



1. Sheila Casson throwing porcelain bowls.



2. Casserole, dolomite and tin glaze 5in high, 8in wide. 1965.



3. Teapot, stoneware, Tenmoku glaze. (developed in Japan) 6.5in high. 1965.

## Final part of the series Women Potters, Part 6. Sheila Casson

by Joan Witham

*"I cannot imagine not making pots. There is always the hope that one pot will be a 'racer', one where all aspects of form, colour, texture, glaze and decoration work".*

### Sheila's mark on lower edge.

W  
S

U  
S

(W)  
S

Earliest pieces.  
(maiden name  
WILMOT)

1970  
Sheila Casson

1997 onwards  
at Wobage  
Farm

After over fifty years of potting Sheila Casson still, through making and experimenting, strives to come nearer and nearer to this goal.

Visitors to Wobage Farm where she and Mick Casson live, in the beautiful Hertfordshire countryside, find a delightful working community housed in workshops once part of an old dairy farm. Six potters, including Sheila and Mick, two wood workers and one jeweller work as individuals, sharing all the facilities including a fine spacious exhibition gallery and contributing to the maintenance of the restored buildings.

Sheila's art training began in 1946 at the age of sixteen when she enrolled at the nearby Hornsey School of Art in London. Wartime had severely disrupted her education so she felt unable to take any further academic training. Instead, having always enjoyed drawing and painting, she applied for an art course. Unsure of which to choose, she eventually decided on pottery. The course itself proved to be very disappointing, the tutor coming from industry with an industrial focus on hand-making, for example, drawing pots in sections before getting to the actual medium.

Sheila was already aware of the work of Bernard Leach and was inspired by his philosophy: "Making beautiful pots for everyday use by hand methods, with natural materials".

She applied for a summer school place in St. Ives to experience the philosophy at first hand but at that time it was a mecca for Americans and she was unable to secure a place. At Hornsey she proceeded with her

course, taking first the intermediate examination and then the National Diploma in Design in pottery and lithography, followed by a one year Art Teacher's Diploma. In the late forties a flood of service men and women were returning to civilian life and it was hard to find a teaching post. She was eventually employed in a boarding school in Somerset where she was required to establish a new craft room with pottery-making facilities.

In 1955 Sheila married Mick and joined him to live and work at his already established pottery near Russell Square in London. For almost fifty years their personal and professional lives have been closely bound. Although pursuing their own individual styles they have shared the same philosophy of seeking to make beautiful things to use. In London they both taught pottery part-time and made red earthenware with tin-glazed majolica and incised decoration. Majolica is pottery with an opaque tin-glaze over-painted with oxides. They sold their work from the back of

the ironmonger's shop and also in Heal's and Liberty's. In 1959 when the Craft Potters Association was first started, Sheila and Mick were early members and have been ever since.

In 1959 a move with their first child took them to Prestwood in Buckinghamshire where they established a new pottery. Happily caring for her family and supporting Mick in his developing career has meant that throughout her life pottery making has been intermittent. Despite this, she managed to find time at Prestwood to make domestic stoneware using a variety of glazes. Most of the work was sold from the shop and they both took part in C.P.A. exhibitions. By the 1970s people were demanding more colourful pottery so alongside their domestic ware Sheila made individual pieces and explored throwing in porcelain.

In 1977 they moved to Wobage Farm near Ross-on-Wye. They organised workshops for themselves and their daughter and son-in-law, a pottery student at Farnham College of Art. Mick and Andrew both wished to make wood fired salt glazed pots and they built their first kiln for this purpose. Salt is thrown into the kiln at 1240°C onwards. It vaporises and fluxes the clay surface of the pots, giving the typical orange peel effect glaze. On holiday in the 1970s in Greece and Crete, Sheila saw early Minoan pots and was inspired to make salt glazed jugs, later in the 1980s with a thrown, cut spout. She continues to make them today.

Meanwhile, influenced by the rolling Herefordshire countryside, she made porcelain bowls decorated with abstract landscape patterns. This decorative technique involved inlaid lines, paper and latex resist (latex is a form of glue which peels away), sprayed overall with oxides of iron and cobalt and then incised. Attempts to widen her colour range caused complications which made results so unpredictable that she gave up after ten years and went back to making domestic stoneware, this time salt-glazed. During the 1980s, such was the international reputation of Sheila and Mick, that they were able to draw potters from all over the world to come and develop further skills at their two week summer school courses. These courses at Wobage Farm continued for five years and were interesting but exhausting. During the same period Sheila was invited on to the Craft Council Index which holds slides of high quality work in a reference library.

A visit in 1997 to the British Museum introduced her to some pre-history Mediterranean hand-built pots. The actual method of building pots by coiling attracted her, partly because she has absolute control over the development and the form, and partly because it enables her to make bigger pots. She has never had the time to acquire the skill of making large pots on a wheel and so, in a new venture, whilst still making thrown salt-glaze, she began to make hand-built pots in red clay, coiled, scraped and burnished. The surfaces are treated with terra sigillata, a fine thin slip used on Roman and Greek pottery to give a very smooth surface. After biscuit firing they are placed in a simple sawdust kiln and smoke fired. Like Raku pots (featured in an earlier edition) they are porous and so, not meeting Sheila's own requirements that all her pottery should be usable, she prefers to regard them as sculptures. The whole process is very time consuming, one piece possibly taking a whole week, but the results are rewarding as fascinating effects emerge from the sawdust kiln. A window display of these smoked pots was held in August 2000 at the C.P.A shop in London.

For the future Sheila dreams of having a long uninterrupted period of time for potting. "Life seems to be all stopping and starting". It is a tribute to her love of creating beautiful pots and her sheer determination to make time to do it that she has been able to produce work so widely acclaimed and collected, whilst at the same time caring for her family and supporting Mick in his multi-faceted career. Her work can be seen at Wobage Farm, which is open for sales every weekend and also in special selling exhibitions in July and November. There are one or two gallery shows elsewhere.

*Acknowledgments to Sheila Casson and to Bill Thomas for picture 5.*



8. 'Cretan' jug, salt glaze stoneware. 3.5in high, 7in wide. 1995. £18.



7. Landscape bowl, porcelain. 8in dia. 1989.



9. Bowl, salt-glaze. 8in dia. 1995. £65.



12. Bowl, smoked. 10in high, 15in wide. 2000. £75 to £250.



6. Landscape pots, porcelain. 10in high to 11in high. 1984.



5. Landscape pots, porcelain. 5in high, 6in high and ten inch high. 1983.



10. Teapot, salt-glaze, 6in high. 1999. £55 to £65.



11. Pot, low fired, smoked. 13.5in high. 2000. £75 to £250.



4. Pot, porcelain. 7.5in high. 1977.