

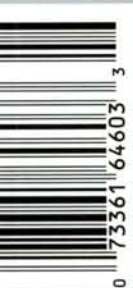
Ceramics

Art and Perception

2001
ISSUE 46

INTERNATIONAL

AU\$14 US\$13 £8 NZ\$18 CAN\$19 Euro 55



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Cover:

Dorothy Feibleman

Coral Lunar.

1997. Shigaraki, Japan.

Coloured clays.

Photo: Thomas Ward

Editor Janet Mansfield

Business Manager Glenys Waller

Editorial Assistant Ishil Ihtiyar

Colour Separations Digital Pre-press Imaging

Printing GSM Press Pty Ltd Brisbane AUSTRALIA

Designed and published quarterly by Ceramics: Art and Perception Pty Ltd

120 Glenmore Road Paddington Sydney NSW 2021 AUSTRALIA

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The Stylistic Works of Michelle Erickson

Article by Robert Hunter



King and Queen Delft Tulipere. 2001. Tin-glazed stoneware. 35.5 cm/h.

RECENT WORKS BY AMERICAN POTTER MICHELLE Erickson incorporate an incredible range of techniques and decorative styles acquired through nearly 20 years of systematic ceramic research. Internationally known for her reproductions of 17th and 18th century English ceramics, Erickson is

turning her efforts to more unique and personal works. Her latest creations reflect years of discipline and training gained through exploration and experimentation in the arcane methods of English ceramic design and manufacture. Erickson's undergraduate experience at the College of William and Mary initially



Candlesticks and Stands. 2001. Earthenware. Slips, engobes. 55.8 cm/h.

exposed her to the time-honoured Asian potting traditions. Contrary to the academic curriculum, however, Erickson developed a fascination with English pottery. Subsequently, she turned this interest into a considerable business, making reproductions for many museums including the Colonial Williamsburg

Foundation, the National Park Service and Parks Canada. Her period-styled examples are highly sought after by collectors of British decorative arts. Even Hollywood has called on her for help – some of her pots can be seen in the recent American Revolutionary War movie *The Patriot* starring Mel Gibson.



Marriage a la mode. Pair of Hogarth Figures. 2001. Creamware. 35 cm/h.

In the course of her research, Erickson has gained a proficiency in the methods of manufacturing English Delftware, slipware, agate ware, creamware, and porcelain. Erickson's more personal work is no less diverse, utilising earthenware, stoneware and porcelain bodies with a variety of slips, agate clays and glazes. Along with her acquired knowledge, Erickson's throwing skill, developed by years of production work, combined with her painting and sculpture abilities, provide an enviable repertoire of resources for her fertile imagination

Erickson is probably best known for her remarkable English Delftware. She has made virtually every form of Delft produced in the 17th and 18th centuries ranging from simple chamber pots to elaborate posset pots and puzzle jugs. Similarly, she has mastered all types of Delft decorative treatments, from plain white tin-enamel to intricate polychrome designs. With this background, Erickson designed an imposing pair of tuliperes inspired by English Delft flower containers.

At the onset of the European craze for tulips in the 17th century, large vases were commissioned, often under royal patronage. This allusion is readily seen in Erickson's containers as she first threw, and then hand-modelled, vases as heads with the faces of a king and queen. The separately thrown covers, which serve as crowns, contain a system of hollow tubes for flower stems. The painted animals and flowers in cobalt and manganese provide a period sense of the natural order and the function of the containers.

English slipwares, which have long been a hallmark of English ceramic history, are also a mainstay of Erickson's reproduction business. Her own version of a pair of candlesticks, although reminiscent of 17th century Wrotham-made candlesticks, goes far beyond the typical creation of the English potter. Erickson transformed the candle sockets into gaping birds' mouths begging hungrily for their next meal. Her use of applied snakes and period-derived slip trailing appropriately reflect the mannerist style of



Marriage a la mode. Pair of Hogarth Figures. 2001. Creamware. 35 cm/h.

original pieces, but she saw something more. She created stoneware bases composed of moulded branches in the Yixing style to provide nests for her fledglings. The nests are appropriately littered with broken eggs shells.

Another piece representing a mixture of styles is an imaginative agate-ware teapot. Erickson invokes a number of period ceramic references creating a powerful statement beyond the sheer whimsy of the piece. The teapot body is patterned after a press-moulded pecten shell of a 1750s Staffordshire design. These intricately crafted agate bodies represent the pinnacle of English clay technology and were incorporated into many of Josiah Wedgwood's products. Erickson is possibly one of the few, if not the only modern potter, to rediscover the process of creating these agate wares. She balanced her teapot body precariously on a nest of moulded branches adding a bright yellow bird perched on the lid. This composition plays on the tension between the disciplined manufacture of the agate body and the almost unsteady stance of the teapot.

While Erickson's considerable sculpting talents are apparent throughout her work, she never strays far from the techniques of a potter. Even her large figural groups rely upon thrown elements that are then modelled and joined. Like many 18th century potters who sought illustrations for design sources, Erickson has also drawn upon period prints for inspiration. Her fascination with the work of William Hogarth has resulted in several studies that have translated the satirical commentary of Hogarth's two-dimensional representations into her own three-dimensional interpretation. One such study, made in creamware, features a pair of characters from Hogarth's series *Marriage A-la-Mode*. Erickson has echoed Hogarth's observation on the practice of arranged marriages, portraying an unfortunate couple's boredom with their privileged but unhappy lives together. By placing the husband and wife on separate plinths, Erickson has suggested the tangible gulf between the couple. Erickson's figural groups not only reflect a skilful rendering



Agate Teapot with Bird. 2001. Earthenware, metallic oxides. 30.5 cm/h.



Roemers. 2001. Porcelain. Tallest 28 cm/h.

of clay but also record a moment of social history and the timelessness of the human condition.

Prints and paintings also can be the source for unexpected ideas. A wonderfully graphic engraving comes from Dutch naturalist, Maria Sybillia Merian,

who compiled a natural history of moths in Surinam in the late 17th century. Merian recorded a scene of a mother alligator fending off a marauding snake after the eggs in her clutch. Erickson chose this powerful image for a commanding sculptural piece that conveys a sense of immense natural power and beauty along with the pathos of maternal instinct and the struggle to survive. Ever resourceful, Erickson found insight for creating the scaly reptilian body in the fabric of her high-tech running shoe.

Erickson's work of course, is not devoid of Asian influences. In the early 18th century, the European porcelain manufactures at Meissen directly copied Chinese examples that had been exported to the West. By the mid-18th century, English porcelain manufactures were copying Meissen examples, thereby appropriating the Chinese style indirectly. Erickson's massive *Blanc de Chine Raven* pays homage to this process of cultural stylistic migration.

The connection between period ceramic forms and glass vessels is often overlooked. As commodities in



Merian Alligator. 2001. White Earthenware, overglaze slips. 48 cm/l.

the 17th and 18th centuries, ceramic and glass vessels coexisted and often shared the same function as storage containers and drinking vessels. Erickson noted this relationship in a series of porcelain vessels inspired by Dutch glass roemers. She captured the graceful shape of the glassblower and translated the purity of the form into the potter's domain.

While the use of porcelain in these delicately thrown vessels hints at the translucency of the glass originals, the intent is to focus the eye on the wonderful sculptural qualities of these 17th century artifacts.

Taken as a group, Michelle Erickson's most recent work is an exciting preview of good things to come. Beyond the technological virtuosity of her clay work is a creative and imaginative force. A symbolic reading of many of her pieces conveys themes of incubation, birth, and struggle – themes that aptly reflect Erickson's own career. After years of diligent training and practice, Erickson is ready to fully stretch her own wings and soar to new heights with her ceramic art.



Blanc de Chine Raven. 2001. Porcelain. 29 cm/h.

Robert Hunter is Editor, *Ceramics in America*. He lives in Virginia. Photographs by Gavin Ashworth.