

## Simon Olding (1954-2022): A Reflection

Journal Editors

In 2007, Simon Olding was asked to respond to a survey question: “What does the word craft mean to you?” He answered as follows:

An expression of humane endeavour creatively realised on the borders of utility, design, architecture, sculpture and art. Craft is specific, recognizable and broad enough to carry loaded meaning with good cheer. It means little without its association to the individual maker and the organisations that give it life and value.

This concise, considered response to the question was typical of Simon. And the idea in the second sentence – that craft can bear “loaded meaning with good cheer” – shows how his perceptiveness and optimistic view of craft sat alongside his unremitting affability. Colleagues, PhD students, curators and researchers who visited the CSC during Simon’s long directorship (2002-2022) might recall sitting in his office, shelves slightly sloping under the weight of ceramics from the CSC’s collections, and having discussions that covered the full breadth of crafts and sister disciplines. Generous, welcoming, and extremely knowledgeable (particularly on studio ceramics), Simon was well-connected to the extensive and dispersed networks of craft advocacy and practice in the UK. Anyone with an interest in British craft research or practice knew his name. It was a great loss when he died in November 2022, aged 68.

After a PhD in at Edinburgh University, on the subject of the English short story in the 1890s, Simon embarked on a long career within museums and arts administration. His first post was at the Salisbury Museum, and he subsequently took up roles at the Areas Museums Service of South East England, Southern Arts, Salisbury Art Centre, Heritage Lottery Fund and at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum in Bournemouth on the English south coast from 1989, where he began commissioning contemporary craft as part of the public engagement programme. In 2002 Simon became Director of the CSC, becoming Professor of Modern Craft in 2004 and overseeing the move of the CSC from its former home in Bath to purpose-built premises at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), then called Surrey Institute of Art and Design, in Farnham.

One of his largest projects was *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery* (2017), shown at the Yale Centre of British Art in Connecticut and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Simon was one of the three curator-editors for the exhibition, alongside Glenn Adamson and Martina Droth. Yet it was the sheer range of his projects, often with associated publications with essays by Simon, that most impress: his first exhibition at the CSC, *Magdalene Odundo: Time and Again*; solo shows of Takeshi Yasuda, Garry Fabian-Miller, Matthew Burt, Ewan Clayton, Angus Suttie, and Nao Matsunaga; several exhibitions supporting MA and PhD students at the UCA; and an early recognition of the influence of Gwari potter Ladi Kwali on British studio pottery explored in an exhibition of 2015. Yet he last exhibition that Simon had a hand in – *The New Craftsman, St. Ives: The Craft of Selling*, his final research project brought to completion by Curator of the CSC Greta Bertram in 2023 – perhaps best encapsulates two of his enduring research interests: the influential potter, artist and writer Bernard Leach, and the craft cultures of England’s south-west. The

exhibition and accompanying publication highlighted the importance of mid-century craft shops in the development of studio craft in St. Ives. What at first glance might seem like a modest theme emerges as an important missing piece of craft history and is pursued with Simon's characteristic scholarly rigour. Moreover, the attention in the exhibition to the wider infrastructure of craft that surrounds the making has a parallel in his own commitment to building and sustaining a museum and archive of modern craft in Farnham.

Simon's admiration for Leach was well known, and he built on the CSC's impressive collection of Leach's ceramics and archival holdings with judicious additions, secured with financial economy and a savvy eye. *Bernard Leach: Discovered Archives* (2020) was Simon's most recent contribution to this scholarship; here he managed, by carefully sifting through new archives that had been acquired in the late 2010s, to reveal new insights into Leach's life and work. The chapter unpacking the archive of Alan Bell – Leach's friend and assistant in his later years, and fellow member of the Bahá'í faith – reveals the depth of Leach's talent in drawing, etching, and painting. This lesser-known aspect of Leach's career was explored in the 2009-2010 CSC exhibition *Bernard Leach: Graphic Artist*.

In his lectures and PhD supervision Simon sometimes adopted language you might imagine Leach himself using. He encouraged audiences and readers to take a "hard look" at the material world around them, suggesting this focus might lead to broader human empathy and understanding of skilled making. This advice was always delivered with warmth and openness. Simon was undogmatic and would not impose his views or knowledge on others. Alison Britton, acclaimed potter and chair of the CSC during the later years of Simon's directorship, remarked on his "quiet and serious intelligence,"<sup>1</sup> which is certainly reflected in the catalogues and exhibitions he created. It is also evident in his ultimately successful lobbying for Farnham to be recognised as a UNESCO World Craft Town. The town achieved this status in 2020, but a lecture that Simon gave at a symposium ran by CraftNet<sup>2</sup> and Crafts Council in 2011 reflects the longer backstory of this effort to get the town's craft heritage officially recognised. We have reproduced an edited version of these lecture notes as an example of Simon's scholarship, and the particularly gentle and careful way he pursued his argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Britton, "A Tribute to Simon Olding, the Curator and Writer who Quietly Shaped the Craft World" *Craft Council / Stories* on the Crafts Council website (December 12, 2022), <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/a-tribute-to-simon-olding-the-curator-and-writer-who-quietly-shaped-the-craft-world> (accessed June 16, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> CraftNet was an informal network of meetings, events and exchange all based around the support and development of contemporary craft and was open to museums, commercial galleries, individual makers and anyone interested in being part of the discussion. They held a number of meetings in collaboration with the UK Crafts Council in the 2000s and 2010s.