



1. Joanna Howells in her studio.



2. Shallow blue dish, 9in. £70. 1995.



4. Two lidded globes, 10in, £95. 15in, £290. 1996.



3. Three jugs, quarter, half, one pint, £20 to £70. 1995.

Women Potters, Part 5. Joanna Howells

by Joan Witham

“It was a tremendous privilege to study medicine and I don’t regret it; science still fascinates me. However, I wish I had discovered my true interest in ceramics earlier - but to do both would need two lifetimes”



All pieces are impressed with either one of these two marks.

Joanna speaks here of her early science studies, leading after school to Cambridge University and a Medical Science Tripos in 1983. Yet there was already a hint of a leaning towards a non-scientific career when, alongside school ‘A’ levels in physics, chemistry and mathematics, she chose to take ceramics. Always interested in art and quite obsessed with making objects by hand, she was inspired by the pots which her older sister brought home from evening classes and decided she too would like to work with clay. Another significant influence, another step on the way, was the proximity to the Cambridge College of the Fitzwilliam Museum. She was drawn there, week after week to admire the whole ceramic collection but what specially captured her imagination were the early Korean and Chinese porcelains.

Although she was a conscientious and very successful student in her medical studies, she began to realise that, above all, she wanted to make pots. After her degree, despite strong

recommendations from her tutors not to change courses, she felt absolutely certain that it was the right thing to do. She duly took the first step and enrolled part-time at the Sir John Cass School of Art. Later she was accepted on a two-year vocational pottery course at Harrow College of Higher Education from which she graduated in 1986 with distinction. The course at Harrow was marvellous, exactly what she had hoped for and the teaching of Mo Jupp, Danny Killick, West Marshall, Victor Magrie and Richard Slee equipped her to start work in a studio in London with two other graduates from Harrow. She made a variety of wares in stoneware and porcelain but, with no outlets for her work, no experience of how to run a business and bring her work before the public eye, she had to learn the hard way.

By 1993 Joanna began to feel dissatisfied with the pottery she was producing - that it was becoming static, lacking freshness. She needed new inspiration, new challenges. Meeting Anthony, who became her husband, was the catalyst for change: he suggested that they leave London and move to Vaucluse in Southern France where he could write and she could continue to make pots. There in the new environment, she found time to re-appraise her

work, time to contemplate her future in ceramics and, what she sought most of all, inspiration. This came from the medieval villages which abound in Southern France.

“Inspiration is a complex thing, often about bringing together dormant thoughts, feelings and aspirations which have built up over a long period of time and lodged in the brain. Suddenly something, anything can trigger a new idea out of this compost”.

In France she looked closely at natural and man-made textures, exploring the surfaces of things worn and weathered - tombstones, rocks, pebbles, fabrics - all of which led to the work she makes today. The images accompanying the article are specifically chosen by her to illustrate ceramics made after the five months in France and up to the present time. It is as if her previous pieces were merely a prelude to far more significant work for which she is known today.

Another important change in direction occurred as a result of moving to live in Wales near the sea three years ago. Responding confidently as Joanna does to her environment and drawing ideas from the natural world, her current pots are more fluid with lines which echo the ebb and flow of the sea and the

working of the waves and sand. She gathers shells, pebbles, seed heads and skeletal leaves to give texture to the surfaces of her pots.

Constantly seeking the perfect clay, (currently using Limoges porcelain) she is now testing a new batch of porcelain from New Zealand, looking for a good white colour and easy handling. All work is thrown on a wheel and re-formed by hand. The lidded pot (illustration 6) is thrown in one piece, the emphasised ridge being created by a sharp change of direction at the base. A clay stamp with surface texture derived from a bale of straw pressed on to the pot causes the 'skirt' to distort and ripple. All this is done with tools and her fingers: sometimes the indentations are deep, at other times understated but always enough to add an extra dimension to the work. Joanna's pots are defined by a delicate sensitive touch. Sinuous lines and dimples please the eye and invite the hand to trace them over the pots. Where appropriate, forged iron handles are added, the idea coming from Byzantine glass in Venice. Initially she forged her own but now they are made to her prototypes by Aaron Peterson at the Museum of Welsh Life in St Fagans. With typical attention to detail she sometimes adds delightful 'lips' of clay from which the handles emerge. (see illustration 8)

Various galleries stock her work and she has six to eight exhibitions each year, some shared, some solo. A new venture, in collaboration with three other potters is to hold twice yearly open studios showing porcelain, wood-fired stoneware and Raku. In addition Joanna gives demonstrates to the general public at events like 'Earth and Fire' at Rufford, Nottinghamshire, to ceramic groups and conferences and is a visiting lecturer at Art Colleges.

In 1990 having sent slides of her work to the Craft Potters Association of Great Britain she was invited to send actual samples and was accepted as a Fellow of this prestigious organisation. She makes no accommodation to changing public tastes or current fashions, being interested only in developing her own way of handling her materials and producing, 'usable wares of wit and ingenuity which have a natural and understated quality'.

In the future Joanna would like to explore the effects of wood firing, soda and salt, on porcelain. These major new developments would need a great deal of time for experimentation - time which is hard to find between potting and attending to the bureaucracy of running a business. She would also like to travel, especially to see the work of potters in Japan, China and Korea, returning no doubt inspired afresh and keen to develop new ideas.

Visitors are welcome at her studio workshop at Cwrt Isaf, Tythegston, Nr Bridgend. Please phone in advance 01656 784021

Acknowledgements to Joanna Howells; Martin Avery, Graham Matthews, Abbas Nazari, Henri Schneebeli. (photographers)



6. Lidded jar, 9in. £98. 1997.



7. Bucket vases 6in to 12in, £15 to £169. 1999.



8. Teapot, 8in. £110. 2000.



5. Two beakers and bowls, £16, £15 each. 1996.



9. Totem vases, 5in to 18in, £24 to £240. 2000.



10. Cups and saucers, £50 each. 2000.



11. Porcelain tray, 18in. £250. 2001.