

ANDREW MATHESON

CHANGING FOCUS

by Tim Saunders





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1 Andrew Matheson working on stoneware landscape pieces. Photo: Jennie Howe. 2 Various porcelain pieces in production: teapots, beakers, round lidded and small ginger jars. 3 Teapot, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, blue underglaze slips, Cornish stone glaze, fired to cone 11 in reduction.

Forty years into his career as a potter, Andrew Matheson now allows himself the luxury of exploring decoration techniques. Until this point, his focus was on form when making pottery.

Matheson has always had a mixed career of making and teaching full and part time in secondary schools in the UK. This approach has helped him to maintain his current workshop since 1981. In 2009, he worked full time in his studio in Lichfield, producing a range of individual thrown and sculptural pieces, and exhibited work throughout the UK. The skills he learned through production throwing helped him to develop more complex, individual forms that he makes in runs of 10–20, now with a range of glazes rather than just one or two.

In his vast experience, decorating is a risky process, fraught with complexities. “But it is only by making mistakes that you learn,” he admits. “You do have to be so careful though, because if the pot gets too wet it can simply collapse and then you’ve got to start the whole process again.” Fortunately, Matheson, who works from his Staffordshire, England, studio, is a careful and patient person.

Finding Inspiration

It is the classic blue-and-white ware with Willow-patterned designs that provide much of Matheson’s inspiration. This distinctive and elaborate chinoiserie pattern used on kitchen and housewares was popular at the end of the 18th century in England. It was developed by English ceramic artists, often themselves located in Staffordshire, at Stoke-on-Trent—the heart of the British ceramic industry—who adapted motifs inspired by blue-and-white wares imported from China. “I have no desire to paint a scene though,” he reveals. “I am purely interested in pattern work; my designs are much freer and more abstract. I looked at the classic blue-and-white work from Spode, which involved the use of prints pulled from etched copper plates to create the designs/decals, then took the blue-and-white

concept and used it in a totally distinct, contemporary way; it’s evolved.” He notes that when people view his work, they comment that it is different and modern.

Although Matheson has produced blue-and-white pottery since the 1980s, it was not his major focus until an exhibition he visited in 1995. “It was a solo show by Japanese ceramic artist Kondo Takahiro at the Royal Scottish Museum,” he explains. “Suddenly, blue-and-white ware became an exciting proposition for me. Now my work incorporates more shades of blue, Chinese decals, lines, stripes, and spots. I’m still working on research and there are many technical details to work out.”

He is currently researching different techniques to transfer designs onto pots. Referring to Spode’s use of etched plates, he says, “perhaps a copper-plate medium that uses linseed oil and ceramic ink is the way to explore creating my own decals. Another [possible] way is to use Perspex [acrylic sheet] and scratch into it to create an etched design,” he says, adding, “I’m still at the experimental stage. I am looking at using screenprints, but the result so far has been weak and thin.” Referring to another possibility, he notes, “I have found Dara syrup in the US, which is like maple syrup, and may be another possible medium for creating ceramic decals; I’ve been using golden syrup as a basis for repairs of pots by mixing it with vinegar and ground up clay to repair cracks, or I mix it with glaze and use it for touch up after firing, taking advantage of the glucose.” He is also considering using silkscreen and paper stencils to make decals.

Decorating Process

Decorating is a time-consuming process that often sees Matheson producing a pattern or shape using Copydex (a latex glue) as a masking technique. He then dabs slip onto the surface. Using a brush, he makes patterns and builds these up with layers of color and tone.

Glaze firing adds the final surface effect. Matheson uses Pot Clays’ JB Porcelain, which is fired to cone 10 in reduction. All the

work is bisque fired first and coated with a Cornish stone glaze before the final reduction firing to 2372°F (1300°C). “The large jars, ginger jars, and other pieces all have a blue-and-white decoration based on cobalt oxide applied as either a blue slip under the glaze or as an onglaze decoration,” Matheson explains, adding that the decoration process calls for carefully mixing slips to create various tones and finishes.

For his slips, he mixes a very light blue (0.25% cobalt) and a medium blue (2% cobalt). To create different tints and tones, he measures a pint of 2% blue slip and a pint of stoneware or porcelain slip, then mixes them together at different ratios. For example, mixed 1:1, he gets a 1% blue. Mixing it again reduces the percentage of the blue. For darker shades, he uses iron and/or manganese with the cobalt, resulting in a blacker finish.

Teaching and Current Projects

Word of Matheson’s knowledge of creating blue-and-white surface decoration is spreading and in March 2019, he demonstrated his technique to students at Clay College in Stoke-on-Trent. “I’m at the point where I want to give something back,” he says. “I’ve learned a lot of skills and want to pass them on. The college students are looking at ways of decorating work and are interested in my technique of underglaze decoration and incorporating decals on porcelain.”

Matheson has just completed a commission for an office next to his studio to make 105 blue-and-white porcelain tiles. He had never made tiles before and made extra to account for some warpage during the firing. To minimize warping, he dried them on boards with layers of newspaper between the tiles and the board. He has





4 Cup, 3½ in. (9 cm) in height. 5 Lidded jars, to 5 in. (13 cm) in height. 6 Lidded box, 4 in. (10 cm) in width. 7 Beaker, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, Chinese decals. 8 Large vase, 13½ in. (34 cm) in height. 4–8 Porcelain, blue underglaze slips, Cornish stone glaze, fired to cone 11 in reduction. 9 Jug and small beakers, to 9½ in. (24 cm) in height, stoneware, shino glaze.

also just completed a small blue-and-white porcelain whisky/espresso beaker, and is now working on a group of large, round, blue-and-white vases and teapots.

Embracing New Styles

Matheson is always keen to make his finishes as interesting as possible and other potters inspire him. “For instance, at the International Ceramics Festival in Aberystwyth, Wales, I saw a Chinese potter mixing cobalt with water and pouring it over work to give a pale sheen.”

Teaching continues to occupy him too, even though he retired from full-time teaching in 2009. “Since 2013, I have been teaching for one day a week at King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham. “The students are delightful. I really enjoy watching their progress. They make some great pieces.”

Studying ceramics and sculpture at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen has always influenced the fact that some pieces Matheson makes are sculptural in addition to the functional ware. By doing this he caters to a broad audience—those who like to use attractive, well-designed pieces along with those who like the sculptural forms. Some he knows are collectors and have asked him to produce items specifically for them. Work has been sold to locals and visitors from

all over and many pieces have gone abroad. Matheson is a selected member of Creative Coverage, which approaches galleries on his behalf and as a result several galleries have shown an interest in selling his work both in Scotland and the rest of the UK, which has attracted a wider audience for his work.

Matheson, whose work can be found in collections throughout the world, continues to work on commissions and exhibitions. This year, exhibitions of his work have included “40 Years in the Making” from March 30 to May 6 at Brampton Museum, Brampton Park, Newcastle under Lyme, Staffordshire. His cups and jugs will be on view in a solo exhibition titled, “Pour Me a Drink” at the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) in Birmingham, England, until November 16, 2019.

Andrew Matheson is an elected member of the RBSA, a member of Creative Coverage, a member of Birmingham Art Circle, an associate member of the Craft Potters Association, and the chairman of Midland Potters. To learn more, visit www.andrewmatheson.co.uk.

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