necessitating a design response. Multi-use pieces seem a good idea.

The *Egg-Shi* plates are intended to house an egg cup or miniature sauce bowl, for sushi, say, or a dip. Redesigning the combination seems fundamental to something as prosaic as having enough room on the plate for the toast.

Responding to Paul Vincent's ironically-titled article 'In Praise of the £100 Colander', [2] the pasta server is a perforated serving dish, with a drip tray, so that one can drain and serve immediately. On a purely functional level – if this is of primary importance – it means saving time and having to wash up fewer items. On an aesthetic level it is far more than a colander. Although this may sound like making a fetish of function, by starting at the functionalist end of the spectrum the logical development is design for new circumstances and lifestyles. Beyond that, the aim is – to quote Rawson again – 'to awaken those important and intensely valuable regions of feeling and sensuous order, which pure visual-abstract work ignores, or even affronts'. [3]

Could it be that intrinsically functional objects have nothing to say about the world beyond function? Historically, saying anything of social importance on or with a pot has usually involved decoration on the surface. What can a 'jumped-up celadon potter' do to compete? Simply putting it in those terms is challenge enough.

The most commonplace object – probably the defining



functional item in our contemporary culture – is the mug. It is often used as a canvas for images that portray important or trivial events (a commemorative collection charts history) but what about form alone? When arranged in different ways they can become comments on society, commerce and politics. Thus *No Time for a Break?*, *Pyramid Selling* and *Shoulder to Shoulder*. The third of these demonstrates that we can, as we so like to do these days, have a comforting choice of beverages while eating our satirical cake. Admittedly, this is not quite form alone, since it is allied to language and configuration, but it does demonstrate that even a demotic mug can ask worthwhile questions on imperial issues. **CR**

**[1]** Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p1

**[2]** *Ceramics in Society*, 42, Winter 2000/1

**[3]** Rawson, p206

*The Way We Live Now*: porcelain by Joanna Howells and silver by Bernadette Ripley, New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham, Surrey, October 1-29. Website [www.newashgate.org.uk](http://www.newashgate.org.uk)

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OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT: Pasta server, porcelain, Ø max. 34cm | BOTTOM LEFT: *The Busy Person's Teabag Dunking Kit*, porcelain, H max. 12cm | TOP RIGHT: *Stay Home* dishes, porcelain, W max. 16cm | BOTTOM RIGHT: Dimple Tray, porcelain, L50cm | THIS PAGE TOP: *Joanna-paks*, porcelain, H20cm | BOTTOM: *Pyramid Selling*, porcelain, H40cm.