



Josie Walter in her workshop.

Women Potters, Part 2. Josie Walter

A woman of many parts, potter, writer, lecturer, researcher, exhibition organiser, consultant and curator, Josie Walter would seem to have already lived three lives in one. This article, however, will concentrate almost entirely on her career as an acclaimed maker of earthenware which celebrates the art of cooking and the presentation of what she describes as 'slow rather than fast food'.

by Joan Witham



Poultry plate 1986.



Poultry dish 1987.



Vase of flowers dish 1988.

In a traditional grammar school Josie Walter experienced very little in the way of art teaching and when she left in 1959 it was to study anthropology at University College, London followed by a Post Graduate certificate in education at Leicester University. Employed as a teacher in 1973 she taught social studies and was a 'stop gap', filling in occasionally in the art department. Feeling totally inadequate there she was sufficiently motivated to attend evening art classes and then courses in pottery at Loughborough College during her summer holidays. Gradually she was becoming convinced that her future lay in making pots.

In 1976 she enrolled for a part time Diploma in Studio Ceramics at Chesterfield Art College, teaching in a secondary school at the same time but with a burning ambition fuelled by the inspiration of a tutor, Geoffrey Fuller and her fellow mature students to start on a full time potting career. She gained her diploma with distinction in 1979, escaped from teaching and joined John and Judy Gibson, friends made at Chesterfield in an old coaching inn in Matlock which they fitted out as a number of pottery workshops. There she made and sold earthenware. In 1980 she took six months away to work as a repetition thrower in a pottery in France with Susan and Nigel Alkins, successful makers of salt glaze. Here she was able to learn business and marketing. Returning to Matlock Josie still felt a preference for earthenware.

'It is predictable, what you put in is what you get out, barring a few problems when manufacturers change the nature of materials; salt glaze is far more uncertain'.

Influenced no doubt by the French love of food and of attractive, purpose-made pots for cooking and serving, she concentrated on pieces directly related to cooking.

Not content with the hard work of potting she found time to teach for two days a week at Chesterfield Art College in 1983, leaving after two years to join the Derbyshire College of Higher Education and lecture one day a week on their Higher Diploma course. In 1986 it was necessary to vacate the Matlock pottery and her next workshop, until 1990, was at an old mill in Bonsall, Derbyshire. During this time her reputation as an accomplished and innovative maker become established. Formal recognition came in 1986 from the Craft Potters Association which granted her full membership and this recognition was further enhanced by her appointment, first as Exhibitions Officer 1988 to 1994, then as Vice-Chair of the CPA Council in London in 1991.

During the 1990s her lecturing work increased and her own education was developed by a three year M.A. degree course in the History of Ceramics at Staffordshire University. She now divides her time between her purpose-built workshop in the garden of her home and two days at Derby University. She follows a disciplined routine, leaving the house and 'going to work' at 9am, normally spending most of the day there. Almost every piece of pottery apart from small slab butter dishes is thrown on the wheel which she built from skip-salvaged materials whilst at Chesterfield College.

All pots are raw glazed (cutting out the biscuit firing) and fired in an electric kiln. Sometimes white slips (ball clay and water) are poured thinly to let the colours of the earthenware body show through, at other times poured in layers overlapping each other. Slips are also brushed very thickly whilst the pot is turning on the wheel. Coloured glazes are applied thinly overall, then more thickly where detail needs to be highlighted. Cobalt (blue)

and chrome (green) oxides provide colours. Some photographs show yellows and pinks which are commercial stains not now used. Paper resist, colour infill, slip trailing and sgraffito (scratched) are processes regularly used as Josie searches for increased fluidity in her designs. Her pieces are most comfortable on a dresser, on the kitchen and dining room table. Cups, saucers, plates, bowls and teapots all have a soft, warm glow and a gentle smoothness of decoration whilst being at the same time, robust and earthy.

Photographs show the changes in her work over three decades indicating not only her own creative preferences but also changes in public taste. The 1970s showed a preference for dark, sombre tones; people in the 1980s wanted brighter colours. Now at the turn of the century tastes are for plain, pale, simple almost rural styles in furnishings and pottery. Dining is much more informal; many young people reject the past fashion for full dinner services and have the confidence to 'mix and match'. Pottery is chosen which directly relates to food, lasagne, pizza, risotto, fish, and often a studio-made dish will have pride of place amongst industrial tableware.

Looking to the future, always experimenting and always optimistic, 'I see a glass half full rather than half empty', Josie will eventually give up her lecturing commitments and work full time in her workshop. When the mortgage is paid off she and her musician husband hope to take 'a gap year' which many youngsters do now, only she will pack a rucksack at sixty. One feels sure however, that wherever her wanderings take her, the lure of pottery makers in Japan, India, Australia will draw her like a magnet and inspire her when she returns home.

Her work can be bought in the Contemporary Ceramics gallery in Marshall Street, London and in many other galleries throughout Britain. Visitors and enquiries are welcome at her workshop in Bolehill, Derbyshire (please telephone first) 01629 823669.

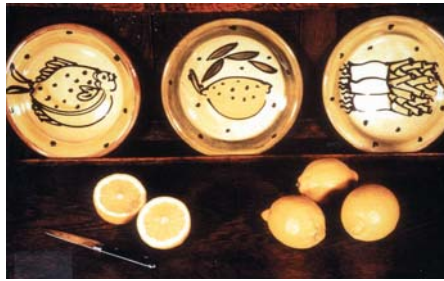
Current Prices (Retail)

Mugs, bowls, small plates. £10. Dishes £30 - £40. Salad bowls £40 - £50. Teapots £45.



Impressed mark of fish (Trout, her married name) and W on base. When she remembers! Signature 'Walter' on base, no longer used.

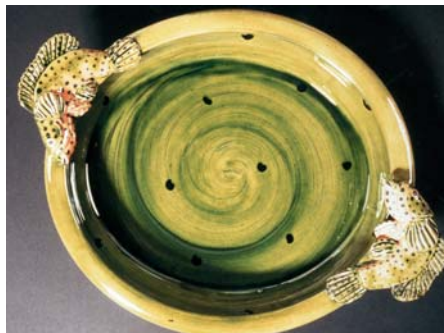
Acknowledgements to Josie Walter and to Lu Jeffery, Peter Holdcroft and Oded Shimshon for photographs.



Fish, lemon and leek plates 1990.



Fish dish 1990.



Dish with fish handles 1992.



Abstract design bowl 1994.



Pear dishes 1997.



Hen bowl 1999.



Detail of fish handle 1999.



Oak leaf in various sizes 2000.