

## Portrait of the artist as a young man

In 1981 Michael Cardew was in Wichita, Kansas, speaking at an NSECA conference. Aged eighty, he was in elegiac mood: 'And when the time comes, at last, when you finally have to stop making pots, and all the pots you made in the past have been broken in use (except, perhaps for a few which have been preserved in museums) then, people are going to ask, "where can I obtain other pots like those?' And, at that point (if you have done your life's work properly) they will be able to go to pupils whom you have taught in the past. Their pots will be different; but if the pots were given life by the maker they will be able (nobody understands how) to impart life – that is to say, pleasure – to the people who use them.'

Luckily for us, Michael Cardew *did* do his life's work properly. A small coterie was imaginative enough to spend part of their youth at Michael's pottery at Wenford Bridge in Cornwall, living the simple life. Mark Hewitt was one of these young people who chose to be apprenticed to this cantankerous, scholarly, hot-tempered genius.

Hewitt's background was industrial ceramic; his parents assumed he would rise to an eventual directorship within Spode-Copeland, the Staffordshire firm his family had helped run for several generations. But his undoubted interest in ceramics took him in markedly other directions.

At Bristol University a fellow student gave him a copy of Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, a text that proposes an alternative way of life, albeit in ceramic terms. It spoke to Hewitt's idealism - after leaving school he had travelled to India through Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, seeing first hand how the rest of the world lived. But *A Potter's Book* also teaches aesthetics and practice and Hewitt began to study the early Chinese pots in Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and to use the pottery studio in the Student's Union.

On November 15 1976 a touring retrospective devoted to the work of Michael Cardew opened in Bristol. Mark Hewitt was present, eager to meet Leach's greatest pupil. He saw 'a most remarkable man' with flowing white hair and shabby clothes - these were imbued with the scent of wood-smoke which Mark found 'homely and warm and, at once, defiant'.

Michael took few apprentices and chose them with care – Hewitt passed an invisible test and arrived at Wenford in early September 1977 to enter a strange new world. By the late 1970s Michael's extraordinary energy was flagging and he was much concerned with setting down his life story, in particular the tumultuous first years in West Africa between 1942 and 1948. Sometimes he just reflected on the past. Take this diary entry for April 1 1978: 'Up 8.30 Dreaming & grieving & thinking all morning'.

On occasion he made pots and, up to a point, engaged with his students. But at that stage his son Seth oversaw much of the day-to-day routine. Perhaps routine is the wrong word – on sunny days Michael would urge his students down to the sea or up onto the moors. Mark was often co-opted into garden work – cutting down dead trees or sowing peas. Visits were paid to Bernard Leach in St Ives. In November 1977 Michael and Mark were allowed to read passages from Leach's as yet unpublished autobiography *Beyond East and West* and Michael records: 'Discussions in car, chiefly w Mark, on way home re "E & W" etc.' Fellow students came and went – Joanna, Danlami, Dawn, Tom and Thiebaut. Michael had created a commune for his old age that also did duty as an informal university.

Mark learnt how to run a pottery and how to throw quickly and accurately elsewhere. From Michael he learnt standards – looking at Michael's own pots, discussing pots in the evening at dinner, sitting at a long table by the fire. He learnt standards too by grappling with Cardew's complicated ways of preparing his materials - 'the clay was alive, it felt organic and fresh' - and from firing Cardew's demanding, unpredictable kiln. One day Michael asked 'Who made those pitchers?' and Mark realised that he was on the way to becoming a potter.

In October 1979 Mark set off for West Africa, going part of the way in Michael's footsteps, reporting back on the Pottery Training Centre Michael had created at Suleja in Northern Nigeria. He saw the women potters at work in nearby Tatiko and Kwali and sent vivid, descriptive letters which Michael carefully filed away: 'a long letter from Mark all about Tatiko near Paiko & their lovely pots - it made me cry, copiously!'

Mark, like many of Michael's students, was for a time treated as a son. In the end sons have to leave home and when Mark got back from West Africa in early 1980 he

realised he should move on. He worked for Todd Piker (another former student) at Cornwall Bridge in Connecticut. North America began to exert its hold and he wrote to Michael 'it is such an interesting place, not so much stiffness, an abundance of wood, good materials down south in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and I am greatly intrigued with the idea of trying to set up a 'pioneering' type of workshop down there'.

Mark's most beautiful letters to Michael were written from the Far East during 1982. In Japan he felt uneasy, unnerved by 'A veneer of politeness and courtesy'. In retrospect he preferred Korea: 'the Korean potters were so confident, happy, generous and strong. They were anti-commercial, preferring to spend time talking and laughing and drinking fermented rice wine...But when they did work they worked with a fluency that was beautiful to watch...The most important thing I learnt was that the work should be approached with a healthy delight and an easy confidence; anguish, worry and doubt have no place in the decisiveness necessary to be fluent.'

He confided in Michael: 'My apprenticeship is almost at an end..The pots that I am drawn to more and more are the

simplest ones, often unglazed, relying on strength of form alone, and on the accidents of firing'. There was the problem of eclecticism. He, like all modern ceramicists, had seen so many pots, been subjected to such a wealth of images of pots. But, he wrote to Michael, 'So long as I start with good materials, work hard making lots of pots and fire with wood in a big kiln I'm sure things will fall into place'. And so it proved.