

This article is from *Burning Point Bergen*, published in 2002 by Bergen National Academy of the Arts and The West Norway Museum of Decorative Art as part of a larger research project including documentary film, exhibition and seminar.



**Nina Malterud:**

### **Education in the ceramic arts – wood firing or intellectual enterprise?**

In Norway today, two institutions offer higher education in ceramics: Bergen National Academy of the Arts and Oslo National Academy of the Arts. What does this education consist of and how did it develop? As a point of departure, I refer to a quotation by Jan-Lauritz Opstad, director of the Nordenfjeldske Kunstrindustrimuseum (the National Museum of Decorative Arts, Trondheim), from an article on Norwegian ceramics published in the German *Keramik Magazin* in 2002. A similar opinion is expressed in his 1990 book, *En ny bevissthet. Norsk kunsthåndverk 1970-1990 (A New Awareness. Norwegian Crafts 1970-1990)*.

“In Bergen, the Leach tradition has had a strong impact on ceramics. Clay is the preferred medium, and one can clearly see to what extent clay comprises the basis for artistic work. Wood firing as well as more “primitive” firing techniques have been of great importance. In Oslo, on the other hand, a more intellectual approach has been emphasised. There they have kilns with the highest technical standards, and teachers have used their extensive knowledge to create more sophisticated expressions in stoneware and porcelain. “Free sculpture” and installation has become a trend, and clay is no longer the preferred material. Despite having received one’s education at the Institute of Ceramic Art, one does not necessarily use clay as one’s artistic medium. In recent years we have seen graduate students utilizing video, photography, plastic, neon lighting or metal instead of clay. As a result of these two distinct approaches to “ceramic art”, one can almost always determine through their work where Norwegian ceramics artists have received their education within the last 25 years.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan-Lauritz Opstad: “Selbstbewusster Aufbruch ins Offene“, *Keramik Magazin* 1/2002, p. 16.

Is this an accurate and significant description of these two educational institutions? The following account focuses on developments in Bergen during the almost fifty years a ceramics education has been offered here – but it will also detail the relationship between the ceramics programs in Bergen and Oslo and similarities in their evolution independent of location.

The ceramics education we speak of begins as vocational training in a craft area, and today has evolved into a college education with a career in the arts as its objective. The vocational training model has been replaced by college studies, research and artistic development. Its academic niche has been moved from applied art to craft art to art in its broad sense. This development has been influenced by factors at various levels – international, national and local – and it can prove difficult to distinguish between them: academic politics, local economy, institutional circumstances, the ceramics discipline and its milieu – and the omnipresent coincidence of time, place and people.

### **The 1950's: A school for applied art**

Bergens Kunsthåndverksskole (BKHS: Bergen School of Applied Arts) began offering an evening course in ceramics in 1947, and created a separate ceramics department in the so-called “day school” in 1957. In Oslo a similar education had been offered by Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole (SHKS: National College of Art and Design) since 1939.

BKHS was founded in 1909 with a goal that coincided with that of SHKS in Oslo and similar schools in Europe: to “secure craft workers greater artistic independence. (--) Of course, not all the school's students will progress to the point that they will be capable of original composition in their decorations and designs, but it is the goal that they should be able to apply motifs critically and tastefully as well as in a somewhat independent fashion.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950's the aesthetic training of craft workers in this sense is no longer a major priority. Now an education should qualify one for production of more attractive every day objects in the spirit of the Applied Arts Movement. The schools should produce “skilful and aesthetically well-trained ceramicists”<sup>3</sup> as well as drawers and designers for the expanding ceramics industry. Beginning in 1958, students are allotted loans from the State Educational Loan Fund, which contributes to a sharp increase in the number of career-oriented applicants. The school's administration remains simple. Here is the rector's description from 1955: “The administrative department consisted of the rector and a custodian.”<sup>4</sup>

Then, as now, it was a difficult task for an institution outside the capital to be recognized as comparable with corresponding institutions in Oslo. When BKHS in 1951 attained status as a school for craft artists like that in Oslo, this event received “a rather chilly response from the administration of SHKS”.<sup>5</sup> The demand for similar status and economic support for the two craft schools in Oslo and Bergen has been a one-sided campaign from BKHS's side, and the topic has been much discussed with both the Ministry and the Parliament committee for education affairs.

A journalist with the newspaper *Dagen* in 1959 describes the newly established ceramics department in this way: “The smell of clay and the sight of red-brown pots and vessels in every fashion met us at the

---

<sup>2</sup> *Bergens Kunsthåndverksskole 1909-14. Oversigt ved O. Ingstad. Bergen 1914.*

<sup>3</sup> Finn Glambek: *Bergens Kunsthåndverksskole gjennom 50 år. 1909-59*, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Runar Børresen, Rector 1955-1977, interview in school paper *Koma 2/1979*, p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Runar Børresen in *Bergens Kunsthåndverksskole etter 50-års jubileet 1959-77*, Bergen 1979, p. 6.

door, and, well inside, ceramics teacher Kåre Mjøs threw a pot for us with a dexterity and a speed that caused us to forget what we had intended to ask him about.”<sup>6</sup> The discipline is depicted as a field with a stable corpus of techniques, objectives and values. Prowess and healthy morals are considered essential elements. The course offerings at BKHS are described in the teaching curriculum from 1966: design composition and drawing, modelling, wheel throwing, practical work, pottery and casting, technical drawing, materials and glazing. Further common curriculum: free-hand drawing, geometrical drawing, colour, writing, history of art and style, life drawing and modelling. The instructors were, from the start and until 1977, Kåre Mjøs and Alf Rongved.

### **The late 1960’s: The revolt begins**

Disciplined and teacher-directed instruction predominates, at any rate on paper. In an announcement for a teacher’s meeting at 11:30 a.m. (1970), one finds the following: “Students are dismissed or have permission to work independently after 11 a.m.” (Runar Børresen, Rector). Until 1966, the form “Monthly report on student attendance” is utilized, where students with frequent absences are described in this way: “They have been exceptionally careless in attendance of the penmanship class.” Yet the average school day has many sides. At the ceramics department there is vigorous activity both day and evening. The teacher’s presence and direction is limited, and the students have considerable leeway to explore their own interests. Ceramics activity develops as much in relation to impulses and current events outside the school as to the organised class topics. Teaching is oriented towards industrial design, but a complete absence of contact with the industrial sector results in the students having a lack of confidence in this direction.

“*A Potter’s Book*” by Bernard Leach<sup>7</sup>, featuring a forceful philosophy based on the values of craft, appears in Bergen in 1966. Here is revealed information about clay and glazing that breaks with traditional trade secrecy and inspires students to conduct their own experiments based on the book. The ideal of the teaching staff has been perfection in low-fired titanium and zinc glazes; students now become acquainted with a different aesthetic in which the visible traces of the ceramic process are valued. Interest grows for firing methods other than the electric kiln, but it will be some years before experiments with oil, gas and wood begin. Research is lively in many areas. Numerous materials are put to use, not just clay. Clay is worked with directly, without the prescribed preparatory work with drawing and watercolours that has been presented as the ideal in applied arts instruction. Students work independently with sculpture in addition to functional objects. Particularly engaged students establish interdisciplinary milieus, and art and politics are vociferously discussed.

In the student council’s records from 1962-69 one finds examples of surprisingly direct communication between the students and the rector regarding teaching content and physical conditions. The school is still simple in its organization, and there is close contact between the administration and the students. 1966: “Meeting at the Rector’s office. Item 1. Problems with the girls’ wardrobe, ceramics. No curtain or shoe shelf, floor not washed. Rector promises to follow up.” 12.02.69, item 10: “Rector and instructors concerned about students’ indolence.” Everything from intoxication at student parties and a request for a new lamp to demands for student representation in the school administration is an item at these meetings.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Kunsthåndverksskolen 50 år på flyttefot” *Dagen* 10 October 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Leach: *A Potter’s Book*. London 1940

Towards the end of the 1960's the tone sharpens. A new day is dawning, also in Bergen. Students complain about the organisation of teaching - or its lack of organisation, exam structure, a lack of influence, poor health and safety standards, and more; and requests arise for the inclusion of such subjects as ecology and social conditions.

### **The 1970's: Revolt and reorganisation**

In the first half of the 1970's, the applied arts ideology is rejected by large segments of the ceramics milieu. The idealised relationship between art and industrial production is viewed as both unrealistic and inhibitive for artistic endeavour. Organisations in the art world are in revolt and in the process of restructuring themselves. A central factor is "Kunstneraksjon-74" ("Artists' Movement -74"), a broad coalition of artists' organisations that demands a radical increase in national funding for artistic activity. Their view is that the national government must bear responsibility for cultivating artistic endeavour in the country. For many this is a new and controversial idea, and a heated debate ensues. Norske Kunsthåndverkere (NK: The Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts) is established in 1975. Craft art is here defined as something other than industrial design, both in process and product. The Applied Arts Movement is now history. Among the schools' instructors, nevertheless, both in Oslo and Bergen, applied art continues as a central concept until well into the 1980's. Artists' organisations are now more progressive and updated than the educational institutions and are the indisputable sources of inspiration for the students' new orientation.

Economic growth and new forms of communication in western Norway open myriad possibilities for professional ceramicists. *Ceramic Review* and other English-language periodicals appear around 1970 and become frequent reading in Norway. In 1975, ceramicist Grete Nash arranges a raku course for Norwegian colleagues at Agder Folkehøgskole, inviting influential guests from the USA. Both the "workshop" as an active and democratic educational form and raku-firing as a dramatic process are new to Norway. Erick Stanley Hanson, who from 1972 plays an important role as a new instructor with the ceramics department, participates, bringing the newest developments in ceramics home to Bergen. As described earlier, there is already established a climate for this type of activity in Bergen, and the new knowledge is immediately put to use. The backyard of BKHS on Strømgaten becomes a free area for experimentation with both materials and firing methods.

The student revolts, beginning in 1968 and lasting throughout the 1970's, have not since seen their like, neither in the educational system as a whole nor at the school in Bergen. Student activism with its meetings, resolutions, wall posters, and criticism – both the well-founded and the hysterical – of academic content, organisation and the administration, dominates academic life. Some of the criticism is congenial, some brutal. For example, in a statement from the "Kunstutdanningskonferansen i Trondheim" ("Conference on education in the arts") in 1977, arranged by student organisations, it is bluntly pointed out that "as concerns the academic environment at the art institutes the conference is of the opinion that the hiring practice for teachers results in a moribund staff with little possibility for replacement. At the same time, teachers' class loads are so heavy that they lose contact with their artistic careers, and as a consequence easily become a burden for the school and its students."

At the ceramics department in Bergen, lengthy conflicts between students and teachers lead to the total replacement of the teaching staff in 1977. The students are permitted the disposal of a year's salary for the engagement of guest teachers, a step that proves decisive for further developments. English and American ceramics journals and books are the primary source for enthusiastic students searching for desirable guest teachers. With great optimism invitations are sent to William State Murray and Hans

Coper (who apologizes but says he is too ill to come), among others. Japanese Takeshi Yasuda, living in England, responds to an advertisement in *Ceramic Review*, and in 1978 arrives to teach and work for four months in Bergen. This “artist/teacher-in-residence” practice is new, and initiates a decade with a unique series of guest teachers visiting for long and short periods. Students’ needs are met by a new educational practice fashioned with both intensity and enthusiasm. An exhilarating academic expansion is in process, encompassing both attitudes and techniques: wood and oil firing, salt-glazing and raku take place outdoors and seem to accord well with the Norwegian fondness for nature. New experiences with material and processes provide new content and perspective.

Opstad’s comments on the significance of wood firing and other “primitive” firing techniques in Bergen are therefore legitimate for this period. The anti-authoritarian and do-it-yourself educational climate stimulates an innovative attitude to all aspects of the ceramic process. In Oslo, Arne Åse, a teacher with SHKS since the end of the 1960’s, worked diligently for the lifting of so-called “trade secrets” (glazing recipes, etc.) and for a professionalisation involving the pooling of knowledge. His efforts demonstrate that this was a movement typical for its time.

Names of guest instructors from 1978 and later, most from Great Britain and the USA, include modernists and postmodernists, traditionalists and rebels. The list is impressive for those in the ceramics profession. Besides Yasuda, who returned several times, we find names like Randy Johnston, Bob Shay, Richard Slee, Jacqueline Poncelet, Angus Suttie, Martin Smith, John Maltby, Herta Hillfon, to name a few. One of the guests, Richard Launder, who came to Bergen for the first time in 1982, was to be an important contributor in a longer perspective as he became a tenured associate professor in 1987. Students at this time characterise their encounters with these figures as decisive for their development. “By inviting numerous guest teachers from all over the world, SHKD has played a seminal role in the creation of an international network. These contacts have provided important impulses to the Norwegian art milieu – primarily in the west, but also in other areas of the country. This activity has been of crucial significance in the recent development of Norwegian ceramics.”<sup>8</sup>

Bringing in people who represent contrasts and extremes becomes important in itself. For a small institution this approach is not a given – gathering people holding similar views can seem a more comfortable alternative. With this transition the ceramics department in Bergen undergoes a unique and particularly fruitful development.

### **The 1980’s: Accreditation as a college**

In 1981, BKHS and SHKS become nationally funded colleges. In 1985, the four-year diploma plan is restructured into a three-year undergraduate study and a one-and-a-half year graduate program, a system that has continued until today. Norway’s first professorship in ceramics is offered as a temporary position in Bergen in 1985, and is occupied by Arne Åse (who, to be sure, leaves Bergen again when the following year a professorship is established in Oslo). Focus on and debate about the school’s responsibility for research and artistic development begins. A consequence of its new status is that in 1986 the school in Bergen changes its name from BKHS to the Statens Høgskole for Kunsthåndverk og Design (SHKD: the National College of Art and Design).

The school is opened to public scrutiny and formalisation of all academic procedures commences. Several teachers are tenured. Instruction becomes more stabile, but a working environment open for

---

<sup>8</sup> Hanne Heuch: Gjester/Guests 1980–1990, exhibition catalogue USF Bergen 1990, p.3.

improvisation and external impulses nevertheless continues. Descriptions of the academic content of ceramics instruction are still marked by traditional, formal approaches, with remnants of designations from the earlier vocational training, including detailed references to material and technique. Simultaneously, an attitude now develops that more clearly encompasses open, artistic goals. The intense experimentation with firing techniques lessens its fervour during the 1980's. The expansion that this first represented has been incorporated into the repertoire, and becomes more of a method than a goal in itself. People like Richard Slee, with themes and materials far from the "natural-romantic", now serve as representatives for the new and exciting.

Academic expansion brings with it physical consequences. It is reported that Rector Børresen, in a speech delivered in 1964 on the event of moving into new premises at Strømgaten 1, predicted that the school's space problems were now solved until well past the year 2000. Twenty years later this no longer holds true. In the course of the 1980's and 1990's, the school's activities have filled the building on Strømgaten and expanded into three more buildings. Furthermore, new health and environment standards finally catch up with the institution; the ceramics studios are closed down by the Occupational Health and Safety Commission and are completely renovated.

### **The 1990's: The establishment of Kunsthøgskolen**

"Ceramic art is a broad characterization for a variety of functions: from pure utility-value to sculpture and everything in between – or across – these extremes."<sup>9</sup> This definition is formulated in 1989 by Hanne Heuch, professor in Bergen 1988-1992. The previously somewhat moralising and narrow definition of the discipline is now clearly replaced by an encouragement to transcend boundaries in both thought and action. While references to tradition and skills continue, it seems that in descriptions of the discipline every attempt is made to emphasize greater academic freedom. This tendency continues into the 1990's – in accordance with student practice. Texts in which it is necessary to define the discipline are written with great reluctance, not least as regards the complex relationship between fine art and craft art.

The Institute of Ceramic Craft Art changes its name to The Institute of Ceramics, because it "better coincides with the focus, and is a more spacious and accurate designation".<sup>10</sup> Many of our contemporary issues seem to be on the agenda at SHKD already in 1990: matters regarding student autonomy, evaluation forms, and an increase of theory in course content, as well as calls for interdisciplinary and optional courses and courses in written composition.

The question of what kind of and how much theory higher education in the arts should include becomes a focus at the beginning of this decade. Traditional history of art now occupies a smaller niche; subjects such as the history of contemporary art, art theory, theory of science, and philosophy are now requested. To a certain extent this reflects circumstances in the art community, but it is just as much a necessary consequence of being a college, where practice must be supplemented with theory. While at the art academies the elaboration and study of theory becomes a primary goal, developments at SHKD proceed at a slower pace. Theory as a common and/or discipline-specific element is constantly discussed, but does not find its final solution. The relationship to practice is central in a subject with as

---

<sup>9</sup> SHKD Course Catalogue, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Hanne Heuch, letter to the board/administration of SHKD, 20 November 1990.

many material considerations as ceramics. "He who would learn to swim can not just stand on land and think about it."<sup>11</sup>

The major educational debate in Norway is now the college reform. Small colleges are required to expand by merging, and arts institutions must follow suit. The early 1990's seem to be rife with discussion over which institutions will be joined together. In Bergen the option of a fusion between Vestlandets Kunstakademi (The National Academy of Fine Arts, Bergen) and SHKD is chosen, not without problems. Two quite disparate educational cultures confront each other. Accomplishing the fusion of two small institutions (respectively 60 and 200 students) proves to be a demanding task, both in terms of finances and for the personnel. The new Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen (KHiB: Bergen National Academy of the Arts) is formally established in 1996, and the earlier disciplines are reorganised into three new departments: the Department of Design, the Department of Specialised Art (with sections for photography, graphics, ceramics and textile) and the Art Academy. It is worth noting that in organising departments it is not now considered desirable to distinguish between craft and fine art, but rather to group arts education according to approach (specialisation or open study). For ceramics the greatest challenge in the new art school is the close contact with arts studies which have an established foundation in fine art. The old craft art school had enjoyed a more sheltered environment for its subjects.

## 2002

Following the establishment of KHiB, the ceramics section's wish for a "both and" position becomes more manifest: both ceramics as a general artistic medium, and ceramics as a field with a unique and rich history. Three main educational areas have been staked out during the 1990's: function, sculpture and architecture – but the designation sculpture, as in the arts otherwise, becomes too confining, and is broadened to include a greater emphasis on time, place, space, context and concept. Long established forms of expression such as installation and performance also demand their place in our medium.

During the 1990's computer technology has affirmed its place both in the community and – especially - in education, raising significant new questions about the disposition of time and money. The struggle for time is intense in the schools, and the issue of spending time building up technical skills versus acquiring orientation and breadth is a vital concern in a rigorous study program. Intradisciplinary versus interdisciplinary forms of study are also topical issues, in addition to the question of individualised study programs and optional courses. As a new measure for expanding theory, the ceramics and textile sections hire their own professor II in contemporary discipline theory.

### **Forward: Wood firing *and* new technology, intellect, and intuition?**

So what of Opstad's assertions? The influence of Bernard Leach on contemporary western ceramics, also in Norway, is indisputable. Yet one wonders if Opstad in his characterisation confused Leach with England – or the international arena – as regards influences on Bergen. For students in the 1970's and onwards it was openness to manifold impulses that was primary, including encounters with ceramicists expressing perspectives that diverged significantly from Leach, like John Maltby or Jaqueline Poncelet. 1970's England saw vigorous opposition to Leach. "Pale copies of Japanese bamboo are not the stuff of decoration for western potters."<sup>12</sup> Already in the 1960's there was a milieu Bergen that was actively

---

<sup>11</sup> Hanne Heuch: *Skisse til et relevant teoritilbud*, internal memorandum SHKD 1990.

<sup>12</sup> John Maltby: "John Maltby – On Decoration", *Ceramic Review* 18/1982, p. 15

experimenting with technique, material and form, and sculpture was early incorporated into its field of activity. In this way an atmosphere was established in which deviating and even conflicting impulses were equally welcome.

Since beginning to invite guest teachers in 1978, the ceramics milieu in Bergen has enjoyed great international contact. The school in Oslo does not seem to have become more active in this respect before the Oslo International Ceramic Symposium (OICS) in 1990 – and this was more of a one-time event than part of an ongoing practice. Today, access to international impulses has fundamentally changed. The ability to obtain information from other parts of the world, both digitally and physically, has become so commonplace that it is no longer as significant where one studies.

There exists little support for the contention that the school in Oslo has laid particular emphasis on an intellectual approach – something not to be understood as synonymous with the utilisation of specific forms of technology.

A difference between the two schools that is seldom openly aired is that in Bergen, in keeping with architectural and fine art ceramics, one has deliberately chosen to maintain and develop the category of “function” in instruction and discussion. In Oslo during the 1990’s, this category was declared as undesirable in “ceramic art”, and the teachers there have made it a rhetorical point that potter’s wheels be banished.

Today the field of ceramics finds itself in an artistic climate in which few if any criteria are stable and all qualities are up for discussion. The struggle for professional existence has intensified, and confrontations over the discipline’s legitimacy are frequent. Constructive future development of the field requires that practice, history and theory are constantly reformulated, that professionals from various fields make contributions, that unique possibilities are explored – and that artistic results have contemporary significance. Many ceramics students in both Oslo and Bergen continue to work with clay – this is actually their choice and their reason for making it their subject of study.