

Ceramics at Mayfield

Flying the flag for ceramics is important at a time when reduced budgets, resources and support has seen its gradual demise as a subject area in arts education.

Tim Rees-Moorlah, head of ceramics at Mayfield School, Tunbridge Wells, explains

I am in the very privileged position of teaching ceramics at Mayfield, an independent 11 to 18-year-old girls' school south of Tunbridge Wells. The school was originally built up from the ruins of an old palace belonging to the Archbishops of Canterbury. It has a strong Catholic tradition and was founded in 1872 by Cornelia Connelly, a nun and educator with a strong belief in creativity; a theme that happily still continues today. The school supports the arts, which are on an equal footing alongside all of the other academic subjects, and over the years has invested heavily in the growth and development of all the visual arts subjects.

Mayfield has dedicated spaces and departments for fine art, textiles and ceramics. We have two specialist ceramic teaching areas and a generous budget to work with. This enables us to develop knowledge of ceramic media and explore its potential with students. It would be very fair to say that without the support from the school and its ethos, our pupils' knowledge and achievements in ceramics and other specialist areas would not have been possible.

At Mayfield, ceramics is effectively the 3D technology subject in the school, as 15 years ago design and technology ceased to be taught. I am blessed with small class sizes (16 at key stage 4) and each pupil learns how to coil a pot, slab build

and model in years 7–9 (ages 11–14) so that they have a good understanding of the material before they reach year 10 (ages 14–15). At this point pupils are encouraged to become much more individual with their design approach, while also building upon and refining their skills. Many GCSE and sixth-form students take multiple arts subjects and in the sixth form we offer A-level and now also Pre-U, a course that we feel offers our pupils more time to develop and refine their work, especially as so much time is needed to dry and fire work.

With clay, pupils become specialists. We have some who become skilled in specific areas such as modelling or decorating, and it is wonderful to see the growth in skill and confidence within each individual. All are able to direct their own journey from an open starting point such as 'structure'. Sixth-form pupils have tutorials each week to discuss what they intend to achieve. Tracking sheets are used to aid their progress and keep momentum through the course.

The key element to a successful ceramics area (beyond the materials and equipment) is organisation. I am fortunate to work with two excellent members of staff who are both ceramics specialists and I learnt quickly the importance of the systems that were in place for drying, firing and glazing a whole school's ceramics output efficiently. Nine different clays are used in the department and firings range from 750 Celsius to 1280. Coiling, slab building, throwing, sculpting and mould making are a few of the skills our pupils learn.

Constant testing of glazes on small pre-made test pieces or textured maquettes is key to the pupils obtaining the desired results. Failure to do so usually results in disappointment. I'm often reminded of Winston Churchill's quote: 'Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.' Indeed, our most successful pupils are those that do not give up when faced with technical problems.

Characteristics of a student that undertakes an art subject is that of an independent learner and a flexible problem-solver, qualities that schools encourage but don't always provide the opportunities for their pupils to practice on a regular basis. In art, craft and design, problem solving and resilience are key.

In an attempt to spread ceramics to a wider local audience, a recent development in the department has been the inclusion of an artist-in-residence position. My goal for this role was to provide a stepping-stone for ceramics graduates after university, to develop their work and deliver lessons to the local community. We were very lucky to have Anastasia Simmons with us for two years. In this time she developed links with a local school, teaching ceramics to year 10 pupils there once a week and helping with the technicalities that clay presents. Anastasia moved on to teach ceramics part time at Bedales School this year. We are very pleased to welcome Jessica Thorn who has joined us this year who has been hailed as one of 'the ten to watch' in *Ceramic Review*.

Our pupils have the expertise, time and the support of an arts-rich school. We know this contrasts with some schools where the subject is challenged by reduced support, budgets and lack of space. Within this national context it is important to keep the ceramics flag flying. It would be very sad indeed for these skills to die out, and I sometimes wonder how many young people will never have the opportunity to experience clay and discover their talent.

We would welcome anyone who is keen to set up or develop their ceramics practice in school to visit Mayfield and see what we do. We would also happily provide any technical advice and hope that some aspect of our methodology might be helpful. ■

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1 Ella O'Connor, w80cm, Pre-U
2 Davina Thomas, GCSE
3 Abbie La Rooy, A-level
4 Yasmin Whitlock, GCSE

5 Casia Makren, 90cm, Pre-U
6 Emmy Redman, life size, Pre-U
7 Laura Fernandez, GCSE



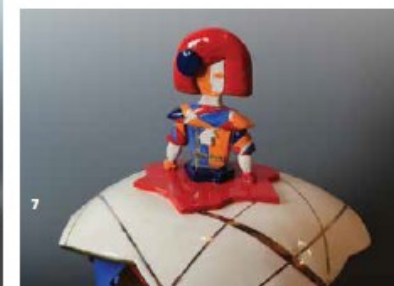
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