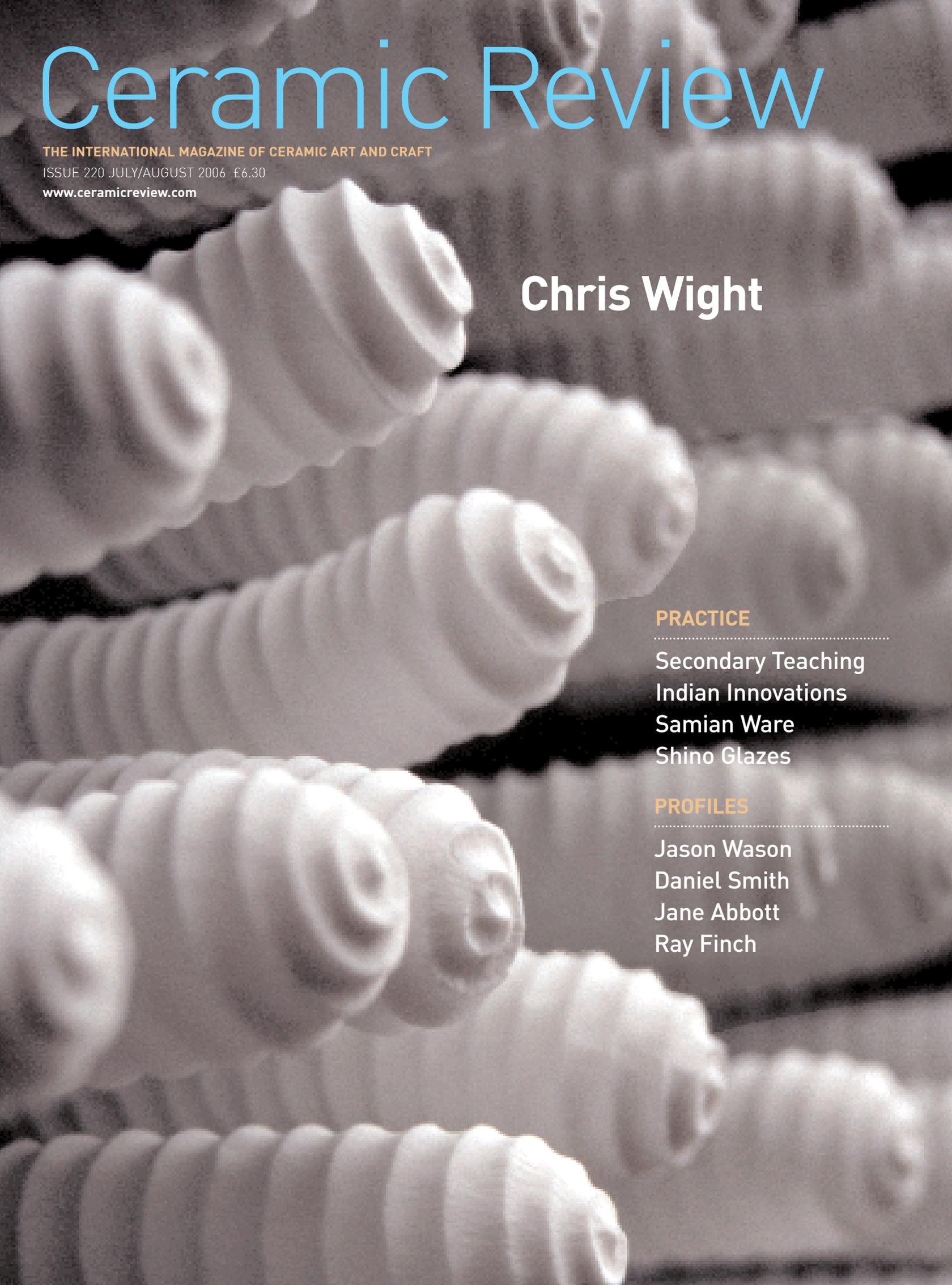


Ceramic Review



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Chris Wight

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From Mimbres to Mashiko

POTTER – Immersing himself in other cultures, Jason Wason has brought erudition to his work whilst retaining a distinctive style, says **ANTHONY FAGIN**.

PHOTOGRAPHY – BILLY GRAHAM

He may have the most memorable name in British ceramics, but the work of Jason Wason (a childhood nickname that stuck) is not as widely known in this country as it deserves to be. Is this because he sees himself as an outsider, a somewhat solitary spirit, at one remove from the commercial mainstream and the vicissitudes of artistic fashion? He lives as he works, uncompromisingly and entirely devoid of excess, on the windswept moors of West Penwith in Cornwall. On a fine day he can look out from this ancient edge of England over the blue Atlantic to the Scillies and beyond. During winter gales when the wind lashes the rain horizontally and with visibility down to zero, he occasionally has to erect a temporary buttress to prevent the end wall of his wooden studio from blowing in. In this demanding environment, Wason produces an extraordinary body of work. Its austere beauty and strong presence are a combination, as with all good work, of the person and the place.

As a potter, he is largely self-taught. He presented himself at the Leach Pottery in St Ives to enquire about buying a Leach kick-wheel one day in 1976. Janet Leach was on

duty and offered him a job to replace someone who had just left. He took it. Over the years he acquired good workshop practice and an acute eye. 'At the Leach,' he says, 'I knew I was near a deep well'. As Bernard Leach grew older and his eyesight failed, one of Wason's nightly duties was to read aloud to Leach who, characteristically perhaps, chose his own autobiography, *Beyond East and West*.

Before arriving at the Leach Pottery, Wason had set up a craft co-operative in Scotland, having spent the previous decade travelling, principally in the Middle and Far East and North Africa. During his travels, the traditional wares of the people he moved among had always spoken to him to such an extent that he knew that as soon as he returned he would answer the call to become a potter himself. What was it that had appealed to him about pots? It was their functionality, aesthetic and indispensability to all people in all ages. The fact that they remain humanity's most durable

THIS PAGE: Jason Wason's studio | **OPPOSITE PAGE:** 1 Red and black vessel, H48cm | 2 Small gold jar, Ø20cm | 3 Pouring vessel, Ø26cm | 4 Low vessel, Ø52cm | 5 Studded bowl, Ø55cm | 6 Lidded jar, Ø19cm.



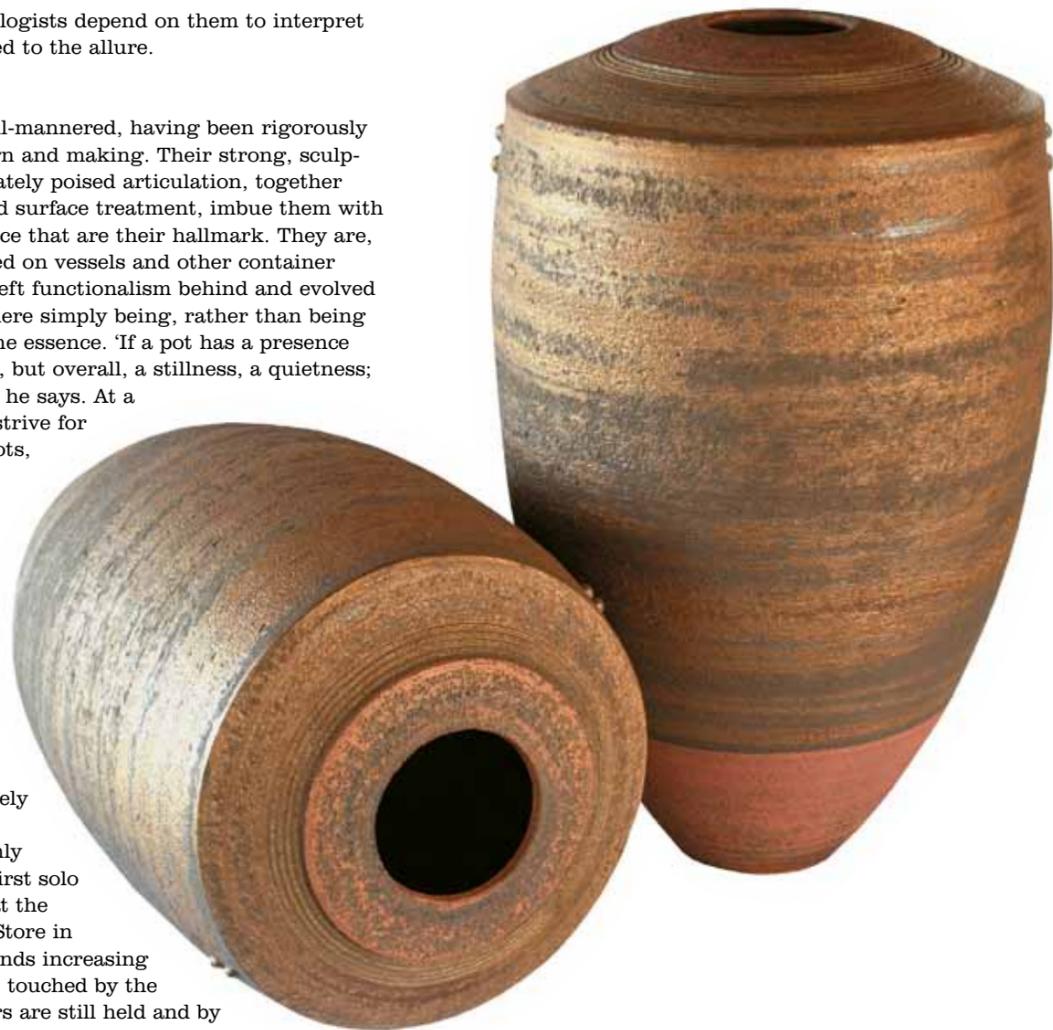


good and that archaeologists depend on them to interpret past civilisations, added to the allure.

BALANCE

All Wason pots are well-mannered, having been rigorously controlled in the design and making. Their strong, sculptural shapes and delicately poised articulation, together with the rich, unglazed surface treatment, imbue them with a dignity and a presence that are their hallmark. They are, for the most part, based on vessels and other container forms. But they have left functionalism behind and evolved onto another plane where simply being, rather than being for some purpose, is the essence. 'If a pot has a presence and a sense of balance, but overall, a stillness, a quietness; then the thing works,' he says. At a time when some may strive for asymmetry, Wason's pots, including those not thrown on the wheel, are perfectly symmetrical. If his work contains echoes of anyone else, it is of Hans Coper. Not too surprising, perhaps, since many are made on the very wheel that Coper owned and Wason inherited.

Today Wason is closely associated with Japan, where his work is highly regarded. He had his first solo show in that country at the Maruzen Department Store in Tokyo in 1992 and spends increasing amounts of time there, touched by the esteem in which potters are still held and by



the skill and craftsmanship that continue to flourish. Six times he has visited Japan, on three occasions as artist in residence at Seto City Cultural Centre in Aichi prefecture, one of the country's great pottery areas. There he works with his friend Yasuo Terada, a fifth-generation potter from Seto. Although their work has little in common, they frequently exhibit together. Wason admires Terada's deep knowledge of traditional Japanese firing techniques. Terada has established the Seihoji Ancient Kiln Park on the Chukyo University campus where, together, they have fired the vast ogama and anagama kilns.

Wason sees himself as connected with Japan but not influenced by it, and feels honoured to have his work in the permanent collection of the prestigious Mashiko Museum. Likewise he is delighted to have been invited, during his most recent eight-week visit, to exhibit again in Tokyo later in 2006. But he is acutely aware that he should never seek to emulate the work or the traditions of his hosts, even if his own integrity would allow it. His work flows from a quite different source and that is precisely the reason why he and other international artists are invited to work in Japan. In this highly traditional culture there is a strong desire to incorporate fresh ideas – to embrace the exotic – to the mutual benefit of host and guest.

MIMBRES

In 1998 Wason was awarded an Arts Council grant to go to New Mexico in order to study the work of the Mimbres potters of the southwest region. Here again this left no discernible influence on his work, but the effect of immersing himself in other cultures has ultimately strengthened the character of his own work.

So what is the source of Wason's inspiration? He professes not to know: it is a tender thing, which should never be forced or intellectualised. If the muse is not there, he takes his canoe out on the ocean or walks his dog on the moors and clifftops. Or he gets together with other Penwith artists and musicians at their regular Deaf Dog Full Moon Band sessions.

Technical Notes

CLAY BODY

I tend to not to use any orthodox glazes. I have always preferred to play around with the surface texture of the clay itself. I augment those surfaces with various mixtures of oxides, some of which I get from the old mine workings down on the cliffs below my workshop. For economical and environmental reasons I rarely fire above 1100°C, sometimes post firing with pine needles, sawdust, gorse or seaweed to generate random marks.

During his most recent trip to Japan he surprised himself by starting down an entirely different path and producing an installation that he called *City of Stones*, but he does not know where it came from nor why. Rather than question it, he simply went along with it and in the end it felt like growth. The individual pieces, resembling the skeletal ribs of an animal, carry an incised or impressed zigzag pattern familiar from some of his vessels. Some have rectangular slots, others a tiny balcony or pulpit. The original pieces were fired in the ogama kiln in a large brick saggar filled with rice husks and shells from a nearby sushi restaurant and achieved a texture resembling desiccated, wind-worn desert rock. Since his return he has not yet managed to recreate that texture, but continues to experiment. **CR**

Jason Wason's work can be seen at Austin Desmond Fine Art, Bloomsbury, London and Joanna Bird Gallery, Chiswick, London.

Contact: Website www.jasonwasonceramics.com

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Guardian vessel, L49cm | BELOW: Red and gold jars, H54cm | THIS PAGE: Studded square vessel, W33cm.