

Chapter Four Sensing Workmanship



Fig. 4.1. Lead-glazed earthenware teapot, probably Josiah Wedgwood, enamelled at Leeds. C. 1770. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. C.728&A-1928¹.

Produced in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, this earthenware teapot shaped the physical world of at least one contemporary. Its visual vibrancy ultimately masks its other sensual qualities. A photograph of the object leaves questions unanswered. Reaching out to this object what were the physical expectations of the contemporary who grasped it? Is it heavy? Is it smooth to touch? Are there marks or grooves on the surface? Is the handle comfortable to hold? Does it have an odour? What sounds does it produce? Does the object have a taste?

Over the course of the eighteenth century the sensual experience of ceramic objects broadened as the products of the ceramics industry developed in new ways². This chapter argues that contemporaries principally experienced the skills of potters through the objects they encountered. As new products came onto the market contemporaries, through their senses, became accumulatively aware of the changing skills of potters. To explore the relationship between perceiver and object this chapter will use a range of ceramic objects from the period to construct an artefact-based account of contemporaries' sensory experience. This landscape of sensory experience will then be cross-referenced with contemporary comments, found in advertisements, literary sources and correspondents. I argue that it was in this arena of interaction, between perceiver and object, that the contemporary's concept of workmanship was initially constructed. I will use theoretical frameworks from both the material culture and anthropological disciplines to structure my approach.

¹ Height 13.5cm and length 19.8cm.

² For an outline of how ceramic production techniques and ceramic objects changed over the eighteenth century see Chapter One.

Jules D. Prown argues that, 'Material culture is the study of material; raw or processed, transformed by human action as expressions of culture.'³ For Prown, professionals working with material culture can be neatly divided into two groups. Firstly, the 'farmer' group, who approach material culture by focusing 'on those characteristics of objects that are consciously put there by the makers'⁴. The 'farmer' group consists generally of curators, who interact with objects to explore themes of authorship, provenance and aesthetics, by focusing on the aspects intentionally created by the maker.

The second group that Prown recognises is the 'cowmen' group made up of cultural historians and anthropologists. For the 'cowmen' their, 'quest is not to gather information about the object itself and the activities and practices of the society that produced it, but rather to discover the underlying cultural beliefs'⁵. Objects act as metaphors for the values of a given culture⁶. Cultural historians have broken new ground with objects, recognising the complex roles they play in social interactions. Borrowing frameworks from anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Arjun Appadurai, historians have analysed the meanings and uses of objects in various societies, cultures and periods. Douglas argues that objects are neutral⁷. It is their uses that are social and coded. They derive their meanings and values from relative human judgements, which compare objects in a hierarchical system⁸. In the 1980s, Appadurai, turned material culture analysis towards processes of exchange and commodification. Goods were reclaimed as social beings, which circulate, continually accruing meanings and life histories⁹. Marcia Pointon's work is a strong example of how historians have approached the historical problem that objects present. She uncovered evidence of eighteenth-century contemporaries exchanging, requesting and discussing objects as substitutes for intimacy in relationships operating across geographical space¹⁰. Pointon's work observes the use of objects in shared interactions to elucidate their meaning and their role in social and cultural

³ Jules D. Prown, 'Material/Culture: Can the Farmer and the Cowman Still be Friends?', in W. David Kinglesy (ed.), *Learning from Things: Methods and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington and London, 1996), p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London, 1996), p. xv.

⁸ Mary Douglas, *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste* (London, 1996), p. 50.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 8.

¹⁰ Marcia Pointon, *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture 1665-1800* (Oxford, 1997), p. 20.

mechanisms¹¹. For ‘cowmen’ like, Pointon, Douglas and Appadurai meaning is instilled in objects through their exchange and consumption.

Prown argues that the two sides of the material culture discipline are ultimately divided by their different interpretation of where ‘reality’ resides. For farmers it lies in the ‘facts’ of the artefact, whilst for cowmen it lies in the ‘underlying belief structure of the culture that produced the object’¹². Prown offers another location, he argues that ‘reality’ lies, ‘in the relationship between perceiver, whether farmer or cowmen, and artifact’¹³. Another reading of this ‘reality’ is that it lies between the contemporary perceiver and the object¹⁴. It is this relationship, which is of interest to both this project and to a recently emerging sub-discipline, the anthropology of the senses¹⁵. Building on work carried out by Paul Stoller, C. Nadia Seremetakis, Constance Classen and David Howes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, anthropologists have drawn closer attention to the problem of the five-sense model and the cultural construction of the senses and perception¹⁶. It is recognised that the senses provide the main means of establishing perceptions of objects, yet a critical framework for discussing the senses has yet to be achieved¹⁷.

The anthropology of the senses model has important implications for this project and material culture studies in general. It encourages us to question fundamental aspects of material culture, particularly; how did people experience objects? The model asserts that we experience the world through our senses. The way contemporaries approach sensory experiences, and the way that those

¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹² Prown, ‘Material/Culture’, p. 24.

¹³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴ As opposed to the relationship between the historian and the object. In an earlier article Prown explored sensory experience, but his analysis was highly unsatisfactory. He argued that the sensory experience of the historian gave the most direct way of linking to actors in the past, our sensual experience was their sensual experience. He did grant that the senses are culturally biased, but argued there was an underlying level of sensual understanding that transcended time and culture. He argued that, ‘through the channels of the senses they taste sweet, sour and bitter’, all of which are cultural constructions. See Jules David Prown, ‘The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?’, in Steven D. Lubar and David W. Kingery (eds), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, D.C, 1995), pp. 1-19.

¹⁵ Constance Classen and David Howes, ‘The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts’, in (eds) Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford and New York, 2006), p. 199. They argue that the sub-discipline partly emerged as reaction to the excesses of “textualism” and “ocularcentrism”.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips, ‘Introduction’, in Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth B. Phillips (eds), *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford and New York, 2006), p. 6; Constance Classen, ‘Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses’, *International Social Sciences Journal*, 153 (1997), pp. 406-407; P. Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1989); C.N. Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity* (Boulder, Colorado, 1994); Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London and New York, 1993); D. Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto, 1991).

¹⁷ Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

experiences are subsequently processed and understood is culturally affected. Cultural historical analysis shows that the European five-sense model was culturally constructed, originating in the work of Aristotle¹⁸. Yet, sensory orders differ across space as well as time. Other cultural constructions include that of the Anlo-Ewe people of Anlo-land, West Africa who, in addition to the Euro-American five-sense model, consider 'balance' an essential sense¹⁹. Furthermore, the Hausa of Nigeria divide the senses into two, one term for sight and another term for all the other senses²⁰. Clarifying the senses and their relative cultural importance helps us to understand the 'tools' by which a given culture perceives the world. Kathryn Linn Geurts argues that, 'the sensory order – or multiple, sometimes competing sensory orders – of a cultural group forms the basis of sensibilities that are exhibited by people who have grown up within that tradition'²¹.

How can we understand the senses, as they existed in eighteenth-century British culture? During this period, the senses were understood through the five-sense model, however, the relative importance of those senses is more uncertain²². Previously, historians, such as Barbara Maria Stafford, have highlighted the contentious nature of sight in the eighteenth century²³. Stafford, however, analyses the importance of sight within the Aristotelian context of the senses as the means to knowledge, rather than analysing the cultural importance of sight as a method of perceiving metaphysical reality²⁴. Eighteenth-century literature suggests that although contemporaries attached great importance to sight, the other senses were also valued. Daniel Defoe employs a variety of sensory motifs in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to elucidate Crusoe's castaway experience. Defoe's description of Crusoe's

¹⁸ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 4.

²⁰ Classen, *Worlds of Sense*, p. 2.

²¹ Geurts, *Culture and the Senses*, p. 5.

²² Hobbes, Descartes, Locke and Hume purported different views on the relative importance of each of the five senses. In *Leviathan*, (1651), Hobbes insisted that the senses were the foundations upon which thought was built, whilst Descartes argued for the fallibility of the senses in the search for truth. Locke painted a more optimistic picture of the senses as the central source of most of our thoughts we have. However, Hume was more sceptical of their use and role. Anthony Synnott, 'Puzzling Over the Senses: From Plato to Marx', in David Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 69-72.

²³ Although this overly simplifies her argument, in *Artful Sciences*, Stafford argues that during the eighteenth century the visual was displaced by texts as the main route to 'truth'. Whereas in *Body Criticism*, she argues that visual props were central to the process of enlightening, however, it was stipulated that the visual could only deliver truth when accompanied by discourse. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Sciences. Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (London, 1994); Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

²⁴ Stafford argues that in the eighteenth century, 'optical demonstration and visualization were central to the process of enlightening'. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), p. 2.

physical experience of the island is not richly sensual, yet he does employ a variety of sensual metaphors. Concurring with Stafford's arguments, he employs sight to demonstrate Crusoe's pursuit of knowledge and truth, 'to his sight and knowledge of things'²⁵. Defoe also uses taste to slowly illustrate Crusoe's spiritual experiences, 'How can He sweeten the bitterest providences'²⁶. He uses touch to describe Crusoe's emotional journey, 'This touched my heart a little', suggesting that tactility was linked to an emotional or base response²⁷. One of Crusoe's major fears is that he will fall 'into the hands of the savages'²⁸. The repetitive use of this phrase suggests that Defoe attached real significance to the savages 'hands' and implying that touch was a savage sense.

A similar relationship is played out in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), where tactile metaphors are used to depict significant aspects of the relationship between Pamela and her Master. Richardson repeatedly uses the Master's attempts at physical contact with Pamela to set up his 'moral problem' to the reader. In the early stages of the novel Pamela regards the Master's physical contact as bestowing honour upon her. She emphasizes the significances she places on the Master's hand and touch, 'took me by the Hand; yes, he took me by the Hand before them all'²⁹. As the novel continues the Master's attempts at physical contact become increasingly contentious for her, 'He then put his Hand in my Bosom, and the Indignation gave me double Strength, and I got loose from him'³⁰. By employing a physical contact as a metaphor for moral depravity, Richardson links into widely established ideas on touch and the sanctity of the female body. Richardson further builds on his use of physical contact by using tactile metaphors to describe Pamela's wishes. She asserts, 'O soften him! Or harden me!'³¹.

Such examples suggest that, in relation to the sensory order, touch was considered, a particularly important, yet contentious, sense in the eighteenth century. The very development of ceramic objects themselves, as arbiters of touch, provides evidence of its contentious nature in the period. This chapter argues that, despite its contentious nature, contemporaries' valued tactile experiences very highly,

²⁵ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1994), p. 193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁹ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (Oxford, 2001), p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. I will expand this section of the chapter, at a later stage, to include more examples and a deeper analysis.

particularly in their interaction with objects³². It specifically contends that tactile experiences significantly shaped contemporaries perception and understanding of objects, which subsequently affected how they made they sense of the world and of workmanship.

In the British Museum over the last two hundred years, visitors have used a variety of senses to interact with artefacts, potentially indicating a changing sensory order within British culture. In the twenty-first century the visual is all-important³³, whilst in 1786, Sophie de la Roche privileged touch as the most important sense for interacting with the object she encountered. She writes, 'With what sensations one handles a Cathtagian helmet excavated near Capua'³⁴. Moreover, in the depiction of Wedgwood and Byrley's showroom, seen below, the most prominent figure in the foreground is clearly touching the objects.



Fig. 4.2. Interior view of Wedgwood and Byrley, York Street, St James's Square, Westminster. Showing figures looking at chinaware laid out on tables and on view in display cases. Published by Rudolph Ackerman. 1809. Collage³⁵.

³² Despite the problematic carnal undertones attached to those sensual experiences. See, Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, 'Women, China and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29:2 (1995-6), p. 156; John Gay, *To a Lady on Her Passion for Old China* (London, 1725).

³³ Classen and Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape', p. 200.

³⁴ As cited in Classen and Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape', p. 202. NB I plan to expand and further problematise this discussion of eighteenth-century touch.

³⁵ Collage, Record 29195, <<http://www.collage.nhil.com/>>, (accessed 4 June 2006).

The figure clarifies her visual experience of the objects through tactile interaction. These examples support the contention that contemporaries' valued tactile interaction as a means of understanding objects³⁶.

Both Leora Auslander and Marcia Pointon have explored the importance of touch in understanding objects, by examining the tactile qualities of historical artefacts, disappointingly neither analysis is wholly convincing³⁷. At the outset of her article, 'Beyond Words', Auslander argues that the difference between visual and material culture is the ability to touch the object³⁸. Yet in her analysis of French Revolutionary material culture she fails to explore the tactile aspects of the objects she examines³⁹. Pointon sets out to reinstate the importance of touch in experiencing nineteenth-century mourning objects, yet only includes one sentence regarding the tactile qualities of the objects she is encountering⁴⁰. Cultural historians' failure to convincingly analyse the tactile qualities of objects may be due to a lack of critical frameworks.

How can we effectively examine historical tactile experience and its meaning and value within a culture? I argue that although it is difficult to isolate one sense, as our sensory experience is often overlapping, within a particular sense, such as 'touch', our understanding of a specific aspect of an object, such as 'rough', is constructed through a relative scale of experience. As the linguist, George Lakoff, and the philosopher, Mark Johnson argue, it is our bodies, brains and interaction with the environment that shapes our mostly unconscious understanding of our own metaphysical reality⁴¹. The data produced from sensual interaction changes the relative boundaries of what constitutes our sense of reality. As Susan Stewart argues, 'We may apprehend the world by means of our senses, but the scenes themselves are shaped and modified by experience and the body bears a somatic memory of its encounters with what is outside of it'⁴². We perceive the world through our senses but the meaning we place on a particular object is shaped by our bodily, 'somatic

³⁶ I will address the issue of how space affected the encounter later in the chapter.

³⁷ Marcia Pointon, 'Materializing Mourning: Hair, Jewellery and the Body', in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (Oxford and New York, 1999), pp. 39-57; Leora Auslander, 'Beyond Words', *The American Historical Review*, 110:4 (2005), pp. 1015-1045.

³⁸ Auslander, 'Beyond Words', p. 1016.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1030.

⁴⁰ Pointon, 'Materializing Mourning', p. 55.

⁴¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York, 1999), p. 37.

⁴² Susan Stewart, 'Prologue: From the Museum of Touch', in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (Oxford and New York, 1999), p. 19.

memory', of previous interactions with other objects. M. Merleau-Ponty insists that, 'Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them'⁴³. This 'somatic memory', or 'background', forms a landscape of tactile experiences that we use to locate our experience of a particular object in order to construct a relative understanding. This chapter re-constructs a typical landscape of tactile experience in order to understand the basis on which contemporaries judged pottery pieces and then constructed a concept of workmanship.

To re-construct the eighteenth-century tactile landscape I have collated a range of samples of three particular types of objects, namely mugs, posset pots and teapots⁴⁴. For each of these types I have examined a range of objects from the extensive collections of eighteenth-century British ceramics held at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge⁴⁵. My sample of objects covers the majority of the important changes and innovations that took place in the earthenware and stoneware industry in the eighteenth century, including, press moulding, throwing and slip casting. Each piece was then examined in terms of weight, thickness of body, and surface texture.

Handling objects to deduct the tactile landscape of eighteenth-century contemporaries is admittedly fraught with difficulties. These difficulties mainly arise from trying to communicate tactile experiences to the reader. Primarily, any description of the surface texture of the object is subjective. As the handler of these artefacts, I am restricted by my own cultural experience of touch and objects. I am accustomed to the five-sense model of the senses, and have been educated in a world that emphasises the importance of the visual. As I do not exist in a culture that depends upon touch, my own sense of touch may be under-developed. As Classen and Howes stipulate, it is important for researchers to be aware of, and ultimately to overcome the bias of their own sensory order⁴⁶. They emphasise that researchers must be able to operate on 'two sensoria' in order to be able to take notes between their own experience and that of the culture they are studying⁴⁷. As the examples in

⁴³ M. Merleau-Ponty, Trans. by Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, 1999), p. x.

⁴⁴ These three types were chosen because of the availability of examples, their being widely used in the eighteenth century and the range of skills that were encompassed in their making. The number of types of ceramic objects analysed in this chapter will be increased when further primary research has been completed.

⁴⁵ My thanks go to Julia Poole, Ceramics Collection Curator, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, for her help with this research. In the full chapter I will also use data collected from the V&A, the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the Manchester City Museum.

⁴⁶ David Howes and Constance Classen, 'Sounding Sensory Profiles', in David Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto, 1991), p. 260.

⁴⁷ Howes and Classen, 'Sounding Sensory Profiles', p. 260.

the introduction to this chapter illustrated, touch was a highly valued means of interacting with objects in the eighteenth century. Therefore the 'two sensoria' between which I have to work are, at one end highly visual and at the other, more fluid with a greater, or a more problematic, sense of touch.

Moreover, my use of language to express my own tactile experience of the textural surface of the object is also culturally grounded. For example, 'smooth' is an incredibly loaded term whose comprehension in Western culture requires knowledge of its antonym, 'rough'. The binary nature of synonym versus antonym needs to be questioned. Language must not be assumed to act in such linear or oppositional formations in other cultural contexts. The use of a scale of description between two opposites, for example rough to smooth and all the descriptive words that fall in between affects how we conceptualise and structure our perception of objects. By creating a tactile landscape I want to explore a richer, more multi-levelled understanding of experience rather than assuming a binary understanding.

Yet, the very language that exists to define textures and forms is highly inadequate, particularly for use in academic work requiring descriptive precision. Vocabulary, which has arisen from the discipline of History of Art, has created a means of describing visual motifs. In contrast, as Daniel Miller notes, merely attempting to describe the difference in shape between a sherry bottle and a milk bottle demonstrates the inadequacy of language when describing form⁴⁸. The problem of describing the form of objects, however, can be overcome by using visual depictions such as photographs. Other, non-visual, sensory aspects, such as taste, lack sophisticated descriptive language, possibly because of their position in the sensory order. As the linguist A. Lehrer found, taste is particularly difficult to express and describe⁴⁹. In a series of tests, where participants were encouraged to describe the taste of the wine they were experiencing, it became apparent that the wine they referred to could not be recognised from linguistic description alone⁵⁰. Tactile descriptions are equally problematic. I will describe the tactile aspects of the objects I use by bolstering my own vocabulary with that used in ceramic collection catalogues⁵¹. In a later part of the chapter I will explore the different means by which

⁴⁸ Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987), p. 98.

⁴⁹ Cited in Miller, *Material Culture*, p. 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Particularly, Bernard Rackham, *Catalogue of The Glaisher Collection of Pottery and Porcelain in the Fitzwilliam Museum* (Cambridge, 1935).

eighteenth-century contemporaries described their interaction with objects in order to create a relationship between my own experience and theirs.

The Tactile Landscape

During the eighteenth century pottery consumption grew rapidly. Lorna Weatherill has shown that between 1675 and 1725, the percentage of inventories including earthenware goods rose from twenty-seven percent to fifty-seven percent⁵². Consequently these highly sensual objects increasingly dominated contemporaries' tactile landscapes. Diversity, rather than progression, is the most useful concept for envisioning the output of the eighteenth-century pottery industry. Increasingly objects were produced that were lighter, finer and whiter, however, some manufacturers continued to produce heavier and more substantial objects⁵³. The eighteenth-century tactile landscape, as depicted by ceramic objects was rich, cluttered and complicated⁵⁴.

'Posset pots', central props in early eighteenth-century eating and drinking rituals, induced highly tactile forms of sociability. At the start of the eighteenth century, 'posset' was a type of dessert-cum-drink, made from warm milk curdled with wine or ale and mixed with sugar and spices⁵⁵. These ingredients were whipped up in the pot until a deep layer of frothy foam was formed on the surface. The posset consumers then sucked out the liquid buried beneath the foam through the tubes attached to the side of the pot. Once the liquid was finished each consumer took a spoon and scooped out the froth. The ritual was highly sociable and richly sensual⁵⁶. As the consumers gathered round, drinking and eating in close proximity from a shared vessel, they tasted the posset, viewed the scene, listened to their companions, smelt the alcoholic essence emanating from the froth and touched the pot and each other. The three posset pots analysed in the following section demonstrate the varying tactile encounters consumers experienced when interacting with the different posset pots on offer.

⁵² Lorna Weatherill, 'The Meaning of Consumer Behaviour in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993), p. 220.

⁵³ I need to insert figures regarding these statements.

⁵⁴ To develop this chapter I will base the tactile landscape upon the lifespan of one eighteenth-century consumer

⁵⁵ Julia E. Poole, *English Pottery* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 32.

⁵⁶ By the end of the century the social proximity encouraged by the communal posset pot was displaced as posset consumers began to enjoy their treat in individual containers.

The white and blue enamelled earthenware posset pot, below, was made at the very start of the eighteenth century, in 1701 probably in Bristol or Brislington⁵⁷. The pot is highly ornate with a full, bulbous body, a wide neck and two loop handles, which end in pairs of volutes⁵⁸.

IMAGE - TO BE ADDED

Fig 4.3. Enamelled Earthenware Posset Pot, 1701. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, GL1510/1928.

Visually, the pot appears reasonably delicate and fragile due to the thickness of the body and the chipping on the lid⁵⁹. Grasping the pot in both hands it becomes clear that its weight is substantial, suggesting that the thickness of the body is not as thin as it appears, possibly indicating that it is a durable object. This posset pot weighs one kilogram and three hundred and thirty-two grams, a weight that would have substantially increased when it was in use and full of posset.

IMAGE - TO BE ADDED

Fig. 4.4. Slipware Posset Pot, 1711. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. GL259/1928.

The yellow and brown slipware posset pot, shown above, was probably made in North Staffordshire in 1711⁶⁰. Its thick body and its 'simplistic' colouring and decoration possibly suggest that the object was 'practical', 'useful' and therefore 'durable'⁶¹. With this posset pot, as with the previous pot, the visual perception of the object and the tactile perception of the object are in opposition. This posset pot is in fact very light to hold, weighing just four hundred and fifty grams. As shown in the depiction of Wedgwood and Byerley's showroom, ceramic objects need to be handled to clarify the visual image created by the perceiver.

IMAGE - TO BE ADDED

Fig. 4.5. Slipware Posset Pot, 1732. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. GL319/1928

⁵⁷ Fitzwilliam Museum, Applied Arts Department, Glaisher Collection, White and Blue Delftware Posset Pot, 1701, c1510/1928.

⁵⁸ Rackham, *The Glaisher Collection*, p. 191.

⁵⁹ Is there a link between the development of ideas in the fragility of thin people and the fragility of thin ceramics? Is there a link between the desirability of thinner, whiter, finer in ceramic form and in the human form? See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London, 1979).

⁶⁰ Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, Applied Arts Department, Glaisher Collection, Yellow and Brown Stoneware Posset Pot, 1711, c259/1928.

⁶¹ The notion that the decoration of the object leads to these judgements is an assumption itself and will be examined in a later part of the chapter.

The final posset pot in this study, the dark brown slipware pot shown above, was made in 1732⁶². There is no opposition between the visual and tactile perception of this object. Visually it appears to be very substantial and solid. Its spherical shape takes up a large physical space, suggesting a low point of gravity and a significant weight. This posset pot weighs one kilogram, nine hundred and twenty five grams, the heaviest of the three pots. Such a small sample is perhaps not significant, yet these pots are examples of wider trends and illustrate important aspects of the eighteenth-century tactile landscape.

Firstly, all these objects demonstrate the complexity that contemporaries faced in anticipating the tactile experience of ceramic objects; the visual experience deceived the perceiver⁶³. Secondly, the continued production of substantial wares, evidenced by the slipware pot of 1732, demonstrates that ceramic objects in the eighteenth century did not develop through a process of linear progression to lighter, whiter, finer objects. Clearly, more substantial wares continued, or even became more substantial during the eighteenth century. Consumers wanted choice, the feel and weight of a good was a significant point of difference among products. The tactile landscape of eighteenth-century contemporaries was cluttered with different objects. It did not experience a change from a landscape filled with thick, heavy pots to a landscape filled with fine teacups. In certain situations contemporaries wished their physical environment to be solid and substantial. As a richer, more intricate landscape of tactile experience emerged in ceramic products, weight remained a meaningful and positive attribute to consumers, users and makers.

The tactile experience of ceramic objects was shaped by texture as well as weight. The objects were displayed and admired for their visual beauty, while they were also handled and touched for their tactile qualities⁶⁴. However the tactile aspect of ceramic decorative schemes has been significantly overlooked. Aside from the visual qualities of glazes and painted illustrations, ceramic objects were also

⁶² Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Applied Arts Department, Glaisher Collection, Dark Brown Slipware Posset Pot, 1738, GL319/1928.

⁶³ Or, the visual deception that I experienced is actually a product of my own tactile landscape. The expectations I have about these different artefacts must be shaped by my current experience of objects. What does this tell us about these objects and the tactile understanding of eighteenth-century contemporaries? We know that the great diversity of ceramic objects in terms of weight must have prepared them for a host of different experiences.

⁶⁴ The tactile appeal of ceramic objects, particularly regarding texture, is problematic when discussing vessels designed for hot drinks. An object holding hot water is too hot to caress. However, the texture would have been important at the point of purchase, as the Wedgwood and Byerley showroom depiction suggests.

decorated with sprigs, lathe patterns, press-moulds, slip-casted designs and texturally rich glazes. These techniques added to the tactile experience of the object, encouraging users and consumers to reach out and interact with the body of the object itself. As Classen and Howes ask, 'What do a culture's aesthetic ideals suggest about the value it attaches to the different senses?'⁶⁵ The value eighteenth-century consumers gave to touch is demonstrated by the variety of tactile designs and their proliferation upon ceramic objects.

Redware objects are remarkable due to their rich colour. They are made from a type of earthenware clay that turns red when fired due to its high iron content. The technique, an imitation of the Chinese stoneware made at Yi-hsing, was brought to England by two silversmiths, the brothers, John Philip and David Elers⁶⁶. They had travelled from Holland, after acquiring the technique from Delft potters⁶⁷. The process was then used and improved upon by Josiah Wedgwood at Etruria and Thomas Astbury at Fenton, who made the redware teapot shown below.



Fig. 4.8. Redware Teapot, 1765. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, GL468/1928.

The teapot is a wheel-thrown cylinder, with a slightly convex top and a cone-shaped knob⁶⁸. The spout is straight and the handle is a loop, moulded with a wicker pattern⁶⁹. It is decorated with a very simple pattern, merely a series of lines at regular intervals, which is made using a roulade on the surface of the body whilst it is turned on the lathe. However, this austerity hides a highly tactile object. Each of the series of lines creates a subtly undulating surface. The surface texture is smooth; therefore the

⁶⁵ Howes and Classen, 'Sounding Sensory Profiles', p. 264.

⁶⁶ Rackham, *The Glaisher Collection*, p. 69.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

accumulation of lines creates a richer tactile experience. The regularity of the lines adds to the symmetry and balance of the teapot's body. The teapot is ten point four centimetres high (including the lid) and seventeen point eight five centimetres wide, yet it only weighs three hundred and thirty grams.

The body of the pot is very fine reducing both the weight and the bulk of the object. The multi-faceted tactile experience is juxtaposed with the simplicity of its visual appearance. The pot's existence provides evidence that certain eighteenth-century contemporaries experienced an aspect of physicality that was quiet, demure and austere. This highly tactile object raises the question; if touch is culturally constructed does this object's decoration, demonstrate a cultural preference for tactile over visual experiences?

In contrast, the mug below is visually striking in terms of its colour and visual decoration. The marble effect decorative panel running around the centre of the mug appears to be mix of reds, yellows, light blues and white. The panel is made by marbling bluff, red and blue stained slip⁷⁰. The panel is also highly tactile. The pattern is very simple, it is the tactile expression of the marbling effect you can see, but it is very effective. This example demonstrates that, even in objects that are visually striking, the tactile aspects of the object are also explored and added.



Fig. 4.9. Creamware Mug, XXXX. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. GL1048/1928⁷¹.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷¹ The mug is 16.1cm in height and 14.8cm in width (including handle). It weighs 414 grams.

Wares that offer consumers a rich landscape of different textures, patterns and additions, further confirm the importance that consumers attached to tactile experience. The lead-glazed earthenware teapot below appears almost over laden with different textural motifs⁷². Its three lion's-mask-and-paw feet lift the teapot above any surface on which it is placed. The three feet also indicate that the teapot is intended to imitate silverware styles. Moving upwards from the legs, the body of the pot is spherical, a pleasing shape due to its symmetry and infinite surface. This surface is festooned with stems of grape leaves and rosettes, which spring from the handle. The clouded glazed surface of the pot is smooth. It is only interrupted by the reliefs, which swirl around the pot creating an idea of motion and undulation.



Fig. 4.10. Lead-glazed earthenware Teapot, 1750s. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, GL669/1928.

The crab stock design of the handle and spout creates a richly textural surface, entirely different from the rest of the object. This difference appears to remove the handle and spout from the body, highlighting the symmetrical, spherical nature of the body itself. Finally, the lid of the pot is adorned with a bird. This topping appears almost gaudy to the modern eye, yet its inclusion on the pot is essentially practical. Early eighteenth-century teapots did not have a lip on the lid to automatically attach it to the teapot whilst pouring, therefore the bird was provided to allow the pour to keep hold of the lid, without getting burnt, whilst pouring. The bird seeks to encourage another tactile engagement with the object itself.

These three different objects suggest the importance of tactile experience for eighteenth-century contemporaries. The tactile landscape that these objects paint is multi-layered. The tactile aspects of each object could either reiterate or oppose its

⁷² See Rackham, *The Glaisher Collection*, p. 95.

visual aspects. Tactile decoration could include a wide range of motifs or just a single motif finely executed. The complex tactile landscapes they offer suggest that consumers had highly developed tactile tastes and expectations about the products they bought. These tastes and expectations need to be understood in comparison to twenty-first century objects, that tend to emphasise minimal textural decoration and clean smooth lines. These eighteenth-century objects clearly existed in and appealed to a different sensory order. They added to the creation of a rich tactile landscape, in which contemporaries' tactile experience was increasingly diverse. The breadth of tactile experiences on offer suggests that contemporaries had a wide span of experiences upon which to judge and perceive each new object they came into contact with.

Perception and Conception: Towards Workmanship

If all objects are perceived through a relative sensual experience, where perception is defined by what has been experienced previously, then how do we conceptualise a new sensual experience? Lakoff and Johnson argue that, there is strong link between perception and conceptualisation. They assert that, 'the very mechanisms responsible for perception, movements, and object manipulation could be responsible for conceptualisation and reasoning'⁷³. I argue that the new sensual experiences offered by earthenware and stoneware objects in the eighteenth century created an arena in which contemporaries negotiated initial conceptions of skill and workmanship. It was to these experiences that any subsequent concepts of workmanship would be linked. New products, offering different forms, weights and textures allowed contemporaries to appreciate change or continuation. They would not perhaps allow contemporaries to consciously link material changes to changes in skill. However, any subsequent formation of a concept of skill would link back to their material experience of objects. Moreover, the continued production of certain objects allowed contemporaries to build stores of experiences, enabling judgments of 'good' and 'bad' workmanship for a particular type of object, material or maker.

The teapot below is incredibly light, weighing just two hundred and forty grams, significantly less than the other teapots in this study.

⁷³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, p. 38.



Fig. 4.11. White Slipcast Teapot, 1760s. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. GL578/1928.

It was made using the technique of slip casting. Slip was poured into a mould and a thin layer quickly dried to form the body of the object. The process means that the body is incredibly thin, almost paper-like. Touching the surface of the teapot its fragility is quickly apparent, this judgment is formed in the context of other teapots. The teapot's vulnerability would not be obvious if this was the first ceramic teapot the perceiver had encountered. The teapot's fragility becomes still more apparent when the lid is removed. The slip casting process means that the pattern of the decoration can be felt on the inside as well as the outside. Feeling the inner side of the teapot can tell the perceiver much about the process used to make this object. I argue, however, that the thickness of the teapot's body was actually, a more powerful and informative attribute.

Firstly, it was highly unlikely that any contemporary would have actually felt the inside of the teapot. Secondly, the inner pattern of the teapot's body communicates complicated technical information; it voices the intricacies of the process of slip casting which might have bypassed an uninformed consumer. The thickness of the body communicates something much more simple to the contemporary, it communicates just how light and thin the body of teapot can be. Ultimately the body of the teapot communicates that another individual (the producer) has created this physical possibility. These objects were the physical manifestations of a potter's tacit knowledge; they shaped contemporaries' conceptions of workmanship by altering their physical world. In these arenas of negotiation, 'workmanship' was the physical possibility that the potter could produce for the consumer.

The chapter will go on to explore other examples of the 'possible' that the work of potters created.