



A Pantheon of Celtic Saints

recent sculpture and reliefs
by Montreal ceramist

Richard Lynn Studham





Usk

Do not suddenly break the branch, or
Hope to find
The white hart behind the white well.
Glance aside, not for lance, do not spell
Old enchantments. Let them sleep.
'Gently dip, but not too deep',
Lift your eyes
Where the roads dip and where the roads rise
Seek only there
Where the grey light meets the green air
The hermit's chapel, the pilgrim's prayer.

T.S.Eliot.

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The past comes back to haunt us all in different ways. For Montreal artist Richard Lynn Studham it has been like errant smoke from a friendly fire, not unlike the smoke that shades the earthenware objects he has been making for over twenty years. As Studham nears retirement from the Faculty of Education at McGill University, he finds himself engaged in an extended meditation on origins - his own and those of the culture into which he was born.

By virtue of his youth in County Durham, England, through attendance at Sunderland College of Art and Design and subsequently at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Studham became aware of the scope of his Celtic heritage. He remembers that fragments of that heritage were at hand, real and tangible. They were embedded in architecture, apparent in the landscape of churches and graveyards, revealed in archaeological sites, garnered in museum collections, spilling from the pages of regional history, and even included in vitrines in the local pubs. Over time, his knowledge of the surviving corpus of Celtic art has grown, as has his understanding of the context from which it arose.

Studham's Celtic horizon stretches from Scandinavia, south Germany and eastern France, the Iberian peninsula and pre-Roman Britain from the second half of the 5th century BCE, extending through to the Celts under Christian aegis in areas now called England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Brittany from the third through the seventh centuries. However, while extensive and multinational, this background does not receive a great deal of attention in present day Quebec.

Five aspects of Celtic art, as its material remains define it, are important to this discussion. First, Celtic art is renowned for the rhapsodic rhythms, for the ecstasy of entanglement, for that high sense of swirling linear patterns used as sophisticated counterpoise to surface void. Connected with that is the second factor of textural contrast, often rendered

in metalwork through hatching, stippling, and through the techniques of engraving and repoussé. Third, the vigor and assurance in complex colour orchestration characterizes Celtic manuscript illuminations such as the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels (the Book of Durham). Fourth, strong geometric structures permit the combination of disparate parts in composition. And finally, densely compressed information is often suffused into comparatively small formats. These aspects lend vitality to archaic Celtic forms, as they do to Studham's work.

For practical reasons, Studham submits each concept to intense design considerations in his sketchbooks months in advance of execution. While working on a previous series of hand built platters, the artist established a procedure which took into consideration the marked shrinkage of clay while accommodating pre-existing material or found objects. While not thematically related, those prior works and their technical solutions permit his expression here, carrying both the technique and their creator to another level of maturity. This is the embodiment of material knowledge that other cultures promulgate as 'The Way of Craft', and no amount of intellectual posturing can avail work with its proceeds. Studham is one whose work is an effort to discover meaning in the world through the materials, processes, and stylistic language of art, and hence it is identified with research, investigation, and inquiry.

For Studham, each piece evolves slowly, indeed, methodically, yet each carries the flamboyance of improvisation. Strong geometric matrices are foiled by the fragility of ripped clay and the roughness of the primitive techniques. Studham capitalizes on the fortuitous accident, that dividend of the orchestrated chaos of pit-fired ceramics.

As a teacher of teachers, one who prompts students to produce and interpret art and to generate those practices in others, he is constantly aware of the personal and social functions of art in the broadest sense. In speaking of this consolidated body of work, he points out that from its beginning, he had a spiritual intent. Edmund Burke Feldman writes:

"Religious art tells a sacred story, or enjoins right behavior, or endeavors to sustain faith. But spiritual art endeavors to be a revelation of the divine in

human nature and in the world. That is to say, spiritual art tries to declare the immanence of the divine world, often finding it in unexpected places. But it does not come to us with appropriate labels, and its creators may not necessarily think of their work as having a spiritual quality. Furthermore, spiritual art expresses the questions an artist may have about man's place in the universe, whereas religious art tends to deal with the answers which have been institutionally established. We might define spiritual concern...as the personal search for ultimate values through art..”¹

In Studham's terms of reference, spirituality marks the confluence of personal expression in the language of visual form. He also warrants that for the artist, responsible social action and the creative act are one. So while all of the present pieces, whether wall-based or freestanding, are cruciform as a design feature, for Studham, meaning is subsumed by formal considerations. These works were not intended to be objects of veneration, nor were they destined for any cult purposes. The artist does not regard himself as devout. Studham is shrewd enough to recognize that the pieces will take on a life of their own. As one who has made his share of elegant functional vessels, he knows that, just as he cannot predict what a vessel may contain, these works, as vessels for meaning, similarly bear no precise prediction. However, through the exploitation of certain elements, he has launched them on an initial trajectory, of which this author's reading is but one variant

Theorists have been explaining for decades now that the meaning of any text is unstable. They have revealed that signification is, of its nature, unstable, that an inherent incoherence posited by the text/reader relationship creates numerous deferments of meaning, apparently endless criss-crossing patterns and sequences. Studham demonstrates in material form the vaunted indeterminacy of recent critical theory, where elements that may be interpreted in a number of different (and conceivably, mutually conflicting) ways are said to be indeterminate. And, indeterminacy multiplies in accordance with complexity.

Forms of post-firing pigmentation, the application of other media to the completed ceramic surface, is of the kind of complexity sanctioned in the post-modern scene, where



structuralist sensibilities foster the collage of allusions, references, and quotations. Undoubtedly, Studham's work conveys multiple meanings, but these are signals rather than statements. We have moved from symbolism to semiotics. The cruciform is but one obvious factor, but so too are associations with totem, tombstone, cenotaph, shrine, altar, memorial, cairn, standing stone, etc. On one hand, the pieces seem elegiac if not apocalyptic, as if they lament a heritage of conflagration and havoc. On the other, through layering and the markings of human presence and wear, they speak of duration, delicacy, and the humane permeation of the past into the present. The juxtaposition of the order of history and its coherent sequences, with the poetics of impulse, rhythm, atrophy is paradoxical. It underscores the complete unreasonableness of the creative act.

Twenty historically known individuals, both men and women, together with locations with which they were at some point associated, lend their names as titles. This is but a small cadre of a larger community of Celtic saints, all of them tied to journeys, missions, churches, chapels, monasteries, hermitages, baptismal springs, wells, and cemeteries. Some component parts in these works evoke

aureoles and nimbus forms of medieval sculpture and seem to bind the saints to the lintels, arches and corbels of architecture. They are tied as well to myths, miracles, and martyrdom, to present day villages, to the animal kingdom, to biosphere, and to the calendar.

The lives of the Celtic saints unfolded in a context where "local organizations were independent of the kind of hegemonic controls, political hierarchy and imperial pretensions which characterized the later Roman Catholic and Protestant churches." As Rev.Dr.Gordon Strachan has pointed out, "it appears that among the Celts the church was much more decentralized, less authoritarian, valued personal sanctity more than doctrinal orthodoxy and local variation more than international conformity. It is easy to see how attractive such a devolved, indigenous and unstructured system seems to those who today want freedom to pursue their own personal pilgrimage." ²

Celtic monasteries had constituted an important network of cultural centres where scriptoria or writing workshops produced gospels and works of art that embodied the very ethos of their time. In Studham's pieces, books bear strategic roles, but each is charred. Erasure of this type is redolent of associations with the mid-century pogroms of fascist regimes. Since these texts have been rendered illegible, the message conveyed is one of a convention of communication annulled. Only shredded tissues of text, remnants of discourse, whispers in flame, are left to taunt our imaginations.

Studham is too young to be part of Yeat's Celtic Twilight, and too mature to have a great affinity with the popular Celtic revival. This body of work is unique to his biography and intent. Perhaps the music compositions of Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki are the closest cultural parallels. In any case, Studham's achievement is a rare and powerful blend of asceticism and barbarity at the spiritual frontier. As every

wayfarer knows, crosses signal intersection. Studham's ***Pantheon of Celtic Saints*** carries us to stations where issues of history, fate and flesh collide.

Glenn Allison, Director.

1. Edmund Burke Feldman, *Art as Experience*, New York, 1971, p.39.
2. *The Book of Celtic Saints*, Courtenay Davis and Elaine Gill, London, 1995, pp.9-10.



Technical Notes: The works exhibited qualify as mixed media. They are constructed of parts hand built of Sial brand white earthenware clay. The clay parts are first bisque fired, then pigmented or 'smoked' in an outdoor raku kiln. In keeping with the raku tradition, the clay pieces are frequently extracted from the fire and affected by natural substances which leave the marks of their combustion. Studham keeps a basket of favorite implements, natural and manufactured, to press patterns into the damp clay. Included are carved carob pods, lumps of coral, fabric print blocks, butter pads, etc.

Pictorial elements are achieved through a unique form of *découpage*. Coloured images, scaled to requirements, are photocopied onto fabric transfers which are applied to a very thin and strong Japanese paper known to the trade as MM Tengujo. These are cut out and then placed on the clay surface with a matte acrylic gel. At times, the image is bedded down onto another layer of paper used as a patterned background. The print on those supports acts as *pentimenti*, showing through the top surface like ghost images under thin paint. The book forms are stabilized with acrylic gel.

In recognition of the inherent fragility of the medium, Studham customarily reinforces the clay modules by applying woven fiberglass and resin to the back, which is then camouflaged with paint. Additional structural support comes from old iron spacers once used by bricklayers. These have been adjusted to act as armatures with thin, stabilizing bases.

List of Works:

Numbers 1 through 10 are wall mounted, 11 through twenty are free standing.

1. **St. Petroc at Bodmin**, 2000,
mixed media, 61 x 27 x 15 cm.
2. **St. Winifride at Treffynnan**, 2000,
mixed media, 50 x 35 x 18 cm.
3. **St. Winnaloe at Lavert**, 2000,
mixed media, 55 x 36 x 19 cm.
4. **St. Ita at Sliable Luachra**, 2000,
mixed media, 53 x 51 x 17 cm.
5. **St. Ia at Venton**, 2000,
mixed media, 65 x 42 x 14cm.
6. **St. Columba at Movice**, 2000,
mixed media, 60 x 66 x 16 cm.
7. **St. Aidan at Lindisfarne**, 2000,
mixed media, 66 x 46 x 15 cm.
8. **St. Patrick at Lérine**, 2000,
mixed media, 79 x 50 x 18 cm.
9. **St. David at Henfynyw**, 2000,
mixed media, 82 x 50 x 8 cm.
10. **St. Bridget at Carragh**, 2000,
mixed media, 76 x 54 x 18 cm.
11. **St. Piran at Perranporth**, 2000,
mixed media, 51 x 34 x 15 cm.
12. **St. Kentigern at Eglais ghu**, 2000,
mixed media, 52 x 33x 15 cm.
13. **St. Michael at Brentor**, 2000,
mixed media, 75 x 39 x 15 cm.
14. **St. Kevin at Kilnamanagh**, 2000,
mixed media, 73 x 47 x 15 cm.
15. **St. Nectan at Brychan**, 2000,
mixed media, 72 x 35 x 14 cm.
16. **St. Cuthbert at Melrose**, 2000,
mixed media, 63 x 44 x 17 cm.
17. **St. Anthony of Egypt**, 2000,
mixed media, 70 x 49 x 15 cm.
18. **Desert Father #1**, 2000,
mixed media, 70 x 42 x 14 cm.
19. **Desert Father #2**, 2000,
mixed media, 50 x 35 x 15 cm.
20. **Desert Father #3**, 2000,
mixed media, 70 x 40 x 15 cm.

