

John ffrench was born in Dublin to Irish and Italian parents. He currently divides his time between Massachusetts in America and County Galway. Travel and foreign inspiration has always been a factor in his work. His early art education was in design, drawing and calligraphy in the National College of Art in Dublin. In 1951, ffrench went to the Institute Statale d'Arte in Florence to study under professor Bruno Pauli. He stayed on in Italy until 1955 to work with like-minded ceramicists on one-off pieces and to soak up the innovations of Italian Modernism. The Mediterranean influence, so apparent in his work from then on, set him apart on his return to Ireland. At this time, Ireland had virtually no craft pottery tradition and mass produced and imported work was standard. Even in the 1950's, the new craft schools based on the Bernard Leach school favoured the Anglo-Oriental style of dun-coloured pots, the "little brown pots" as they were known.

When ffrench returned to Ireland in 1956 he set up the 'Ring Studio' in Kilkenny with Peter Brennan. He began to create pots unlike any seen previously in the country; ffrench preferred to hand build rather than throw his pots and they were very sculptural and experimental in form. The cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque inspired both the ceramics and paintings he made at this time and much of his work was large and irregularly shaped (to the point that his work was described as "too obstinately asymmetrical" by a Dublin newspaper). His work was often non-utilitarian and seemed to evolve and depart from any standard form of pot at the earliest opportunity. In terms of colour, the influences of Matisse and Juan Miro can be seen in the glaze designs of his pots; bright, joyous colours, playful lines and swirls, stripes and bands in turquoise and yellow, spirals and zoomorphic shapes. The colourful patchwork design that appeared in his work was influenced by harlequin glass from Murano. Much of the imagery of birds and swirls came from Castle ffrench, his childhood home in Galway.

The Waddington Gallery in Dublin exhibited ffrench's work where it held the same status as contemporary painting and sculpture. An exhibition of his pots at Brown Thomas in Dublin sold out on opening and although Ffrench remembers the writer Flann O'Brien calling his bowls "tortured ashtrays", his work was regarded by most as highly original and desirable. ffrench did not stay in Ireland and in 1957 he went to India basing himself in Calcutta for the next three years. The Indian tradition in ceramics and the Indian love of pattern in ceramics, calligraphy and textile work was of great interest to him. He held a position as folk-art collector for the local Design Centre of West Bengal. This afforded him the opportunity to travel about India exploring the diverse styles and traditions. He lived for a while at the ashram in Sevagram, the last home of Mahatma Gandhi. The craft tradition, the lifestyle and ethos in India was to become a huge influence on his own ceramic work. The ashram way of life emphasised the importance of hands-on work, and commitment to one's craft. ffrench continues to be an advocate of this artisan lifestyle.

In 1962, ffrench returned to Ireland and founded the Arklow Studio Pottery. The Scandinavian Report into the status and quality of craft in Ireland had been scathing, a government initiative to improve standards by involving experts in the various fields was set up. ffrench was closely involved in this capacity with Kilkenny Studios, which was producing designers for various industries. Influences from his time spent in India were seen in the imagery, colour, form and pattern work of his time. The studio produced tableware, pots, jewellery, wall panels in colourfully glazed, stamped and gilded finishes. In 1969, he moved to America and opened the Dolphin Studio in Massachusetts. With his wife he added batik works and silk-screen prints to his range. He made cheerfully coloured decorative temples and mythical buildings made from individual tiles and arranged like children's building blocks. In 2007, John ffrench was honoured with a lifetime achievement show from the Arts Council of Ireland.