

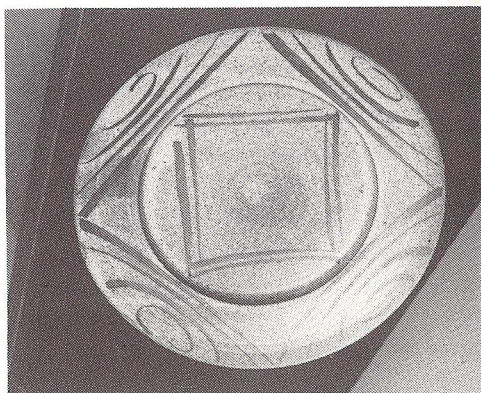
## 'Retrospect and Prospect'

*Richard Grasby comments:*

Two weeks is not long enough for an exhibition of the work of David Ballantyne: two years would not be long enough to comprehend the range of ideas and prototypes or to learn from finished pieces. The catalogue headings—Commissioned works, Lettering in ceramics, Architectural and mural schemes, Industrial design, Wall cladding—might imply separate creative activities undertaken by a team of craftsmen. Not so. They spring from one source, each reflects upon the other, and they are the output of one craftsman. Sir George Trevelyan opened the exhibition with a review of David's achievements as a painter, potter, designer, musician and writer, describing him as a Renaissance man. I dare say he would have enriched that period, but if there was a designer and craftsman with a grip on our times it is David Ballantyne.

Prototypes—the word in the title of his practice—has a double meaning: the 'original model' and the 'exemplar'. Both are expressed in this exhibition. The sense of 'beginning' is overwhelming. His works have the order and developed skills that make them exemplars, and the fresh originality that makes them the front runners of things to come. His lettering on bowls is executed with outrageous panache in a demanding medium (a combination of groundlaid enamelling and sgraffitto). The chances of producing a successful one-off piece that has passed

through several critical processes seem slim but he succeeds. Three stunning wedding plates have been lent for this exhibition which express joyful purpose as well as technical excellence. The sense of moving from design, to experiment, to achievement is everywhere and particularly in his terracotta relief tiles, the mural schemes and building elements.



David Ballantyne—Stoneware platter  
Photo: David Ballantyne

The group of restoration works show problem-solving at its best. No doubt the Victorians had complex moulds for the mass production of air bricks; a challenge for David was to produce a handful of replacements at a reasonable price. The cheap plywood forms he made with their related 'apple corers' will delight anyone whose heart leaps at practical solutions.

Formal elements repeated and assembled to create random patterns have been developed, in one form or another, for as long as I have known David, and he is still able to bring a new eye to their possibilities. There are curved forms in concrete wall blocks. Symbols contained

in squares, build pattern, texture and message. Coloured tiles based on a simple geometry assembled in marvelously complex and satisfying patterns are here displayed as completed works, but they suggest infinite possibilities. We had a joyous weekend workshop with David in which we explored these things, making our own interpretations



David Ballantyne—Mural panel for a theatre  
Photo: David Ballantyne

of form within the constraints of a grid. He was able to make the commonplace extraordinary and we astonished ourselves at our perception until we recognised that he was ahead of us.

The integration of his terracotta and metal name panels into the brickwork of buildings is something to which all environmental letterers will respond—a practical and creative relationship between craftsmen, architect and builder. David has devoted much of his professional energies to the development of *Codes and Advices on Professional Practice*, now adopted by 'Art and Architecture' and published in their Register.

It is inescapable that David is best known as a potter through his teaching at Bournemouth College of Art as well as his immense personal output. It is here in abundance, and as one with a deeply unspiritual loathing of the brown and crusted pot with the tactile qualities of rough cement, it was a joy for me to see and handle David's subtly glazed, coloured and superbly finished work.

A small gull-grey vase will be mine. I thought I had seen his bird-shaped dishes before, until I studied those shown here. I must have seen the prototypes. They have moved forward, delightfully.

David exhibits some of his works in collaboration with Ian Hamilton Finlay as drawings, photographs, maquettes and finished pieces. His footnote in the catalogue—"the Finlay collaborator must be prepared to work in a de-stabilising diversity of idioms"—is a charming understatement. Under the banner of 'collaboration' Finlay sets a variety of daunting technical problems. David is one of the very few craftsmen who has at his command both the poetic vision and the technical skills to resolve them. Consider the making of artefacts as diverse as a planter in the form of a rectangular Corinthian capital, a basket of pears and a watering can.

If you would see all the imagination, excitement and energy of a young craftsman coupled with the technical prowess of an experienced designer and maker, you will find them in David Ballantyne.

—Richard Grasby