**Bound by Clay: remembering women’s contribution to the ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent**

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Stoke-on-Trent, known as the Potteries, was the centre of ceramic production in Britain from the 17th century to the late 1980s. The industry has experienced a rapid decline in the last thirty years, fracturing the working-class community and creating a cloud of mournful loss. It should be acknowledged that manufacturers such as Emma Bridgwater, Steelite and Churchill China, are thriving in these challenging times, and the people of Stoke-on-Trent are still proud of its industrial heritage. Many hope for a pottery renaissance and that manufacturers such as these will save a declining city, but it is unlikely that industrial ceramics in isolation will be the panacea. There is an urgency to preserve the knowledge and intangible skills of those that have worked in the pottery industry before it is too late, and to acknowledge the contribution of those unknown individuals, particularly women, who at the height of pottery production were 40% of the workforce. In 2019 the Stoke and North Staffs Women’s Network received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, for a project Bound by Clay to produce a film, an educational resource and book to celebrate the contribution women have made to industrial ceramics within Stoke-on-Trent. This paper will provide an overview of the challenges with respect to accurately documenting the contribution women have made within the industry and recording their memories. It will consider the issues around integrating gender within heritage outputs and the risk of nostalgia distorting the local collective memory.

There is a BBC television documentary “How Walter Gropius's decision to relegate Anni Albers to the weaving class of the Bauhaus created the greatest textiles artist the world has ever known.” Critical commentators have now acknowledged the important contribution of women to the Bauhaus movement. Despite its progressive integrative approach to design and proclaimed ethos of absolute equality amongst the sexes, Anni joined as an aspiring fine artist but the school told her that women had a choice of three subjects, textiles, bookbinding and ceramics. Not giving women the same choices as men was active discrimination, the restrictive choice also represented a value system of design practice where weaving, ceramics and bookbinding were lower in the hierarchy. Women were noticeably absent within the school management structure; women were rarely given the position of department lead. The lesser known Gunta Stolz was the first official department lead, also in weaving. Ironically weaving turned out to be one of the most commercially successful areas of Bauhaus design. Anni was a named woman within the Bauhaus movement unlike many other nameless women who contributed. The BBC’s documentary acclaims and preserves Anni’s involvement. If weaving had not become commercially important, and if men had also been involved in weaving to the level that women had, it could be questioned whether women’s contribution would have been acknowledged at all. The pottery industry, had its own Anni Albers, such as, Suzy Cooper and also Clarice Cliff, even Greta Marks a Bauhaus alumni spent a short time in Stoke-on-Trent, after her exodus from Germany in the early 1930s, although she moved to London complaining about the parochial approach of design of the manufacturers in the region. In ceramics like the Bauhaus there were many nameless women who made an invaluable contribution to the production process. The aim of the Bound by Clay project was to acknowledge and identify these previously nameless women.

Often people in Stoke-on-Trent define their cultural heritage within the context of ceramics and they can be extremely nostalgic about their industrial heritage. Peter Hewison (1987) in the Heritage Industry identifies the danger of heritage projects free-falling into expected and inaccurate nostalgia.

**Heritage ... has enclosed the late twentieth century in a bell jar into which no ideas can enter, and, just as crucially, from which none can escape.**

**(Hewison, 1987, p.144)**

Hewison, argues heritage, distorts the images of the past, creating a distraction from today’s difficulties that have resulted from the break down on industrial society. As the Bound by Clay project could be classed by default as a heritage project because it was funded by money from the National Heritage Lottery Fund which is raised by the National Lottery players, the complexities associated with heritage production and nostalgia were an inherent consideration. However, if should be acknowledged that there is a danger losing heritage if it is not captured, according to Ybarra-Frausto

**Culture is fragile - languages dies off, people die off, stories, die off. That gives us a trenchant reason to build archives. There is almost an archival imperative to preserve, conserve and maintain historical memory so we can draw sustenance from the past to envision our future**

**(Ybarra-Frausto in, 2005 p.10 in Sommerville and Echohawk 2011 p.653)**

One of the motivations behind the Bound by Clay project was to build an archive of resources which could be referred to in the future in a variety of contexts. It also, wanted to see if it could lift the bell jar and allow heritage to critically frame the past before stories and the intangible skills that these women had disappeared.

Critical heritage commentators, like Anna Reading, have stated that heritage has suffered from gender blindness, as gender and heritage have become the women’s problem. She says that,

**A more productive way of understanding gender in relation to heritage is to frame it in terms of how changing constructions of masculinity and femininity interact with what is valued and included in heritage.**

**(Reading 2014, p.401)**

Reading refers to Smith (2008) who says the representation of gender cannot be culturally and politically neutral, that the way something is produced can have an impact on the perceptions of men and women. Reading suggests bringing heritage and gender through four levels of enquiry, which are, representation of collections and shared performances; production and curatorial practices practices and heritage management; consumption, how individuals encounter heritage and finally the impact of local and national heritage policies. Applying Readings levels of enquiry to the Bound by Clay project, there are some positive checks. The project represented women that worked in the ceramics industry in a range of roles and it included critical commentary by women experts in the field of ceramics. The film was directed by a young female director. Members of the Stoke and North Staffs Women’s Network, were involved in putting together the questions that were asked in the film, and the educational resource, was produced by practitioners from within the network. The branding for the project was produced by a young female designer, and the project was launched as the network’s International Women’s Day celebrations. However, due to time and resource restrictions, the project lacked the co-production, that can help to avoid what Somerville and Echohawk (2011) perpetuation of

**outdated assumptions and entrenched hierarchies which limits the potential of contemporary civic discourse to co-create the imaginative and inclusive future**

**(Sommerville and Echohawk 2011. p.651)**

As “memory guardians” we need to reflect on our own values and biases, social and political, if those that are the focus of the heritage output are not part of the production process.

Hewison (1987), has criticised nostalgia as it distracts people from problems of the present, Brownsword also says

**Finding value in the active memory and former practices of those affected by industrial change often provokes simple assumption of nostalgia, or unchecked idealisation of the past. Thus, the psychological and emotional dimensions of industrial history – the firsthand recollections surrounding the complex networks, social bonds and pride forged by collective skill, can be too easily side-lined.**

**Brownsword, 2017 p.6**

The Bound by Clay film focuses on women talking in way that could be described as nostalgically about their experiences of working in the ceramics industry, although it is alongside critical commentary. There is a challenge presenting a film with historical content, as De Groot, states documentaries cannot totally represent the past, and do provide an incomplete picture. Their production requires a whole new set of skills that go beyond the academic, often presenting complex information in a simplified way to a broad audience (Evans 2002 in De Groot). Nostalgic, images and music are often used to engage the audience in historical documentaries. Eisen in De Groot says, that audience are not “interested in either the complexity of the past or in explaining it”, audiences want a powerful emotional experience and nostalgic techniques can assist with this. The ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent has been used as a catalyst for regeneration, with marketeers often using imagery of smoking skylines to evoke the past. This is possibly the over simplistic nostalgia, that Brownsword and Hewison critically refer to, which could be described as an idealised representation of the City’s heritage. With respect to the Bound by Clay project there were robust discussions about the music and imagery used in the Bound by Clay film, which did not involve the main protagonists in the film, the women of the ceramics industry. This could possibly mean that the complete authenticity the film could be disputed because as the women were not co-producers.

However, nostalgia is a useful mechanism in storytelling to unravel and reminiscing about the past. According to Moghadam and Bagheritari

**Storytelling…is widely regarded as feminine practice and therefore marginalized. If such intangible art became recognised internationally and received financial and other support, this would empower the women who practice the art. (Moghadam and Bagheritari, 2007 in Reading p.406)**

The women in the Bound by Clay film use many phrases that could be deemed to be nostalgic, but it could be asserted that nostalgia is a useful mechanism in storytelling as it helps individuals to dig deeper into their memories of the past. From the language the women used in the film the project was able to gather rich insights into the social, economic, environmental and creative aspects of working in the ceramics industry. However, it should be accepted that the documentary format does not make it feasible to go into women’s narrative in detail but the whole interviews with the women which the project has made available provide more depth.

On reflection ideally the project would have taken co-creation approach with production that included the women in the film, but time and resources limited this. Despite Hewison’s criticism of nostalgia, it could be argued if nostalgia is not used as technique to commodify heritage and to not make simple assumptions (Brownsword 201&0, it is owned by the storyteller, it can be a useful mechanism for highlighting a range of more complex issues. The project has succeeded in creating an archive of women’s narratives that includes rich information about the lives and culture of women working within the pottery industry, as well as a greater insight into the production processes and the roles associated with this. These women are no longer defined as a group of unknown individuals but a collective of known individuals with specialist skills and knowledge. However, applying Reading’s model of the enquiry the project has generated more questions about gender and its intersection with class and ethnicity in the context of representation, production and consumption.

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**Related Resources**

* **Bound by Clay Website** [**https://www.boundbyclay.co.uk/**](https://www.boundbyclay.co.uk/)
* **Bound by Clay Podcast** [**https://shows.pippa.io/culturalquarterofanhour/episodes/bound-by-clay**](https://shows.pippa.io/culturalquarterofanhour/episodes/bound-by-clay)
* **Bound by Clay YouTube Channel** [**https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEOC5b2TPBDW82Hd1u1bzRQ**](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEOC5b2TPBDW82Hd1u1bzRQ)
* **Bound by Clay Presentation Slides** [**https://drive.google.com/file/d/11WLpztGYy2ruv9AoxCqgnyOjNi5-TsC4/view?usp=sharing**](https://drive.google.com/file/d/11WLpztGYy2ruv9AoxCqgnyOjNi5-TsC4/view?usp=sharing)
* **Bound by Clay Presentation Notes** [**https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UHnlgyaAzozzod7JeEYhkyBgXJmmRXpr/view?usp=sharing**](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UHnlgyaAzozzod7JeEYhkyBgXJmmRXpr/view?usp=sharing)