



Tristram Hunt: Talents of nimble-fingered potters can be used to improve surgery skills

By **The Sentinel** | Posted: November 18, 2013

‘IT WAS the work of seconds. At one moment a wet, grey lump of clay would be slapped on to the fast rotation of the wheel. As his left hand kept it centrally poised, the right hand – a large, strong hand with thick, yet nimble fingers – would make a hole in the wet clay with the thumb, and then coax and pinch.

‘It was all so skilful that it felt like a completion of some celestial purpose; as if this lump of earth, from the moment of its first geological formation, had been but half-finished until re-crafted by the hand of Josiah.’

So read A.N. Wilson’s fictionalised [account](#) of Wedgwood’s brilliance at the potter’s wheel.

But what if that skill had a broader use, beyond the potbank? That is the argument of an interesting new charity, Clayground Collective, working to explore the wider uses of clay beyond cups and crocks.

It was established in 2007 by the ceramic artist Duncan Hooson and theatre producer Julia Rowntree to address the decline of clay studies in schools and colleges. Its long-term initiative, Project Clay, brings people together across generations and cultures to appreciate clay and its role in cultures across the globe.

And just as Wedgwood would never have pigeon-holed himself as just an artist, designer, businessman or scientist, so Hooson and Rowntree want to explore the multiple skills which working with clay can encourage.

The thinking was inspired by Rowntree’s own parents, who combined science and art by being both doctors and skilled crafts people. But in the schools she visited promoting drama, Rowntree noticed a dramatic decline of creative hand work among primary children.

Since the late 1990s, children were having less and less familiarity with games, toys, and other forms of play that give practice in exploring and creating through the use of hands. Almost none worked with clay to mould shapes and figures, or learned how to do intricate needlework.

Alongside the drop off in these activities had come a sharp decline in the ability of primary school children to discern visual details in illustrations of maps and graphic designs.

And we have seen these trends accelerate in recent years with a slowdown in the numbers of students taking art, design and music subjects at school in the face of an increasingly constricted syllabus.

But what was really interesting was the connection to Rowntree's parents as doctors. Because the decline in children's ability to use their hands had, she learnt, also come to affect the ability of surgeons. Increasingly, medical students had no sense of how to use their hands in diagnostic work, as they had come to rely too much on technologies. The best doctors always combined the work of hands with visual detection.

What had been lost in the medical profession was the so-called 'thinking hand'.

For as the hand does its work – just as the potter shapes his or her clay – it calls on other ways of knowing that result from shaping, grasping, drawing, and manipulating materials.

So what the Clayground Collective did was try to return some dexterity to doctors.

The Professor of Surgical Education at Imperial College was invited to Central St Martin's Art College in London to lead a team of surgical students in learning about the craft of surgery through working with clay.

Students were reminded of things central to surgical craftsmanship – adjustment of body position and sightlines; preparation and choice of tools to achieve precise results; management of changing fluid levels; "seeing" normality or abnormality of material through the finger tips; attention to progress after procedure.

All the crafts of the potter could be brought to bear in improving medical surgery.

This seems another example of the extraordinary versatility of clay – and a further stage in man's long relationship with the substance. Doctors playing with potting also points to the importance of art and design in even the purest of academic disciplines.

And so here in The Potteries we should surely follow suit – as I am sure our top surgeons at UHNS could learn a few things from the ceramics department at Staffordshire University.

Certainly, the surgeons who cut off Josiah Wedgwood's lower leg back in the 18th century could have learnt a bit of subtlety at the potter's wheel.

Read more: <http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/Tristram-Hunt-Talents-nimble-fingered-potters/story-20094113-detail/story.html#ixzz30NZUwh2e>