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After Palissy

Bernard Palissy's Aesthetic, Four Centuries Later

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Carol Gentithes. *Palissy Portrait*. 35 x 20 x 25 cm.



Oval Basin, French. c. 1570-89. Attrib. to Bernard Palissy. Lead glazed earthenware, overall: 56 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Arthur Mason Knapp Fund and anonymous gift, 60.8.
Photograph, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

WORKS ATTRIBUTED TO BERNARD PALISSY THAT I had seen at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum in New York provided visual delight and continued to spark my interest for years. Lush colours and intricate detail of sea and swamp life afloat in simulated moving water on the basin forms nurtured the concept for a show of contemporary work reflecting or influenced by Palissy's process, imagery and surface treatment. I wanted to explore whether modern ceramists, like the Palissyites who followed him in the 19th century, had been inspired by or had knowledge of him. In other words, what was his ceramic legacy in the modern world? As I learnt more about the life of this man, I was struck by his achievements beyond the ability to create beautiful functional and sculptural decorative ceramic work. Therefore, I suggested to Lucy Lacoste of the Lacoste Gallery in Concord, MA, a show on current interpretations of Palissy, which she asked me to curate and which we titled *After Palissy*.

Bernard Palissy was a model of the French Renaissance individual, a philosopher, lecturer, naturalist and self-made scientist. As author of several learned manuscripts on art, architecture and science, all sprinkled heavily with Calvinist religious doctrine, he made outstanding early contributions in his many fields of interest. Born in 1510 in Agen in southern France to a poor peasant farm family, Palissy worked as a journeyman glass painter and possibly glass-maker, sometimes a draughtsman, cartographer and surveyor. It is likely that he served brief stints with alchemists as well.

After travelling in the southwest of France, he chose to live in Saintes in 1536 near the western Bay of Biscay, where a group of Huguenots were established. It was here that he was attracted to the New Religion. Marsh and swamp provided opportunities for surveying and pursuing his interest in nature and later provided a source for foraging specimens for his ceramic work.

The area was a centre for ceramic production, and a thriving export trade supported a communal pottery. The Chapelle-des-Pots, in operation from the 13th to the 16th centuries, provided a kiln for firing. Palissy had begun to contemplate a ceramic career which he thought would provide a steady income for his growing family. In 1539, a friend, Antoine de Pons, Comte de Marennnes, returned to Saintes with a white enamel cup which he had acquired in Italy. Palissy was so enthralled with the white maiolica glaze which had not yet been made in France, that he became firmly committed to becoming a ceramist and finding a way to replicate the glaze. He experimented using other potters' shards for economy and ground glass to mix with other components for glazing. But numerous mis-firings due at first to the use of a glassmaker's kiln and therefore insufficient temperature, caused him considerable agony. Describing such an event, he wrote: "After making I put them into the kiln, while continuing to keep the fire just as hot. But after doing this, another misfortune befell me, this is having run out of wood, I had to burn the tables and floorboards of the house in order to melt the second compound."

It took him 10 years to achieve the perfect tin-based white glaze over which he began to apply the rich and translucent lead-based colour glazes for which he became famous. His fresh fresco-like colours far surpassed attempts by other French potters who had tried to produce Italian maiolica. His first successful ceramic works were medals and vessels covered with various enamels mixed to resemble jasper, but they still had flaws because of the different firing temperatures of the glazes. In 1556 he perfected his *rustiques figurines*, rustic ceramics using red and buff clays collected by him in Saintes. Forms included vases, pitchers and basins. His first basin was shown to Henri II by Palissy's patron, Anne de Montmorency. The king purchased the terracotta vessel which had a smooth white background encrusted with life-like lead-glazed turtles, lizards, fish and shells, on a background of jasper.

The application of ceramic animals moulded from life was new to Europe, but tied in with the Renaissance interest in nature. It is likely that Palissy learnt the art of life-mould casting from a goldsmith. Animals were chosen for sharp surface definition and were captured without damaging them. Viper snakes were popular because of their outstanding scales. The animals were kept alive in a bottle of bran or damped earth and killed with vinegar or urine. Palissy often whacked the snakes behind the head to speed up the process. The clay was rolled out, the animal was positioned naturally, and pin holes made in the skin were threaded with wire to anchor it in the clay. The animal was covered in butter or oil to facilitate removal from the plaster mold, the moulded figures were carefully laid out in the basin, and a mould of the whole was made. At other



Bonnie Seeman. *Red and Green Teapot with Tray.*
25 x 17.5 x 12.5 cm.

times, he pressed the subject upside down into the clay or plaster (depending on the fleshiness of the animal), then fired the clay to make a mould. Palissy enhanced the imagery by sculpting the necessary detail to approach reality. The fine quality of his rustic ceramics became highly regarded and soon after he signed one of his literary works "Creator of Rustic Ceramics for the King and his Lordship the Duc de Montmorency."

Early in 1562, the Duc de Montmorency, a Catholic, commissioned the Huguenot Palissy to build a grotto, his first architectural commission. The Duc also built an atelier for Palissy near the gates of the town and became his protector from religious persecution, until a Protestant riot provoked retribution and Palissy was thrown in prison. While in prison, Palissy wrote the architecture and commission of the rustic grotto of Le Duc De Montmorency, a detailed and elegant description and his first literary work. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the grotto, which was never built, would have been the life casts of human figures, the illusion of swimming fish in the fountain, and the beige flesh colour using liquid slips or the bare clay, a Palissy invention.

He was released from prison in 1563 and between 1565 and 1567 Palissy left for Paris where he established a successful atelier which produced a variety of work. On this site moulds were found for the Montmorency grotto which he may have planned to use for the grotto commissioned by Catherine de Medici in the Tuileries. The building of her grotto was begun, exhibiting Palissy's finest tile work; but Catherine, who liked classical iconography, and Palissy, who preferred naturalistic imagery, may have differed in stylistic tastes and the project was abandoned in 1572.



Michelle Erickson. *Liberty On Leave* 2003. Earthenware glaze, slip. 57.5 x 50 cm.

Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC. Museum Purchase.

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Soon after, because of the extreme religious persecution in Paris, Palissy left for Sedan in northeast France where he lived in some comfort at MontPalissy. He travelled to Paris frequently where he established his 'little academy', the series of lectures which became the *Discours Admirables*, his last and most influential literary work which revealed his many astute observations of natural phenomena. Included among them were his descriptions of the water cycle in nature and the futility of the alchemists' attempts to transmute base metals into gold. In 1590 he died of an illness in the Bastille where he had been imprisoned for religious heresy. His contributions to natural science were overlooked for a century, but rediscovered and lauded in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The ceramic achievements had practically been forgotten.

The Palissy ceramic legacy was finally recognised in the 1820s by Alexandre Brogniart, director of the Sèvres porcelain factory who chose Palissy's quest for technical perfection as a model for his artists. Intertwined with the legacy were Palissy's qualities of perseverance, courage, and resolve mixed with a feisty stubbornness that Brogniart admired. In 1843 Charles Jean-Avisseau of Tours became entranced by a private

collection of Palissy's work, and the first generation of Palissyites was born. Avisseau's son Edouard, daughter Caroline and grandson Edouard-Leon and Joseph Landais, also of Tours, continued the style. International exhibitions stimulated interest at Minton, in England, and in the late 19th century Portuguese ceramists began to copy the style.

To organise *After Palissy*, I selected artists whose work was directly influenced by or had elements of the Palissy style. Three artists were chosen whose work was a literal interpretation of the imagery, colours or techniques used in the rustic basins. They were Christine Viennet, Maryann Webster and Michelle Erickson. All three had studied Palissy's work and interpreted it to express their own contemporary messages in their own vernacular.

Christine Viennet lives in Beziers, France, 150 miles from Agen, where Palissy was born. She is the artist whose work is closest to Palissy's in style and treatment of nature. Her *Caught In The Net* is a revival of Palissy basins so covered with an assortment of shells, fish, frogs and leafy ferns that the background veining of moss and lichen is almost hidden. Viennet's method of catching and moulding sea animals is similar to

Palissy's but she stores them in the freezer till needed. Her methods of using clay and plaster for moulding and her spontaneous handmodelling replicate Palissy's techniques. Using red and white clays, enamels and transparent lead glazes fired at 1000/1060°C, Viennet works in an atelier environment with help from assistants, as did Palissy.

Maryann Webster views natural imagery as it has often become in modern times, "irreparably altered by human carelessness and apathy". Capturing a gecko a few years ago, she examined its form and texture, saw its tiny heart beating through its fragile white skin, and froze it for moulding in plaster. When, on removing it, she saw its heart still beating, she decided never again to cast from real animals but to use plastic moulds. Webster chose to portray animals, mainly fish and snakes, that had been flawed by man's careless pollution of nature. Sculpting in high relief to make a more dynamic presentation arranged on a Palissy-like background is another twist on his style. She uses a porcelainous clay and usually a cone 10 celadon glaze to produce exquisitely glazed, but shocking and sad, interpretations of nature as *Monsanto Ponds* reveals.

Erickson's *Liberty On Leave* references a Palissy original that depicts the allegorical figure of fecundity. Made of white earthenware with relief and applied sprigs, the platter reveals a technique similar to Palissy. Of the technique, Erickson says, "I began by modelling the dish using the original as my guide. From the model, I created moulds of the entire dish complete with the individual sculptural elements. I was able to pressmould the dish, altering its form and meaning." *Liberty on Leave* is a satire on our vanishing democratic freedoms once protected by liberty, but now jeopardised by hostilities symbolised in the border by machine guns, rocket launchers and gas masks, and even by our own government. The artist questions "Is liberty taking a vacation?" while she tries to protect her offspring with one finger on the trigger of the gun she holds.

In the show, the transition from literal Palissy to *After Palissy*, began with Keisuke Mizuno's pieces of superbly sculptured floral forms, tiny creatures sometimes adorned with wings and placed inside womb-like cavities of flowers and fruit, and leaves decorated with slugs. All of this imagery is rendered in the rich colours of china paint on porcelain. Mizuno wishes to surprise the viewer by enticement into a beautiful scene of life's pleasures and then confrontation with symbols of death and decay. By this means, he captures the theme of the inevitability of death in the midst of the riches of life. Mizuno's response to Palissy's platters of abundant sea life is in some ways related to Webster's irony, but expresses an uncontrolled destiny beyond the reality that man controls.

Other work was chosen mostly for technique, colour, imagery, patterning and surface treatment



Top: Maryann Webster. *Monsanto Pond*. 43 x 29 cm.

Above: Christine Viennet. *Caught In The Net*. 44 x 31 cm.

that relate to Palissy attributes. Two examples are ceramics by Bonnie Seeman and Susan Beiner. Seeman's work has been influenced by a friend's struggle to survive in spite of possible death. The luscious reds in the cross sections of rhubarb or pomegranates are a metaphor for the raw anatomy of muscle and the green leaves are a symbol of regrowth. The glass beads which Seeman also crafts can be seen as drops of blood. This combination of motifs stresses the fragility of life but also the beauty of having the strength to live. In relating to death in the midst of her beautiful renderings of porcelain leaves, fruits and flowers on her teapots and ewers, she has approached its inevitability with a hopeful determination to live and renew.

Susan Beiner decorates her teapots with slipcast nuts, bolts, screws and snakes that combined with floral and fruit elements become lush and sensuous. The abundance of these objects on the *Allegory Teapot* resembles an overgrown jumble of Palissy design gone awry, but has an order that cleverly and dramatically emphasises its function. In the context of the Palissy show, it can be considered as a metaphor for 'harmony in nature' or a garden of 'earthly paradise' which Palissy describes in his writings.



Susan Beiner. *Allegory Teapot*. 20 x 17.5 x 12.5 cm.

Beiner comments on her work with phrases such as "voluptuous form" and "succulent colour" while she admits to being "captivated by the complexity of encrusted volume". Beiner was influenced in her designs by living in the environment of the Detroit automobile industry. She makes casting molds of her forms and combines them with found objects. Allegory is multi-fired, first in a gas kiln with colour, and then in an electric kiln with a different palette, and finally in a lustre firing in the electric kiln.

Figurative sculpture was also exhibited. Examples are pieces by Chris Antemann and Louise Radochonski, who drew on mythology for their inspiration. In recognition of Palissy's grotto work, Janice Strawder showed large tiles with reliefs of lobsters, sea lions and lizards. Other work, rich in colour and tactile surface treatment included Betsy Rosenmiller's tureens, Lisa Orr's platters, and Eunjung Park's collaged teapots of slip cast fruits, vegetables and sea life. Punctuating the show with humour was the folksy bust of Palissy by North Carolina's Carol Gentithes who used porcelain, alkaline glazes and stains to create the bust, the shells for the ears, the shell covering the eye, the lizard for the nose, and the bug on his forehead. (figure 8)

My aim in *After Palissy* was to pick contemporary imaginative work that reflected Palissy's aesthetic. I

discovered that some of the invited artists knew his work and his philosophy in depth. Others had seen his work and had consciously adopted some of his techniques. Still others barely knew of him, but by chance used images both sculptural and figurative that seem to reference not only his sea forms, but also his mythological scenes depicted in the grottoes and on numerous platters. But all were inspired to learn more about the complex and eccentric Bernard Palissy. A vital connection between the two distant generations is that both have used nature and mythology coupled with their personal philosophies and world views to seek beauty and perfection through the vehicle of ceramics.

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