

# Hans Coper: new contexts, new approaches

## One-Day Symposium

Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2024

### Schedule:

- 10.30am Arrival, registration and coffee
- 11.00am Welcome from Andrew Nairne, Director of Kettle's Yard
- 11.10am Introduction from Inga Fraser & Naomi Polonsky
- 11.30am Janine Barker: *Crafting Émigré Communities in Post-War Britain*
- 12.00pm Helen Walsh: *Recollecting Coper*
- 12.30pm Helen Ritchie: *Collingwood/ Coper*
- 1.00pm Lunch break and chance to see current exhibitions
- 2.30pm Senah Tuma: *Hans Coper and Health*
- 3.00pm Alun Graves: *'An accumulation of sensations': the sculptural pottery of Hans Coper*
- 3.30pm Comfort break
- 3.45pm Roundtable and Q&A
- 4.15pm Closing remarks from Inga Fraser & Naomi Polonsky
- 4.30pm End

Please note that the 'Hans Coper and Health' paper contains discussion and details of suicide and chronic illness.

## **Abstracts and Speakers:**

DR JANINE BARKER, 'Crafting émigré communities in post-war Britain'

Henry Rothschild arrived in Britain in 1933, escaping the spread of National Socialism in his home country and beyond. Influenced by his cultural experiences at home in Germany, and his time in Italy during the war, in 1945 he returned to London and, with unmatched confidence, set up Primavera, a retail outlet that sold and exhibited the very best of industrial and handmade craft and design. Part of Rothschild's success stemmed from positioning himself within the network of European émigrés of this period who influenced and changed the direction of British craft. Among these makers were Hans Coper, Lucie Rie and Ruth Duckworth, all of whom Rothschild worked with and supported during their careers. This talk will explore this network of European craftspeople living and working in Britain. It will explore the tensions and challenges in negotiating a new home in a new country. There will be a discussion on the wider implications of national identity and how shared experiences do not always equal a shared path, both personally and professionally. The aim of this talk will be to present these individual narratives and use them to build what is a nuanced picture of the craft community in post-war Britain.

**Dr Janine Barker is a historian specialising in post-war British craft. Her AHRC-funded PhD focused on Henry Rothschild and Primavera, a collaboration with Northumbria University and Shipley Art Gallery. Barker subsequently secured an AHRC Cultural Engagement Fellowship to digitise Rothschild's archive, now housed at Tyne and Wear Archives. In 2021, following a number of associate positions in academia, Dr Barker sidestepped into secondary education as a history teacher and now works with young people with special educational needs.**

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DR HELEN WALSH, 'Recollecting Coper'

Hans Coper's impact on the ceramic world was, and continues to be, enormous. His legacy can be seen in the powerful body of ceramic works he produced, and in the work of the artists he taught or inspired. Coper himself remains an enigma, unlike his friend, fellow refugee and potter Lucie Rie, who took part in a seminal BBC Omnibus programme in the 1980s. Coper's experience of fleeing Nazi persecution in World War Two left him with a lifelong and unshakeable fear. He never allowed himself to be recorded speaking or working; he regretted the one piece of writing he allowed to be published; and he insisted that his personal papers be destroyed upon his death.

Primary source material within private collectors' personal archives, are one of the few remaining opportunities to gain an understanding of Coper's character, offering insights into relationships and encounters. This paper uses the archives and recollections of private collectors (such as Yorkshire librarian W.A. Ismay and the husband-and-wife collectors Alan and Pat Firth), to discuss the important and supportive role collectors had in Coper's life.

Through the anecdotal experience of these private collectors, we also discover the powerful effect owning and living with Coper's ceramic works had on some.

**Dr Helen Walsh is Curator of Ceramics at York Art Gallery and has been in charge of York Museums Trust's important collections of contemporary and historical ceramics since 2004. She has curated a number of exhibitions at York Art Gallery, including *Honest Pots, Lucie Rie Ceramics & Buttons*, and *Gillian Lowndes: At The Edge*, as well as managing the touring exhibitions *Gordon Baldwin: Objects for a Landscape*. In 2023, she redisplayed part of the permanent collection to focus on women ceramic artists. Walsh founded the UK's Contemporary Studio Ceramics Subject Specialist Network in 2012 and helped establish the Centre of Ceramic Art (CoCA) at York Art Gallery, which opened in 2015. She completed doctoral research at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2017 on the W.A. Ismay collection, transforming her research into the exhibition and book *The Yorkshire Tea Ceremony* in 2020. She supervises research students, writes and is a judge on the Henry Rothschild Bursary selection panel.**

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HELEN RITCHIE, 'Collingwood | Coper 1969'

This paper will take as its starting point the important exhibition, *Collingwood | Coper*, on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 29 January to 2 March 1969. Intended as the first of a series of exhibitions showcasing work by pairs of contemporary makers, it sought 'to complement and underline the reputation of fairly well-established craftsmen.' Rather than a retrospective, this exhibition was intended to showcase new work. Weaver Peter Collingwood and Coper worked intensively throughout 1968 to produce hundreds of new pieces. However, this led to tension between the artists, who wanted to sell their work and be recompensed for their time, and the V&A, who felt that this was not appropriate. A watershed moment for British public institutions working with contemporary craftspeople, this exhibition exposed tensions between commercial and non-commercial modes of display, just as the status of crafts in Britain began to change. Using this exhibition as a fulcrum, this paper will explore the display of Coper's work during this period, contrasting institutional displays with those organised by an increasingly broad and active community of craft dealers and galleries. Analysing contemporary reception of Coper's work and the ways in which it was framed in relation to 'craft' and 'art', this paper will explore the meaning of Coper's work to viewers and collectors during the latter part of his career.

**Helen Ritchie is Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Applied Arts at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. She is also a doctoral student at University of Cambridge, researching the studio ceramics of Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie (1895–1985) and Norah Braden (1901–2001). She writes and lectures on British studio pottery, contemporary craft and European design post-1850, and has curated a number of exhibitions, often in collaboration with contemporary artists.**

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## SENAH TUMA, 'Hans Coper and Health'

This paper explores the role of 'health' in the life of Hans Coper through a holistic consideration that aims to further humanise the enigmatic figure. Coper ultimately died after seven years of debilitating illness attributed to Lou Gehrig's disease, also known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis: a rare, fatal neurodegenerative disease that causes progressive muscle weakness and paralysis. The causes of ALS are uncertain, and to date, there is no cure. In the final years of his life, he was unable to sculpt, and this physical decline profoundly impacted both his life and work. This research contributes to an appreciation of this artist, offering insights into how traumatic physical and mental health shaped his art and legacy. It draws from existing research, such as biographies, scientific journals, and potters' forums. The paper will explore key points of 'health' in Coper's life – his father's suicide, his escape from persecution in Nazi Germany, his own attempts at suicide, and his physical health. This paper engages with this research to enhance consideration and awareness of the interplay between Coper's work, his creative-personal experiences, and mental health.

**Senah Tuma is an early-career decolonial curator-researcher; her research primarily concerns applying decolonial and anti-racist lenses to art history, spaces of art and art education. Her interest in ceramics comes from her time studying at the University of York and the University of York Art Gallery, where she received her BA in History of Art, and where there is an impressive collection of ceramics. Of particular interest was the collection of works by Lucie Rie, longtime friend and studio partner of Hans Coper. She also holds nearly two postgraduate degrees from the University of Cambridge.**

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## ALUN GRAVES, "An accumulation of sensations": the sculptural pottery of Hans Coper'

In a letter of recommendation of 1958, Bernard Leach observed that Hans Coper has 'already proved himself as a sculptor-potter'. This compound term reflects the duality of Coper's practice. From the late 1950s onwards, Coper developed a novel visual language for pottery, in which ceramic forms assume the characteristics of sculpture. Coper himself appears to have understood ceramics to be distinct from sculpture – or at least its more expressionist forms – reportedly characterising pottery as 'an accumulation of sensations and not an expression of emotion'. Coper's concerns certainly lay in the abstract possibilities of three-dimensional form and the tactile and sensual nature of surfaces, rather than with representation or with expressive gesture – then prevalent in sculpture. These various positions reflect something of the complex and ambiguous position of ceramics within the arts in mid-century Britain. While sculptural readings of pottery were prevalent in the interwar years, when relationships between sculpture, painting and ceramics were apparent, the postwar years witnessed greater separation of disciplines. This situation was heightened by the placement of ceramics within the field of three-dimensional design rather than fine art, for the purposes of the new Diploma of Art and Design, launched in the early 1960s. The period nevertheless witnessed an explosion of activity in sculptural ceramics, with Coper and others including Gordon Baldwin and Ruth Duckworth leading the way. This paper will explore the ground-breaking sculptural

character of Coper's pottery in the context of these wider developments of ceramics of the period.

Alun Graves is Senior Curator, Ceramics and Glass 1900–now, in the Decorative Art and Sculpture Department at the V&A, London. He is the author of *Studio Ceramics: British Studio Pottery 1900 to Now* (Thames & Hudson, 2023), and has written widely on 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21st-century British ceramics and sculpture. He has curated many exhibitions including *Alison Britton: Content and Form* (V&A, 2016), *Simon Carroll: Expressionist Potter* (V&A / Ruthin Craft Centre, 2014–5), and with Sarah Griffin, *Material Language: New Work in Clay* (New Art Centre, Salisbury, 2016).