

## **MICHAEL CARDEW – (1901-1983)**

The names of Michael Cardew and Bernard Leach are almost invariably linked. Cardew was Leach's "first and best student"<sup>1</sup> and Cardew stated that his three years at St. Ives were "the most important part of my education as a potter."<sup>2</sup> Yet the two men were very different, both personally and artistically, and Cardew's legacy to the world of ceramic art stands firmly on its own. Among the highlights of his long career are his establishment of potteries in England which revitalized the English slipware tradition, and the parallel establishment of potteries in Africa where he introduced the methods of Leach and in return brought to the western world the traditions of African pottery. He is also noted as a gifted teacher, one who led by example rather than formal instruction, and whose total and passionate involvement with pottery left a lasting impression on his students and apprentices. Cardew authored a number of articles, and his *Pioneer Pottery*, a classic in the field, is still being reprinted.

1. Bernard Leach. "Introduction." *Michael Cardew: A Collection of Essays*. London: Crafts Advisory Committee, 1976.
2. Michael Cardew. *A Pioneer Potter: an Autobiography*. London: Collins, 1988

### **ARTIST'S STATEMENT - MICHAEL CARDEW**

"If you are lucky, and if you live long enough, and if you trust your materials and you trust your instincts, you will see things of beauty growing up in front of you, without you having anything to do with it."<sup>1</sup>

" You see, nobody can teach anybody anything, you must teach yourself. You just keep trying and repeating a shape and then you begin to feel confident...yes, yes, I can do this. I know this shape."<sup>2</sup>

1. Michael Cardew quoted in: [http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth\\_search.php?authid=2975](http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=2975)
2. Quoted in: Jane Herold. "Cardew's Legacy." *The Studio Potter* 22 no. 2 (June 1994): 21+

### **RESUME - MICHAEL CARDEW**

1901	Born, Wimbledon, London, England
1919-1923	Exeter College, Oxford, Humanities
1921-1922	Braunton Pottery (summers)
1923-1926	St. Ives Pottery, Apprenticeship
1926-1945	Established Winchcombe Pottery, Gloucestershire (sold, 1945)
1939	Established Wenford Bridge Pottery, Cornwall

1942-1945	Pottery Instructor, Achimota College, Ghana, Africa
1946-1948	Established Volta Pottery at Vumé-Dugamé on the Lower Volta River, Ghana, Africa
1950-1965	Pottery Officer, Nigeria, Africa
1950-1965	Divided time between Africa (10 months/year) and Wenford Bridge (2 month/year)
1951	Established Pottery Training Centre, Abuja, Nigeria
1959	“Geology for Potters” course at Wenford Bridge
1964	Awarded MBE
1965	Retired as Senior Pottery Officer, Nigeria, Africa
1967	University of Wisconsin, instructor
1968	Visited New Zealand and Australia; lectures and demonstrations Helped establish a pottery for Aborigines in the Northern Territories
1969	<i>Pioneer Pottery</i> published by Longman Group Ltd.
1971	Son Seth Cardew joins his father at Wenford Bridge Pottery
1976	Retrospective touring exhibition organized by the Crafts Advisory Committee
1981	Selector/writer for Crafts Council exhibition “The Maker’s Eye.” Awarded OBE
1983	Died, Truro, Cornwall, England Seth Cardew becomes owner of Wenford Bridge Pottery until its sale in 2004.
1988	<i>Michael Cardew, A Pioneer Potter: an Autobiography</i> published posthumously by Seth Cardew

## ***BIOGRAPHY - MICHAEL CARDEW***

Michael Cardew was born in Wimbledon, London, England in 1901; his father was a civil servant and dealer of arts and antiques and his mother an amateur violinist. Ceramics were part of his life from the beginning. His parents collected pottery made by Edwin Beer Fishley of the Fremington Pottery near their summer home in Saunton, and Cardew loved watching the potter at work and the sturdy, earthy functional pieces he produced. Cardew entered Oxford University on a scholarship, studying classics, but during his free time he studied ceramics with

Fishley's grandson, William Fishley Holland, at the Braunton Pottery. There he heard about Bernard Leach and the St. Ives Pottery and upon leaving Oxford in 1923 decided to pay a visit. As Leach later recalled, "... (he) came to see for himself what two potters, one Japanese (Hamada), the other English (myself) were up to at St. Ives. He strode in, nose and brow straight, handsome as a young Greek god, eyes flashing, blue, hair waving, gold, and within the hour announced that this was where he wanted to work."<sup>1</sup> For the next three years he was a student of Leach, his first one, making Japanese-inspired rustic earthenware, sharing a common interest in English slipware, and developing his own style.

Cardew left St. Ives in 1926 to set out on his own. He rented the old Winchcombe Pottery in Gloucestershire where, with the help of Elijah Comfort, the former thrower, and apprentice Sydney Tustin, he made lead-glazed slipware in the 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition using local clay and firing in a large wood-fired bottle kiln. The early work was difficult but by the 1930's the pottery was producing richly glazed earthenware and Cardew was now exhibiting as well as selling his ware. Sydney Tustin's brother Charlie joined the pottery in the mid-1930's along with Ray Finch. Despite the success of the pottery, Cardew decided in 1939 to leave and return to Cornwall, leaving Ray Finch in charge. He bought the old Wenford Inn and set up Wenford Bridge Pottery, continuing to work occasionally at Winchcombe as well, producing earthenware and now stoneware as well. The onset of the War made setting up and running the new pottery difficult. Black-outs created problems and the call-up to service of both the Tustins forced Cardew to return to Winchcombe for about a year to help operate it.

In 1942 his life took a major shift when he was offered the position of pottery instructor in Achimota College in what is now Ghana, a position that offered him the security of a regular salary running a government program. Unfortunately the program failed within a few years. He returned to England, sold the Winchcombe Pottery to Ray Finch, and then returned to Africa to establish a pottery at Vumé-Dugamé on the Lower Volta River producing stoneware with rich olive and rust coloring. The hope was to establish a modern industry of West African art work that would co-exist with the traditional pottery already being produced. Poor health and political problems forced him to return once again in 1948 to Wenford Bridge Pottery, which was being run by Australian Ivan McMeekin, and he made primarily slip-decorated ware both at Wenford Bridge and Kingwood Pottery in Surrey.

1950 found him accepting another position in Africa, this time in Nigeria as Senior Pottery Officer in the Ministry of Trade. He left his pottery in the hands of McMeekin, his wife teaching in London, and his three sons in school. "And I was fifty," said Cardew. "And that was when my life began."<sup>2</sup> He set up the Abuja Pottery to train native potters, and for the next 15 years he spent ten months of each year in Nigeria and two months in Wenford Bridge. On his return trips home, he would bring exhibitions of work being done in Africa along with some of his students to demonstrate their skills, bringing both the Abuja potters into the international ceramic world and increasing his own fame. In addition to teaching and working, he wrote a number of articles on Nigerian pottery and his well-known book for studio potters, *Pioneer Pottery*, first published in 1969. While the Abuja Pottery itself was a success and trained a number of noted artists, the plan to use the pottery to establish a network of other small rural potteries never succeeded. As a Nigerian civil servant Cardew was forced to retire when he reached 65 in 1965. Once again he returned to Wenford Bridge, but not for long. He traveled to the United States in 1967 for several months to work on a film and to teach summer school at the University of Wisconsin. In 1968 he joined Ivan McMeekin, now in Australia, to start a pottery for the Aborigines in the Northern Territory, spending a year away. Cardew returned to the United States in 1971 to teach at the Arrowmont School of Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN, and to deliver a lecture at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The following year he returned again, this time

accompanied by Kofi Attey, his close colleague from West Africa and the renowned Nigerian potter, Ladi Kwali. For two and one-half months they toured the United States and Canada, presenting more than 45 workshops. In 1981 a retrospective exhibition of his work was held in conjunction with the NCECA meeting in Wichita, KS. In between his traveling and workshops, Cardew continued to produce stoneware at the Wenford Bridge Pottery, and his son, potter Seth Cardew, joined him there in 1971. The Wenford Bridge Pottery remained active until 2004 when Seth Cardew sold the property and relocated to Masia Albadas in Spain.

The demanding life that Michael Cardew chose took its toll on his health. He suffered repeated bouts of respiratory illness and contracted more than one tropical disease during his years in Africa. Nevertheless, he continued to live a full life of teaching and potting until his death in 1983 at age 82. He was awarded the MBE in 1964; had a retrospective exhibition of his work mounted by the Crafts Council in 1976; and was awarded an OBE for contributions to British ceramics in 1981. At the time of his death, he was to be knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

Michael Cardew is inevitably linked with the legendary Bernard Leach, yet the two men were very different both personally and artistically. Although sharing similar backgrounds, an interest in English slipware, and a strong belief in traditional handwork, art was Leach's primary focus whereas Cardew had a wider range of interests including the classics, country dancing and music. Leach was a very social individual who was sensitive to both praise and criticism; Cardew was known for a quick and sharp temper that subsided as quickly as it arose. Leach had a formal art education with strong influence from Japanese pottery traditions; Cardew learned his art through a series of classes and apprenticeships and was influenced by the traditional English pots. Perhaps the most basic difference concerned how each viewed their work. Leach saw his pottery as art, work meant to be exhibited in galleries and museums, and priced accordingly, and believed the idea led to the process. Cardew allied with the functional potters he first knew, viewing pottery as something that should be useful and used as well as affordable, and believed the process preceded the idea.

Cardew is also remembered as a teacher, his teaching method more indirect than direct. Primarily his students and apprentices learned by example, by watching him work and by working through their own problems with minimal advice and direction. There was a strong give and take with the students. Seth Cardew has said that the "...many students that came to Wenford..with their youthful vitality, came to be a necessity to father for the rest of his life. There was a symbiosis at work; father's erudition was enjoyed and devoured, and in return some youthful vigour was transferred."<sup>3</sup>

In 2001 the Michael Cardew Centenary Symposium was held at the Arts Centre at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth and an accompanying exhibition of his works was held in London. In reviewing the exhibition, Malcolm Haslam talks of the evolution of Cardew's work. The exhibition, Haslam notes, included pieces from most of the potteries where Cardew worked. "...such an overview clearly demonstrated that in every stoneware vessel there is a piece of slip-decorated earthenware trying to get out."<sup>4</sup> However, as his worked evolved, that influence is less seen. "A style of decoration recognizably inherited from the potters of Fremington, in time gives way to much black slip and Tx'u Chou imagery. During his years in Africa and at Wenford Bridge, Cardew spent considerable time and energy developing stoneware slips and glazes which allowed him to decorate his pots in a manner more appropriate to earthenware. But this chronic tension between the two different technical disciplines generated an overall uniformity in Cardew's work..."<sup>5</sup>.

At the Michael Cardew Centenary Symposium, former student Peter Stichbury offered this memory: "Michael summed up his feelings about pottery and being a potter by slapping his knee and saying emphatically, 'I would hate to be a lawyer, I would hate to be a doctor, I would hate to be a banker! All I want to be is a potter.' What more could you say to that? And that's why we honour a man who indeed became a potter, one of the highest order."<sup>6</sup>

1. Bernard Leach, quoted in: Cardew, Michael. "Introduction." *Pioneer Pottery*. (London: A&C Black, 2002), 11.
2. Cardew, Michael, et al. *Michael Cardew: A Collection of Essays*. (London: Crafts Advisory Committee, 1976), 40.
3. Seth Cardew. "Michael Cardew at Wenford." *Ceramic Review* no. 192 (November/December 2001): 30.
4. Malcolm Haslam. "Michael Cardew." *Crafts (London, England)* no. 172 (September/October 2001):63-64.
5. Ibid.
6. Peter Stichbury. "Michael Cardew Remembered."  
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## **GALLERY REPRESENTATION – MICHAEL CARDEW**

Secondary market

## **WEB SITES – MICHAEL CARDEW**

<http://www.wenfordbridge.com>

Link to web site for Cardew's Wenford Bridge Pottery; web site for Seth Cardew

[http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue003/conf\\_contents.htm](http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue003/conf_contents.htm)

Michael Cardew Centenary Symposium, 2001; articles and audio links

[http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/points\\_of\\_view/transcripts/coca/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/points_of_view/transcripts/coca/)

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Article on Michael Cardew

<http://webbpottery.blogspot.com/2007/05/michael-cardew-pottery-clip-from.html>

Link to video of Cardew throwing.

<http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/cardew.htm>

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Photo of Michael Cardew demonstrating pulling



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