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FIRED WITH A PASSION

As a restless young man obsessed with pottery, Pierre Culot travelled the world to meet the great mid-century ceramicists. Then, in the 1960s, he and his wife, Mieke Wynants, converted a derelict farm outside Brussels into a home and studio, where he in turn assumed the role of mentor. Culot died in 2011 but, as Amy Sherlock reports, his son has kept the kilns burning to pass on his legacy to yet another generation. Photography: Jan Baldwin

Left: the floor of Pierre Culot's studio in the former stable block is lined with press moulds for producing tableware - he designed more than 100 of these from the 1960s onwards. Against the far wall, wooden shelving units of Pierre's own design flank a Scandinavian wood-burning stove. Top: both farmhouse and studio are south-facing, with the gable end of the latter glazed to make the most of the light. Pierre also created the planters on the terrace



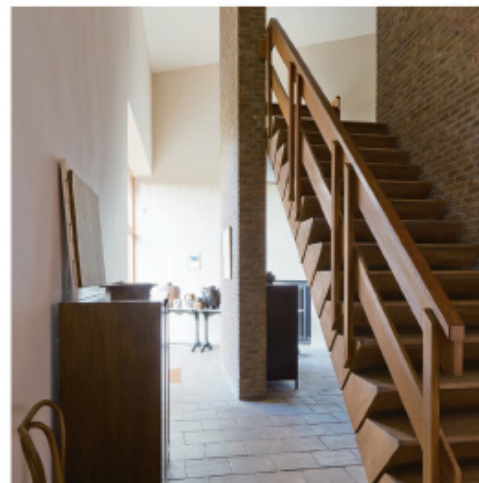
The shelves in the studio are stacked with tableware shaped in the press moulds below, biscuit-fired and now ready for glazing. The glass double doors above were designed to allow heavier pieces to be winched between the ground and upper floors of the studio. On the plinth to the left of the storage racks stands a small maquette for one of the large outdoor sculptures that Pierre Cuïdt constructed from reclaimed brick and stone



This page, clockwise from top left: the glass panel in the upper-floor doors admits a view of the garden; nine *Hommes Debout* (Standing Men), constructed by stacking sections of fired stoneware, parade beneath the trees; a sculpture inspired by the Hellenistic *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. Behind it is a poster for Pierre's 1971 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Pierre mixed all his own glazes, and the kiln-room wall is covered with test tiles



Pierre Cuiot's talents were not confined to ceramics, and the house/studio at Roux-Mirair is filled with pieces of furniture he made or designed himself. He created this prototype table, which Joseph and Arnaud plan to bring into production, in the 1980s. On it stand two of Pierre's signature "Cruciform" vases, other ceramics, and a model of the table itself. He also designed the stoneware flooring tiles that run throughout the ground level of the house



This page, clockwise from top left in the hall, above one of Pierre's *Pots Encrier* (inkpots), hangs a tableau by his assistant Pascal Siootmakers; three ancient French and Burgundian pots share a table with works by Pierre; on the mantelpiece is a maquette for an outdoor sculpture of 17th-century Flemish bricks and *bleue du Hainaut* stone; the staircase was built to Pierre's design, while the cupboard on the left is by the Belgian designer Jules Wabbes



'HERE YOU ALSO

drink with your eyes,' Arnaud van Schevensteen tells me, referring to the beautiful small turned stoneware bowl from which I am about to take a sip of coffee. We are sitting in the airy kitchen of the converted 18th-century farmhouse in the village of Roux-Miroir, just outside Brussels, in which the Belgian ceramicist Pierre Culot lived and worked until his death in 2011. The kitchen's open shelves heave with bowls, plates and platters, which the artist began to produce using press-moulds of his own design in the early 1960s.

'That is one of the interesting things about Pierre,' remarks Culot's son, and Arnaud's friend and business partner, Joseph. 'Even when he was making large-scale sculptures, he never stopped producing vessels. He had a relationship with the basic things: he understood that without a cup, we can't drink, without a plate, we can't eat.' Joseph, who grew up in the house, is now the custodian of his father's artistic legacy; reproducing Pierre's moulded tableware with the help of his long-time studio assistant and collaborator, Pascal Sloomakers, is one way that Joseph and Arnaud hope to keep Roux-Miroir – and Pierre's spirit – alive.

Pierre Culot was born in 1938, the youngest of five children, and his parents taught physics and mathematics. Uninterested in studying and rebellious from an early age, he had his first experience of clay between 1954 and 1957 as a student at the Maredsous Abbey School. From there he went in to the workshop of Antoine de Vinck, one of the foremost Belgian ceramicists of the period. Pierre's apprenticeship lasted only a few months, reflecting a tendency for restlessness that would last a lifetime: 'He spent his life running from one thing to another,' Joseph recalls, half admiringly, half despairingly. But nevertheless, it was there that he learned the fundamentals of his craft.

Around this time, De Vinck was translating Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, which had been published in English in 1940. A manual-cum-philosophical treatise, it synthesised Oriental and Western traditions, arguing for an understated, harmonious and functional ideal of ceramics that would hold sway over a generation of Anglophone potters. Comfortably established in his role as paterfamilias, Leach must have been slightly taken aback when,

in 1958, the 20-year-old Pierre turned up unannounced at the door of his St Ives studio. Pierre stayed at the pottery for nine months, working alongside Richard Batterham and Gwyn Hansen Pigott, who would remain lifelong friends.

There is more than a trace of Leach in the clean, assertive lines of the square 'Cruciform' vases that would become Pierre's most recognisable forms, as well as in the utilitarian ethos of his moulded tableware. Another crucial influence was Shoji Hamada, the Japanese *mingei* (folk art) master, with whom Leach had founded his pottery in St Ives in 1920; Pierre made two pilgrimages to Japan to visit him in the 1970s. In the kitchen at Roux-Miroir, a trio of footed vases with flat rectangular sides and narrow thrown necks stands shoulder to shoulder on top of a wooden dresser – one by Leach, one by Hamada and a 'Cruciform' vessel: markers of Pierre's artistic inheritance as well as of his innovation.

He absorbed other influences, too: during his National Service while serving in a parachute regiment at the end of the 1950s, Pierre was stationed in the then Belgian colonies of Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, where he observed traditional potters at work, occasionally picking up pieces that would make their way to Roux-Miroir. One in particular – an unglazed hollow cuboid form on top of a flared cylindrical pedestal – suggests an alternative source of inspiration for the 'Cruciform' pots.

In 1965, with his star in the ascendant following exhibitions in Brussels, Paris and London, Pierre moved to Roux-Miroir, having seen an advertisement for a run-down farmhouse in a newspaper. 'He came to this place and fell in love,' says Joseph. Pierre moved with his wife, the illustrator Michèle Wynants, and their baby daughter Charlotte. Joseph was born two years later. The house was restored, largely according to Pierre's design – from the wooden staircases and claustra partitions down to the pale stone ware floor tiles that run throughout the ground floor. Across a small courtyard, a stable block was converted into a studio fitted with kilns and spectacular floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the garden and the rolling Walloon fields beyond.

In addition to the tableware, Pierre made much of the furniture: a dining table and ceramic lamp stands (that Joseph and Arnaud plan to re-create) as well as the tall wooden drying racks on which his pots are now displayed, garden benches and plant pots. In the early 1990s, he would turn his hand to larger outdoor sculptural commissions – craggy monoliths made from stone and reclaimed brick – a number of which found their way into the garden, completing the Roux-Miroir *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Pierre was an voracious collector, amassing around 3,000 pots that spill across the basement of Roux-Miroir like the hoarded treasures of Ali Baba's cave. As well as the hundreds of unattributed pieces he found on his travels, there are examples by Batterham, Hamada, Hansen Pigott, Leach, De Vinck, Michael Cardew, Claude Champy, Hans Coper and Lucie Rie: the inventory reads like a roll call of ceramic Modernism. A central part of Joseph and Arnaud's vision for Roux-Miroir is to make Pierre's collection – of his own pots and those of others – available to all who want to engage with it. This will entail working with curators and institutions to produce exhibitions of Pierre's work internationally; the other element is to invite artists to residencies at the house to make use of the exceptional research library that his collection forms. Joseph is emphatic that he does not want Roux-Miroir to become 'a dusty museum'. Over the years, the little road down to the house from the village came to be known simply as Rue de la Poterie (Pottery Street). Long may it remain that way.

For more information, visit pierreculot.com



Opposite: ceramic claustra panels made and installed by Pierre give the upper floor of the studio a light, open feel. The sill is lined with milk jugs he made. This page: The Vase Composé on the plinth dates from c1972 and is part of a series that evokes the interlocking forms of the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida