

A close-up photograph of a dark, textured surface, possibly a piece of wood or stone, with a white, speckled area. The white area is covered in small, dark brown spots, suggesting a natural or aged material. The background is a plain, light gray.

JANET LEACH

Willoughby Gerrish
in association with
Jonathan Reed

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5 July – 14 September 2025
Thorns Gallery, North Yorkshire

5 – 19 December 2025
Willoughby Gerrish, London



Bottle vase
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
7 x 6 7/8 x 5 7/8 in
17.9 x 17.5 x 15 cm

The name Leach is synonymous with pottery. The pioneering works of Janet Leach (1918-1997) have often been overshadowed by the reputation of her husband, Bernard (1887-1979) who, together with Shōji Hamada (1894-1978), established The Leach Pottery in St Ives in 1920. Leach Pottery is widely considered to have shaped the development of studio pottery in the United Kingdom, yet it was Janet Leach who was instrumental in the commercial and financial success of the pottery business in St Ives following her marriage to Leach in 1956, at which point she took over its organisational and administrative management. Her tough upbringing in Grand Saline, Texas, was a source of great resilience, self-confidence, and determination, defining her leadership style in ways that shaped the subsequent direction of The Leach Pottery. Over the course of two decades Leach and a small team of assistants became responsible for the production of Leach standard-ware, which was first established by her husband and his son, David, during the 1930s. Her influence proved central to the continued development of The Leach Pottery and under her management the business was international in its reach, welcoming students, apprentices, and potters from around the world to train in the studio.¹

Underestimated and overlooked by some of her contemporaries, Janet Leach was a talented ceramicist in her own right. Her skill lay not only in her sensitivity to her chosen material but also in her technical ability and individual creative style. Leach's career took a decisive turn when she became the first non-native woman to study pottery in Japan under the mentorship of Hamada, which was no small undertaking in a society where women did not typically train as potters. Leach's pieces are organic in form, imbued with a natural asymmetry, and borne from a playfulness and vitality learned from watching Hamada's unconfined approach to his clay in the early years of her artistic creative development.² Having first met Hamada whilst attending a course in 1952 at Black Mountain College, Colorado, she subsequently enjoyed two years training under him in the small town of Mashiko just north of Tokyo. Leach wrote of her time with Hamada fondly after finding herself inspired by his relationship to the clay, recording how 'at the first spontaneous burst of life he stops working it...he does not sacrifice spontaneous vitality for the sake of mechanical slickness and perfection'.³ Leach's experiences in Japan were to have a profound effect on her work, shaped as they were by a range of philosophical approaches and new techniques that encouraged her to experiment with materials, methods, texture, and finish. Through her use of colour and texture there is an inherent physicality in all of her pieces, which revolve around shades of mood and intensity that are variously encompassed by contrasting qualities of motion and stillness, the refined and the rugged, stability and fragility.⁴ Indeed, each work is sculptural in its form.

1 Joanna Wason, *Janet Leach: Potter* (Lewes: Unicorn, 2024); Emmanuel Cooper, *Janet Leach: A Potter's Life* (London: Ceramic Review Publishing Ltd, 2006).

2 Cooper, *Janet Leach: A Potter's Life*, pp. 32-34; Emmanuel Cooper, "Leach, Janet Darnell (1918–1997), potter," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004; Wason, *Janet Leach: Potter*, pp. 27, 44.

3 Janet Leach, 'With Hamada in Mashiko', *Pottery Quarterly*, 3:11 (1956), unpaginated, online edition.

4 Cooper, *Janet Leach: A Potter's Life*, pp. 82, 118.

Ceramics have been variously described as craftwork, decorative arts, fine art, and sculpture, thus raising questions about their place in overlapping and interdisciplinary discourses concerning function and utility, aesthetics and art. It is therefore a commonplace for serious analyses of ceramics to be excluded from scholarly histories of art, with this particular medium often not subject to the same kinds or levels of criticism and interrogation. This omission has been further reinforced by a long-standing vertical hierarchy that dates back to at least the Renaissance. Marjan Groot's research of art and culture in non-European societies underscores how notions of 'value' have been shaped by this hierarchy, and that 'the divide between fine art and decorative art/crafts is a Western construction'. The divisiveness of this debate was, according to Ashley Thorpe, 'particularly vehement in the 1980s'.⁵ As Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin also observe, such hierarchies resulted in 'certain kinds of art being privileged and others ignored'. Tobin and Goggin go on to show how these designations radically transformed earlier concepts of art and artists. Privileged objects regarded as high or liberal arts were located at the top of the hierarchy, whilst other objects were demoted as minor or decorative arts and thus 'often distinguished in negative terms as "useful" objects, and typically feminised as "women's" objects'.⁶ Whilst Grayson Perry's 2003 Turner Prize award was widely viewed to have elevated British ceramics into the fine art category, Perry himself acknowledged the strength of hierarchical binary art models when he recalled how working with clay was still considered 'humble, small and domestic and seen as feminine'.⁷

At its most pervasive it is by locating ceramics within the spheres of the 'feminine' and the 'domestic' that has led to such a significant gap in scholarly assessments of Janet Leach, and is compounded further by her proximity to the career and business of her husband Bernard. Whether in design, decoration, and production, or as practitioners and innovators, women's presence in the field of art has been circumscribed by societal norms and the laws and conventions of femininity regulating their behaviour. As such, the history of women artists has differed substantially to that of men, maintains Cheryl Buckley and Susan Waller. Women's contributions to art have gone unrecognised or been marginalised since they often worked as assistants, for example, to their male contemporaries, resulting in women's achievements being overshadowed by assumptions of their comparative amateur status or being subsumed under the names of their husband, father, lover, or brother. Indeed, the various designations allotted to the field of ceramics more broadly has meant that the experiences of women artists were, remarks Waller, 'as much affected by the changing institutions of family, marriage, and motherhood as by academies and exhibitions' and their exclusion from professional bodies or membership.⁸ The tendency to view ceramics from an object and gender focussed approach (which is in stark contrast to other creative

5 Marjan Groot, 'Inscribing Women and Gender into Histories and Reception of Design, Crafts, and Decorative Arts of Small Scale Non-European Cultures', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 12 (2015), 1-32 (p.1); Ashley Thorpe, *Contemporary British Studio Pottery: Forms of Expression* (London: The Crowood Press, 2023), p.8.

6 Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin, 'Introduction: Materialising Women', in Daly Goggin, Maureen and Fowkes Tobin, Beth (eds.), *Women & Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-16 (p. 5).

7 Grayson Perry in Thorpe, *Contemporary British Studio Pottery: Forms of Expression*, p.7.

8 Cheryl Buckley, 'Made in Patriarchy: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design', *Design Issues*, 2-14 (1986), 3-14 (pp.3-4); Waller, *Women Artists in the Modern Era: A Documentary History*, pp. ix, x (quote at p. x).

mediums) also means our engagement with them has historically been measured against their production, function, and consumption rather than from an aesthetic, sculptural and thus academic perspective. Yet the increased profile of Leach Pottery St Ives under Janet's management, especially in the years following the death of her husband, demonstrates that her success lay in her ability to work against dominant prevailing attitudes. Moreover, we see in her creative style, experience, and technical skills a career directly informed by her training in Japan, with her body of work bridging not only the cultures of East and West but also contemporary discourses on aesthetics, fine art, and sculpture.

The lack of critical attention afforded to the works of Janet Leach is a multi-layered and interconnected narrative, centred then not only on the ambiguous status so often awarded to ceramics but also with regards to the history of women and the professional opportunities available to them.⁹ Since Linda Nochlin's 1971 feminist essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', there have been a number of significant reappraisals of women's contributions to art within which the works of Janet Leach must also be included. In her now seminal text, Nochlin sought to dismantle traditional methodologies, historical institutional and educational constraints, and male-ordered narratives within the artistic canon.¹⁰ Whilst Nochlin did not consider ceramicists or sculptors in her essay, her analysis not only reinvigorated, but revolutionised, the debate on canon formation within which there was a conspicuous absence of women artists deemed as 'great'. According to Nochlin the 'white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian, may – and does – prove to be inadequate, not merely on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist, but on purely intellectual ones'.¹¹ Despite the heady optimism and political energy of the 1970s there remained for a time a distinct lack of female representation in modern histories of art. In fact, according to Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, women were 'more thoroughly rubbed out of the pages of art's histories' in consequence of their new-found freedoms in the wake of World War I, which included increasing emancipation, heightened social activity, public and professional visibility.¹² Leach can be firmly located within this framework of influential revisionist history alongside her contemporaries and close friends Lucie Rie and Barbara Hepworth albeit, as Waller concludes, women's professional artistic opportunities were still significantly curtailed by 'institutional and cultural parameters that conditioned what women artists attempted and what they accomplished'. Moreover, across the course of two centuries women artists' capacity to enjoy the same level of recognition and success of their male counterparts was 'doubly affected by the social, political, and economic changes that shaped modern society'.¹³

9 See Waller; *Women Artists in the Modern Era: A Documentary History*. In contrast to the career of Janet Leach much has been written about her husband Bernard, whose prominence in the aftermath of the Arts and Craft Movement positioned him as the dominant ideological force in the British studio pottery movement of the twentieth century. See Thorpe, *Contemporary British Studio Pottery: Forms of Expression*, p.8; Edmund De Waal, *Bernard Leach* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998); Marion Whybrow, *Leach Pottery St Ives: The Legacy of Bernard Leach* (St Ives: Beach, 2006).

10 Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2021). Nochlin's essay was originally published as 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *ARTnews*, 69:9 (1971), 22-39.

11 Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, p. 22. Original emphasis.

12 Rozsika Parker & Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021 [originally published 1981]), pp. xxxiv, 3.

13 Waller; *Women Artists in the Modern Era: A Documentary History*, p. ix.

That little is known of Janet Leach and her body of work is certainly due in part to the shadow left by her husband but it can also be attributed to the lack of women's wider historical representation in the technical and creative side of the ceramics industry, despite her later successful management of Leach Pottery St Ives. Originally established at a time when the pottery manufacturing industry was in decline, Leach Pottery St Ives reshaped attitudes to ceramics in the 1920s by awarding the studio potter in Britain a new-found status. However, it was widely understood that the elevated status of potters remained firmly in the creative hands of male artists, with women's work focussed on the decorative features of production instead. Whilst women comprised at least half the workforce of the pottery industry during this period, they lacked representation in the National Society of Pottery Workers and continued to be less well-paid than men some fifty years later even after the introduction of the Equal Pay Act in 1970.¹⁴ Aside from subsequent histories of the labour market it is thanks to feminist histories that women have since been included in assessments outside of the decorative arts. The shape of ceramics as a cultural category came to include histories of design, manufacturing, and material culture, which ran parallel to the history of art and subsequently encompassed disciplines as wide as archaeology and anthropology. Moira Vincentelli's in-depth feminist history of ceramics, for instance, demonstrates that it was thanks largely to the development of material culture studies and design history specifically that women artists came to be included within a wider debate on the relationship between ceramics, art, and sculpture. Once firmly established these new disciplines intersected with the history of art and offered an alternative model of assessment that awarded agency to women artists in ceramics.¹⁵

Janet Leach's training and career straddles this multitude of sociopolitical and cultural conditions and is testament to her tenacity and skill as an artist in what was very much a man's world. In their dynamic originality, organic sensuality of form, and eclectic range of influences her contribution to the field of pottery in the late twentieth century was formidable. In what was a male-dominated art world, she stands out as a fiercely independent female artist; she was a trailblazer whose work reflects her bold if sometimes contradictory character as well as the creative environment in which she learned her craft. Her work is evidence of the intimate relationship between process and artist, informed as hers also was by a congruence between mind, body, and material.

Leach enjoyed great individual success during her lifetime, exhibiting widely in Japan and holding solo exhibitions in England at the Primavera Gallery, Marjorie Parr Gallery, and at the British Crafts Centre. A retrospective of Leach's work was held posthumously in 2006-2007 at Tate St Ives. Her pieces are on display in collections including in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; York Art Gallery; and The Hepworth Wakefield.

¹⁴ Cheryl Buckley, 'Women Designers in the English Pottery Industry, 1919-1939', *Woman's Art Journal*, 5:2 (1984), 1984/1985, 11-15; Jacqueline Sarsby, 'Sexual Segregation in the Pottery Industry', *Feminist Review*, 21 (1985), 67-93 (p.67). See also Cheryl Buckley, "'The Noblesse of the Banks': Craft Hierarchies, Gender Divisions, and the Roles of Women Paintresses and Designers in the British Pottery Industry, 1890-1939', *Journal of Design History*, 2:4 (1989), 257-273.

¹⁵ Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-2.

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Collared vase
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
8 1/8 x 4 3/4 x 4 3/4 in
20.7 x 12.2 x 12.2 cm



Tea bowl, c.1980s
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
3 1/2 x 5 3/4 x 5 1/2 in
9 x 14.5 x 14 cm



Small bottle vase with lugs
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
5 7/8 x 4 3/4 x 4 1/4 in
15 x 12 x 11 cm



Tall lugged vase
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
11 x 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 in
28 x 16.5 x 16.5 cm





Large charger, c.1995
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
2 5/8 x 17 3/4 x 17 7/8 in
6.6 x 45.2 x 45.5 cm



Small bottle vase with lugs
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
5 1/8 x 4 3/4 x 4 1/2 in
12.9 x 12.2 x 11.5 cm



Squashed pot with lugs
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
5 1/4 x 5 1/8 x 4 1/8 in
13.5 x 13 x 10.5 cm





Footed dish
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
3 1/8 x 8 6/8 x 8 6/8 in
8 x 22 x 22 cm



Tall lugged vase, c.1990
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
9 1/2 x 4 x 4 in
24 x 10 x 10 cm



Tall bottle vase with lugs, c.1985
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
9 x 4 x 4 in
23 x 10 x 10 cm



Tall cylindrical slab vase
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
12 3/8 x 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 in
31.5 x 14 x 11.5 cm



Monumental vessel, c.1980
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
18 1/4 x 11 7/8 x 11 7/8 in
46.5 x 30 x 30 cm





Large bowl
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
5 7/8 x 13 x 13 in
15 x 33 x 33 cm



Tall lugged vase, c.1980
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
12 3/4 x 5 3/4 x 5 1/2 in
32.3 x 14.5 x 14 cm



Tall squared vase
Impressed J.L. and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
13 1/4 x 7 x 7 1/8 in
33.7 x 18 x 18.2 cm



Miniature wide bottle vase with lugs, c.1980
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
4 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 3 3/8 in
11.5 x 9 x 8.5 cm



Oval slab vase
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
5 1/8 x 4 1/2 x 3 1/8 in
12.9 x 12.2 x 8 cm



Small bottle vase, c.1990
Impressed JL and Leach Pottery seals
Stoneware
3 7/8 x 3 1/2 x 2 1/8 in
10 x 9 x 5.5 cm

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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