

Mid-century British Ceramics

Author and historian *Lesley Jackson's* distinguished career began as a ceramics curator, a passion reflected in her personal collection. Continuing her introduction to the mid-century pieces in her own home, she shares the stories behind much-loved British ceramic designs.

Optimism on a plate



When I started out as a curator, ceramics and glass were my specialist areas. Having immersed myself in the history and technology of these industries, it was hardly surprising that I should develop a personal interest. The more you know about a subject, the more likely you are to spot interesting pieces in unlikely places. And as ceramics and glass are relatively affordable, it's hard to resist the temptation of succumbing to the odd cruet set or vase. Before you know it, you've got three dinner services, your mantelpieces are overflowing and you're triple-hanging plates on walls!

The mid-20th century was a fertile period in British ceramics, both creatively and commercially, making it a rewarding field for collectors. The industry was booming, particularly in the heartlands of Stoke-on-Trent ('the Potteries'), where firms such as Wedgwood, Susie Cooper and Midwinter were based. The scale of production means that there's a wealth of material out there – in charity shops as well as antiques centres – just waiting to be snapped up. As well as supplying the domestic market, British pottery and china were exported

all over the world, so if you're in Canada or Australia, it's worth keeping an eye out for familiar pieces. We've repatriated a few over the years.

The reason why this period is so interesting for collectors is because of the quality and diversity of what was produced. Visually, the patterns and shapes are very exciting – both tableware and ornamental pieces. And technically, in terms of how they're made and decorated, they are often outstanding, reflecting centuries of expertise. Visitors often ask why we don't have a dishwasher – the reason is that most of our crockery dates from the pre-dishwasher age. I'd much rather eat off postwar Poole Pottery tableware, with its beautiful cursive hand-painted designs and soft velvety eggshell glaze, than the bland mass-produced imported china in the shops today. Washing up is a small price to pay for the privilege of such a pleasurable experience!

The strength of mid-century ceramics arises from the creative renaissance that transformed the industry during the 1930s and enjoyed a second wave after the war – Modernism with a classic English twist. As well as

dynamic new artist-led firms such as Susie Cooper, who developed innovative modern tableware shapes and patterns, established firms such as Wedgwood were revitalised during the interwar period by teaming up with artists.

Eric Ravilious's designs for Wedgwood, such as *Persephone and Travel*, were successfully reintroduced postwar. Melding tradition and modernity, they juxtapose delicately engraved vignettes with calligraphic linear borders. We were fortunate enough to acquire some specimens before they became too rare and expensive. To eat your pasta from a Ravilious bowl is sheer delight.

Most of our collection dates from the 1950s, a truly democratic period when there was a wealth of high-quality reasonably-priced products on offer. Newly-weds often acquired a large dinner service, but there was a shift towards increasing informality over the course of the decade. The ceramics industry was re-energised after the war by a new generation of young designers, many of whom had studied at art school, although others were factory-trained. Jessie Tait, the in-house pattern

Previous: Sienna by Jessie Tait, Midwinter, 1962. Photograph courtesy of 20th Century Collector, 20thcenturycollector.com. Left: Feather Drift by Alfred Read, Poole Pottery, 1953-4. Photograph courtesy of robspool pottery.co.uk. Right: Ann Wynn Reeves for Kenneth Clark pottery, 1960s. Photograph courtesy of the Virtual Pottery Museum, flickr.com/photos/robmcrorie/collections.



