

Knowledge, Certainty and Symbol

For us as ceramists, knowledge and certainty have a different meaning than for philosophers. For them, knowledge consists of certainty and doubt. This certainty is objective and can be substantiated. With increasing knowledge, certainty decreases to the point at which I know that I know nothing. This qualifies as wisdom. Plato considered it a cardinal virtue.

In ceramics, however, certainty is often subjective. You experience something, and you are sure that it is generally valid. But certainty of this kind can be based on ignorance. Ceramic knowledge is very demanding, and practical work is full of little certainties that may be either objective or subjective. We call this practical experience. It consists of details that do not put specialist knowledge of ceramics in question, but they complement it. One example is that an unfired glazed body reacts more with the glaze than a biscuit fired body does. The glaze flows less and crystals develop better than if the pot is fired twice. The reason for this in both cases is the silica released when alumina decays. In the first case, it increases the viscosity of the glaze and in the second, it reduces the relative proportion of alumina, and alumina has a negative effect on the formation of crystals. Another example of the subtlety of practical experience comes from paperclay, which is only ever mentioned with positive properties. As the fibres interrupt the capillaries, they hinder the transport of water from inside the clay. This is why paperclay must be used thinly because it would otherwise be too wet for firing after the normal drying period.

Specialist knowledge can also be superseded by research results. One example of this is the claim that a glaze is more refractory the more silica it contains. This is only true in most cases. But if the glaze consists of silica with the oxides of sodium and calcium, to the contrary, it melts more readily with more silica and less readily with a smaller quantity of silica. Scepticism towards acquired knowledge is thus not to be excluded in the field of ceramics. But it is tried and tested in practice, so that's the way it is because you shouldn't make things more complicated than necessary. After all, the exception confirms the rule, as they say. Philosophers express this differently, speaking of ignorant knowledge and knowing ignorance – as if they meant ceramics!

Knowledge can be of descriptive type, about things that exist: in the animal or vegetable kingdoms, in the mineral world. Descriptive knowledge is additive and not very creative. This is like parts of the specialist knowledge as it is taught. It is different from explanatory knowledge, about how things come about, how and why it has developed or reacted in a certain way. Knowledge of this kind is found in medicine, psychology and the sciences, in all historic sciences. The knowledge of the ceramist that he needs for production is also explanatory. A third kind of knowledge links things. It fills the gap between defined sciences, it is interdisciplinary and inventive. Between the sciences, there is room for attack for new research. New branches of science develop. Ceramics corresponds to this when it exists between artistic genres, and may be multi-media art. Putting it in general terms: an art form in which the hands execute what you have in your head, independent of any rules.

Knowledge that links things promotes creativity, but like wisdom, creativity does not depend on knowledge. Wisdom also contains elements of the experience of life. With creativity, it is similar. You cannot learn it. It is an ability. Moving between defined positions means mental flexibility and an unconventional productive style of thought. A creative ceramist defines ceramics differently from one who only knows about the material. His openness and toleration of frustration correspond to experience of life for wisdom. Something else comes to the fore when we talk of creativity: aesthetic certainty. According to Jacques Maritain, it is based on the fact that writers and artists behave in more contemplative fashion towards their world view than ordinary people, i.e. they compare themselves to the creator*), for whom all logic and theory is superfluous. That leads to overcoming humankind's lack of relationship to things, which is spreading through modern civilisation. Aesthetic certainty results from artists integrating themselves in the process of their work. As it is rooted in the depths

of the soul, aesthetic certainty stands between knowledge and symbol, of which Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) said, that “to grasp us omnipotently, it must be presented with a glimpse of the soul”.

T-shaped man, who has broad general knowledge but profound knowledge in one field, has become questionable as an ideal. To put it bluntly, he would be an idiot specialist with a range of small talk. His profound knowledge should be orientated towards a broader context too. Our specialist could be accused of playing irrelevant intellectual games, but a world view is educational, which brings us to the educational value of fine art.

All knowledge strives towards absolute certainty, for otherwise it would have no claim to differ from mere opinion. Epistemology says that art is one way of communicating understanding. It was Ludwig Wittgenstein who famously stated, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” This may be taken to mean that for art, figurative representations can go beyond what cannot be spoken of.

Art may be decorative or symbolic, or both at once. “Applied art” is also called “decorative art” in other languages. But if we speak of ceramics moving towards art, it is less decoration that we mean than semantics. Semantics is the science of the meaning of signs, and symbols are signs. They have a meaning. Symbolism was always an irrational counter-movement to Rationalism, to the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and today to the calculating applied art of the 20th century. This shows the pendulum swings of intellectual movements and attitudes to life. Sometimes reason has the upper hand, sometimes emotion.

In *Le Figaro* of 18 September 1886, Jean Moréas published an article, “Le Symbolisme”. He demanded that ideas should be clad in symbolic form. In the 20th century, colour symbolism became psychologically charged, from “colour harmony” to “colour music”. From this, a new area of research developed, colour-tone research, a sub-section of synaesthesia, i.e. a sensory experience in a different field of the senses.

In symbolic directions, a sense of history can be much more highly developed than in movements whose essence lies in the decorative. In the concept of history among Symbolists in the late 19th century, the imaginary rebirth of the past as present and future was realised in the cycle of time. There are a number of other things from the Symbolist movement back then that seem to apply today too. They tried to overcome the traditional boundaries between “high” and “low” art forms. Then art at the turn of the century was dominated by the idea that every artist had their own technique, which differs from every industrial technique and does not serve to produce useful things for life, but which are assimilable to scientific research. Technique becomes an anti-industrial style. And finally, Symbolism stresses the equation of creativity and imagination, which for its part is both recalling things past as well as a preview of the future: two infinite dimensions in which transitions look like the change of the seasons in the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth of nature. All of this is quite naturally recognisable in ceramics as we know it today.

For the ceramist who attaches himself to general developments in art, it is no longer about a further development but about a radical transformation both in the creative process and in aims. Ceramics thus no longer possesses its natural social function, and the ceramist who follows it has to find out what this decision might mean to him. Since ancient times and the Middle Ages, when there were seven liberal arts, art has been seen as an intellectual classification. Back then, the arts literally involved intellectuals, far removed from any practical activity. Meanwhile, intelligence is ascribed to artistic activity, even if you do get dirty doing it. But in contrast to the mediaeval liberal arts, art nowadays strives to liberate itself from rationality. In modern art, this began with the rejection of nature and (especially noticeable in Surrealism) with the complete separation from logic. Paul Klee described his “creative credo” with the words, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible”.

And now in ceramics too art is moving towards a hidden world of the unconscious rather than the intellectualism of Constructivism, which was typical of applied art.

But what is considered to be art in public varies in many people's opinions. It can be construed as being static or dynamic, imaginary or realistic, academic or revolutionary. Whatever the case, it is about the effect on the viewer, who will be more or less moved in the midst of the flood of information to which they are subjected in contemporary society. Even four year-old Aelita Andre in New York can manage that, splashing paint onto a canvas. Or in Berlin, over eighty young people from various countries who have never attended a famous academy of art cause a sensation at an exhibition ("Based in Berlin") with their "street credibility", beyond any artistic classification. And this is without any claim to establish a new world of art for ever, because for ever "would be a little long", as they have stated. All of this may be seen as a protest against conventional authority, similar to what happened at the end of the 19th century.

Seeking for your own path is an inner adventure for every individual, and it expresses itself in individuality. And symbolism can be the result of an independent search, not dissimilar to poetry and literature. This certainly has an intellectual character. But ceramics remains a peripheral phenomenon because the financial elite is not interested in it. It cannot serve them as elitist consumerism to distance them from the masses: but even that need not be true for all time. We can contribute to changing it.

Footnote: *) Of comparisons with the Creator, Paul Klee said, "Art is a parable of the creation; it is an example, as the terrestrial is an example of the cosmos." Paul Klee, Kunst-Lehre. Aufsätze, Vorträge, Rezensionen und Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre". Leipzig: Reclam 1991.

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