

# Design and Conquer



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Alun Graves interviews David Queensberry and Martin Hunt about their forty years at the forefront of international tableware design.

**ALUN GRAVES** When you became Professor of Ceramics at the Royal College of Art in 1959, what did you want to change?

**DAVID QUEENSBERRY** I could see there were three activities that were needed. One was design, which I felt I had ideas about; that was what I did. The next was that the American movement – mainly Peter Voulkos – had made people think that, actually, ceramics can be art rather than pottery. So I thought the best thing was to get a good artist in. I was a friend of Eduardo Paolozzi's, so he came to the college. And then on the studio ceramics side I had enormous admiration for Hans Coper, and I thought if we could get Coper we would have all three areas covered.

**AG** And when you arrived as a student, Martin, was design what interested you?

**MARTIN HUNT** No. Like most people I was totally confused about what I would do. I had been a studio potter in Cheltenham. But at an RCA open day the thing that hit me was these incredible moulds and the precision, the ways things fitted. The technical side of it seemed so wonderfully precise and craftsmanlike, but in a completely different direction from studio pottery.

**AG** What led to the formation of the partnership?

**DQ** Martin was a superb craftsman but he's also an extremely good designer and that was very, very clear early on. I didn't have anything like his natural ability. I'd struggled and succeeded, and had modelled things, but I was nothing like as good. But I was getting quite a lot of work and also I was full-time Professor at the College. So it seemed to me that what we could do, was form a partnership. We had a studio in the RCA; in the old days they liked the professors to be involved in their own work there. Well, we rather took that to the limit!



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1 Milk jug, *Loft* range for Thomas, Rosenthal Group, porcelain, 2002, Ø8cm 2 Teapot and cover, *Loft* range for Thomas, Rosenthal Group, porcelain, 2002, H18.5cm 3 Oil and vinegar bottle, *Trend* range for Thomas, Rosenthal Group, glazed porcelain, 1987, H16.9cm 4 Sugar bowl and cover, *Loft* range for Thomas, Rosenthal Group, porcelain, 2002, H10.5cm



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**DQ** What happened was that in the 80s a new technology came into the industry called isostatic pressing, which allowed items that were not round to be made at similar production speeds and expense. The other factor was the trend for Asian food. So we saw there was a change in what people were eating, which would make square, rectangular, and different shapes interesting and more significant, and there was a technology to make them. We introduced *Trend Asia* in 1991, but the timing was a bit too soon. So we readdressed it in the late 90s, and extended the range to be round, oval, and squares and rectangles, and reintroduced it as *Loft*. It took off.

**AG** Is there a Queensberry Hunt aesthetic?

**MH** It is designed very much out of the total world of ceramics, because we use colours and things that have not been the traditional remit of industry. We introduce ceramic qualities that are in the province of the studio potter, and try to bring these techniques

## Tableware marketed on how you live, not how you aspire to live

**MH** Each professor had a small studio behind their office. Some used it a lot, some didn't – but we used it a lot!

**DQ** I remember a client saying, 'Are we working with you, or are we working with the RCA?' I said, 'With us!' But finally, of course, it did develop and we were successful.

**AG** The *Trend* range for Thomas was a particular success. How did that come about?

**DQ** Thomas was the mass-market arm of Rosenthal. I went to Rosenthal to try to sell the *Trend* concept, which was that it should be connected with food, that we should be thinking of how people live. Do they have brunch? Do they have pasta? And I said, we should create the first range of tableware marketed on how you all live, not how you aspire to live. And this got us the job to develop *Trend*, which Robin [Levien] designed with us.

**AG** How did those ideas develop with the *Asia* and *Loft* ranges?



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struggling and screaming into industry, which I might say is really quite difficult. If you say, 'put a transparent coloured glaze on a plate', it sounds no problem; a student at the Royal College of Art can do it, a studio potter can do it. You try to produce 10,000 all exactly the same, at some sort of speed, then you hit all sorts of problems.

**DQ** People still say to me sometimes, 'David's a potter.' Well, I think in a sense we are designers and potters. But speaking personally, when I became interested in the subject, the first important book I read was Bernard Leach's. And although I don't any longer go along with Bernard's rather restricted concept of aesthetics – you know, grey pots – there is something there that I believe in. It is that concept of simplicity and restraint. The word he gives it is *shibui*. Somebody said that the problem is not to design an extraordinary teapot, but to design an ordinary teapot that is extraordinary. So the extraordinariness in the design doesn't come, in our aesthetic, by putting it on little legs or putting a hat on it, but out of doing it much the way other teapots have been designed, but just seeing if we can get something into it that is a little bit different. I suppose that's our aesthetic; I would say it's *shibui*.



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**MH** Making things continuously makes you very, very critical of the aesthetics of others that have been made. So when one looks at a beautiful little pressed unglazed redware Chinese teapot, you say, 'isn't that nice', but if you scale it up to take the regulation litre or so, it would be pretty ghastly. In a sense, one is always trying to assess what is good and what is bad about the objects that flow past you.

**DQ** We're always amazed at how there seem to be things in shops that are so, by our standards, appalling. But what we've found is that the market has moved, mercifully, over the last twenty years in our direction. We are 'shape guys' – that's what we do. Trend was probably the first really successful range of white tableware, because even then most Rosenthal was sold decorated. White didn't come on in England in a big way until about fifteen years ago. If you went into John Lewis now and said, 'Have you got any white tableware?', the girl would say 'Okay, we have fifteen different ranges for you to look at.' Had you gone in twenty years ago, the girl would have said, 'Oh, there's no demand for that.' And that was a big change. But we think that's going to change too – that's why we're moving into colour!



**5** Saucer, *Contrast* range for Hornsea Pottery Co. Ltd., stoneware, 1974, Ø14.9cm  
**6** Teapot, *Ebony* range for Hornsea Pottery Co. Ltd., stoneware with terra sigillata slip, 1981, H20.2cm **7** Casserole, *Contrast* range for Hornsea Pottery Co. Ltd., stoneware, 1974, W25.8cm **8** Cup, *Contrast* range for Hornsea Pottery Co. Ltd., stoneware, 1974, H6.8cm. All images courtesy V&A Museum, London

**Exhibition** The display 'Queensberry Hunt: Ceramic Design' will run at the V&A Museum from 14 April-2 September 2012  
**Stockists** John Lewis, [www.johnlewis.com](http://www.johnlewis.com); Jme, [www.jamieoliver.com/jme](http://www.jamieoliver.com/jme); Crate & Barrel, [www.crateandbarrel.com](http://www.crateandbarrel.com); The Conran Shop, [www.conranshop.co.uk](http://www.conranshop.co.uk); and David Mellor Shop, [www.davidmellordesign.com](http://www.davidmellordesign.com)

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**Technical Article** Martin Hunt discusses 'Resin-strengthened Plaster' on page 62

**MH** What is interesting is that whenever you look through a high standard magazine that involves pottery and food – cooks' magazines, Waitrose magazine – you're hard-pressed to find a white plate on which they're showing food. Almost everything is done in a plate – either from a junk shop or from wherever – of some different ceramic quality. But mostly speaking, chefs want a white plate. A lot of our success has been acceding to that, but it's interesting that there are two aesthetics: from the ones who do the photography and the publication, and the ones who put food on plates. And in what we're doing now, we're somewhat shuffling those together. We are pushing through some ideas to do things in a different way. I mean we're very much behind white tableware – in a sense we've been involved in creating it – but there's a wonderful world of ceramics that can be chosen, if it's offered in an appropriate way. **CR**



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