

# kerameiki techni

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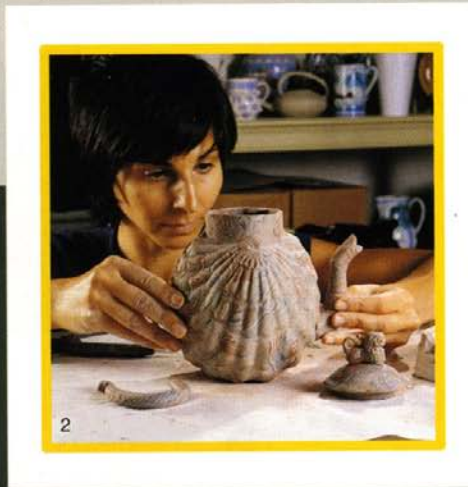
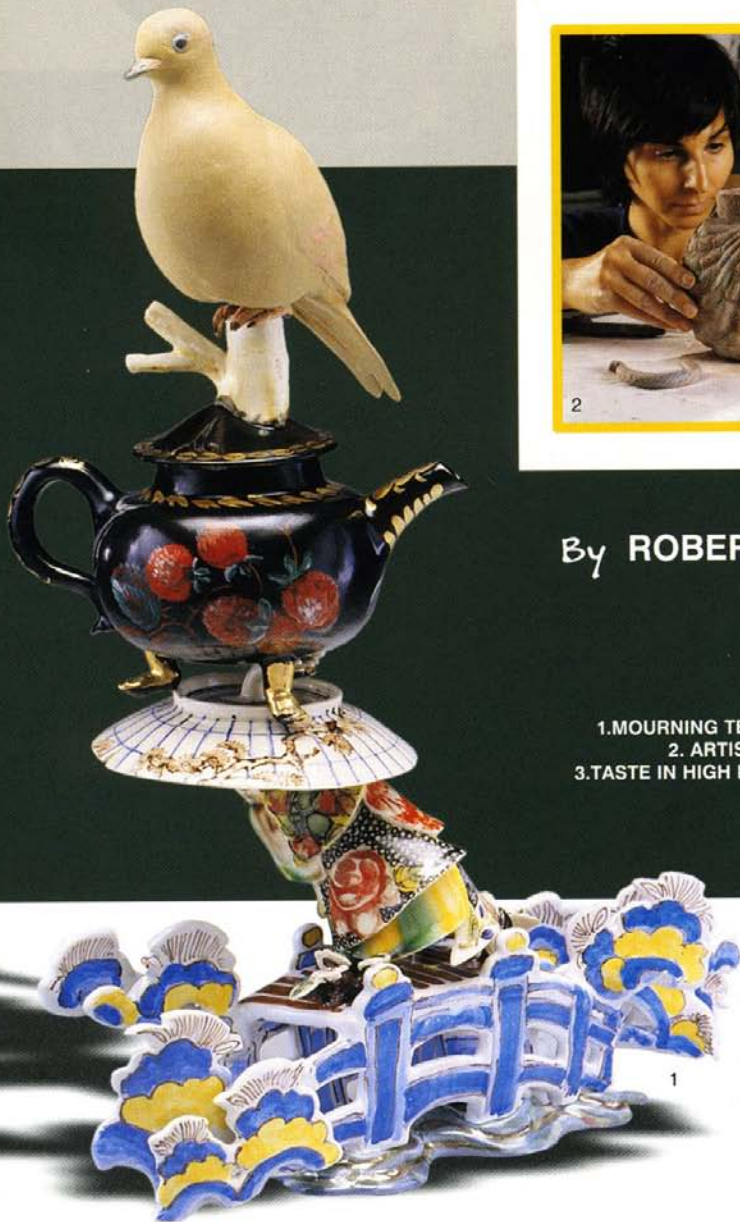
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# SPECIALIZING IN THE DIVERSE:

## THE MANY STYLES OF MICHELLE ERICKSON



By **ROBERT HUNTER**

1. MOURNING TEA, 2003. H: 49 cm  
2. ARTIST PHOTO  
3. TASTE IN HIGH LIFE, 2003. H: 55 cm.



It has been my privilege for the past twenty years to work with the masters – the masters of Staffordshire, London, and Devon. Of Utrecht and Rotterdam, Frechen and Cologne. Rouen, Neveres - Urbino, Monteloupe and Faenza – Yi-Hsing and Ching-te Chen. These masters are the countless unknown makers whom I've come to experience through the legacy of their artifacts. When pieced together the vessels and fragments of the past create a mosaic of human experience. The physical rediscovery of such arcane shapes and methods inform the present with the all-encompassing concerns of humanity.

The integration of material and form is what I find most compelling as an artist. The discipline required to re- create objects with an intuitive authenticity proves to be an endless challenge and resource for my personal expression through clay. Critics often dismiss such an approach as one that limits creative expression reducing such an endeavor to the constraints of imitation – a moniker that holds true for most of what we've come to call "reproductions"- where the end



TEAPOT WITH ALLURE,  
2003. H: 25 cm



justifies the means. It is the means however, that create and therefore the means that justify the endless and ageless pursuit of self-expression. In this timeless community exclusivity is not in the product but in the labor of its making, the intimacy only gained through collective experience.

Garth Clark has called her a "postmodern chameleon". Although an apt description in many ways, Michelle Erickson's ceramics transcends mere mimicry. Her work is that of an artist, a time traveler and a chaneler of the human condition. She defines herself however by simply saying "I'm a potter."

Working in historic Tidewater, Virginia for nearly 20 years, Erickson has pursued the replication of English ceramics of the type used by the American colonists in the 17th and 18th centuries. Her efforts have rewarded her with a toolkit of technical skills representing 300 hundred years of potting traditions and a loyal following of ceramic

collectors familiar with Anglo-American decorative arts. She is a proficient chemist working in a wide range of earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain bodies and glazes. In just the last several years, Erickson has begun to apply these skills to a growing body of her own personal work.

Unlike many clay artists who are content to work in a single style and in some cases, concentrate on a single form, Erickson avoids repetition in her contemporary creations. One could compare the production nature of her historical reproductions to a musician endlessly practicing scales. Amid the lack of restrictions in composing her own works, she defiantly refuses to repeat any specific object.

A telling question overheard repeatedly in her booth at the annual *New York Ceramics Fair* where she has exhibited since January 2001 is: "How many artists do you represent?" The answer is "One!" Most unsuspecting patrons do not realize that the showcases are filled

solely with her pieces. For some collectors this poses a challenge as how to decide what to choose since her "style" is defined by its diversity. Several dedicated followers have assembled a broad representation of her pieces. Indeed, one couple has amassed over a hundred of her works reflecting the full trajectory of her career. In the short time she has offered her unique objects for sale, a half dozen major museums have acquired examples. Also encouragingly, her contemporary work has been featured in many of the major ceramics journals, while her historically-based objects have been illustrated in dozens of publications ranging from *Architectural Digest* to *Gourmet Magazine*.

The source of her fascination with historic ceramic technology is readily traced to specific times and places in her career but the fount of her artistic expression springs from somewhere deep in the past. Watching her work is witnessing the compulsive hands of an ancient votive maker. Worrying the clay between her fingers, figures take



**MARRIAGE A LA MODE – Husband,**  
001. H: 35 cm



**MARRIAGE A LA MODE – Wife,**  
2001. H: 35 cm



PEACEABLE KINGDOM - Wolf  
And Lamb, 2001. H: 30 cm



PEACEABLE KINGDOM - Ox,  
2001. H: 55 cm

shape from seemingly nowhere. Mysterious compositions arise, reflecting a variety of cultural manifestations encompassing both eastern and western philosophies. Her ability to draw upon the world's great archetypes is akin to the mystic powers of a spiritual channeler.

Not only is time travel possible for Erickson using the clay medium as conveyance into the past, she recently had the opportunity to visit the future in responding to a request during Dream Works Productions's remake of Orson Well's *The Time Machine*. Although she has produced ceramics for other historically-based projects, this time she was asked by the set designers to create bowls and drinking vessels for scenes involving New York's 800,000 A.D. inhabitants. Her futuristic efforts may go unnoticed by the average moviegoer, but astute ceramic lovers will appreciate the visual impact of her ceramics in the scenes in which they

appear.

Past or present, ceramics have always been used to express some form of political or social commentary and Erickson's contemporary work is no exception. She has specifically addressed present-day issues and events including making several major statements about the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Towers. For the most part, her political expression is rooted in time-honored concerns invoking concepts such as truths, justice, and liberty. She does not shirk from exploring the duality of human nature however as evidenced by a just

completed set of drug jars. Working in an Italian tin glazed manner, the majolica drug jars are decorated with "The Seven Virtues" on the obverse with "The Seven Deadly Sins" on the reverse.

It will be interesting to see what direction Erickson's work will take. With a well-established clientele based in the traditional decorative arts, it has been a difficult adjustment to purposively make her works known to the collectors of contempo-



THE BEGGAR'S OPERA -  
Macheath, 2003. H: 22 cm

THE BEGGAR'S OPERA -  
Lucy, 2003. H: 20 cm



**TEMPTATION POSSET,**  
1999. H: 40 cm



**J'AIME ET J'ESPERE,**  
2003. H: 48 cm

rary ceramics. She has struggled to maintain the historical integrity of her ceramic creations while trying to figure out how to educate this new audience to the significance behind her technological abilities. For example, the current obsession with the teapot as art form by both potters and collectors seems a soulless pursuit. Yet it is clear, that today's market is driven in part by the need to include a teapot form in the potter's repertoire. Certainly, Erickson has earned the right to engage in the teapot mania by virtue of her extensive study of original historical accoutrements associated with the tea ritual and its movement from East to the West. Consequently, her complex and absurdly balanced teapots are primarily sarcastic statements on the lack of historical understanding surrounding the production of the 17th- and 18th- century teapots...

Without question, beyond her technological virtuosity and historical grounding, Erickson's greatest artistic strength is her ability to capture both

the sacred and the mundane in simple sculptural expression. Her work is rarely self-conscious and evolves from a rhythmic manipulation of the malleable clay. Her compositions while conceived in the present are only finished when the past tells her it's time to leave the clay alone.

**Michelle Erickson is a graduate of The College of William and Mary with a B.F.A. in Fine and Performing Arts. In addition to her contemporary ceramic work, she has over twenty years of**

**experience in working with 17th- and 18th-century reproduction pottery that have won critical acclaim internationally. Examples of her contemporary work are in the collections of the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, North Carolina, The Museum of Art and Design, New York, The Long Beach Museum of Art, California, and The New York Historical Society among other collections. Robert Hunter is Editor of Ceramics in America.**

**PHOTOS:**  
Gavin Ashworth, NY.



**LIBERTY ON LEAVE, 2003.**  
L: 60 cm. Photo courtesy of  
Mint Museum of craft and Design, NC