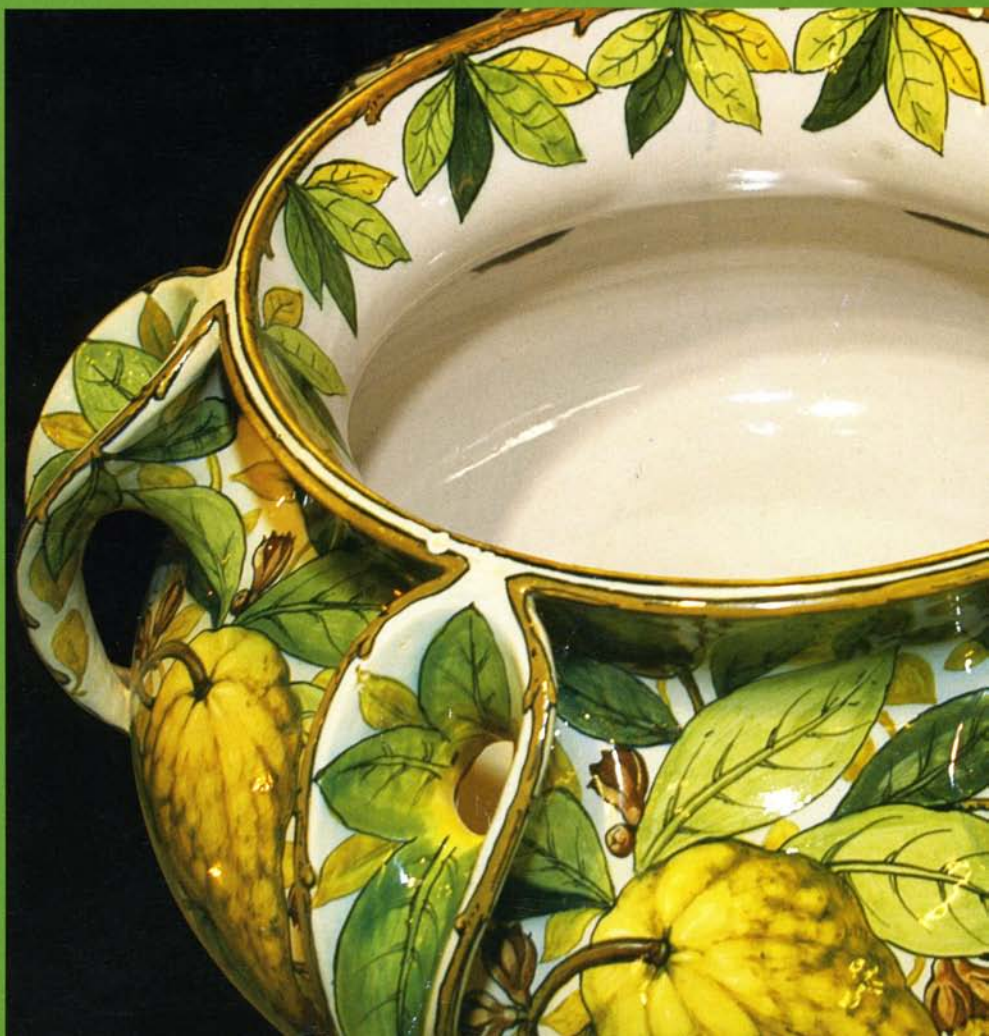


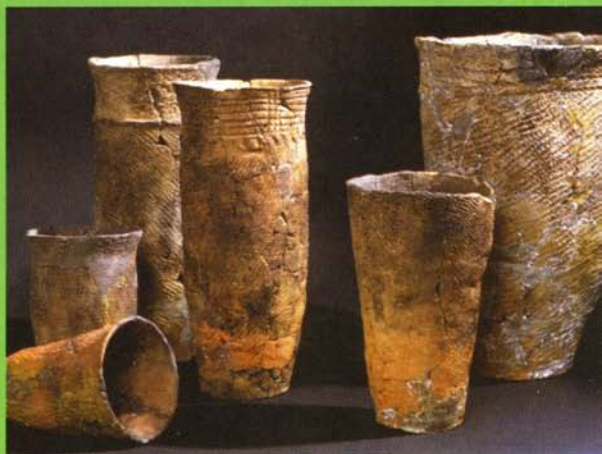
THE NEW YORK
CERAMICS
FAIR





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THE CERAMIC WORKS OF MICHELLE ERICKSON

BY ROBERT HUNTER

Editor, *Ceramics in America*

Michelle Erickson's ceramics have been a crowd favorite at the *New York Ceramics Fair* since its inception in 2000. One of the few contemporary artists representing their own work, Erickson's ceramic art is a perfect fit with the diverse presentation of international ceramics that occurs annually at the Fair. Her sculptural creations are marvels in their own right but are also informed by centuries of world ceramic history.

Working in historic Tidewater, Virginia for over 20 years, Erickson has intensively studied the technology and history behind the ceramics used by the American colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth 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. Erickson has successfully applied these skills to her diverse contemporary 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. Many 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.

The *New York Ceramics Fair* has provided the perfect venue to display her diverse objects as many of the viewers recognize the historical precedents that inform the work. At least a half-dozen major museums have acquired



Left: Figure 1 Above: Detail of Figure 1
Michelle Erickson, *Taste in High Life*, 2004.

Stoneware and porcelain. H. 26".
(Private collection; photo, Gavin Ashworth)

Taste in High Life incorporates a laid agate teapot at the work's core to suggests not only its 18th-century Staffordshire predecessor and its 8th-century Chinese origin, but its own geological ancestry. Comprised of porcelain and Yixing style red stoneware, the fan represents conceptual balance. The oversized finial satirizes the western adaptation the Chinese Art of porcelain making using a Staffordshire styled Monkey brandishing the Meissen "goldchinesen" cup atop a K'ang-Hsi Lion, all of Erickson's making. Broken sherds scattered below are alliterated with the images of the foppish connoisseurs excerpted from William Hogarth's *"Taste in High Life"*



Figure 2
Michelle Erickson, *Liberty*, 2002. Tinglazed
stoneware with cobalt decoration. H 16".
(Private collection; photo, Gavin Ashworth)

This poignant bust of *Liberty* is completely
hand modeled using thrown and altered components.
The posture of *Liberty* in repose reflects a
post 9/11 sentiment.

examples from her annual showing including The New York Historical Society, The Museum of Art and Design, The Long Beach Museum of Art, and most recently Yale University Art Gallery. In addition, several notable private collectors have discovered prized examples of her ceramic work.

Erickson's contemporary ceramics have been featured in all of the major ceramics journals, and have popped up in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, while her historically based objects have been illustrated in dozens of publications ranging from *Architectural Digest* to *Gourmet Magazine*. Erickson is often called upon to create historical ceramics for Hollywood movies including *The Patriot*, *The Time Machine*, *The New World*, and most recently the forthcoming HBO series *John Adams*. For the 2007 commemoration of the 400 year anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, Erickson was asked to create the official gift presented to Queen Elizabeth on her visit this past May—a finely sculpted bas relief plaque made from clay dug from the Jamestown site! Erickson subsequently received a thank-you letter confirming that indeed her gift is now displayed in Buckingham Palace.

With a well-established clientele based in the traditional decorative arts, Erickson's works are increasingly sought after by collectors of contemporary art. Part of the challenge is to maintain the historical integrity of her ceramic creations while educating this new audience to the significance behind her technological abilities. All of her work is infused with cultural, social, or political concerns that she feels strongly about.

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



Figure 3
Michelle Erickson, *Virginia*, 2005.
Slip decorated earthenware. H 19".
(Chipstone Collection, photo, Gavin Ashworth)

This large bust incorporates techniques specific to reproducing an early eighteenth century Staffordshire press molded dish. The work speaks to the convergence of cultures historically referenced by "first contact" between the English and the Native Americans at Jamestown 1607.



in simple sculptural expression. At first glance, the depth of her insights into the human condition, past or present, may not be apparent. Careful study will reveal an incredible underlying spirituality that engages the viewer even though the immediate message may not be obvious.

Probably the most telling recognition of the success of her work at the New York Ceramics Fair is the number of smiles that are elicited from those that carefully examine her showcases. For returning patrons who are familiar with her work the adventure lies in seeing what new creations Erickson has provided this year. For those newly acquainted with her work, be prepared for a ceramic history lesson while absorbing the complex message behind her fascinating ceramic art.

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 considerable contemporary ceramic work, Ms. Erickson has over twenty years experience in working with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century reproduction pottery. Her exquisite reproductions have won critical acclaim internationally. She has lectured and demonstrated her work widely for scholarly groups and institutions that include Williamsburg's Antiques Forum, Winterthur Collectors Circle, Sotheby's learning weekends, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the St. Louis Museum of Art, the University of Wisconsin and the British Museum. She is a partner in the business PERIOD DESIGNS in Yorktown, Virginia, an innovative firm specializing in the reproduction of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century decorative arts, antique prints and ceramics and contemporary ceramic art.

She maintains a website of her work at: www.perioddesigns.com.



Left: Figure 4 Michelle Erickson, *Junk Teapot*, 2006. Indigenous redware and porcelain clays, thrown hand modeled and press molded. H. 12.5". (Photo, Gavin Ashworth)

This teapot was inspired from the salvage expeditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century shipwrecks. Erickson melded together imagery of encrusted sea life onto a Yixing style teapot and her version of an appropriated figural finial. The oyster shells and barnacles are made up of layers of specially prepared porcelain clays.

Above: Figure 5 Michelle Erickson, *Timepeace*, 2005. Creamware with gilt and printed decoration. H 16". (Photo, Gavin Ashworth)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, large English creamware jugs often carried overt political messages. Drawing on this background, Erickson added her present day concern with the harsh problems of child soldiers and the blood diamond trade.