



LR

SALON

The Intersection of Art + Design

The power of collecting



Klara Kristalova,
Camouflage, 2017,
on display in *Strange
Clay: Ceramics in
Contemporary Art* at
the Hayward Gallery.
Photo: Mark Blower

Dominic Lutyens explores how
contemporary ceramics are
breaking the mold and setting
new trends for collectors



SHAPING A COLLECTION

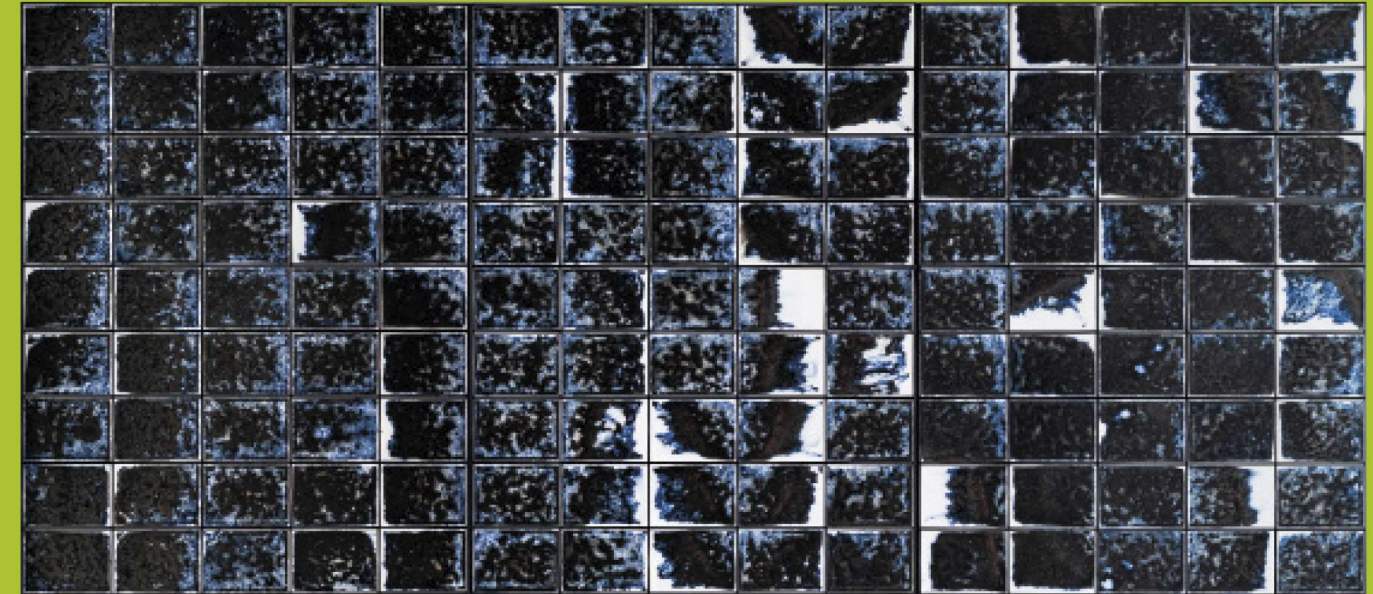
A gradual assimilation of ceramics into the fine-art world has resulted in them becoming highly collectible. Yet the impact of the craft-loving zeitgeist extends beyond gallery walls, evidenced by a global boom in ceramics classes. Social media has fueled this with practitioners' videos flaunting their pot-throwing prowess and wowing followers, especially during lockdowns.

Public museums have been elevating ceramics from mere craft to art: "In the UK, a retrospective on Lucie Rie at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, and the show *Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art* at London's Hayward Gallery introduced clay's potential for artistic expression to a wide audience," says Clare Wood, artistic director and chief executive of the British Ceramics Biennial in the UK. With its large-scale sculptures, *Strange Clay* challenged preconceptions of ceramics as politely tasteful and purely functional.

If collectors once mainly bought work by Rie or Bernard Leach, the success of such contemporary artists as Edmund de Waal and Grayson Perry is broadening the repertoire of collectible ceramics. Debra Finn, co-founder of UK gallery Cavaliero Finn, cites de Waal, Lubna Chowdhary, and Magdalene Odundo—who, incidentally, participated in *Strange Clay*—as some of the most highly sought-after ceramicists working today.

"From private collectors to institutions, the appeal of ceramics is more far-reaching as the line between craft and fine art becomes increasingly blurred," argues Finn. "Functional ceramics tend to be

Right: Kwak Hye-young, *Seeing the Sound of Rain*, 2021. Below: Olivia Walker's *Tall Collapsed Bowl in Black* and *Tall Collapsed Bowl in Grey*. Photos: Courtesy of Matteo Losurdo; courtesy of Agata Pec



"PUBLIC MUSEUMS ARE ELEVATING CERAMICS FROM MERE CRAFT TO ART"

more accessible and will always be collectible but the money will always be made in rarer, more sculptural, fine-art-based ceramics. With global galleries such as Gagosian and Hauser & Wirth getting in on the act, this market will keep growing."

Ceramics with subtle textures are embraced in the US, according to Damon Crain, owner of Manhattan gallery Culture Object. "The blob esthetic that ruled the past decade, in the raw, expressive manner of art brut [invented by French artist Jean Dubuffet], seems to be giving way to an interest in technical processes that, while still producing a raw effect, are highly skilled and refined."

According to Angel Monzon, co-founder of Vessel Gallery in London, whose collectors mainly hail from India and the Middle East, "Collectors are drawn to large-scale, sculptural pieces with intricate textures and interesting glazes. Two of our top ceramic artists are Steven Edwards and Olivia Walker. Steven's work is within the permanent collections of Chatsworth House, and he shows internationally—at Swiss gallery Objects with Narratives, for example. Olivia's wall-mounted porcelain installations sold almost instantly at Artefact and Cromwell Place." Walker explores growth and decay and begins by throwing pieces on a wheel, then assembles them so they appear to grow organically. Edwards' pieces include monumental vessels made of interwoven strands of clay.

LR



South Korean ceramics are also increasingly coveted for their fine surfaces and sparing use of glazes, says Lloyd Choi, founder of the eponymous gallery specializing in contemporary Korean studio ceramics: "Korean ceramic artists minimize use of glazes to achieve a more natural look. Ree Soo-jong throws sheer glaze onto the ceramic with a brush to create abstract textures, while Kwak Hye-young incorporates rainwater into glazes that give a subtle shimmer to her *Seeing the Sounds of Rain* series."

British ceramicists such as Grayson Perry and Carol McNicoll have addressed political issues for some time, and this tendency is gathering pace. "Ceramic artists also tell stories and make political statements," says Wood. "We're living through a politically volatile period, and this is reflected artistically as well as in collectors' choices since they, too, engage with their times." At London art fair Collect this year, the Victoria and Albert Museum snapped up an imposing piece by Xanthe Somers, represented by Galerie Revel, which examined Zimbabwe's colonial history.

At the British Ceramics Biennial, Mella Shaw will show work spotlighting the relationship between sonar pollution—noise generated by devices that transpose underwater objects—and whales stranded on beaches. Ceramicists are also concerned about creating work more sustainably. "Artists such as Jim Gladwin and Louise Frances Smith use local materials, digging their own clay and making natural glazes or working with unfired clay," says Wood.

With ceramicists giving free rein to self-expression and experimentation, this field is expanding in unforeseen ways. As Finn summarizes, "It's artists who have a strong individual narrative and carry out extensive experimentation with the material that produce the most collectible work."

Above: Mella Shaw's *Turn the Other Cheek*, 2021.
Left: Two large vessels from Xanthe Somers' *RANCID* collection.
Photos: Shannon Tofts; courtesy of Deniz Guzel