

Auction eye

Marijke Varrall-Jones, founder of Maak Contemporary Ceramics, reveals the success of their ceramics sales over the past year and highlights her favourite pieces from recent auctions

Over the past 13 years of working as an auction specialist in contemporary ceramics, the market has never felt as vibrant or as energised as it does today. During the past 18 months our biannual auctions have seen record prices smashed, with fiercely competitive bidding across the board pushing hammer prices well in excess of estimates. The phenomenal prices for Rie and Coper continue to polarise the market. A world record was set in December 2016 for Lucie Rie by Phillips in New York for a white bowl with blue inlay that sold for a \$170,000 hammer price – the fourth time her record had been broken in two years. Although these prices dominate the headlines, we are now seeing more artists than ever achieving record prices.

COLLECTING OPPORTUNITIES

So where is this renewed interest in studio ceramics coming from? Although Maak is still the only auction house in the UK to hold regular auctions dedicated exclusively to the field, the market is without doubt broader and therefore stronger now than it was five years ago. There are more participants in the market, with many more regional auction houses including good selections of studio ceramics in their decorative arts auctions. This provides more opportunities for people to be introduced to studio ceramics and be drawn into the wonderful world of collecting.

Studio pottery and contemporary ceramics has historically been quite a specialist collecting area, where buyers and sellers have taken more of an academic approach to collecting. However over the past few years we've been seeing a broadening of our audience with a new generation of collectors coming to appreciate the pleasures of living with one-off, handmade objects and works of art. Often this younger generation are established collectors in other fields such as contemporary art and design looking for something new and different. Unique objects crafted by artists have infinite variety, with their tactile qualities as important as their aesthetic, which just isn't the case with a mass-produced item.

In comparison to a painting or sculpture by a major contemporary artist, ceramics are extremely accessible as an art form. Prices for some of the major names in the field often start at just a few hundred pounds. Even at the top end of the spectrum, prices are comparatively reasonable. ■

The next Maak Contemporary Ceramics auction will be on 13–16 November; entries are invited until mid-October and free valuations are provided, with a view to consigning. Contact Marijke at info@maaklondon.com or call 01628 290 050 to make arrangements; maaklondon.com

RECORD BREAKER

The star lot of the last 12 months – and focus of significant international interest – was an extremely rare and important Cycladic Winged Bud Form dating from c. 1976 by Hans Coper (1920–1981). Coper, alongside Lucie Rie, is arguably the most important post-war potter, who popularised the concept of hand-built ceramics with his wheel-thrown and reconstructed composite works. Though small, the Cycladic forms are considered his finest. This piece went for £88,800 – a UK record for a single work by the artist at auction.



STELLAR PERFORMANCE

There is a noticeable shift in interest with collectors looking for the next big thing. This perhaps goes some way to explaining why the market for John Ward has seen an astonishing rise in prices over the last 18 months. Works that might previously have sold for around £1,200–1,800 are now selling for well in excess of £10,000.

Maak achieved a world record for a spectacular black and white vessel by Ward in the May 2016 auction, which sold for a hammer price of £18,000 – far in excess of the £1,000–1,500 estimate and more than double any previous auction result. Any apprehension that this might be a one off result were allayed by similarly spectacular results in November 2016. Undoubtedly this contributed to a rush of consignments that allowed Maak to offer a stunning group of seven black and white vessels in the May 2017 auction that represented some of the best examples by the artist. They were hotly contested by 27 individual bidders who pushed the prices to just below our previous record. Although the black and white vessels have seen the highest level of interest, the prices for even small scale, quieter works have increased significantly.



WHEN IS A BROKEN POT NOT A BROKEN POT?

As a general rule, most collectors avoid buying restored pieces. Once a ceramic work has sustained damage, you're looking at the market value being reduced to around 25% even after professional restoration. However, sometimes a piece is so rare or an artist so highly in demand that this rule no longer applies. With the market for Lucie Rie reaching unprecedented levels, this fine golden bowl with a turquoise ring and a small area of restoration to the rim was offered at auction in November 2016. At £2,000–3,000, the estimate was set to tempt buyers to look beyond the restoration to acquire a significant work by an important artist at an affordable price. It sold for £9,000.

Images: courtesy of Maak

NEW FACES

A recent consignment from the US included this stunning *Hipped Vessel*, c. 2012, by the Irish ceramist Sara Flynn. Although a first for us, she has exhibited internationally so we were confident that our audience would already be familiar with her work. We were justifiably thrilled when this first offering resulted in a hammer price of £2,000, more than double the top estimate.





GOOD DEEDS

Another work in the May auction that exceeded all expectations was a small footed bowl with soft blue glaze dating from c. 1958 by Lucie Rie (1902–1995). The work was exquisite, with a finely thrown diminutive form and delicate glaze. Measuring just 10cm in diameter, its miniature scale was not reflective of the level of interest: the bowl sold for a hammer price of £20,000 against an estimate of £5,000–7,000. The work was sold to raise funds for the Michael Cardew Trust, a charitable organisation established by Michael O'Brien to help fund and support ceramics graduates to make the transition from an academic environment to fully establishing themselves as working potters (*Editor's note: For more details about Cardew and O'Brien, see our feature on page 56*).

PERSONAL FAVOURITE

Gordon Baldwin has always been one of my favourite ceramic artists. His conceptual exploration of the vessel form was truly groundbreaking. Over the last few auctions we've had a number of fine examples from the 1980s that perfectly demonstrate his work of that time. This piece, *Painting in the Form of a Bowl*, from 1988, which was offered in the May auction was probably my favourite. The surface markings interacted so well with the form that it had real tension and suspense as you moved around the work. I was delighted to see it hotly contested at auction, eventually selling for a hammer price of £6,000.



INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Over the last four auctions Maak has offered selections from a significant private Parisian collection of 20th-century Japanese ceramics. The quality of the Parisian collection has galvanised a noticeable resurgence in the market for this sector, offering a rare and exciting opportunity to view and handle works by some of the leading *Mingei* and *Sodeisha* Japanese ceramic

masters, some of whom were awarded the title of Living National Treasures. Of the 45 Japanese works offered in the May auction, all but four lots were sold and many of the works generated competitive bidding. The world-renowned potter Shoji Hamada saw considerable interest in the latest sale. A rare and early vase (far left) from c.1923 – made at the Leach Pottery that Hamada helped establish with Bernard Leach in St Ives, Cornwall – sold for double the low estimate of £2,400, while later examples of his work also sold very well.

Elsewhere, we've seen considerable interest in a group of works by German husband and wife potters Karl and Ursula Scheid. Both were members of the London Group, a group of six German potters who first exhibited together at Henry Rothschild's gallery Primavera in 1968, with all eight of the lots selling well. This piece by Ursula Scheid (left) sold for £600.

