RAM PUBLICATIONS #4

Linda Lothe
Å seile sin egen sjø / Sailing On Your Own

Joakim Borda-Pedreira

RAM GALLERI 2020

Bølgen (The Wave), 2020. Photographed at Bogstad Manor.

Previously published in RAM publications:

#1 Vidar Koksvik & Erik Tunstad: *MÅ*
#2 Knut Ljøgodt & Rhea Dall: *Eva Bull Holte & Marthe Elise Stramrud*
#3 Johanna Zanon: *As Handsome as the Chance Encounter*

RAM galleri
Kongens gate 15, 0153 Oslo
www.ramgalleri.no

Introduction

Spring 2020 became historic as the entire world was launched into a global pandemic that caused most nations to go into a complete halt and lockdown, as social distancing was the only viable strategy to combat the worldwide spread of Covid-19. This had dramatic consequences for cultural institutions, as they were forced on a global scale to close their premises practically overnight. In most European countries this lockdown lasted for at least two months. Not only did this affect the big museums, most of who have built their financial model and visitor numbers around blockbuster exhibitions and international tourism, but also small galleries and independent art institutions have been shaken by the quarantine lockdowns. In Norway, many exhibitions were shut down early or cancelled.

Ceramic artist Linda Lothe had been working for months on a new series of objects that were to be included in an exhibition in Bergen in May, when the Covid-19 pandemic caused the exhibition to be canceled. RAM gallery, meanwhile, were fortunate enough to be able to reopen as soon as the quarantine in Oslo was lifted in mid-May and together with the artist we arranged a viewing of the series *Å seile sin egen sjø* in our showroom, which is a minor space in our premises destined for sales presentations and smaller projects. Personally I felt that it was our duty to do what we can to limit the consequences the pandemic has had for artists, and at the same time this was a project that fit very well within my own research practice and seemed ideal for the fourth edition of our publications series, entitled RAM publications, which we launched in 2019 when RAM celebrated 30 years anniversary. The series has been edited by me and Hanne Cecilie Gulstad, and for this edition I have also written the essay.

The idea behind RAM publications is the conviction that smaller art institutions have responsibility and opportunity to contribute to discourse within the arts, as much of the work we do lays the foundation for future art history. So far the series has been a success, and all previous publications are currently out of print, proving that the general public is thirsty for substance rather than easily digested information. We hope to be able to produce two editions each year.

I would like to thank the artist Linda Lothe for a wonderful collaboration, thanks to Bogstad Manor for allowing us to take pictures of the works in their beautiful interiors, and especially thanks to the RAM staff Preben Holst and Hanne Cecilie Gulstad for their valuable contributions to this publication.

Joakim Borda-Pedreira, Director RAM and editor of RAM publications.

ill. 1: Serving dish, *Willow*, probably Rörstrand, Sweden. Ca. 1850. Private collection.

Sailing On Your Own

Tracing a ceramic iconography in the work of Linda Lothe

By Joakim Borda-Pedreira

A weeping willow
Pagodas
A crooked fence
A tree bearing fruit
Three or four figures on a bridge
A boat
A pair of lovebirds forever kissing[1]

From the early 19th century, dinner services in stoneware or porcelain were often decorated with transfer printed images and patterns that conveyed complex narratives and scenery taken from historic or geographic sources. The iconic Willow pattern, often also called Blue Willow on account of it generally being printed in cobalt blue, is said to relate the tragic love story of the beautiful girl Koong-Shee, daughter of a rich Mandarin, and the poor secretary Chang. Forbidden to marry because of their unequal stations, they escape with the aid of a gardener. They are seen running over a bridge, only to be caught and nearly killed. The Gods, however, take pity on them and turn them into a pair of lovebirds that fly away.[2] The story has countless variations, and is more likely a Victorian marketing ploy than a real Chinese legend, although the 'forbidden love'-narrative is as common in China as everywhere else.

The history of the Willow pattern starts in 1780 when the Coughley Pottery produced a dinner plate with a steel engraved décor, presumably designed by Thomas Minton, clearly influenced by Chinese blue and white export porcelain.[3] Its central motif featured a landscape with a pagoda and what looks like a Court eunuch crossing a bridge. A willow stands on a small island in the background, and we can see a *sampan* boat in the foreground.[4] It was to become the prototype of Willow pattern, which was later codified to the elements described in the beginning of this essay. The lovebirds, the actual protagonists of the Willow legend, only appeared much later in the décor, and in the early decades of the 19th century there are countless variations of the theme, featuring stag hunts and various types of animals. The earliest example of the standard Willow pattern seems to be a plate produced around 1822 at the Herculaneum pottery. By 1830 it was already a very popular pattern and the story of the two lovers was by then commonplace.[5] Proof of its popularity is the fact that nearly all pottery makers of the time – Thomas Heath, Josiah Spode and John Davenport to name a few – copied the Willow pattern. [ill. 1]

The Willow pattern was printed on stoneware, trying its best to emulate genuine hand painted porcelain from China. According to Coysh, some of the chinoiserie patterns of the late 18th century were in fact straight copies of imported china, produced in odd quantities as replacements for transport wreckage.[6] But from the moment the standard willow appears, it is produced in full dinner services, making a virtue of its mass-produced stylization and becoming an epitome of European industrialization and efficiency. From England the pattern is soon taken into production by many European stoneware factories, like Rörstrand in Sweden (in production from 1826) and Egersund in Norway, trying to compete with the English industries.[7]

Willow and the age of industrialism

Ceramic artist Linda Lothe has kept a longstanding interest in the many layers of cultural meaning imbedded in the standard Willow pattern. Her project *Å seile sin egen sjø (Sailing on Your Own)*, from 2020, consists of a series of hand painted and tin glazed terracotta dishes, each with motifs inspired by the Willow pattern. [Cat. 1]

In these works, Lothe explores the iconographic elements of Willow, studying them in detail, often isolating them from their original context. She fragmentizes the pattern, highlighting particular elements – the boat, a branch, the flighting lovebirds – or exaggerating them into imagined events that seem to test alternative sequences of events in the story of the forbidden lovers: What if they had gotten on the boat instead of crossing the bridge? And what if a storm had come upon the boat? Lothe projects a whole range of unforeseen events and rightly dramatizes the serene tableau of the Willow pattern. It is undeniable that the brutal narrative of violence and persecution of the young lovers is well hidden, invisible in fact, in the pattern. What we see in a Willow plate, after all, is a rather picturesque scene of a presumably Chinese landscape.

Another aspect that seems central to Lothe's project is the economic and social connotations of the Willow pattern. A product of the Industrial revolution, intended for mass-consumption of the emerging middle- and lower middle-classes, Willow patterned stoneware china represented in its day great technical innovations, as well as social progress. The transfer print process, in which the pattern was transferred from a stencil engraving onto the goods, allowed a rational process of decoration that was both cost efficient and rapid. Until the mid 18th century, most dinnerware had to be imported from the far East, at a high cost that made porcelain china ware unattainable for the vast majority of the population.

Certainly, from the earliest arrival of oriental porcelain, many attempts were made in Europe to copy or emulate this 'white gold', as it was often known. Unable to recreate genuine porcelain, the Europeans made counterfeit copies from tin glazed earthenware, hand painted with cobalt in the Chinese style.[8] These pastiches, made in the Dutch city of Delft in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as in other places, were fragile and chipped easily, but soon developed charming decorative styles of their own, often inspired by Oriental china, but no longer masquerading as such.[9] Sweden, Lothe's native country, had two important faïence factories in the 18th century: Rörstrand and Marieberg. They flourished particularly with the Rococo style, which also had a considerable tendency towards chinoiserie. There is for example a service from 1748, made at Rörstrand, with a scalloped shape and a stylized décor of carnations and willow trees, which in spite of its oriental influence is impossible to mistake for anything but a European make. Dahlbäck Lutterman points out that faïence from this period could mix influences freely, and there are many examples of pieces decorated with European flower baskets surrounded by Chinese bands and scalloped rims.[10] Incidentally, Rörstrand was the factory that first produced the Willow pattern in Scandinavia, as early as 1826.

Linda Lothe plays with this ceramic heritage, as her plates retain the classic 18th century scallop shapes, though roughly press-molded, and at times warped as if wanting to escape from the constraints of serialization. A dish with the title *Epletrær med forsvinnende båt (Apple Trees With Disappearing Boat)* firmly upholds its classic shape and is partially decorated onto the unglazed rim with a brown slipware intercepted by a few dots of white tin glaze [Cat. 2]. In the exhibition at RAM, this plate is followed in sequence by *Blått tre (Blue Tree)*, which is entirely similar in shape and decoration, although somewhat simplified. The rim is almost clean, and the glazed center is sparsely decorated with a Chinese sampan boat on calm waters, and a large veiny tree in the foreground [Cat. 3].

From here on the series present a form of progression that could also be described as a degeneration, as the scalloped rims become unruly to the point of being deformed, and the painted scenes become increasingly dramatic with violent storms tossing the boat on fierce

waves, the glaze eventually spilling over the rim as if the waves were to wash the boat right out of the platter [Cat. 5].

Beauty for all

The iconic status of the Willow pattern was almost instantaneous from its conception. The combination of a traditional-looking pattern with innovative ceramic materials, that were much cheaper to produce than real porcelain, while much more durable than faïence, made Willow ware popular with the middle classes in the early 19th century, and eventually it also found its way to the working classes. The history of porcelain and china is in essence a history of status, and if originally it was reserved for the aristocracy, by the 19th century household china becomes a necessary vehicle for the emerging classes to display their social advancement.[11] With this backdrop, it is evident that the Willow-pattern is not only a part of cultural history, but social history as well.

The term 'social engineering' is a modernist proposition for social reform that had a dominating influence on public policy in most, if not all, the Scandinavian countries in the 20th century. Intimately connected to the emergence of Social Democracy and the welfare state, it sustained the notion that a just and egalitarian society necessitated democratization of the everyday objects surrounding us in our homes. The Swedish social reformist Ellen Key wrote that once the basic necessities of a human being were satisfied – food and shelter – she would inevitably turn towards beauty, but then the problem in modern society was the proliferation of cheaply mass-produced trinkets that were overly decorated and of poor quality. Key formulated a vision – heavily inspired by William Morris – where form and function are dependent on each-other and where material and decoration are 'true', in the sense of genuine and honest, not pretending to be anything else.[12]

'Beauty for all' was the motto of Key, and eventually of the functionalist design movement in Scandinavia. Modernist aesthetics had a clear progressist agenda that sought to refine industry, art, design and society at large. In 1926, 100 years after the Willow pattern was introduced in Sweden, Wilhelm Kåge, one of the leading Swedish designers of the time, made a dinner service for Gustavsberg that presented a highly stylized Willow pattern in the sleek Art Deco flavor of the 20ties [ill. 2]. *India*, as it was called, was never a success, possibly because it was too modern and had to compete with the classic Willow which was in production at Gustavsberg until the late 1950ties.[13] Nonetheless, it is a good example of the high-modernist belief in linear progress.

Post-modernity and patterns

There will be a form of rupture with this notion in the fluid period of time after 1968, when artists and philosophers reject the modern idea that art can be original, autonomous and progressive. Matei Calinescu describes how postmodernism abandons the harsh critique of the avantgarde, which aims towards radical renewal, instead opting for a logic of renovation.[14] In this post-modern context, style is not a historical truth, but simply a set of codes that can be quoted, reproduced or enacted at will. As Frederic Jameson puts it, 'with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style – what is as unique and un-mistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body (the very source /…/ of stylistic invention and innovation) — the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.'[15] Jameson draws the conclusion that the pastiche, a mimicry that does not seek to parody or ridicule, is a central aesthetic strategy of postmodernism. Jorunn Veiteberg follows the same line of thought when she writes that 'attitudes and strategies, such as appropriation, duplication, and recycling are typical in contemporary art /…/ Art's job is to absorb things produced in other contexts and to recycle and duplicate them.'[16] Veiteberg analyses the paradox of craft artists working with such conceptual strategies, in spite of the fact that these can be regarded as negations of key aspects of craft, such as skills, craftmanship, authenticity and tradition.[17]

If we are to place Lothe's *Å seile sin egen sjø* series within this framework, it is worthwhile noting that while the use of the Willow pattern and the references to massproduction through press molded shapes adheres to conceptual strategies of serialization and pastiche, Lothe also explicitly draws us towards the historic craft tradition of tin-glazed faïence, to the actual precursors of the industrialized Willow dinner services. By allowing the red clay to boldly show, Lothe dispels any attempts of creating illusions: her dishes do not pretend to be porcelain, or rational industrial productions, their irregularities and material honesty are ostentatiously handcrafted and 'authentic'. This can be connected to a tendency within the craft art movement that emerged in the 1970ties and

revolted against the 'restrained and austere minimalism generally in vogue', as Emmanuel Cooper writes.[18] This critique resurfaced again in the 1990ties with a generation of ceramicists reacting against the sober refinement of 'the new white' then dominant, through works that displayed bold shapes, rich patterns and experimental surfaces.[19] Several ceramicists of this generation took up the Willow pattern, fusing it with popular culture references – like Stephen Bowers – or deconstructing it's visual codes and narratives – like Paul Scott, Robert Dawson and Caroline Slotte. Whereas these artists all play with the sleek, standardized expressions of mass-produced dinnerware – Slotte actually re-works found objects, i.e vintage dinner plates – Lothe firmly positions herself within a studio pottery context, even adhering to that strain in Japanese aesthetics that extolls the virtues of imperfection, drawing attention to what Bernard Leach called 'the accidentals and incidentals of pottery' – firing mistakes, cracks, blemishes and breaks – through kintsugi repairs.[20] Kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with visible golden joinery – an expression of the aesthetic concept of wabi-sabi, which celebrates beauty in the humble, imperfect and worn – is present in two of Lothe's work, the dish entitled *Bølgen og huset (The Wave and the House)* [Cat. 5] and *Båten (The Boat)* [Cat. 9], the hand built sampan that closes the series of *Å seile sin egen sjø*.[21] No longer an *image* of a boat sailing languidly without a destiny, but the object itself, released from the flatness of the plate and from centuries of being trapped in the inconclusive stories of the Willow pattern.

Notes

1 Ina Marais, "The Willow Pattern", CULNA – Magazine of the National Museum of South Africa, 5.02.2019.
2 Huitfeldt (1997), p. 115-116. Cf. Gaustad (1980), p. 23.
3 Coysh (1970), p. 10. Dating of the 'Caughley Willow Pattern' is approximate, but it does seem to be the earliest example. By 1785 there are several designs copying the Willow pattern more or less closely, produced by Joshua Heath, Spode and the Leeds Potteries.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid. P. 42,
6 Coysh (1970), p. 80.
7 Lagercrantz (1959), p. 79.
8 Lassen (1969), p. 74.
9 Ibid. p. 82.
10 Dahlbeck Lutterman (1980), pp. 31-33.
11 Savage (1963), pp. 23-25.
12 Key (1913), p. 4.
13 Arvidsson (2007), p. 337.
14 Calinescu (2000), p. 248.
15 Jameson (2001), p. 65.
16 Veiteberg (2005), p. 73.
17 Ibid. p. 74.
18 Cooper (2009), p. 60.
19 Ibid. p. 61.
20 Leach (1945), p. 24
21 Avril (2008), n.p.

Literature

Arvidsson, Gösta: *Gustavsberg. Porslinet. Fabriken. Konstnärerna.* Norstedts, Stockholm: 2007.

Avril, Ellen: 'The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics', exhibition text, Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University: 2008.

Calinescu, Matei: *Modernitetens fem ansikten*. Dualis, Falun: 2000.

Cooper, Emmanuel: *Contemporary Ceramics*. Thames & Hudson, London: 2009.

Coysch, A. W.: *Blue and White Transfer Ware 1780-1840.* David & Charles, Newton Abbot: 1970.

Dahlbeck Lutterman, Helena: *Fajans, porslin och flintgods 1700-1900*. Lund: 1980.

Gaustad, Randi: *Gammelt norsk stentøy.* C. Huitfeldt forlag, Oslo: 1980.

Huitfeldt, Johanne: *Blått som havet. Keramisk blåmaleri fra Peking til Porsgrund*. C. Huitfeldt Forlag AS, Oslo: 1997.

Jameson, Frederic: *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press, US: 2001.

Key, Ellen: *Verdandis småskrifter.77: Skönhet för alla!* Stockholm: 1913.

Lagercrantz, Bo: *Gamla tallrikar. Ur tallrikens historia*. ICA förlaget, Uppsala: 1959.

Lassen, Erik: *Keramik. Den europeiska keramiken från medeltiden till våra dagar*. Stockholm: 1969.

Leach, Bernard: *A Potters Book*. Faber & Faber, London: 1945.

Marais, Ina: 'The Willow Pattern', in: CULNA – The Magazine of the National Museum, South Africa, 5 February 2019.

Savage, George: *Porcelain Through the Ages*. Penguin, Great Britain: 1963.

Veiteberg, Jorunn: *Craft in Transition*. Bergen Academy of the Arts, Bergen: 2005.

ill. 2 Serving dish, *India*, Gustavsberg, Sweden. 1926. Private collection.

Catalogue

1. Installation view *Å seile sin egen sjø (Sailing On Your Own)* at RAM gallery, 2020. (Previous page)

2. *Epletrær med forsvinnende båt (Apple Trees With Disappearing Boat)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 29 x 19 cm.

3. *Blått tre (Blue Tree)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 29 x 18,5 cm.

4. *Bølgen og båten (The Wave and the Boat),* 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta with gold repair, 27,5 x 16,6 cm.

5. *Bølgen (The Wave)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 30 x 18,8 cm.

6. *Bølgen og huset (The Wave and the House)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 27 x 16 cm.

7. *Ensom båt (Lonely Boat)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 33 x 23 cm.

8. *Synkende båt med fugl (Sinking Boat With Bird)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 38 x 26 cm.

9. *Båten (The Boat),* 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta with gold repair, 23,3 x 18 cm.

Biographies

Linda Lothe (b.1963, Gothenburg) is based in Oslo, Norway, and graduated (MFA) from Oslo National Academy of the Arts in 1993.

She has had solo exhibitions in Galleri Blås and Knåda (2016), Stockholm, Konstepidemin (2015), Gothenburg, Hå gamle prestegård (2014), Jæren, RAM galleri (2002), Oslo, etc. Lothe has also participated in group exhibitions, such as Korean International Ceramic Biennale 2019; Essens, 2010, Kunstbanken, Hamar; Norwegian Ceramics and glass, 2019 Lasalle College of arts, Singapore; Nordiskt konsthantverk,2005, Varberg museum. Lothe is represented in the collections of KODE – Art Museums and Composer Homes, Bergen; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; Nordenfjeldske museum of decorative arts, Trondheim; Norwegian Embassy in Copenhagen.

Joakim Borda-Pedreira (b. 1977, Malmö), is Director of RAM galleri since 2018, and has previously held positions of Director of The Association of Art Centres in Norway (KIN), Lead Curator of The Arctic Arts Festival, and Arts Editor of Plaza Magazine International. In 2012 he founded The Boiler Room Gallery in Oslo. Since 2007 he has curated a great number of exhibitions of contemporary Scandinavian art and crafts and published extensively in that area. Among recent publications are: Sverre Bjertnæs: Works (with Knut Ljøgodt), Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2019; Inger Johanne Grytting: Recent Works, Teknisk Industri, 2018; Preben Holst: Things That Never Happened, Teknisk Industri, 2017; He edited Materiality Matters, Vol. 2 of Documents of Contemporary Crafts, Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2014, together with Gjertrud Steinsvåg.

10. *Liten Bølge (Little wave),* 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 24 x 15 cm.

EDITORIAL AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

RAM galleri - Joakim Borda-Pedreira, Hanne Cecilie Gulstad, Sarah Rezayat

PHOTO

Linda Lothe, RAM galleri (Preben Holst)

Norwegian Crafts

KULTURRÅDET
Arts Council Norway

11. *Forloren sjø (Sham Sea)*, 2020
Handpainted and tin glazed terracotta, 29 x 23 cm.