



Trashmagination Podcast #69 – Broken or Unwanted Dishes and Pottery

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

In today's episode, we'll talk about creative reuse of dishes and pottery. The dishes I am talking about today are made from porcelain, ceramics, clay or glass.

Many people are clearing out their kitchens of unwanted items due to the popularity of the show Tidying Up with Marie Kondo. Hopefully most people do not put dishes in the trash, but I bet many thrift stores are currently overwhelmed with dishes. And then there is the challenge of broken or chipped dishes and pottery. So let's talk about ways that people creatively reuse these items.

How It's Made about porcelain - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kab29lfdomQ>

Unwanted Dishes

If you are cleaning out your kitchen cupboards, before you donate to a local thrift store, you might consider donating to local organizations who support veterans or people who are moving in transitional housing. Check with your homeless and women's support centers. The organization Operation Homefront helps set up households for veterans in some areas of the United States [<https://www.operationhomefront.org/>]. On Facebook, there are many Buy Nothing groups where you can get the dishes directly to the people who need them most rather than flooding thrift stores.

Can I Put a Broken Dish in the Recycling Bin?

Now if your dishes are broken or chipped, that's a different problem. If you have ever broken a porcelain item, you know that it is challenging to fix in a way that you cannot see the break, so most broken dishes and porcelain statues go in the trash. Some people asked if it is okay to put broken dishes in the recycling bin, and the answer is no in most places because the small pieces will fall through the sorting machines. Ceramics are considered to be contamination in most municipal recycling programs¹. So don't put broken dishes in your recycling bin. And if you are going to put them in the trash, be sure to securely tape up the broken pieces in a cardboard box labelled "broken dish" to keep your trash collection team safe. But if your broken dish pieces are colorful and not too sharp, there are other options.

Kintsugi

Have you heard about the technique called kintsugi? This is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. It speaks to the idea that we can value items even if they are not perfect. The break is part of the story of the dish, and something to celebrate rather than hide. The resulting dish is very beautiful. While the masters of kintsugi will make extraordinary art, it is still possible for those of us who are not experts to experiment with this technique. Kintsugi works best with pottery that you are not going to use for eating and which have one or two big breaks rather than broken into many pieces. I will link to a video tutorial that might inspire you to give it a try and you only need two materials – a two-part clear epoxy and mica powder.

Robert Mahar – Kintsugi technique - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgWyKFZbPzI>

¹ <https://livegreen.recyclebank.com/column/because-you-asked/what-should-i-do-with-my-chipped-dishes-and-bowls>

Pyrex Dishes

Now let's talk about vintage Pyrex dishes. These are bowls and casserole dishes with thick sides, often very colorful. These dishes are made from a specific type of glass called borosilicate glass which was made starting in 1915. The colorful ones were made from 1947 until the 1980s. There are lots of people who collect vintage Pyrex dishes. Some designs were owned by almost everyone in America, but some were promotional designs and are quite rare. You might own a design that is hard to find, so before you donate them, you might check collector websites and eBay. Or find a local artist who is making pendants from Pyrex and give them your dishes.

If you broke the bottom of your Pyrex casserole dish and only have the glass lid, check out a craft by Sadie Seasongoods. She turned it upside-down and used it as a bird bath [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/thrifted-glass-lid-hanging-bird-bath/>].

If you want to make art from Pyrex, you should be aware that some old Pyrex had a radioactive glazes, so you should research that before cutting them.

Fine China

If you want to downsize your fine china, but the next generation of your family doesn't want them because they don't go in the microwave, check out the International Association of Dinnerware Matchers [<http://www.iadm.com/sell/default.htm>]. They will find you an interested buyer who is trying to fill out their collection of china. Often they might be looking for a specific piece from an old set that broke and is no longer manufactured.

Home Décor and Garden Art Crafts from Recycled Dishes

So now let's deep dive into some fun creative reuse ideas for your home and garden. All these ideas are accessible through the Pinterest board that I made for you - <https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/dishes-porcelain-pottery/> - so you can head over there for inspiration.

One of the most popular items I see on Pinterest to creatively reuse china plates is to make a layered serving dish where there is a big plate on the bottom, then a medium-sized plate and a small plate on top all connected with a post. This can be made with china or glass plates.

If you are looking for garden art, here are two ideas.

The first is to make flowers from glass dishes. You glue colorful glass plates one on top of each other so it looks like a flower. For example, the bottom one is a flat plate, then a bowl and then a teacup for the flower's stamens. These are displayed either flat like a bird bath or upright like a flower. To display them upright, you attach a coupling nut to the back of the bottom plate so the item can hang on a post. It really looks like a big flower and sometimes they are called water-wise flowers because you don't have to water them obviously [<https://www.infarrantlycreative.net/garden-art>]. If the glassware that you want to reuse is transparent and you want to add color, you can paint them with something called glass stain.

The other idea is called a garden totem which is to attach a variety of glass dishes on top of each other in the garden like a sculpture [<https://www.myrepurposedlife.com/glass-totem-tutorial/>]. The sun shines on them and makes rainbows.

Teacups and Mugs

Let's talk about teacups and mugs. They are probably the most fun dish to creatively reuse. You can mount them on the wall with the handles hanging down and hang things from them like hook.

Another idea for garden art is to put a tea cup on a post. This is like a tiny elegant birdfeeder. Sadie Seasongoods uses a mug to make a birdfeeder by filling it with suet and seeds, sticking in a wooden post for the bird to stand on, and then hanging it up by the mug handle [<https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/goodwill-blogging-thrifting-for-the-birdsa-diy->

[suet-feeder-february-2016/](#)]. Check out the show notes to see a lovely bird house made from a teapot hanging from its handle [<http://robinsnestingplace.blogspot.com/search/label/Birdhouse>].

Another way people creatively reuse teacups is to make them into a candle. You just hold up the wick and pour in the wax [<https://www.fix.com/blog/diy-christmas-gifts/>]. I recommend using beeswax rather than petroleum-based wax to reduce your environmental impact.

Mosaics from Broken Dishes

For broken dishes, the most common idea is to make mosaics. I took a mosaic-making class with my daughter at the local community center from Mimi Nyman and she showed us how to reuse broken plates. This is a great craft for someone who loves puzzles because you fit the pieces together in a fun way, and it's also a great craft if you don't like to cut things in an exact way following a pattern. Lots of people reuse broken dishes as decorative mosaics on flower pots. If you don't do mosaic art yourself, you could bring your more colorful or interesting broken dishes to your community center to find mosaic artists.

Some people put broken pottery pieces at the bottom of their flower pots below the soil instead of pebbles and others put it in their gardens instead of gravel. This would work great only if the pieces are not sharp of course.

Artists Who Recycle Dishes and Pottery

Next we'll talk about artists who incorporate dishes and pottery into their work. First I follow three artists who make necklaces from recycled dishes.

Juliet Ames from the Broken Plate Company [<http://ibreakplates.com/>] transforms broken pieces of a shattered family dish or wedding plate into wearable heirlooms for a client's family. She's in Baltimore, Maryland – not far from me!

Broken Plate Company - <https://youtu.be/bGabdOckL3Q>

Valentina Jones cuts big circular shapes from china plates [https://www.instagram.com/valentina_jones/]. Her pieces have a great modern aesthetic if you wanted a big statement necklace.

If you are in the UK, an artist who makes necklaces from recycled dishes is Karen Dixon from Studio Underwood [<https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/StudioUnderwood>]. Her pieces look more like they were dug up from an archeological dig and she makes pieces from recycled metal as well.

Mimi Kirchner is an artist from the Boston area who sews many exquisite items mostly from wool. Something she makes often are "tiny worlds" which are little wool felt scenes inside a teacup [<http://mimikirchner.com/blog/archives/tag/tiny-world/>]. These are different than the sweater pincushions that my aunt Debbie makes. Mimi sews a ball of wool that fits perfect in the tea cup. Then she adds a little house, church or lighthouse sewn from wool, and trees and lots of other lovely details. The color palette of her tiny world usually matches the color palette of the design on the tea cup.

Perhaps you are familiar with the classically popular type of dish with a blue and white pattern that originated in China. The art that you see on this type of dish reminds me of a fabric called toile (twalle) which usually features pastoral scenes of farms and cows. So while you are on Mimi Kirchner's website looking at her tiny worlds, also take a moment to look at her tattooed dolls [<http://mimikirchner.com/blog/archives/tag/tattoo-man/>]. She makes them from toile which she dyes with skin tones and sews them into men wearing kilts, lumberjacks, acrobats, merpeople and pirates. I absolutely love them. I will share a video showing Mimi in her studio and she says in this video, "I have a really hard time throwing anything away. Every little bit seems like it could be used for something." I think Mimi and I are soul-sisters.

Mimi Kirchner - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WgD4T3WEB4>

The next artist makes art from those blue and white dishes. His name is Li Xiofeng and he's from Beijing [<https://www.redgategallery.com/content/li-xiaofeng>]. He attaches pieces of dishes together into sculptural forms –

mostly dresses and suits. I will put a video in the show notes showing how he smooths out the dish shards and attaches them together with silver wire. Some of his designs can even be worn by people!

Li Xiofeng - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzVRY7zxf0>

Zemer Peled [<https://www.zemerpeled.com/>] makes big spiky sculptural pieces from cut up porcelain. They are not usually actually dishes before she uses them, but I love seeing how artists use a material and how they push the envelope with what can be made with them. She cuts up the porcelain elements with a meat slicer or hammer. She sticks it into a clay base and then fires it again so it becomes one big solid piece. Her work is described as both beautiful and brutal. They look like giant coral reef sculptures or cacti. I'll share a video interview with her in the show notes. She talks about the experience of working so up close with the pieces as the artist and then the strange feeling when you step back and see the whole piece and then the whole exhibit.

Zemer Peled - <https://www.facebook.com/boredpanda/videos/10154786718204252/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg4KU7U8ek>

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear what you think about creative reuse of dishes and pottery at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see broken or unwanted dishes and pottery as a source of art in your life!