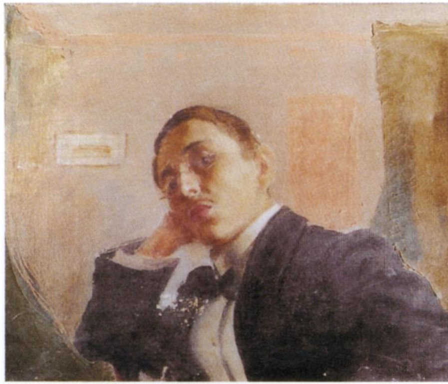
Bernard Leach
Cardiff

by TANYA HARROD

THE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION *Concept and Form* gathers together over one hundred and eighty pots, drawings, etchings, furniture designs and jewellery by the twentieth century's most famous ceramicist, Bernard Leach.[1] Curated by Emmanuel Cooper, the exhibition now at the **National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff** (to 10th August), marks the publication of Cooper's fine biography *Bernard Leach: Life and Work*[2] which gives a very full sense of Leach's day-to-day existence, his hopes and aspirations, his complex family arrangements and his gradual rise to fame after the Second World War, culminating in his appointment as a Companion of Honour six years before his death in 1979. Yet as a biographical subject Leach remains elusive. This is not for lack of material; Cooper has made full use of Leach's extensive archive now housed at the Crafts Study Centre at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design. But anyone using this archive will immediately be struck by its hermetic quality and will need to face the problem of providing a context for Leach's artistic activity, which from 1911 was primarily focused on a new visual discipline, that of studio pottery.

The studio pottery movement has not yet been integrated into histories of twentieth-century design or of fine art. In part this is because the movement, as it developed, became a victim of its own success. After the Second World War, inspired as much as anything by Leach's extraordinarily influential *A Potter's Book* (1940, with many reprints), scores of young men and women turned to ceramics. To take up pottery in the 1950s was one of the pleasures of peace, a compensatory activity after years of war. By the late 1960s middle-class potters, mostly art-school trained, dominated a craft renaissance that culminated in the setting up of the Crafts Advisory Committee in 1971. Potters had their own society, the Craftsmen Potters Association (founded 1957) and their own magazine, *Ceramic Review* (founded 1970). To a large extent, the discipline turned in on itself.

65. Large dish, by Bernard Leach. 1923. Earthenware, diam. 42 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; exh. National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff).



66. Detail of *Self-portrait*, by Bernard Leach. 1903. 30.3 by 40 cm. (Philip Leach collection; exh. National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff).

But in about 1911, when Leach attended a *raku yaki* party in Tokyo and decided to learn more about ceramics, to become a potter was an unusual choice. It was also inherently radical, being part of a more general attempt by young artists both to confront the challenge of modernity and to distance themselves from academic art. At that early date studio pottery needs to be seen in the context of other craft-based activities such as direct carving in stone and cutting bold woodblocks for printed paper or textiles. In part, making technologically imperfect pots was an anti-modern response to new processes and new materials, to what D.H. Lawrence called 'the tragedy of ugliness' that appeared to characterise the industrialised world. Pottery came to stand for a species of elemental simplicity. Thus the potter's wheel was no mere tool but rather an instrument for experiencing what Leach's rival in the inter-wars years, William Staite Murray, called 'rhythmic plastic growth and form'[3] in which a pot was born rather than made.

Bernard Leach's background was privileged and colonial. He was discouraged from becoming an artist, but attended the Slade School of Fine Art from 1903 to 1905, then unwillingly worked for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, breaking free in 1908 to study at the London School of Art where he was taught by Frank Brangwyn. In the exhibition there is a touching self-portrait painted in 1903 when Leach was seventeen, in which he presents himself as a Pateresque young aesthete (Fig.66). A range of Leach's early drawings, watercolours and etchings reveals his debt to Brangwyn, but also suggests careful study of artists such as Samuel Prout and John Sell Cotman. In those early years he was friendly with the painter Henry Lamb and exhibited with and attended the meetings of Vanessa Bell's Friday Club.

In 1909, inspired by memories of early childhood years spent in Japan with his grandparents, Leach sailed for Yokahama, reaching Tokyo in April. His plan was to teach etching. Through some serendipitous introductions he made contact with an élite group of artists, writers and thinkers based in Tokyo and there he absorbed avant-garde European developments at long range. He also began writing for English-language publications in Japan, arguing for a combination of Eastern and Western values which he believed would spark off 'the greatest development in the history of human society'. This kind of thinking was not unusual in the first decades of the twentieth century and could have led Leach in any number of directions. Indeed, he spent some time in China, under the spell of Alfred Westharp, a more sophisticated East–West synthetist who was later to run an experimental boarding school in northern China where aristocratic students wore shorts and were encouraged to reject materialistic Western values, to do handicrafts and play an active part in running the school.[4]

In the end, pottery emerged as the best symbolic medium for Leach's ideas. *Concept and Form* includes examples of the uncertain experimentation of his early years and the powerful, if uneven, work made on his return to England in 1920. The finest of these first pieces made at his pottery in St Ives, Cornwall, are massive slipware platters inspired by Thomas Toft but decorated with haunting images culled from his years in the East – elaborate wellheads, sketchy willow trees, horses eating seaweed on the beach, the Tree of Life (Fig.65). He also experimented with stoneware, often carving patterns and images through slip in a fashion inspired by Chinese Cizhou wares. But Leach soon came to feel that his art was undervalued in England, a complaint that retrospectively seems unjustified. Leach, his rival William Staite Murray and his

67. *Two beakers*, by Bernard Leach. 1930–35. Each 9 by 8.6 cm. (Crafts Study Centre, Farnham; exh. National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff).

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68. Bottle, by Bernard Leach. c.1959. 36.3 by 29.7 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; exh. National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff).

pupils Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, Norah Braden and Michael Cardew exhibited frequently and were flatteringly reviewed. But the economics of their situation did not add up – running a pottery is a good deal more expensive than painting domestic-sized pictures or even carving relatively small pieces of sculpture. Nonetheless, their work was purchased by adventurous collectors.

What is striking is how often the comparison was made between studio pottery and sculpture, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. More research needs to be done in this area, but at least one patron, George Eumorfopoulos, bought early Chinese pots, directly carved sculpture (by Barbara Hepworth for example) and modern stoneware pottery in abundance. Critics, too, frequently made the connection between modern pots and modern sculpture: as Herbert Read pointed out, thrown pottery exemplified 'pure form' to a marked degree (Fig.67). Charles Marriott, the inter-war art critic of *The Times*, pointed out as late as 1943 that there were no British artists to compare with Brancusi but 'pottery is, precisely, abstract sculpture'.[5]

Ironically Leach's most convincing monumental pots were made after the Second World War, many thrown by William Marshall to Leach's designs. The technical problems that had dogged his pottery in its early days were also resolved, in part by his son David. There is a fine array of this late work at Cardiff, exemplifying the 'Sung standard' that Leach came to prefer over other ceramic influences (Fig.68). But post-War sculpture in its various phases had little in common either visually or philosophically, with studio pottery. A moment of synchronicity was over. And more recently Leach's fondness for essentialising East and West as passive and dynamic respectively, has come under hostile scrutiny in the wake of Edward Said's transformative study *Orientalism* (1978).[6] But the pots, especially the more awkwardly made inter-war examples, still stand for a strain of avant-gardism that for a few brief years put craft work at the heart of English modernism.

[1] *Concept and Form* was toured by Penlee House Gallery & Museum, Penzance, where the exhibition originated last year, to Surrey Institute of Art and Design, Farnham, Cleveland Craft Centre, and the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, before its final showing in Cardiff.

[2] *Bernard Leach: Life & Work*. By Emmanuel Cooper. 419 pp. incl. 27 col. pls. + 74 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2003), £29.95. ISBN 0-300-09929-0.

[3] W. Staite Murray: 'Pottery from the Artist's Point of View', *Artwork*, 11, 4 (May–August 1925), p.201.

[4] See G. Goldfuss: *Les tribulations d'un sinophile dans la Chine républicaine. Le musicien et pedagogue Alfred Westharp*, Etudes Chinoises, vol xii, no 2, Autumn 1993; G.S. Alitto: *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, Berkeley 1987.

[5] C. Marriott: *British Handicrafts*, London 1943, p.33.

[6] See E. de Waal: *Bernard Leach*, London 1998.

Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes
Toulouse

by PHILIPPE BORDES, *Université Lyon 2*

THANKS TO THE GENEROUS and informed enthusiasm inspired by local pride, the figure and the art of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819) emerged more clearly than ever before in 1956 on the occasion of an exhibition organised by Robert Mesuret at the Musée Paul-Dupuy in Toulouse.[1] The donation of a sizeable collection of drawings, sketch-books and oil-studies to the Louvre in 1930 had laid the foundation for this revival of interest in a forgotten landscape painter. The remarkable freshness of these unknown works and a selective reading of his major theoretical publication – his widely diffused *Elémens de perspective pratique, à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage*, published in the Republican year VIII (1799–1800) – secured for him a crucial position in the prehistory of *pleinairism*. In 1966 the judicious acquisition by the Musée Paul-Dupuy of another important group of works dispersed at the sale after the artist's death in 1819 constituted a complementary base for this re-evaluation. It was around this time, as Neo-classicism was becoming fashionable with art historians and dealers, that the master of historical landscape also began to arouse interest.

The Valenciennes exhibition at the **Musée Paul-Dupuy, Toulouse** (closed 30th June),[2] which included works primarily from these two collections, focused on the early work and could be regarded as a repeat performance of the one mounted in 1996 in Spoleto.[3] Regrettably, no effort was made to remedy the unusually unreliable entries in the catalogue of the Spoleto show. The problem concerns the varied inscriptions, dates and forms of signature found on the drawings, incorrectly or incompletely transcribed or situated on the sheets.[4] The point is not simply one of sterile philology: the patterns and connections produced by these indications remain a neglected resource for the chronological reconstruction of the artist's *œuvre*. No less irritating is the conceptual atony which weighs on the approach to the art of Valenciennes: the main text in the catalogue revives some of Vasari's biographical clichés and a categorical notion of Neo-classicism presumed defunct long ago. Essentially, the text is still under the spell of Robert Mesuret, whose publication of fifty years ago is treated as scripture. What is needed however is a tabula rasa, allowing for a reassessment of the subject (the biography, the attributions, the datings), with a critical evaluation of all the documentary, technical and iconographic evidence. I hope to be able to demonstrate how even cursory but unprejudiced attention to the exhibited works can be profitable.

69. *View of Vouvray*, by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. 1775. Pencil, black chalk and grey and brown wash, 19 by 30.5 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris; exh. Musée Paul-Dupuy, Toulouse).