

Of the Moment – With a Rare Technique



Dale Bowen and Pate-sur-Pate

Article by Jessica Deutsch

ONCE IN A WHILE AN OUTSTANDING craftsman comes forward to remind us that century-old techniques, executed in raw materials that have been around for thousands of years, when handled with animation and artistry, can far surpass new designs executed in high-tech materials.

Working with one of man's earliest mediums for artistic expression – clay – Dale Bowen, a specialist artisan at Wedgwood, brings us a rare and fast-disappearing technique – *pate-sur-pate*. Not only has he revived this almost extinct and difficult artistic skill but he has applied it to contemporary forms with imagery and colour combinations that lift this liquid porcelain method from its origins in the 19th century into the 21st century. In making this leap he draws from innovative movements and master craftsmen of the past: the Aesthetic movement in America; the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany; and the clean art deco curves of Jean Puiforcat in the 1930s in France.

Dale Bowen takes an art form, recognised as time-consuming and difficult to execute, and transports it boldly into the present, to bring us *objets d'art* that are simultaneously complex yet simple. He presents us with Art Deco shaped vases, smooth '50s elliptical containers on legs, bulbous '60s forms with miniature cylindrical necks, grand urns, miniature boxes and flasks. These works executed in gold upon black, turquoise blue upon orange or white on cobalt blue present lustrous shiny surfaces hung with intricate, almost translucent designs of flowers, fish, birds or nymphs in seemingly diaphanous clothing. Here at last we can revel in the artist's exploitation of the properties of porcelain. Our pleasure is in viewing how a multi-layered, single coloured, contrasting picture has been built on a dark uniform base.

The elegant object with its delicate design dictates a call to order, a revival of skills that are disappearing as we seem caught in a 20th century inheritance of minimalism and monotone. The technique that Dale Bowen uses first appeared in the early 19th century at



the factories of Sèvres in France. The Sèvres porcelain factory, first under the patronage of Louis XV's mistress, Madame du Barry, and later under Marie Antoinette, associated itself with elegance, luxury and love of refinement. That tradition continued under Napoleon I but with a different design regime modelled on ancient Roman and classical forms. By 1840 there was a strong and wealthy bourgeoisie in France hungry for luxury goods and eager to possess the newest and most innovative products of the factories that had once served the ancient regime. Exoticism and the lure of the Orient which had dominated court taste in the 17th century had never really



disappeared even under the rigid program of decoration imposed by Napoleon. As the 19th century progressed Chinoiserie flourished again. A Chinese vase with what appeared as translucent flowers on its surface inspired the artisans at Sèvres to achieve equally glass-like raised cameo images and floral reliefs on their porcelain. This method, which came to be called *pate-sur-pate*, could only be executed by artisans who were highly trained and had an innate artistic sensibility because it required direct brush painting, without previous sketching or outlines of liquid slip porcelain on to a base. As at least 30 to 40 coats of slip were necessary to build up the relief design. *Pate-sur-pate* became, unsurprisingly, the most costly of all ceramic decorative processes.

Dale Bowen, born in Staffordshire and having lived all his life surrounded by the potteries, knew at an early age that he wanted to work with ceramics. A practising artist, he searched for a form of expression that would unite clay and studio painting. Prior to the

sale of the Minton Factory, he was allowed access to its collection and archives. It was here he discovered the work and writing of Marc-Louis Solon.

After the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 many French artisans fled to London. Solon, who had trained under one of the finest artisans of the technique at Sèvres, Leopold Jules Gely, joined the factory of Minton in Stoke-on-Trent bringing the technique of *pate-sur-pate* to England. His work over the next few decades earned him the reputation of the greatest of all *pate-sur-pate* artists.

By the time Bowen discovered Solon's work in the 1990s, the technique of *pate-sur-pate*, had become a lost art form. Without the guidance of practising artisans, and after two World Wars and changes in patronage, with concerns about manufacturing costs and changes in taste from Victorian embellishment to 20th century modernism, production of *pate-sur-pate* at the porcelain factories in England, France, America and Germany had ceased. When a new generation of ceramic artists attempted to apply and fire the layers of slip porcelain they failed on technical grounds with works emerging from the firing process split into fragments, disfigured or blistered. It seemed that the method of *pate-sur-pate* was to pass into history.

Dale Bowen's discovery of Solon's work was at a radical moment because in a few short years Minton, its archives of porcelain, and its records would be sold. Already drawn to the technique through museum collections, Bowen considered *pate-sur-pate* as the "holy grail of all decorating techniques". He immersed himself in study not only of Solon's actual works but also of his writings and scientific observations of the application of slips. Already a long-time practising potter at Wedgwood, he was able to decipher and understand Solon's method through access to Minton's collection and through his own knowledge of firing techniques. "You have to be a skilled artist painting straight from your mind," he says, "and you have to take risks because you do not know what will happen in the firing process."

Pate-sur-pate literally means paste on paste, the application of layer upon layer of liquid slip over a coloured ground in a dry clay state to create a picture in relief. After each layer of slip is dry another is applied with a brush. It sometimes takes 30 layers of slip to achieve the desired image. The clay is then worked with small brushes and modelling tools to

achieve a finely detailed image with both sharp and soft edges. Sometimes areas are reduced almost to the surface so that patterns of light and shade are created when the piece is fired.

Dale Bowen says "Pate-sur-pate is often described in pottery journals as the most difficult and expensive of all the decorating techniques and, having studied it for a few years, I am compelled to agree. The process requires time and patience. It also demands a level of craftsmanship where you must be a master in your craft, have a degree of raw artistic talent as well and be extremely patient. It is only when you combine these attributes that you are then able to bring to life the skill that is pate-sur-pate."

Bowen, who is a senior artisan at Wedgwood, produces a small collection using this technique for Wedgwood where every piece is a one-off unique item. Commissioned pieces have included a huge three-foot vase for the naval academy at Portsmouth to commemorate the Trafalgar 2000 celebrations and a commemorative plaque presented to the Queen.

However, this artist, producing work that requires strict discipline and patience, shows us, in his own creations, that he is a man of the moment. His dreams inspire paintings of fighter planes swooping from fiery skies; his sea-swept landscapes show solitary light-houses silhouetted against grey English skies; his wall plaques in pate-sur-pate range from angelic cherubs to intricate sailboats with billowing sails held by fine white threads. It is the range of his talent that allows Bowen to be in control of his medium.

When he is not at Wedgwood, or driving his classic Cadillac with his hair swept into a pony tail, Bowen is in his own studio. Here he takes cutting edge forms and combines these shapes with free form slip painting. He spans past and present, bringing to us a prized technique but in an idiom which can be incorporated into the most contemporary of settings.

Dale Bowen knows that the craft that he has revitalised may not survive. "There are few people able to do what I can do," he admits, "and with the closure of so many pottery factories the skilled artisans are turning to other trades." While his work at Wedgwood is dedicated to large museum pieces, or to expensive vases that are quickly consumed by the Japanese market, Bowen hopes to be able to leave a legacy behind for a younger generation.



"My personal work is meant to appeal to all people – in whatever country," he says. "It is simple and classical and scaled and shaped for today's home. I think the present and the next generation should somehow appreciate what has gone on before without thinking of a beautiful decorated porcelain piece as an antique. I want to see those city people invest in this, rather than some young painter. In a 100 years their children will wonder at it, and see how in the 21st century someone went back to the 19th century for his model. Maybe that will inspire future artisans that real art has a tradition. What is needed is a fresh imagination to lift that tradition out of the past and place it in the moment."

Jessica Deutsch is an Art Historian and former Director of Public Programmes at Sotheby's New York. Since 1997 she has worked with artists, artisans and collectors to explore and expand the art marketplace. Dale Bowen exhibited his work at 35 Doughty Street, London, UK, in an exhibition at *Arts to Life* from June 7 – July 28, 2007. For more information call Arts to Life at 0207-7403222 or email jessica@infoartstolife.com. From August 2007 his work may be viewed at www.artstolife.co.uk