Reflections On a Recent Visit to the V&A Paul Mathieu

Like most if not all potters, the V&A holds a special place in my affections; especially the ceramics collection. On my first visit, a long time ago now, I remember actually seeing pots by Leach for the first time, and also by Alison Britton, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and so many others. A favorite remains to this day this wonderful little teapot, large creamer and sugar pot with a shell motif and a little swan on the teapot lid, by Coalport. It made a deep impression on a novice potter, barely starting. A while later (78-79), I spent an academic year at the North Staffordshire Polytechnic in Stoke-on-Trent and since the studios were closed on weekends, I would often find myself in London and I never missed an opportunity to go to the V&A and have a deeper look into the collection. I got to know the place really well and I would visit my favorite objects, as if they were old friends. A few years later still, quite a few actually, I was doing research on the relationship between ceramics and language, pottery and text, for a conference I was preparing to propose and deliver at NCECA. I knew that the V&A had many appropriate examples. I also knew I couldn't afford to purchase specific photographic images from them, and as I was on my way to the Continent, I made a stop in London. I had made arrangements to meet the Curator of Ceramics, Oliver Watson, asking him if it would be possible for me to bring a camera and to photograph specific examples for the needs of my conference. He had replied positively, which surprised me a bit, as I was a nobody (then!), and presumptuously making an outlandish request to someone whose books I not only knew about, but had actually read! But sometimes, all you need to do is ask. I presented myself at the side gate, announced my reason for my visit to the guard, who phoned upstairs. Within a few minutes, someone was sent to fetch me and I followed her within the internal entrails of the sacred place. Oliver Watson was waiting for me in the top floor offices. After introductions and further explanations on my specific intentions, he sent me to the ceramics galleries with an assistant. Once within the rooms of familiar old wood showcases full of pots, she handed me a key, told me that it opened all and any showcases, that I could photograph any object I wished, handle them if necessary, but carefully replace them in their original position and lock the showcase back. Then she left, instructing me to return the key to the office once I was done and to take as much time as I needed. Here I was, alone (the ceramics galleries, when opened…. were usually bereft of visitors…) with a master key and total access to these precious, fragile treasures. I must have used all my rolls of films and took hundred of pictures.

I remember two other similar circumstances of unexpected access. At the Leach Pottery in St-Yves (on my very first trip to Europe in 1977), after spending some time in the shop, I told the attendant that I was a potter and asked if it would be possible to visit the studio. She said that yes this was possible. As I was looking around the studio, a young potter working at the wheel inquired about my presence there, who I was, etc. To my informed replies, he asked if I was interested in seeing the collection. He cleaned himself, took me to the house next door and in the living room filled with pots (whole stacks of plates on the floor, window sills lined with instantly recognizable things, many illustrated in "A Potter's Book", the first Raku jar Bernard made in Japan, etc. etc.), he informed me that each object had a label with a number and I would find more info on each pot in a small box of typewritten cards specifically provided for that purpose. He then left me, completely alone (I was all of 22 at the times and looked to be about 16 at most) and I spent nearly two hours, looking, handling, perusing closely all the pots, old and recent, Ries, Copers, Songs and Hamadas…all by myself. In a small cupboard I opened, there were

more recent original Leach pots, stamped by him (he was still alive at the time): two large tenmoku bottles and a few of these beautiful, small, round porcelain boxes with a pointed top or a trailed bird motif on the lid. It did cross my mind to pocket one and leave. I probably would have gotten away with it but I could never do such a thing. A few minutes later, Janet Leach came in with an American visitor. We introduced ourselves and then proceeded to have tea together, as I had been generously invited. I listened intently to the conversation but haven't retained a word of it. Janet then asked me if I wished to visit Bernard who enjoyed visitors and conversation, and by now spending all his time at home, nearly blind. At the times, the guidebook I had with me was titled "Europe on $10 a Day", so I was somewhat stupidly travelling throughout Europe for three mouths with exactly $900 in my pockets! I couldn't stay in expensive St-Yves for the night and I had to make my way to the next town, which had a Youth Hostel I could afford, within the exacting limits of my very tight budget. So, I never got to meet Bernard Leach unfortunately, but the honor, trust and generosity bestowed on me that day, in giving such a young person as myself direct access to the collection (now behind glass in Bath) will always stay with me.

The second circumstances happened while I was a student at UCLA in Los Angeles. One of my friends was a curator at the Getty Museum (in Malibu only, then). On a visit to see her specifically, she took me to the reserves downstairs and opened a metal cabinet. Inside was a large yellow-ground snake platter by Bernard Palissy (1510-1589), resting on a bed of protective foam, and recently acquired by the museum. The provenance went back all the way to the 16th Century and it was the real thing. She asked me if I wanted to handle it. In the affirmative, of course, she handed me gloves to put on, put gloves on herself (I had not used any gloves at the V&A during my extensive photo shoot), took the platter out and handed it to me. I proceeded to examine it closely. How often do you have such an opportunity? Pots can only be fully and truly appreciated through handling. As I was passing it back to her, she asked: "Do you know how much we paid for it?" My expression was evident. "A Million dollars!". I nearly dropped it.

Anyway, back to the V&A. As I was returning the key to the offices, I had another brief chat with Oliver Watson. He said that they were going to reinstall the ceramics collection soon but were not quite sure what to do. Even if I had had an idea myself then, I don't think I would have dared to offer it.

On a subsequent visit much later, I had made an appointment to visit the then Head of Research, Paul Greenhalgh, whom I had met a few times here and there before. On a trip to Canada lecturing coast to coast, he had actually generously used his fee to purchase Canadian Ceramics for the V&A collection, including one example of mine. In his office, he asked if I wanted to see my piece, a stack set of plates and dishes, ostentatiously (pretentiously?) titled "The Will to Will", made in 1987, with Nietzsche in mind and Derrida within my sight. For a stack of dishes! I remember Garth Clark telling me at the time that pottery and philosophy had nothing to do with each other. I believed then (and still do) that he was (is?) wrong. Pottery, like all and any human activity, is nothing if not philosophical. My stack dishes set was then presently on display in the galleries and featured in a small selection of related objects. Through the labyrinthine and inaccessible to ordinary mortals back corridors we went, Paul and Paul, to exit right into the very room where my work was presented. It was a thrill to see something I had done exhibited in this kind of company, in this kind of place.

So, last year I found myself at the V&A once again. What a difference. And, to be blunt, what a disappointment. Of course, at my age, one is basically nostalgic about everything and change of any kind is not always welcomed. The new ceramics rooms at the V&A are in so many ways an improvement, more airy, more light, less stuffy. The new and very ostentatious furniture and display showcases for the study collection, all clear glass and chrome, are to say the least slick, yet overwhelming. They tower over such small, unassuming objects with a predatory and forbidding presence. Before, years ago now, everything appeared to be dusty, even dirty, even if the place was actually properly kept. But it was also then possible to see everything clearly, all objects were accessible, labeled and organized in a logic that may have been hard to assess at times, yet made sense, somehow. Now the study collection is housed in high, very high, very very high cabinets, full to the gills with stuff. The objects in such tight, claustrophobic proximity, and appearing stacked one of top of the other, at times literally, become mere "stuff": an indiscriminate accumulation of matter. They appear to have found their way there trough the proceeds of a pathological mind engaged in the obsessive compulsive acquisition of junk. It is nonetheless as obsessively, and expectedly compulsively organized, "taxonomized", and ordered in a manner that borders on torture. Certainly on confinement, and more than fifty shades of grey. Some works are even organized by color, which is more than a little bit dumb! Despite the obvious reliance on chronology and geography (the old work horses of unimaginative minds) to provide a semblance of structure, none of it makes any sense. Facile formal groupings around color or shape are too obvious to operate efficiently. How many plates can you line up standing on stands in a row on a shelf, with only the first one at the front really visible? I wonder what a novice visitor would feel in front of such chaotic, resolutely impressive yet dauntingly confusing abundance? The others visitors present (very few, as always) were walking around looking baffled and yes, confused. After a fast, tired and superficial look, possibly the only experience on offer to the ordinary visitor, they quickly left. Is that really the best way to present ceramics to the world? To create and expand the appreciation that is so deeply lacking in contemporary culture for the amazing contribution ceramics has made and continues to make to art and to humanity? The experience of the display collection is utterly lacking in imagination. It is but the strained effort of a bureaucratic (dare I say imperialistic?) mindset.

To be honest, the aesthetic and scholarly experiences of the other ceramic rooms are somewhat better. There is a didactic room on the material side of things were the processes, tools and techniques of ceramics and pottery making are described. While reasonably thorough, it still serves primarily to reduce a way of thinking, a specific art form (like all and any art, with its own radically independent conceptual premises), to the mere transformation of basic materials. Who cares, really, for such things? It is a waste of very precious and limited space. There is also a room on Industrial Ceramics (mostly British?) that is clearly sensible. Another room on developments in contemporary ceramics is a bit of a respite from the others, despite its crammed presentation in frontal showcases mostly lined up against the wall. If you cannot display a Grayson Perry so that it can be seen in the round, you may as well leave it packed away. Its presence here seems to shout: "Yes! We are enlightened! We do have a Grayson Perry! The trick is to find it, if you can!" Now that you have located the Perry, try to find my own work, the stacked dishes set already mentioned, within the study collection. It will require more than the will to will. It would be funny, if it wasn't so sad. Its online display is not any better with each piece of the stack presented separately so that the operative concept is, well, inoperative.

There is also a smaller selection of larger ceramics under the high cupola, where things improve, on the display side of things anyway. On the selection side of things, it is more problematic. One senses the prevalent inferiority complex at work in the field, in the unresolved intention to present acceptable and legitimate artworks in order to convince the visitors (unsuccessfully in most cases) that they are experiencing real art, that the work on display is also real art, despite the obvious fact that very little of it is good enough, significant enough to be included in such a context (art), somewhere else. It just looks like art. Most of it is, of course, nonetheless exquisitely made and very beautiful. I welcomed the reassuring and relaxing presence of passages of "sloppy" craft, a relatively recent development in contemporary ceramics that changes us from obsessive control and perfection, something I am too often guilty of myself.

I had also gone to the V&A with the specific intent to see the "installation" by Edmund De Wall, which I knew to be there, somewhere. Despite searching for it, it remained invisible. I had to go to the Information Desk downstairs and ask for it. The lady in charge pointed up that one could actually see it from the bottom floor, by simply looking up through the whole building all the way to the domed cupola, right above her desk! I made my way back up to have a closer look. Of course, to continue the perversity of the other displays, it basically remains impossible to see or to experience Edmund's intervention, other than furtively, frustratingly. Why make a large series of what are clearly rather conventional pots and line them up so high up that nobody even notices them? Why bother? Is it sheer hubris, the delusion that one is so important that others must look up to you, as you tower over them? Or is it simple humility, the implication that one's work is so insignificant as to not even deserve to be noticed, to even be seen? The circular red shelf is simply not enough to attract attention. This is but another (feeble) attempt to beg for legitimacy by appropriating indigested display strategies from elsewhere (installation art and site specificity). Edmund's pots are of great sensitivity and real beauty, and both can only be experienced up close, through touch ideally. No wonder nobody takes ceramics seriously. I couldn't find "my" little Coalport shell and swan teapot anywhere either within the study collection. It is only later that I finally located her on another floor, prominently featured in the Victorian displays, where she is at least in like-minded stylistic company. I was glad that she had been able to escape from the crowded glass prison, upstairs.

If Oliver Watson were to ask me now what I would propose for the reorganization of the ceramics rooms at the V&A, I would know what to reply. I would suggest that a largish room be dedicated to the presentation of what constitutes MEANING in ceramics, in a manner that would explain by association why these so diverse objects were made in the first place. And I would organize such a room following seven aesthetics: the Classical, on the constancy of certain forms through time, the Flux, on the specific qualities of glaze surfaces, the Decorative, on patterns and abstraction, the Narrative, on storytelling and the pictorial space(s) specific to ceramics through framing strategies, the Simulation, where ceramics imitate other materials, often itself, the Industrial, and the search for perfection, finally the Material Aesthetics and the obsession with clay and transformative processes, so prevalent now. Then, I would add seven other displays around Themes: the first is Food, obviously, then Shelter, on architectural ceramics (and pottery), then Text, Hygiene, Sex, the Figure (and the Figurine) and finally Death, so seminal in so many ways. The V&A collection is rather incomplete and some essential elements would have to be

borrowed from elsewhere, possibly the British Museum for Greek Attic pottery and for examples from pre-Columbian and other cultures, unfortunately missing at the V&A. All the objects would be presented following this epistemological (how they are understood) and phenomenological (how they are experienced) structure. They would be chosen from anywhere, through all times (no Britain this and that here), beyond geography and chronology, finally.

This is the structure I use in my two new books, one on the History of Ceramics, and the other on a Theory of Ceramics with a focus on contemporary works, and both titled “The Art of the Future”. These books are available online for FREE, text and images at: www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture.ca

Have a look. Let me know what you think.

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