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Issue 192
July/August 2007
Price £5.95



Dale Bowen and Pate-sur-Pate

By Jessica Ellen Deutsch

Jessica Deutsch is an art historian. She was previously Director of Public Programs in New York where she worked with collectors in all fields of collecting. Since 1997 she has worked to expand the art market by uniting collectors, artists, and artisans internationally.



Imagine racing cars, World War II fighter planes, jockeys on horseback and women in twenties dresses with delicate fingers supporting elongated cigarette holders - and all of these images realised in a difficult ceramic relief method that has been lost for almost a century. Dale Bowen, a master potter from Stoke-on-Trent, has this in mind as he perfects a century-old technique, pate-sur-pate, and transposes it in his studio onto cutting edge forms.

This art form, first introduced in the factories of Sevres in 1840, was later brought to Minton in Stoke-on-Trent by the Frenchman, Marc Louis Solon in 1870. While popular in the 19th Century, the expense of its production, coupled with changing taste and two World Wars in the 20th Century, resulted in its gradual disappearance from the Potteries. Eventually trained artisans able to hand down the secrets of this complicated liquid slip method disappeared from Porcelain factories.

Pate-sur-pate is described by Dale as the "holy grail" of ceramic techniques because of the skill required for its execution and the high probability that something can go wrong in the firing process.

"You have to apply at least thirty slips of liquid porcelain" Dale says "and work freehand without any guidelines. Once you have built up a cameo-like image you take a sharp edged tool and cut

back into the design allowing for different planes of precise outlined layers. It is only judgement and experience that ensure that the design, when fired, will have clearly incised details. You also need to brush and soften the edges to achieve a diaphanous effect and you have to be willing to take risks because the slip can blister or shatter in the firing process."

Once fired, pate-sur-pate becomes a translucent relief which, whether executed in white, gold, red or orange, retains its opaque appearance. Usually worked against a dark colour such as

black, cobalt blue or even turquoise, the effect is one of porcelain having been transmuted to glass.

"It is like alchemy" Dale says "you take one material and it becomes something else without the addition of any other chemicals or high tech ideas."

Dale describes his success at mastering this art form to the notebooks of Marc Louis Solon. Fascinated by works he had previously seen only in museum collections, Dale was able to study Minton's collection before this factory closed.

"Marc Louis Solon was the last great master of the technique," Dale says "and after I had studied his works and his notes I knew I had discovered something that would satisfy my love of painting, and my passion for the Potteries."

While Dale's work at Wedgwood is in the jasper prestige department making unique, special, limited edition pieces, in his own studio he continues to experiment with slip porcelain so as to make works that will appeal to a future generation of collectors.

His independent forms draw from the Art Deco movement as well as fifties and sixties design, while his decoration looks from the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany, to Chinese inspired motifs, and recently to popular 20th Century and even Contemporary images. He is determined to push the technique into new realms and to work bigger and bigger as demands from American collectors dare him to go further.

"Who knows," he says, "the sky's the limit once you know what you are doing."

However, few people do and Dale remains almost solitary in his exploration of pate-sur-pate.

"What I am aiming for," he says, "are those young City people whose bonuses allow them to support the art trade. But instead they seem caught up in a fad for young Contemporary artists. What they do not see is that work like mine will not be around in a hundred years from now. The trouble is that young people do not know enough about luxury trades to realise that they need to support it and that this is where real art investment will pay off."

Dale Bowen's studio works are on exhibition at 35 Doughty Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1N 2AA until 29 July, Tuesday through Saturday. For further information please email jessica@infoartstolife.com or call 07738 981565. After 29 July 29 Dale's work will be exhibited on www.artstolife.com. Private commissions can be explored.

