



Ceramic engagement

Closed for five months due to the coronavirus crisis, *Eva Masterman* looks at the impact on the Shipley Art Gallery in Gateshead and its current and future plans to promote and access its ceramic collections



PREVIOUS PAGE: general view of the John Christian Collection while in store
LEFT: *Pedestal bowl* by Carol McNicholl, from the John Christian Collection
RIGHT: *Pot with twisted handles* by Colin Pearson, from the John Christian Collection
BELOW RIGHT: *Large jar* by Jean-Nicolas Gerard from the John Christian Collection



Following advice in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we took the decision to close Shipley Art Gallery on Wednesday 18 March until further notice... Thank you for your support and understanding at this challenging time.'

This has been a familiar refrain across the globe over the past six months, and by the time you read this, I hope that the Shipley Art Gallery and the rest of the world will have begun to safely open up again. However, I am currently writing this from my home a few streets away from the Shipley in Gateshead, Northeast England, and its doors remain firmly shut in the face of the pandemic.

For a gallery with such a rich and important collection, the Shipley remains fairly low on the national and global cultural radar. This article should have coincided with the opening of a new display of their recent acquisition, the John Christian Collection – over 1,200 ceramic objects of 500 artists, with an emphasis on British ceramists, including Gordon Baldwin, Alison Britton, Hans Coper, Philip Eglin, Elizabeth Fritsch and Bernard Leach. Alongside their existing Henry Rothschild Collection of studio ceramics, this makes the Shipley Art Gallery one of the largest public collections of ceramics in the UK.

CRAFTING HISTORY

Opening in 1917 with 504 paintings bequeathed by local solicitor Joseph Shipley, the gallery started acquiring craft in 1977. Over the subsequent years, it has become an

established national centre for contemporary craft, and also has the recondite accreditation of hosting the first exhibition in the UK by M.C Escher, one of the world's most famous graphic artists.

Alongside its extensive ceramic collections, the gallery also holds beautiful examples of wood and metalwork, glass, textiles, jewellery and furniture, all housed in a magnificent piece of Edwardian architecture in the heart of town. Its extended collection focuses on interdisciplinary media, with an emphasis on craftsmanship and technical and material innovation. It is also part of the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM) a Federation of nine museums and galleries across the northeast, supported by local authorities, Newcastle University and the Arts Council England.

From its formation, there has been a commitment to documenting and recording the local through collecting works by regional practitioners alongside major artists. The 1980s and 90s saw a heyday of big ceramic exhibitions, with shows by leading makers including Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and Bernard Leach. This cemented a refreshingly egalitarian approach and dedication to telling the story of British ceramics, where work from local potters can sit comfortably next to experimental work by prominent 20th-century makers such as Gillian Lowndes.

The new John Christian Collection expands on this approach. Christian (1942–2016) was a specialist, curator and writer of Victorian painting at Christie's, but also



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Images: Shipley Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums; Colin Davison

a passionate collector of British studio ceramics. As well as collecting prominent figures from the 1870s–80s, his eclectic taste included mid-century modern and contemporary. In particular, he used his patronage to support the work of many young potters, often building friendships with them and buying works directly as their careers progressed.

This juxtaposition of traditional vs contemporary, leading figures vs local and emerging makers, made the Shipley Gallery the perfect home for this collection, continuing its commitment to the crafts, specifically ceramics, and the community building and local stories that are embedded within that. When this exciting new collection opens, it will centre around its value as a community resource, as well as an important monument to British craft history.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

I have framed this article within the Covid context as it is impossible not to recognise the impact it has and will continue to have on the arts and the world at large. As restrictions lift, the focus of community activity can be drawn back to the physicality of the collection and site of the gallery. How specifically this activity will relate to the Shipley's new John Christian Collection through future curation and presentation will be centred on a primary question: How can we engage with the local community through ceramics? As the TWAM Statement of Purpose cites: 'Our vision for the future is for everyone to have access to museum and archive provision in Tyne and Wear, to use this access and to value it for the significant and positive impact that it makes upon their lives.'


This new collection has the potential to truly embody this statement: part of it includes rare 'handling' pieces, seconds that are given with the original artwork to handle and inspect the craftsmanship. There is a real intention around access to this collection, of its ownership and activation being not just a static display, but something that evolves and is led by the community and public that engage with it. The Shipley are also asking hard and important questions around diversity and representation within the collection. As a regional gallery with little money for acquisitions, the answer cannot simply be, 'buy more' to 'fill the gaps'. There is instead a commitment among their team to utilise what they have through innovative curation and sensitive storytelling to best represent their local community as well as the wider community of ceramic artists that their collection is a part.

With the final rehang of the collection understandably postponed until probably 2021, the Shipley are looking at

other ways to utilise their incredible resources, with online tours, art challenges that respond to the collections and curation of pop up exhibitions of work by local people that showcases the incredible creativity of the community during lockdown. The TWAM Statement of Purpose goes on to state: 'Our mission is to help people determine their place in the world and define their identities, so enhancing their self-respect and their respect for others.'

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Perhaps this is a lofty statement to make, but at its best, this is what engagement in art does, it helps us define who we are and our place in the world. It has the power to give

voice to the voiceless and bring communities together. The Shipley has prided itself on being a 'local' gallery, and far from focussing on the global audiences that online platforms offer, it has looked directly outside its walls and how it as an institution can benefit its locale. It is this commitment and sense of community that we all need to focus on right now, and if we can do that through innovative engagement with fantastic pieces of ceramics, then even better. 

The Shipley Art Gallery is due to reopen on 25 August, for more information visit shipleyartgallery.org.uk



RIGHT: selection of Philip Eglin pieces currently on display in the gallery
BELOW RIGHT: three pieces by Beverley Bell-Hughes currently on display

