





**JASON WASON**  
A Devil's Box of Tricks

LSG

**'My journey is still unfolding, there is no resolution.'**

Jason Wason was born in Liverpool in 1946. His father, who imported hardwood from Africa and Asia, often brought him to see cargo being unloaded onto the docks. The beguiling impression of Liverpool being a gateway to different places and cultures left an indelible imprint on his young imagination. Almost inevitably he dreamed of leaving and exploring other parts of the world.



At one point an uncle arranged for Jason to be interviewed as a trainee purser with Cunard. Seen as a solution to his growing wanderlust the interview went wrong when it was made clear that no matter how rude the passengers might be, their demands always had to be met. By the time he returned home Jason had decided that he was not going to join Cunard. Understandably his family were not impressed. This rejection of authority has remained with Wason throughout his life.

A brief, early marriage (1964) was followed by a period squatting in Amsterdam. A trip to Istanbul led to an erratic hitch-hiking marathon, with India as the intended destination. Along the way there was regular conflict with the police and custom officials: *'It was all a bit chaotic – yet, endlessly fascinating at the time. I was almost addicted to adventure.'* This

addiction fuelled further adventures throughout Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Morocco.

Embracing the values espoused by the emergence in the 1960s of a confident and affluent youth culture, Wason was eager to experience all of the visual, intellectual, sensual and chemical stimuli that his travelling offered. Opting out of a traditional art school education these experiences became his 'university of life'.

Wason's time in Scotland, where he had set up a crafts co-operative (1972–76), provided a period of calm after a hectic and nomadic decade. Whilst working on his self-made kick wheel he quickly became a skilled and proficient thrower. His pots reflected his awareness of how other people and places interacted with their ceramic artefacts. He instinctively knew that functionality was only one of many considerations. His career as a cultural raider was taking shape based on a belief that many of the pots he had seen and handled *'said something that alluded to our universal self.'*

Following this experience of self-sufficiency, Wason joined the Leach Pottery in St. Ives (1976). In many ways this was an unexpected move, with the pottery heavily involved in the daily production of a standard ware range. Although at this time Bernard Leach's creative powers were on the wane, Wason retained enormous respect for him as a practitioner and teacher (particularly through the publication of *A Potter's Book* (1940) which promulgated the production of pottery as a civilizing force). Wason also acknowledges the influence of Janet Leach and her management of the workshop at a time when her direct manner was seen by some as a challenge. When asked what he gained from his time at the Leach Pottery, he is unequivocal: *'I acquired discipline, new skills, a respect for materials, and a good eye.'* Hardly surprising when he was throwing up to fifty jugs each day!

Throughout his time in St Ives, Wason was permitted to produce his own pots in the evening. This output encouraged a more distinctive 'signature' in order to stand out from the standard ware range. The three-way split on the sale of his pots – one third for the potter, one third for the pottery and one third to pay for materials – provided some additional income for a growing family. After five years of intensive activity, Wason left the Leach Pottery (1981) in order to set up at St Just.

Determinedly walking to his own beat, he freely admits to his own insecurities and demons. He has no identifiable political or religious position but regards his creative output as *'something akin to a devotional activity, essentially exploring the nature of a gradually unfolding journey'*



A Devil's Box of Tricks 11 x 44 x 47 cm Bronze

through the medium of clay'. Even now he recognises that he has never properly settled: 'I am very aware that we are just passing through, we are hurtling through space on a lump of rock, – the ephemeral nature of our lives makes me quite indifferent to possessions and unable to fully commit to stability.' The desire to take off on another journey is always there. With such preoccupations it remains a surprise that a restless soul like Wason can produce such serene and monumental pots.



Reflecting on his indirect influences Wason reveals the critical approach he applies to his own practice. His response to Hans Coper (1920–81), a German émigré who introduced a bold strand of European modernism into British ceramics, is incisive: 'He created a unique physical thing, with a strong underlying spirit.' Of the ceramic ware made by the Mimbres people of the Gila Valley, New Mexico (1000–200AD), Wason believes: 'Their pots, plates and bowls say something about their universe. They provide keys about the nature of being – to people who can read them.' His travels also created a lasting love and respect for Chinese and Korean ceramics. From a British perspective, the pottery of Medieval England remains an important creative source.

Wason's description of his professional self is forthright: 'I am a ceramicist.' He is also a magician who utilises the texture of clay to

produce work that is inspirational and unsettling in equal measure. 'I like clay with a good deal of grog in it, forgiving clay with a lot of heart.'

Many individual pieces, including the ritualistic references in some of the titles, reveal codes and signs to basic human emotions and experiences. The meditative power exuded by the larger pots challenges the boundaries and recognised tension between ceramics, sculpture and architecture.

As a potter who resolutely digs deep and holds a steady course, Wason's visual language evolves slowly, with each pot wrought from his disciplined imagination. He sees no need for unexpected twists and turns. Almost everything he produces has a strong central axis, with the surface textures or applied decoration rarely allowed to undermine the overall symmetry. This embrace of geometry is a reflection of a deep need to establish a rigorous visual order. Wason seems to demand that the viewer should adopt a strict and formal relationship with his work.

Many of the pots dominate their immediate environment and hint at long-lost ceremonies and rituals. It would be wrong however to view these as mere reproductions of ancient relics – they are much more than that and raise questions about the meaning of vessels and their desirability as precious objects.

The sculptural authority of Wason's pots is heightened by his predilection for unglazed surfaces which are burnished and often treated with oxides. This protracted process of surface enrichment reflects his empathetic rapport with nature: 'For economic and environmental reasons I rarely fire above 1100°C. Sometimes, I use post-firing techniques with gorse, hay from the fields or seaweed to generate random marks.'

The moment when his new collection of thrown, coiled or slabbed constructions enters the kiln generates a feeling of excitement and trepidation. The loss of control and his feeling that there is 'always something of the voodoo about fire' could apply equally to clay and bronze casting. Failure is a commonplace occurrence for any potter, as evidenced by the 'broken' pieces I found scattered around the family garden at St Just. They retain a strange beauty and, having come from the earth, look as if they are committed to a long, slow journey back to their subterranean origins. Perhaps these discarded shards should be shown alongside the final selection of pristine objects?

Without exception, the containers, large dishes and bowls in this show have an intellectual and formal coherence. That is underpinned by an enigmatic relationship with the cultural history of ceramics. A creative lineage through the centuries is strongly evidenced in Wason's ongoing

series of constructed 'preservation boxes'. These ceramic containers come to life when the lid is removed and the contents revealed. The eclectic mix of bones, fossils, skulls and semi-precious stones provide for multiple readings.

In 2008 the Pangolin Gallery in London provided Wason with an opportunity to cast some of his ceramic pieces in bronze and silver. This engagement with a new medium offered numerous challenges:

*'Primarily, I had to decide why anything that I had made in clay should be cast into metal. In what way could I use the properties of bronze to further enhance the piece. It has been a great learning curve working with the team at the foundry, watching them translate clay into metal, and then surface the bronze with patinas.'*

*A Devil's Box of Tricks*, made of bronze, sand and fossils, demonstrates a unique ability to amalgamate different materials and histories into an object of real power and mystery. The contents of this box – including three ammonites (160–180 million years old), two belemnites from Lyme Regis (195 million years old) and one Megalodon tooth (the largest fish to have ever existed, 4–5 million years ago, ancestor to the great white) are truly awe-inspiring. Another outcome of the partnership with Pangolin, *Silent Witness* is an extraordinary amphora-shaped bronze container. Its size, the balletic balancing on the plinth, and its unpolished surface texture all contribute to an impressive sense of majesty. The ancient and modern have come together to create a sentinel that looks to the past and the future.

Towards the end of the 1960s the art critic Bryan Robertson was overwhelmed by the emotional power of an exhibition by Mark Rothko (1902–1970), the pioneer of American Abstract Expressionism. He concluded: 'We are left with a presence, rather than a specific identity.'

As we enter a period of austerity, perhaps this should be our guiding star when we engage with the singular and single-minded artistic concerns of Jason Wason.

*Professor Alan Livingston CBE, July 2010*

**Silent Witness** 164.5 x 24 cm Bronze





Tall Red and Gold Jar 73 x 28 cm Ceramic

Red and Gold Vessel 52 x 55 cm Ceramic





Orange Black and Gold Vessel 25 x 38 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Vessel 34 x 45 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Studded Jar 18 x 18 cm Ceramic



Small Lidded Jar with Studs 15 x 17 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Low Vessel 16 x 55 cm Ceramic

Low Vessel 22 x 58 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Vessel 53 x 53 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Vessel 53 x 56 cm Ceramic





Red and Gold Lidded Vessel 27 x 35 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Lidded Vessel 25 x 46 cm Ceramic



Mother's Bowl 26 x 54 cm Ceramic



Red and Gold Vessel 46 x 50 cm Ceramic



Studded Bowl 22 x 36 cm Ceramic



Scaled Bowl 22 x 42 cm Ceramic



Studded Vessel 36 x 30 cm Ceramic



Black and Blue Pyramid Studded Bowl 24 x 44 cm Ceramic



Gold Bowl with Blue Diamonds 13 x 25 cm Ceramic



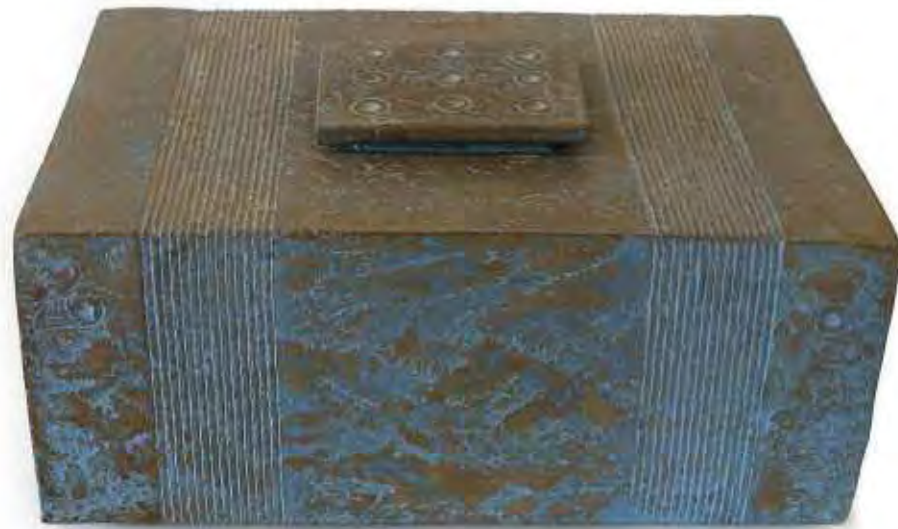
Blue and Gold Vessel 25 x 45 cm Ceramic



Blue and Gold Vessel 56 x 50 cm Ceramic



Square Bottle 28 x 28 cm Ceramic



Blue and Black Square Box 14 x 30 x 22 cm Ceramic



Red and White Zig Zag Dish 5 x 55 cm Ceramic



Red and White Dish 6 x 40 cm Ceramic



Black and White Dish 5 x 45 cm Ceramic

Guarded Dish 10 x 30 cm Ceramic (detail)



Guarded Box with Amonite 23 x 46 cm Ceramic

BRONZE and SILVER



Give Me That Old Time Religion 11 x 38 x 46 cm Bronze, edition of 5

Mother's Bowl 30 x 55 cm Bronze, edition of 5





Low Slung Vessel 17 x 55 cm Bronze, edition of 5

Reliquary 21 x 48 cm Bronze, edition of 5





Closer to Home 60 cm high Sterling silver, edition of 10



Silver Jar 15 x 19 cm Sterling silver, edition of 5

## JASON WASON

Born 1946 Liverpool

- 1964-1974 Travelled Europe, North Africa, Middle East, Asia.  
1974-1976 Set up crafts community in Dumfriesshire, built a kick wheel from the back wheel and half shaft of a Morris 1000 van, and learnt to throw.  
1976-1981 Leach Pottery, St Ives.  
1981- present Own studio, St Just, Cornwall.

### Exhibitions

- 2010 'A Devil's Box of Tricks', Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.  
2010 'Burnt Offerings', Pangolin London.  
2010 'Ceramics in the Studio', Newlyn Art Gallery.  
2010 Mashiko Museum, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan.  
2008 London Art Fair (Lemon Street Gallery).  
2008 'Gallery St Ives', Tokyo, Japan.  
2008 Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu prefecture, Japan, and work bought in for the permanent museum collection.  
  
2008 Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.  
2007 London Art Fair (Lemon Street Gallery).  
2007 'The Circle is Unbroken', Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.  
2007 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London, mixed show.  
2006 Austin Desmond Fine Art, Bloomsbury Square London, summer show.  
2006 Harlequin Gallery, London, mixed show.  
2006 Seto City Art Museum, Japan.  
2005 Kusakabe Folk Museum, Gifu Prefecture, Japan.  
2005 Maruzen Department Store Nagoya, Japan.  
2004 Collect, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
2004 'Jason Wason Ceramics', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
2003 'Body and Form', Joanna Bird Gallery, London.  
2003 Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.  
2002 Gallery Bizen Seto Shi, Aichi, Japan.  
2002 'Ceramica International', including Bernard Leach, Janet Leach, Penlee Museum, Penzance.  
2002 'Potters from the Treasure House', Jason Wason, Yasuo Terada, Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
2002 Seto City Cultural Centre, Aichi Prefecture, Japan, exhibition of work after two months' residency.  
2002 'Japanese Connections', Seto Glass and Ceramic Centre, Japan.  
2001 British Studio Ceramics, Clay Studio Philadelphia, USA.  
2001 'SOFA Expo', sculptural Objects and Functional Art, Chicago.  
2000 Six Chapel Row, Bath.  
2000 Worked for two months with Yasuo Terada at Seto, and firing anagama kiln at Seihoji Ancient Kiln Park, Aichi.  
2000 'Japanese Connections', C Square Gallery, Nagoya Japan.  
2000 'Jason Wason, David Leach, Shinsaka Hamada, Tatsuzo Shimaoka', Dartington Hall, Devon.  
1999 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
1999 Cobra and Bellamy, Chelsea, London.  
1998 Running Ridge Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

- 1998 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
1997 Six Chapel Row, Bath.  
1997 Joanna Bird Gallery, including Leach, Hamada, Cardew, Rie.  
1996 'Playing With Fire', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
1995 'Ten Pieces', Tate Gallery, St Ives.  
1995 'Japanese Connections', touring show.  
1995 'Textiles and Ceramics', Rufford Art Centre, Nottingham.  
1995 Cornish Crafts Association, Truro Museum.  
1995 Gallery Gilbert, Dorchester.  
1995 Gallerie Inart, Amsterdam.  
1995 Boymans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam  
1995 Vincent Gallery, Exeter.  
1994 Raku exhibition, Tate Gallery St Ives.  
1994 Andrew Usisken Galery, London.  
1993 'Excavation Series', Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
1992 Maruzen Department Store, Tokyo, Japan.  
1990 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London.  
1990 National Museum and Gallery, Liverpool.

### Appointments

- 2005 Appointed member of committee for Seihoji Ancient Kiln Park, Aichi, Japan.  
  
2005 International artist in residence, for Seto City, Aichi, Japan.  
2002 Appointed Project Officer for Ceramica International Festival of Ceramics, run by Tate Gallery, Newlyn Orion Gallery, Truro Museum. International artist in residence, for Seto City, Aichi, Japan.  
  
2001 Appointed Project Officer, Japan 2001, to invite Yasuo Terada to UK and together to build a Raku kiln at Leach Pottery St Ives.

### Awards

- 2005 South West Arts Council, grant to work at EXPO 2005, at Seihoji Kiln Park, Seto Japan.  
1998 South West Arts Council, grant to work and study, New Mexico, USA.  
1997 Lecture tour of Israel, funded by British Council.  
1992 Installation at British High Commission, Dhakar, Bangladesh.  
1990 South West Arts Council, grant to open European Connections, Holland in particular.

### Publications

- 2006 *Ceramic Review*, profile, July 06  
2006 *The Leach Legacy*, second edition, Marion Whybrow, published by Sansom and Co.  
2005 *Raku*, second edition by Tim Andrews, published by AC Black.  
2004 *Journey to St Ives, Kinship between East and West*, published by Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Arts.  
2004 'Mimbres Potters', article written by J Wason, *Ceramic Review* 18.  
2004 *Crafts*, exhibition review of Six Chapel Row show.  
2004 *Raku*, Tim Andrews, first edition.  
1998 *Ceramic Review*, exhibition review, issue 173.  
1992 *In Their Element*, film by Television South West.  
1992 *Dictionary of British Potters*, Pat Carter, Scholar Press.



Published by Lemon Street Gallery to accompany the exhibition:  
Jason Wason – A Devil's Box of Tricks, 7 – 28 August 2010.

Design: Classic Design, St Ives, Cornwall.  
Photography of bronzes & silver works: Pangolin London/Steve Russell

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Back cover: **The Party is Over** 157 x 54 cm Ceramic

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