



The Fluid Simplicity of **Soda-Glazed Stoneware**

Sitting in the old ticket office that stands beside Maze Hill station in Greenwich, her studio since 1994, Lisa Hammond reflects, 'I've often thought about moving to the country.' And it is easy to see why. Her soda-glazed stoneware, influenced by the simple shapes of medieval pottery, trades on the immediacy of clay. 'Once, potters used to work near its source and dug their own clay – a few still do.'

A direct relationship with the soil has tempted her, but Lisa is a Londoner born and bred. Her fascination with clay began when she visited the Poole and Devon potteries on holiday as a child.

Even as a student at Goldsmiths College (now the University of London), more than 20 years ago, Lisa wanted to make functional pots. 'The tendency was to follow the style of Bernard Leach, the revered potter,' she explains. 'He

revived the tradition of the craft potter and fostered the Japanese influence that is a part of my work.' Her pots have a simplicity that gives the nod to Leach and her own fluid lines express the clay's softness, even when fired.

She has always enjoyed matching form to function. 'I love to bring a cooking dish to the table so I looked for items that no one else was making. Back then, the potteries were only making round lasagne dishes when lasagne only came in rectangular sheets. Most dishes aren't deep enough either – mine are.'

She has always understood the need for pots to be the right size for the job. When her daughter Jay, now 21, and son Bill, 12, were young, she made little pudding bowls so that they quickly looked full. 'I made them tiny mugs and people said, "They are perfect for espresso." So I still make them.'



Her range of set pieces includes large bowls for pasta and salad and lipped pouring bowls. 'I've always made bread crocks, lidded casseroles and colanders for soft fruit – you just put it in, wash and drain it, then take it to the table.'

One of her recent pieces is a cafetière, with plunger. 'The pleasure of pots is in using them daily. They are functional because I've designed them to be so. I have no room for things I can't use.'

Lisa is one of a handful of established potters working with soda glaze. Ever since the 17th century, people have been firing pottery with salt, throwing it in the kiln during firing to form a glaze with the clay. The delight of salt-glazing is that each firing is unique, with every pot individual, but of the same family. However, the technique fell from favour because of the city smog it caused. It was taken up again by The Craft Potters from the early 1950s, during a revival of the old skills.

Lisa was one of the pioneers to find an alternative to salt. 'Our experiments in the early 1980s were not successful. We tried to mimic salt glaze, using soda which doesn't contain the smog-making chlorine, but which still reacts with the silica in the clay to put a slip on the pots. It took a long time but, used correctly, you get a dramatic, heavily pitted area and a smoother feel on the pot's side. The orange slip comes from the iron in the clay but you can change its colour by dipping the pot into tinted liquid clay slips.'

When Lisa set up her pottery at Maze Hill, she had been teaching for 13 years at Goldsmiths and aimed to take on three student

apprentices. 'Colleges send them out ill-prepared to run a business. In the first year, they come to me part-time while at college. In the second, they are in the studio full time, producing some of my pots, and in the third year they start to produce their own and I help them to establish themselves.' She also runs courses for beginners and advanced potters.

The studio works on three to four week cycles, starting with mixing three clays to get the right colour. This is followed by two weeks of throwing pots. 'I create what I like and the galleries then make their choice. In between, I finish pieces, add handles or pierce holes in colanders, at the leather-hard stage – when a piece is firm enough to pick up, but not completely dried out. The slips are put on then too, first on the outside and, when the pot is back to leather hard, on the inside.'

When the pots are all bone dry, Lisa and her students put them into the kiln she built. 'It takes a day and a half to pack the kiln and we can get a few hundred pots in there,' she says. 'With a soda-glaze kiln, you need a mix of shapes and sizes for the flame to make interesting marks on the pots.'

'The firing takes from 30 to 26 hours. Towards the end, I reduce the air input, which draws the iron out of the clay and bonds it to the surface. About two hours later, we put in the soda.' For this, bicarbonate of soda is boiled up with water, then Lisa and a helper spray this simple solution through portholes in the kiln, over the burners in the fire-box. 'The solution lands on the flame which carries it through the kiln and onto the pots, where it starts fusing with the silica in the clay.'

Cooling the kiln is as skilful as its firing and takes up to two days – opening it is an occasion. Twice a year, at the end of May and early December (Friday 7th December this year), Lisa has a three day open weekend to tie-in with the kiln opening. 'We get a horde of people who cherry pick the best pots hot from the kiln shelves.'

Lisa's work sells through 30-odd galleries, from Cornwall to Scotland, and interest from Japanese galleries led to a recent research trip to Japan, sponsored by the Crafts Council. It renewed her respect for the way that Japanese food culture interacts with ceramics. 'They have different pots for different seasons and uses. My pots sell well in Japan in winter, less so in summer, because they think about the colour of the ceramics in relation to the food served. They say the Japanese eat with their eyes, which is true. I would like to influence the British to do the same.'

By Celia Rufey

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