

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

NATURAL FORMS IN CERAMICS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page No.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	2.
INTRODUCTION .....	3.
The Development of Creative Ceramics .....	4.
CHAPTERS:	
1. MARY ROGERS .....	7.
2. RUTH DUCKWORTH .....	25.
3. ULLA VIOTTI .....	30.
4. NIALH HARPER .....	38.
5. SUMMARY & CONCLUSION .....	45.
FOOTNOTES .....	47.
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	48.



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

No.		Page No.
I.	<u>FRAGMENTS OF BRICK</u> by Picasso.....	4.
2.	<u>PEELING BIRCH</u> by Mary Rogers.....	II.a
3.	<u>CONVOLUTED BOWL</u> by Mary Rogers .....	II.b
4.	<u>WHITE WAVE</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I4.
5.	<u>CONICAL VEINED BOWL</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I4.
6.	<u>OPENING FLOWER</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I7.
7.	<u>SPECKLED EGG</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I9.a
8.	<u>LEAF FORM</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I9.b
9.	<u>SPIRALLING BOWL</u> by Mary Rogers .....	I9.b
10.	<u>CARRYING POT</u> by Mary Rogers .....	2I.
II.	<u>THUMB POT 1964</u> by Ruth Duckworth .....	24.
12.	<u>PORCELAIN FORM</u> by Geoffrey Swindell .....	24.
13.	<u>DETAIL OF RELIEF</u> by Ruth Duckworth .....	28.a
14.	<u>WALL RELIEF OF 1979</u> by Ruth Duckworth .....	28.b
15.	<u>TREE OF LIFE</u> (model) by Ulla Viotti .....	3I.a
16.	<u>RAIN CLOUD</u> by Ulla Viotti .....	3I.b
17.	<u>WALL RELIEF</u> (ORBERO, Saving's Bank ) .....	33.
18.	<u>BOWL</u> by Ulla Viotti .....	35.
19.	<u>LIFE STRATA</u> by Niall Harper .....	40.a
20.	<u>LIFE STRATA</u> (detail) by Niall Harper .....	40.a
21.	<u>ORGANIC GROWTH</u> by Niall Harper .....	40.b
22.	<u>ORGANIC GROWTH</u> (original model) .....	42.
23.	<u>UNTITLED RELIEFS</u> by Ulla Viotti .....	42.
24.	<u>COMMERATIVE PLATES</u> by Niall Harper .....	44.



I N T R O D U C T I O N

\* "Nature in her design and man in his art meet somewhere beyond the limits of imagination and in something universally common to both, in the geometric laws valid for the whole universe. Deviations from ideal shapes give rise to variations in form in both art and nature". \*

Bertel Bager - Nature as Designer

I believe this statement made by Bertel Bager, highlights the link between ceramics and nature. It would be interesting to know how far the creations of nature, were used as prototypes and sources of inspiration for early potters. However there is no doubt that in both decoration and form, purely artistic impulses appeared very early.

My intention in this thesis is to give a selective view of ceramics being made today, which shows an inspirational source from nature. The potters represented are my personal choice and are therefore only a cross section of the many artist craftsmen I have studied, who are inspired by nature. The use of nature in ceramics is the main theme, and it is this element that mainly concerns me. I hope that by including the lesser known work of Niall Harper alongside the acknowledged mastery of Mary Rogers, to represent the different ways nature has been represented and transformed in the final image. By selecting a person representative of different countries I hope to show how the link of nature is a universal element, in pottery.

\* See Footnotes for ref. Pg 47.



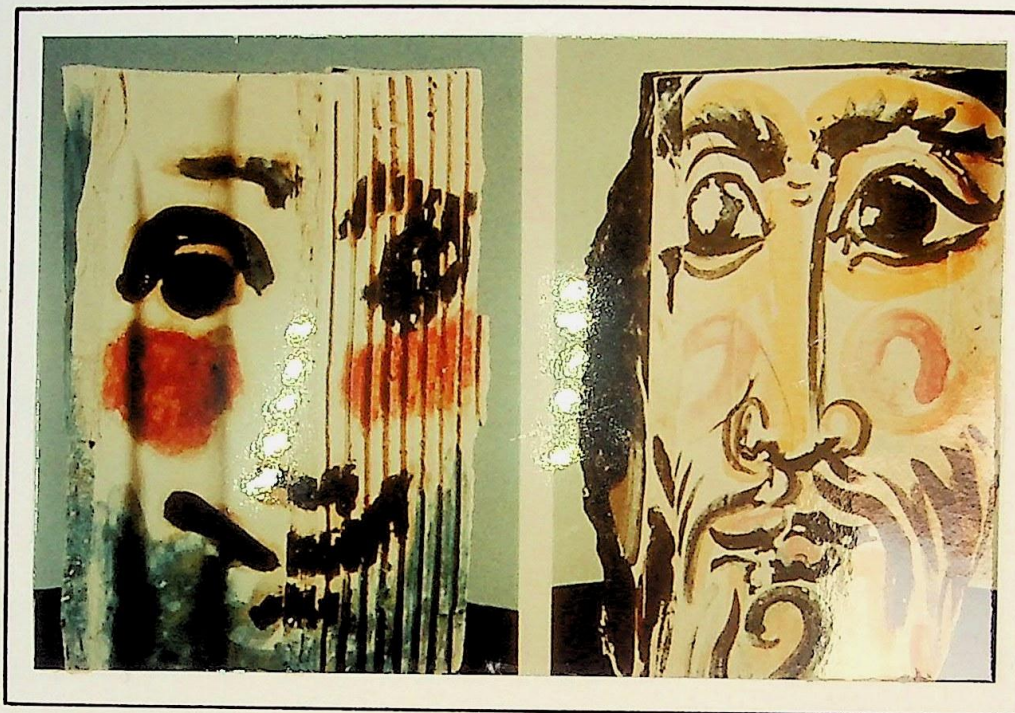
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CREATIVE CERAMICS

In early times man at first produced ceramics to cover the needs of the family. They did not have individual characteristics or the handwriting of the modern day potters but were a collective creation of a group of people and were characteristic of certain areas as in Asia and Europe, rather than of individual style. Technical knowledge, shapes and decoration were passed on from one generation to the next and remained unchanged over long periods of time.

During the course of development the craftsman left his anonymity behind. His work became more individual, emphasized not only by his style but by his subject matter and signature. However, with the introduction of the wheel in 3200 B.C. and thousands of years later with the beginning of the machine age a revolution took place. The individual craftsman could not compete with the speed, precision and mass production of the machine, whose product was favoured by the general public. Factories produced mass quantities of pottery styles and therefore required and trained craftsmen as potters.

Important then in the development of creative ceramics at the beginning of the Twentieth century was the influence of people who were not trained in the ceramic craft but who were educated as painters, sculptors or architects, who by accident, found the ceramic medium ideal for the expression of their ideas. Artists like Chagall, Leger, Matisse, Miro and Picasso among others, apart from their





FRAGMENTS OF BRICK 1962 by PICASSO



specific artistic work left behind an extensive amount of ceramic work. There are, for example 3222 known ceramics by Picasso. These artists gave in their pot sculptures, wall tiles and decorations fertile impulses for new concepts in ceramic creation.

These pioneers of free ceramics were not bound by tradition and were not attached either to the European or Asian pot cultures. Their creativity led them away from the past, and their curiosity led them towards the new, the experimental and its vagueness.

The detachment of tradition started in the design of pots, using consciously unrepeatable elements.

The number of modern ceramic pieces in which animations of organic or inorganic nature can be recognized and which remind us of plants, minerals, volcanic eruptive forms, weathering stones, etc. is extensive. For example, the flowering forms of Mary Rogers, the reminiscent shapes of plants and gills of fungi by Peter John Simpson, the Poppy Heads of Walter Heufelder. Works of Beate Kuhn or Kurt and Gerda Spurey renew associations with organic nature shells or minerals. Even the titles of work convey their inspirational sources - Niall Harpers reliefs of 'Organic Growth' and 'Life Strata' and Alan Barrett Danes 'Environment' are only three such examples. The reliefs of Herbert Peters and Karl Hartung remind us of plant fossils.



All these artists produce, not imitations but synthesis and transformations of things seen in nature and experiences with nature. They are the result of contemplations which are not of visible things but which <sup>\*</sup>'make visible the invisible<sup>\*</sup>' as Paul Klee defined it. With intuitive insight they anticipate such unknowns as microsmic forms. The advantage of the purified work done in this manner, is that it brings it even closer to nature. It builds not in imitation of, but like nature.

Another circumstance that has encouraged the development of new types of ceramics is the modern practice of designing a building, using ceramic panels and facades as elements of harmony to the building. Panels of architectural ceramics adorn facades and interior areas, as in Ulla Viotti (Swedish) wall of a swimming pool in Lund, Sweden and Niall Harpers (Irish) wall panels in The Office of Public Works and The Norwich Building Society in Dublin.

Having introduced my topic, I would like to introduce a potter whose work portrays the essence of natural forms translated into the ceramic medium.

\* See footnotes



MARY ROGERS

Mary Rogers, born in England in 1929, has a studio at her home in Loughborough, and concentrates on the exploration of natural forms. Since she first exhibited in the middle Sixties, her work has been very personal and immediately recognizable. She makes individual pieces, finely hand-built in pinched porcelain, which is sometimes coloured with precisely applied specs of colour. She utilises porcelain's capacity to be eased and pinched to near nothingness in order to capture the luminous potential of the wafer-thin clay. By observing in the natural world, forms of unfurling leaves and flowers, shells, pods and agates, she transforms them into patterns in porcelain. In her wish to express emotions in symbols in this way she is essentially romantic, and it is probably for this reason that I find her work so appealing and sensitive.



HER WORK

As a child, spending the earlier part of her life near Derby, she must have been aware of the high regard held by the painters at the Crown Derby factor. The ideal of being an artist must have been a desirable ambition. The way into that world for her was through graphics, working with a printing firm. She also studied calligraphy and illustration at St. Martins. While the work of the graphic artists or typographer may seem to be irrelevant to a potential potter, the discipline imposed by printing was very relevant to Mary's future work in learning the limitations imposed by the technical process.

During these years she spent a lot of time drawing and it was not until she married Bob Rogers, a sculptor, that she started to look at 3.D. work. Through his eyes she developed a new understanding of form and space, a world which she up until then scarcely been aware of. As Mary says <sup>\*</sup> "there was clay about the house" <sup>\*</sup> and inevitably she started to explore and experience the clay with her fingers.

Her developing awareness of form and the feeling for clay pointed her in the direction of ceramics, and so she attended Loughborough College under the tuition of David Leach.

In 1960 she bought her own Kiln. Throwing, held no interest for Mary and she was encouraged to develop a sculptor feeling for clay. From then on her work was always hand-built.

\* See footnotes



Making pottery by hand, without a wheel usually leads to a heightened awareness of natural forms since the method inevitably gives organic and somewhat asymmetrical effects similar to those of naturally growing forms. This is one of the reasons why I feel Mary Rogers turned to natural forms for her inspiration. Her work portrays her awareness of infinite subtleties, refinements and variations of form and colour that there are in the natural world.

Initially she produced stonewares inspired by natural forms, and were usually chunky and resembled carved stones. They reflected her interest in the shapes of rocks and boulders and the patterns of fossils and erosions found in them.

#### HER STONEWARE

For the first four years all her stoneware was unglazed. She rubbed in oxides of raw ash painted with coloured slips, added oxides to the clay itself, which coloured it right through giving a stone like quality. She experimented for three years before she managed to make the black glaze she was looking for and the first she used. She wanted something that was matt, not too glossy, not too runny, yet had a slight shine that highlighted the form. Mary thus pointed out the similarity between coloured clays and glazes, and rocks such as granite, sandstone and slate. When she was working in stoneware, she made large ceramics by the coiling method, their scale was not of the small size that has become popular today. They would often be as large as the kiln would take.



Then partly as a reaction and a challenge she decided to make more delicate work. 'Peeling Birch' made in 1975, a study of curling bark, is one such piece which showed her the need to change to porcelain. In this piece I feel she captures the delicacy of the outer peeling layer of wood delightfully through using porcelain. In this piece she acknowledges the need for a translucent material such as porcelain to capture the delicate curling shapes.

\* Mary tells us herself; 'I had a marrow-end that had dried into a marvellously crunched shape, and the complex irregularity of the folds was fascinating after the more regular structure of the fossils and rocks which had absorbed me up till then'.

\* Mary Rogers..... 'Potters on Pottery'.

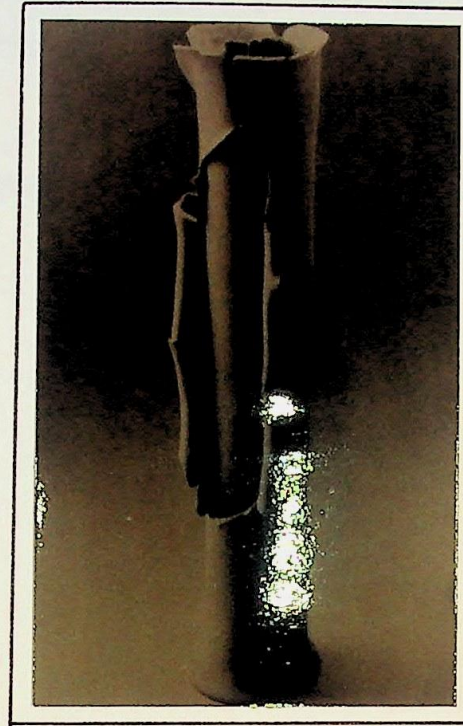
Mary joined the Craftsmen Potters Association, and by 1965 she held an exhibition at Derby Museum. The following year found Mary teaching ceramics at Loughborough College of Education, which she remained for four years. Those days were rewarding for her as she was both learning and teaching. Even more rewarding was a class of blind people she taught in 1962. By teaching blind people she realised how the tactile values had become lost (too many book illustrations?) and that people were almost afraid to handle pots. Maybe as an indirect result her work has always invited touch and has held a nice balance between the delicacy of an idea and its execution and precious fragility.

Mary's forms from this time onwards consistently showed her interest

\* See footnotes



II.



'PEELING BIRCH' by MARY ROGERS





'CONVOLUTED BOWL' 1975 by MARY ROGERS.

in the natural world, not an expression of the open green landscape, the extrovert world of lush vegetation. Her world is small and intimate, not the splendid majesty of mountain and lake but the watercolour world perhaps even seen through a magnifying glass - dried autumn leaves that curl and crinkle at the edges following secret and private laws of structure. She understands the fundamental laws of change and as she says '\*sees the structure, not getting side tracked by the accidental'.\*

But she was not afraid to look at a world beyond such images for ideas. She was very excited by Claes Oldenburg's exhibition at the Tate Gallery in the Sixties, where his soft sculpture changed the shapes of familiar objects into fluid forms, gathered, folding, and melting into each other. When Bob, her husband, was researching on sculpture, she looked for the first time at the drapery forms of Baroque Sculpture. It was very different from her world but she realised it was related and observed it into her own world of forms shown in her piece 'Convoluted Bowl' of 1975. This delicate bowl in pinched white porcelain bears strong resemblance to folding drapery through the convoluted folds that give it its' shape. However it still bears a strong resemblance to a nature inspired form and to me it strongly reflects the idea of an opening poppy head. The pressed folds of porcelain not only depict drapery, but are like the wafer-thin petals of a folded poppy. The delicacy and movement she captures by using porcelain instead of stoneware,

\* See footnotes



and it was for these reasons that she started to use porcelain.

Once she started to use porcelain, she took to its qualities of translucency and purity to even its unpredictableness when fired. Unlike stoneware which alters a little during firing, porcelain has something of a life of its own and presents more of a challenge. It made possible for her to capture the qualities of things she had collected for many years such as shells, dried pods, seaweeds and feathers, - delicate things which life passes through, where space is defined by layers of fine material superimposed. With this in mind, she started to design with ideas of light and shade.

With her turn to porcelain, the scale of her work changed, probably imposed by the material itself. She liked the feeling of working in the hand and as a result most of her pots are small, averaging about 4-5'' in height. The size of the pinched forms are also determined by the size of the potter's hand, though as she sometimes proves bigger pots can be made by resting pots in a cradle of foam to start with. The lower part has to be formed by pinching as much as the length of the thumb will allow, before starting on the top. As in nature, this is the root from which the rest grows naturally.

Another reason why she works pots by pinching out is that she likes the form to look as though it has grown from within, in the same





'WHITE WAVE' 1975  
by  
MARY ROGERS.



'CONICAL VEINED BOWL'  
by  
MARY ROGERS



way that a flower grows from within a bulb and then blossoms from within the sepals.

She concentrates on building by hand and to her, pottery, is a form of imaginative expression rather than a desire to make a vessel. Building things slowly and quietly by hand is a way of exploring the natural world in clay, for which she doesn't think the wheel would be sensitive and she derives pleasure from the actual constructing and decorating of the forms.

'The rhythm of making pieces in the hands tends naturally towards a bowl, a hollow, a cave - the walls enclose space and are so containers. A hollow shape is rich in symbolism and association, it is a basic natural form'

Mary Rogers..... Potters on Pottery.

It is evident looking at her bowls that they have been created in this way. 'Conical Veined Bowl' (1975) and 'Dappled Bowl' (1976) are only two such examples. Both forms seem to grow from a swollen mass, until they curve outward in a thin fragile lip. The veining painted with colour oxides on her 'Conical Veined Bowl' grows in an upward manner, once again suggestive of growth and twigs and leaf veins. Her dappled bowls are suggestive to me of variegated leaves and the uneven thinning edges remind me of Autumn leaves that curl and crack at the edges.



When we look at Mary Rogers' work, we immediately related to the natural world. In pinching her forms, she creates like nature, in a subtle way, groups of the 'same' things which differ from each other. Even if she wished to, it would be impossible for her to create two identical forms. No two leaves on a tree are ever the same, no two people, blades of grass, raindrops, ears of corn, waves, stones etc. Neither identical reproduction nor perfect symmetry is found in nature and it seems that its this lack of 'perfect' symmetry that gives life to a thing and makes it uniquely individual, so that it is itself and not able to be confused with any other.

Differences of shape, size and colour, which single out each thing from a group, and give it a seperate identity. One feature will be emphasized in one and diminished in another, however subtly, so giving variety and individuality.

With these ideas I feel Mary produced her work. Her porcelain boxes, made in 1972, glazed in metallic black and fired to 1280 Degrees Centigrade were based on an observation of the tightly packed and crumpled forms of petals inside flower buds. The boxes themselves open to reveal complex layers inside. Once again the size also relate to the natural form she expresses in clay, as they are only  $3\frac{1}{2}$ ' and  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ' high.

Mary always takes her <sup>c</sup>ues from nature. She tells us herself that she keeps a collection of photographs of natural forms and objects in her studio.





'OPENING FLOWER' 1975 by MARY ROGERS.



"They are important to me, and I have them all around me when starting a new series of pots. They are a guide to the sort of things that happen in nature. I keep them in groups of similar structures with individual differences. When I am working and feel that something is wrong with a piece, it is usually because it would not actually happen that way in nature. It must look like a possible natural form - but not a copy of an existing one"

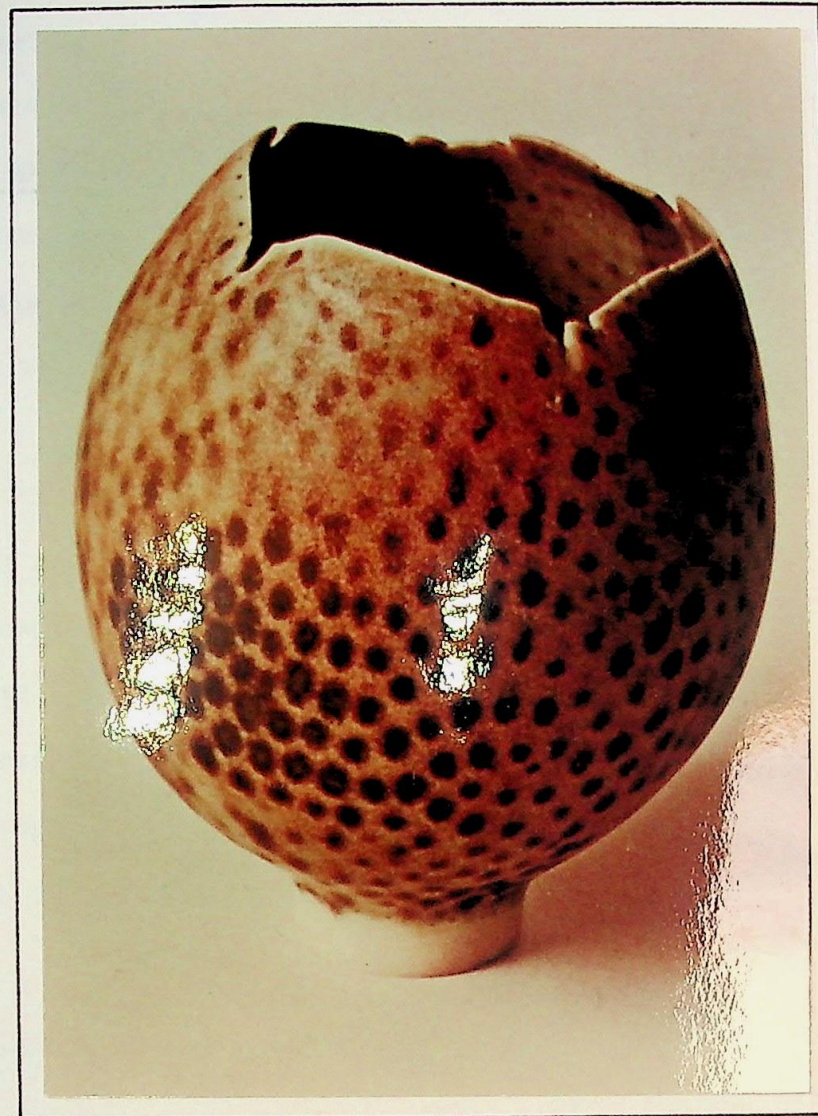
If we look at her bowl called 'Opening Flower' of 1975, we can see this reasoning created in a form. The way in which the porcelain overlaps create areas of greater tonal density, depicts a similar occurrence in a poppy. She has recreated the flower head in a porcelain scale of  $4\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 5''$ .

The colour of her forms always enhance her work. Like the work itself the colours are delicate and almost translucent. She used oxides to achieve her speckled and spiralling effects seen in her bowls. In her porcelain pieces the colouring is done in the raw clay. Her later pieces contain more colour than her earlier work in which she concentrated more on the form for its purity. Now she uses more colour. In nature colour enhances and defines forms and sometimes makes them blend into their surroundings.

Speckled and dappled things fascinated her, - the speckling on trout, the inside of flowers, birds eggs, broken shadows on water. This speckling



19.

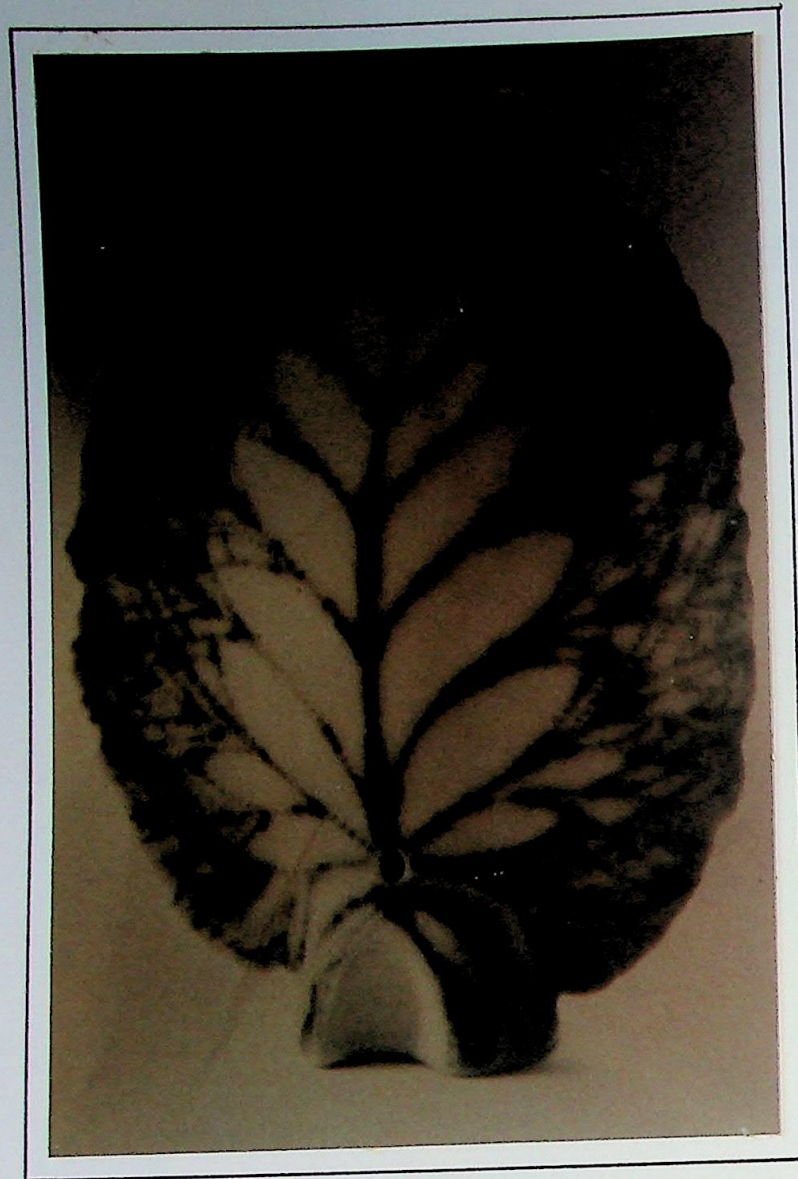


'SPECKLED EGG'

by

MARY ROGERS.





'LEAF FORM' 1975  
by  
MARY ROGERS.



'SPIRALLING BOWL'  
by  
MARY ROGERS.

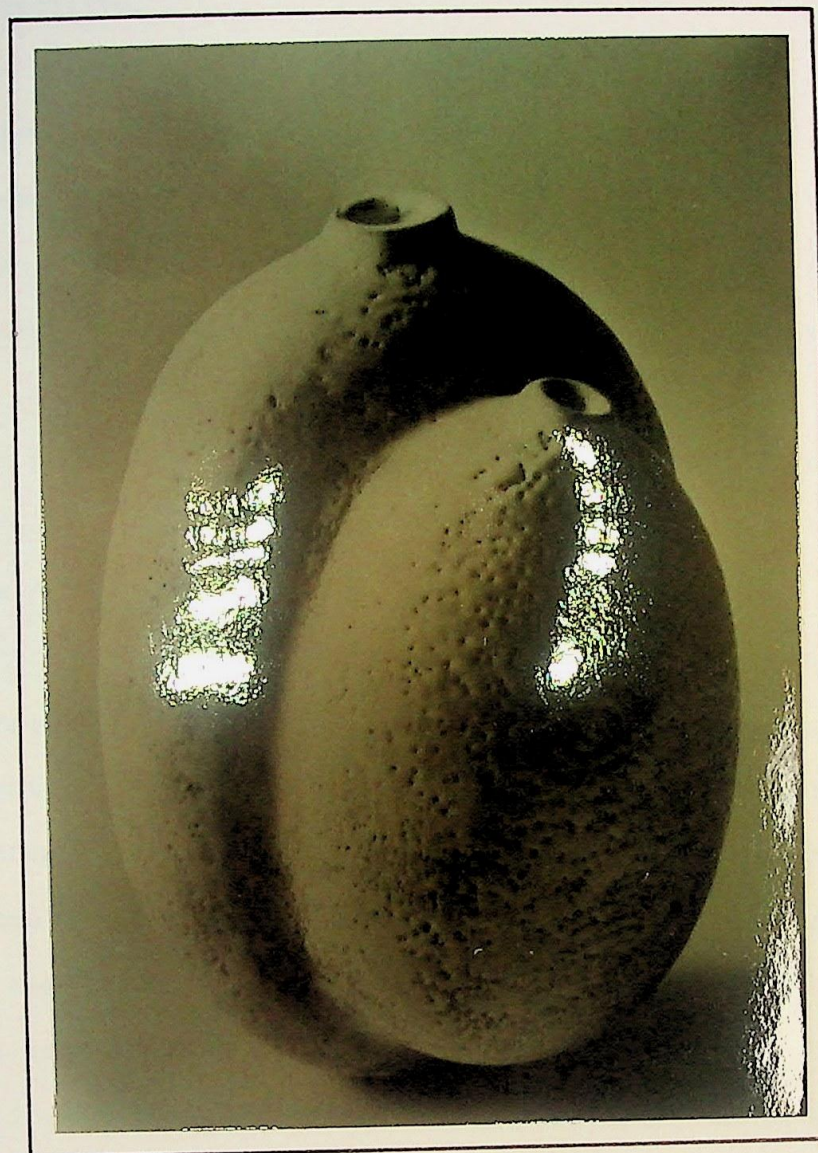
effect she translates into some pieces of her work, 'Speckled Egg' a stoneware bowl is a good example. She used a mixture of oxides painted on in a sort of porntillist way to give variation in depth of colour and to mix the colours. The broken edge of the top furthers the resemblance to an egg, giving it a brittle quality. The browns and yellows are muted and typical of the subtle way in which she uses oxides to colour her work.

In her piece, 'Leaf Form' (1975) she applies a brown oxide in tiny dots, achieving a veined pattern similiar to that on a leaf. However, I feel this piece lacks her usual delicacy of form. Unlike most her forms which open outwards, giving their feeling of lightness, this piece is more static and closed. The pinched thinning edges do not work as well as in other pieces, and it is mainly the colouring and speckling effect that hold the piece together. Her 'Spiralling Bowl' of 1975 I feel is much more effective. She creates winding ribs by unlaying oxide dapples. By contrasting dark and light, in an open form, she entrances the clays translucency.

Despite Mary's excellent skill and adaptability to a porcelain medium, we find that in some of her most recent work she has returned to using stoneware. This was a result of her need to start from the beginning after a brief period of non activity. In 1977 she received a bursary from the Crafts Council and was commissioned to write a book on hand built pottery. The effect of writing the book on her was devastating. She became ingrossed in having to present her ideas logically and she lost her spontaneous



21.



'CARRYING POT' by MARY ROGERS.



reaction to the visual, causing her work to become mechanical and repetitive.

To "give her back the exciting emotions of discovery" she decided to return to the very beginning doing raku work. This technique although new to her, helped her regain her instinctive feel and enthusiasm by using simple and unpersonal shapes and glazes.

Another influence which caused this change was her visit to Crete in 1979 with her husband Bob. Crete is a small island and one can never be far from the sea or unaware of the cycling movement of the waves or the shapes of the fishing boats. All this showed in her new stoneware pots - the prow shape of boats, - the motion of the waves suggested by the heraldic blue wavy lines of another untitled bowl of 1979. These forms were larger than her porcelain pots, but they have still retained her delicacy and subtle use of form and colour. Growth and birth are still themes evident in her work seen here in her 'Carrying Pot'. Even though it is 6" tall there is a new solidity, not created just by the stoneware clay but by the form itself. The raw glaze also helps to create this effect.

Always in Mary Rogers' work there is an underlying idea; the structure of plants and growth, and the sense of the feeling of protection especially in her later work. She creates emotional



responses and I feel that is why her work creates a feeling of warmth and a stimulating satisfaction.

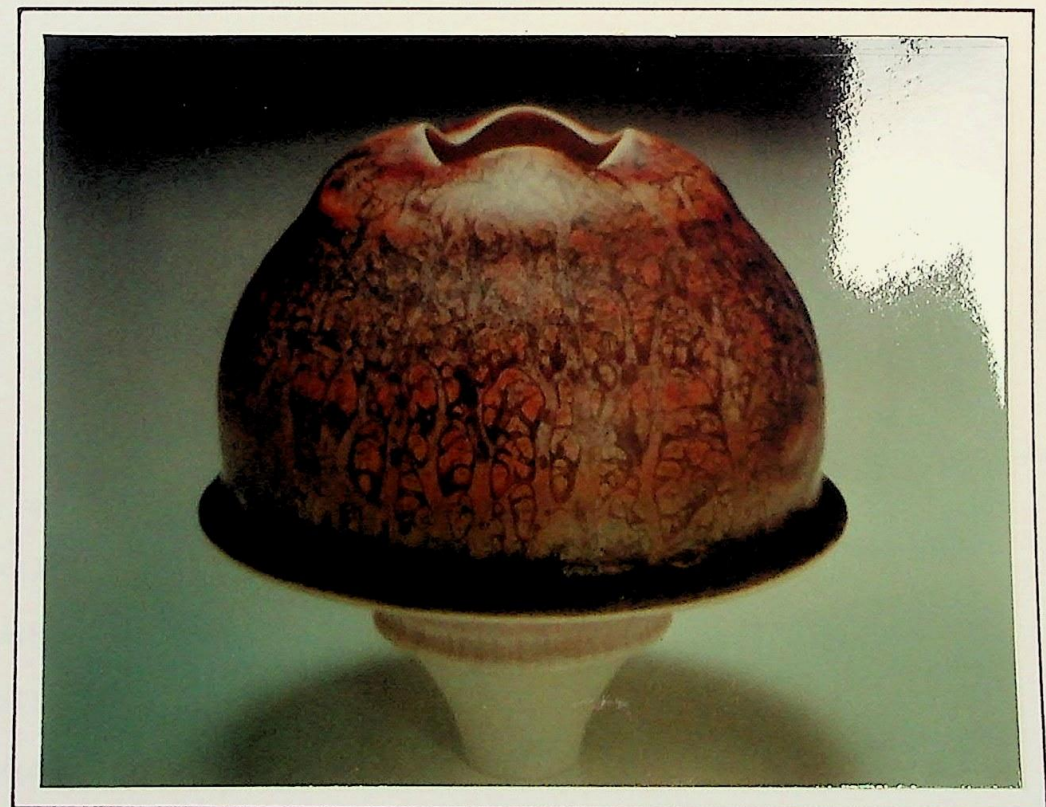
Mary Rogers has inspired many ceramists, in her creative and sensitive use of porcelain. Peter Simpson creates sculptures which like Mary's incorporate a blending of natural forms. His delicate fungoid objects create a similiar feeling for medium and form as those of Mary Rogers. In Gerda Spurrey 'Geteiltes' 1979 the image of tree bark is treated in a layered effect, which can be clearly linked with Mary Rogers 'Peeling Birch' 1975. The smaller porcelain forms of Ruth Duckworth can be associated to Mary Rogers work in the way she used inlays of different clay often in a swirling manner. She applied oxides directly into the clay and the way she left the edges of her bowls in a broken and fluted manner.

The list of people who have used her work as inspirational sources, combined with their own ideas to produce forms is extensive, but I feel Mary Rogers has captured the quality of nature in porcelain in a way that very few others could attain.





'THUMB POT' 1964 by RUTH DUCKWORTH.



'PORCELAIN FORM' BY GEOFFERY SWINDELL.



RUTH DUCKWORTH

Ruth Duckworth was born in Hamburg in 1919, but went to England where she studied painting and sculpture in Liverpool for 4 years. It wasn't until 1953 that she first came into contact with pottery in Hammersmith School of Art and later in Central School in London. The pottery she produced then was functional tableware and she was concerned with finding solutions to practical design problems. Some were thrown, some slipcast as well as gruny, handbuilt oxidised pots, which seem to grow and burst in all directions.

In 1964 she accepted an invitation to teach in Chicago and has remained there since, influencing her students, fellow potters and artists in America.

Like many ceramists, especially those who portray elements or qualities of nature in their work, she rejected the wheel in favour of sculptural pottery. One of her notable qualities is her sense of equilibrium in a form. It enables her to build stable pots on small bases, an idea which Geoffrey Swindell, an English ceramist, is noted for. She often uses themes of swelling, breastlike forms springing from a tiny base and somehow her shapes still manage to stand up. There is a similarity to nature where large flower heads often emerge from a very slender stalk. In this way she too 'risks the threat of imbalance'. Most of her ceramics built by hand are asymmetrical. This is not studied symmetry but the symmetry of an apple or



a pear which grows in response to sunlight or physical circumstances.

Like Mary Rogers her work involves much thought and experiment, whether she is working on huge murals for office buildings - (one mural 'Clouds over Lake Michigan' for the Dresdner Bank, Chicago is 240 feet long), or on tiny handbuilt forms. All of them relate either directly or indirectly to the earth or aspects of nature. Some are reminiscent of natural rock formations seen by the waters edge - a theme that also runs through the work of Ulla Viotti, Niall Harper and G. Swindell. Other works recall the undulations but strong patterns of strata seen on the side of hills or road cuttings. One such wall 'Relief of 1979', directly refers to earth formations. Working on a flat but textured surface she rolls out thick slabs of clay and by arranging them together in overlapping layers she creates a landscape effect. The porcelain slabs are left unglazed, but by placing them at slightly varying angles she creates interplay of light and shadow.

Nothing she does, is merely imitated for her work is as much about 'essence as appearance'. Smoothness of water-worn boulders washed up and deposited by the sea are caught in one form, happily merged together in opposing but related shapes. Whatever the actual size of her objects, they all convey a sensation of massive and monumentality, a feeling we also gather from the work of Ulla Viotti.



These massive reliefs are very different from her other work of delicate tiny porcelains. Some of the pots with inlaid stripes of clay are little more than a few inches tall. Sometimes they are thrown, often pinched, and often resemble branching forms, growing wings and fins. She uses glazes judiciously, rarely intruding, but complimenting and heightning the form. She uses simple ash glazes with mottled and delicately coloured surfaces to bring out the strengths of the porcelain pieces. On some of her stoneware objects, she rubbed oxides directly into the textured surfaces of the clay, a process which Mary Rogers was also fond of using, her pieces take on muted shades of green, buff and pinky greys. The edges of her pots are often broken and undulating, creating a similarity to those of Mary Rogers small porcelain pots.

However some of her pots and dishes shows a more formal arrangement of geometric shapes. She often combines clays, using inlays to capture the freedom and freshness of textures of different clays behaving in different ways put together.

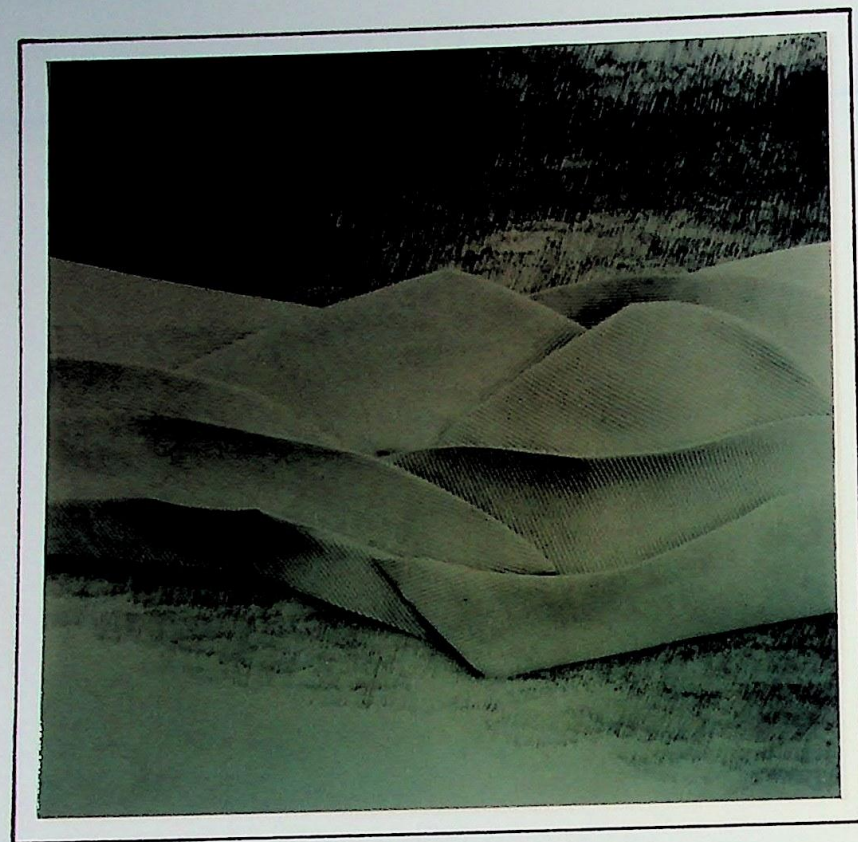
On a series of small porcelain pots these stripes are arranged so that they move in swirling action down the pot immediately suggesting growth and movement defining and relating interior volume and exterior space, another idea also evident in work of Mary Rogers. The relationship between the inside of the shapes and the outer surfaces of the pots and objects are always





'Detail of WALL RELIEF' by RUTH DUCKWORTH.





'WALL RELIEF 1979' by RUTH DUCKWORTH.

in a dynamic balance, the one in tension with the other. This is particularly important in the rounded shaped bowls which are more organic in feeling. Full, swelling and gently curved, the forms are about birth and ripeness, with precisely cut edges and overlapping curves. Again she has used ash glazes, runny and textured or dry and sandy, and they invite touch as well as emphasizing the form rather than the surface.

Her relief panels, which she currently produces on a smaller scale are equally about the careful and precise definitions of space, based on landscapes. The square shapes have a horizon made up of overlapping layers of texture and striped leaves of clay, creating hills and plain, sun and sky. These qualities are displayed in her 'wall relief of 1979.' The colour sprayed on, is flat, matt and subdued, muted purples, browns and olives contain her landscape theme.

Few of Ruth Duckworth's pieces could be said to be useful in that they have a specific function, but all are very much related to the world of the potter both in textures of the clay and in the forms. These elements of texture and form are related in the same monumental way in the work of another artist I have mentioned i.e. Ulla Viotti.



ULLA VIOTTI

Ulla Viotti was born in Sweden in 1933. In her studio workshop in the countryside of southeast Sweden, she creates ceramic sculpture and wall reliefs, many of which can be found in buildings throughout Sweden. She finds clay, an ideal material for the decoration of buildings, both interiors and exteriors as it is durable, flexible and offers unlimited possibilities for her artistic expression, which she bases on rock formations and sea and shore lines. This is evident in the creasing and folding way she uses the clay and her unglazed forms portray an immense feeling of stone and rock.

She started as a potter about twenty years ago making functional bowls and vases and pitchers on the wheel, and it wasn't until the middle of the 1960's that she began moving into a more artistic direction. By the end of the sixties she had come upon a new way of working in clay. Like Mary Rogers and Ruth Duckworth, she began to reject the wheel in favour of hand building methods. For her, the clay took on a new sensual character and she often used it together with other materials, which were often inspired by nature. Her 'Tree of Life' is probably one such piece. Here she combines a mixture of materials not only by mixing a porcelain

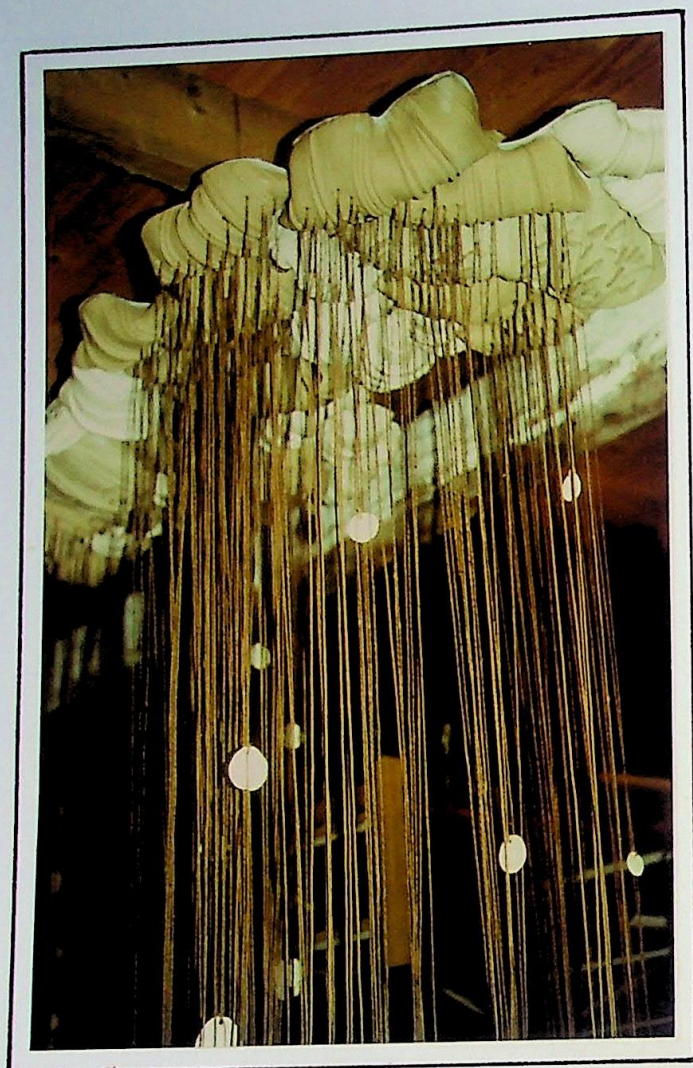




'TREE OF LIFE' (model) by

ULLA VIOTTI.





'RAIN CLOUD' by ULLA VIOTTI.

and stoneware body, but by hanging textile strings and threads from a metal sheed which is fastened on to the end of a pilliar. The pilliar is made up of 17 sections, which are unglazed and stained with iron oxide, resembling the texture and pattern of the bark of a tree. At a height of 6' 7'', it could not help but portray the majestic and powerful feeling we get when standing under a tree. The monumental emphasis of her murals link her with Ruth Duckworth.

This change in Ulla Viotti's art from small pots to large hand built work, was due in part to her contact at this time with the Middle East and its nature. This occurred during her stay in Israel in connection with the first international ceramics symposium in 1966. During the year she spent there she became inspired by her surroundings, the exotic scenery and the bright colours of the sky, to create her now famous ceramic type sculptures. She began working with parts of nature as her model. These early fragmentary pieces she sometimes placed in boxes so that their delicacy and individuality could be strengthened. At the same time she could also place many small objects together thus forming large pieces. She would hang them from the ceiling and let many ropes hang down from them.





'WALL RELIEF' at ORBERO Saving's Bank in Sweden

by

ULLA VIOTTI.



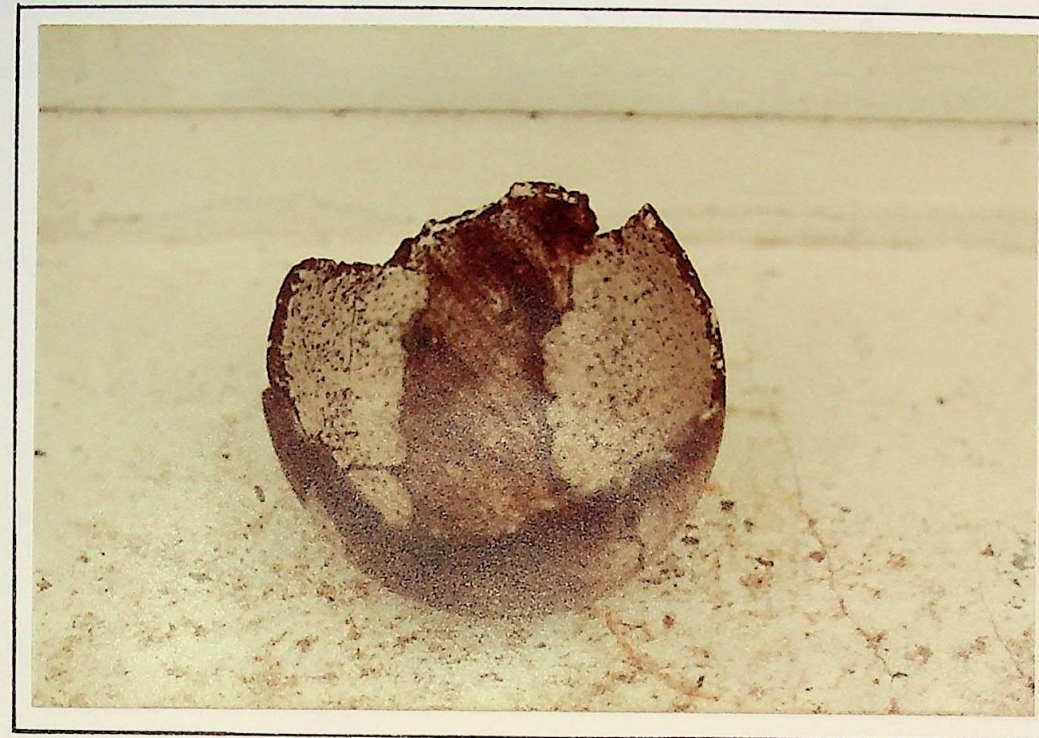


creating sensual feelings in space and taking the whole room under her control. This is evident in her piece 'Tree of Life'.

In this piece the use of rope suspended is used to extend the power of the clay pieces to monumentality. It was really with this piece that she began concentrating on monumental pieces and thus when she moved to Orebro and set up a studio there, she concentrated on this type of work. It was at Orebro's Savings Bank (the new building 1970-71) that this power became especially clear. Her wall panel here is a magnificent piece. She has placed here folded clay pieces tightly together in a stairway where they cover the whole wall. When standing at a distance, its textures and appearance give it the quality of the bark of an old tree and the oxides used, produces colours to reinforce this idea. The panel comprises of several hundred long tubular pieces of ceramics. They are of varying thickness and length, the pieces in the centre being small and light whites and beige in colour compared to the darker browns, reds and purples for the rest. The forms and design is primitive and mystic in feeling. The natural colours and shapes predominate the piece.

The process of creation must have been very long and slow, though not quite as slow as nature in producing a weathering





'BOWL' by ULLA VIOTTI.



and textured effect on stones or bark which would have a similar appearance.

Ulla works flat on the ground. Her first step is to do a tracing of all the pieces that go to make up the pieces. She then numbers each individual shape and when she has created its equivalent in clay she numbers it and puts it in position. Sections are then fired in this manner. The fired sections are attached to sheets of metal and these are then placed onto the final area, onto a matching tracing. In this slow, but meticulous manner, she completes her monumental pieces.

Sometimes diffuse figures merge together with landscapes but there seems to be a tension of the configurations. It seems as though there are figures trying to break away, but they are prisoners of their surroundings. She is particularly interested in the structure and texture of surfaces and even when working on her bowls she shapes the borders so that they bear no relation to a traditional vessel. Her bowls, as well as her murals have the same textured feeling, which I think is a very important part and effect of her work.

Some of my favourite reliefs done by Ulla are those which to me reflect images of rocks and sea. One such piece is her wall



relief in the new swimming hall in Lund in Sweden. It is composed of three panels of varying width which cover the whole end wall of the swimming pool. The unglazed shapes and raw oxides she used, along with the shapes of the individual pieces, create the effect of a rocky stony area. The scale of the stones and rocks with the piece, changes constantly creating great movement. The texture is evident, without ever feeling it and the idea of a sea shore of rocks is highlighted by the way the relief disappears into the water of the pool. The evidence of nature as a source of inspiration, I feel is very evident in her work, not only in this piece but throughout her style.

Even in 1978 when she returned to making bowl forms, she carried forth all the scars, marks and feelings for the preceding decades work. It is in this textural nature, that Ulla Viotti has managed to capture a link with nature.

I feel she has influenced many Ceramic Artists of today in her approach methods of using clay, and we have only to look to our own country to see one such artist whose ideas are similar to hers. Niall Harper's wall reliefs have some similar qualities if not sources of inspiration as Ulla Viotti.



NIALL HARPER

Finally I would like to look at the work of an Irish Potter. I feel his work relates strongly to the environment and there is evidence in his work that there is a similarity to the work of Ulla Viotti.

Niall Harper studied at Ulster College of Art and Design in Belfast in 1970. He taught in Limerick from 1972-74 and later in the National College of Art and Design in Dublin from 1974-77. Born in Kilkenny in 1948 he is presently living in Callan where he and his wife Judy run a pottery studio. He began as a potter creating functional ware but since 1981 he has created some large murals for public buildings in Dublin and Dundalk and it is these pieces of work I would like to discuss.

In 1981 Niall received a commission to produce a mural for the foyer of the Office of Public Works in Adelaide Road, Dublin. As a result he produced his first large wall relief which he named 'Life Strata'. This mural which is approximately 9' x 15' comprises of several layers of different ceramic techniques and was based on rock stratification. This is evident in the lower section of the relief where he has used slabs of clay to produce a layered 2.D. effect. Even the unglazed yellow brown oxide

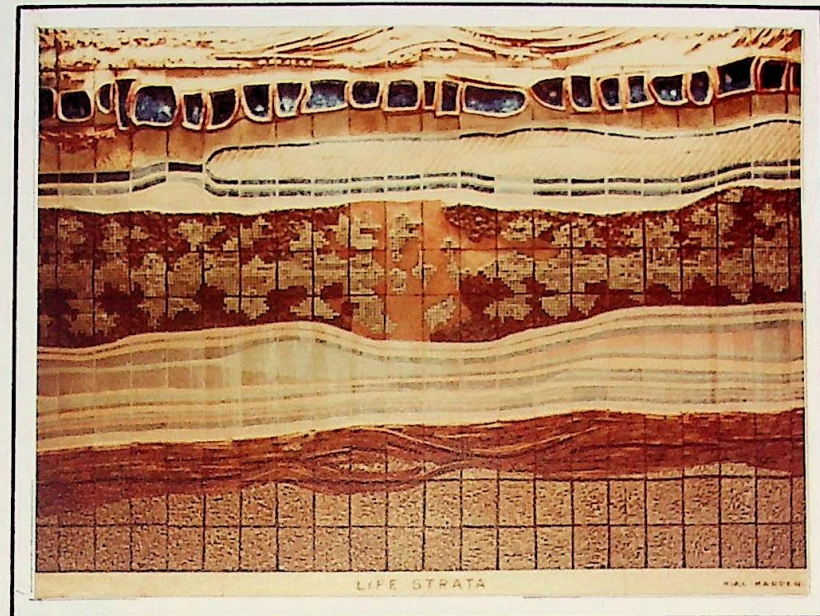


used, enhance this association. The almost open slab type box section with the dark blue glaze as the bottom, reminds me of eroded rock, with pools of rain left after a storm and now glinting in the sunlight. The pale blues and pinks of the flat flowing area across the top, further connect the piece with a landscape. Niall himself said that his influence came from layers of deposited rock that he had seen and photographed at Lough Shinney in North Dublin. Around this time also he came into contact with Jackson, a Geologist, who further stimulated his interest in rock formations.

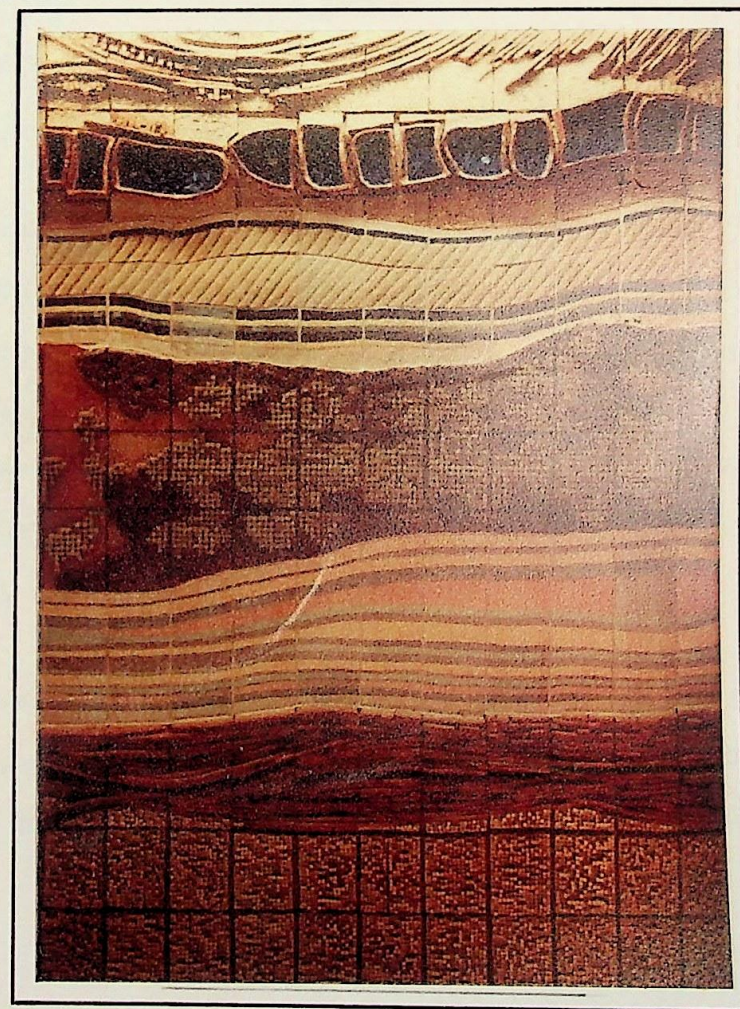
Like the previous ceramists mentioned, Niall has rejected the wheel in favour of hand building methods to create his murals. Like Ulla Viotti, he works his murals in sections, but his method is slightly different. Ulla Viotti creates individual forms and places them together to create her pieces, while Niall Harper works on flat slabs of clay and later cuts them into piles for assembly. Both artists achieve a unity collective of natural forms in their creations.

'Life Strata' is made in stoneware, which as its name suggests was probably the most suitable medium, to achieve the solid form suggested by a rock strata. It comprises of undulating surfaces of





'LIFE STRATA' by NIALL HARPER.







'ORGANIC GROWTH' by NIALL HARPER.

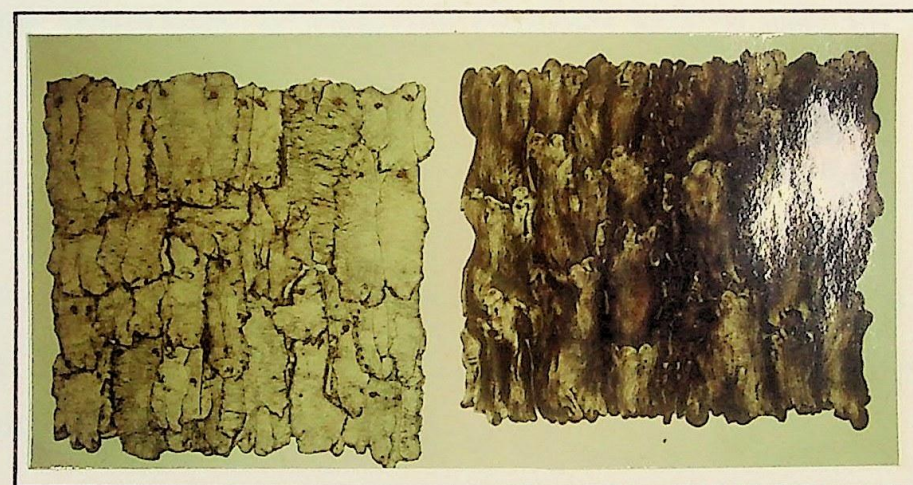
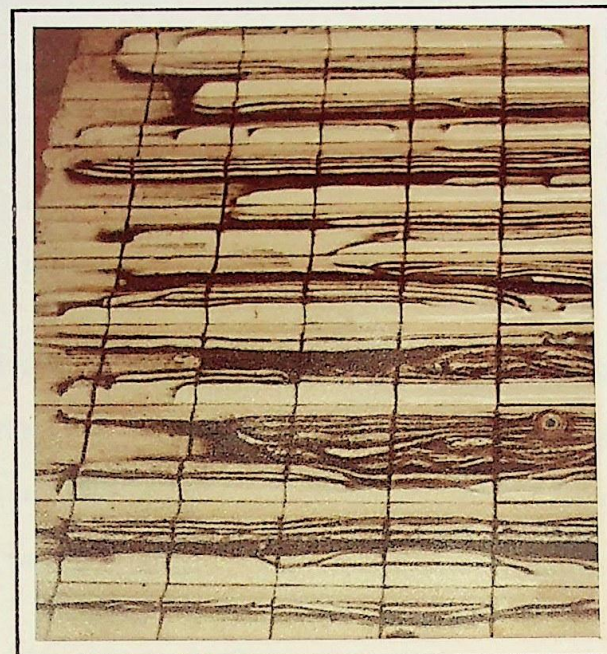
different textures and glazes used to portray each layer or strata. The colour scheme ranges from brown to blues to pinks and creams and combine to achieve a layered effect. Some of the individual areas are like open boxes, others like chopped stumpy rods, and more like flat rectangles. No individual piece could be said to be identifiable with an image of nature, but the overall effect certainly represents the strata of nature extremely well.

Following this period he went to Denmark to attend 'The International Ceramics Conference'. There he participated in projects run by the workshops. While he was there he met many ceramicists, ULLA VIOTTI being one of them. Thus when he returned to Ireland and began to work on his mural 'Organic Growth' he incorporated his new ideas into his mural.

'Organic Growth' is much smaller than 'Life Strata' being only 5 / 8ft approximately. This piece is however full of life and rhythm, and expresses a feeling of growth and movement that is characteristic of fungi on the bark of a tree. The vertical layered wafers of brown oxidized clay, resemble the ridges that develop on the crust of an oak tree as it grows old. The matt rough surface enhances the textural quality of the mural.

The undulating surface creates movement and texture and these elements are also evident in the murals of Ulla Viotti. Even the clay body, a mixture of porcelain and white grog, is almost the same as that





Top. 'ORGANIC GROWTH' (Detail of original model)

by

NIALL HARPER.

Bottom. 'UNTITLED RELIEFS' by ULLA VIOTTI.



used by Viotti. Harper's style is more simplified and the textural quality of 'Organic Growth' could be compared to a small relief (untitled by Viotti) — both having ridges to represent rough bark. The colour is very different in both, though both use matt brown oxides and let the natural white of the porcelain show through.

Harper used a rolling pin to create the ridges of folding clay and by drawing a ruler through the wet clay he gives the mural its character bark effect. Small circles of grey, blue and green create the image of fungi growing in the ridges.

He carried this image further changing it slightly, and returning to a rocky layered image to produce 'commerative plates' for the Joyce Exhibition. In depicting 'Finnigans Wake' he uses the quote

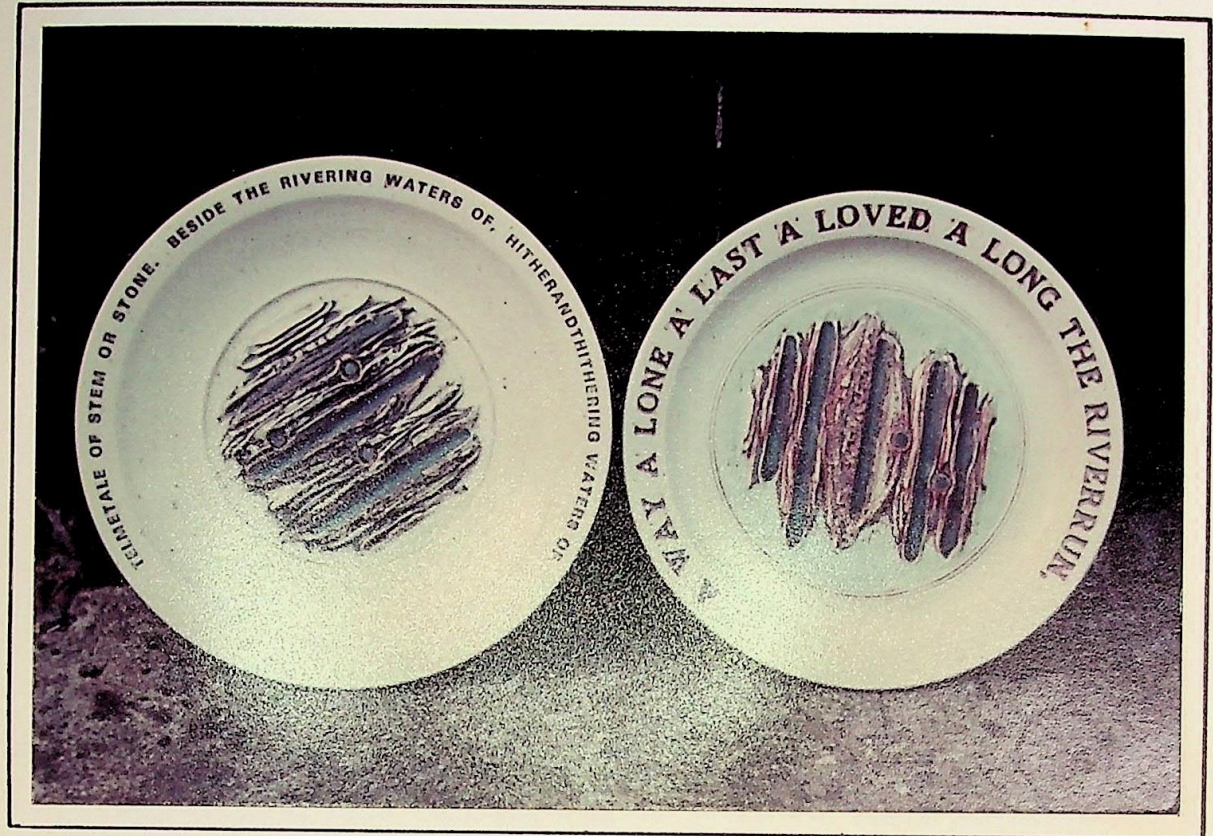
'Telmetale of storm or stone

Beside the Rivering Waters of,

Hither and Thidering Waters of!

to emphasize his image of water running through stone. In this way, like many potters he carries the theme of nature through his work.





'COMMERATIVE PLATES'

BY NIAL HARPER.



SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

In writing this thesis, i have explored the relationship between nature and ceramic form's, by looking at the work of the aforementioned potters. This is not to say that they are the only potters to use nature as a basis from which to work. Most potters at some stage of creation, explore basic elements seen in nature, either consciously or subconsciously. However i feel these four potters have been very successful in their conscious transformation of elements of nature into their work.

Mary Rogers looks at individual objects, such as leaves and flowers, buds etc, and chooses to create small porcelain pots to represent the delicacy and form of these objects. Her success lies in her ability to capture a feeling of lightness and sensitivity in her pots, a feeling we get when looking at translucent petals, dried curled leaves and similar occurrences in nature.

Ruth Duckworth also captures a feeling of lightness and fragility in her pieces. However unlike Mary Rogers who's work bears a direct resemblance to nature, Ruth's work style is more abstracted. Her pots are small in scale but i feel her large wall reliefs are more interesting and stronger as



individual pieces. Her use of earthy colours and spacial relationships carry her further into landscape images. It is through this aspect of her ceramic's that i see her association with nature.

Ulla Viotti's concern for monumentality and her ability to achieve strength and texture in her massive wall reliefs proves her skill as a potter. Her work characterises qualities of bark, sand, rocks and stones, and other natural elements.

Niall Harper's reliefs also portray a quality of strength though his use of nature as a theme, is more concerned with a study of the environment by representing ariel view's, and cross section's of landscapes.

In conclusion I feel these artists have shown the different way's nature can be translated into ceramic forms. I hope this shows some of the way's in which nature can be used as inspiration for creativity in design.

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FOOTNOTESPage No.

- |     |  |    |                                       |
|-----|--|----|---------------------------------------|
| 2.  | <u>NATURE AS DESIGNER</u>                    | by | Bertel Bager                          |
| 6.  | <u>CERAMICS OF THE TWENTIETH<br/>CENTURY</u> | by | Tamara Preaud &<br>Serge Gauthier     |
| 8.  | <u>CERAMIC REVIEW No.76</u>                  |    |                                       |
| 10. | <u>POTTERS ON POTTERY</u>                    | by | Elisabeth Cameron &<br>Philippa Lewis |
| 11. | as 10. above                                 |    |                                       |



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