

# Rosana Antonelli's **RAKU DOLCE**

by Claudia Bruhin



Rome is the Eternal City, where layers of history emerge endlessly in the shape of ancient arches, decorated columns, frescoed walls, and in a more domestic size as pots, shards, and fragments. Where magnificent art of the past two millennia is concentrated at an impressive density. Yet it's a modern city, bustling with the contradictions typical of our times: heavy traffic, big crowds, urban sprawl, tension, and hectic rhythm.

What does it mean for a potter to live and work in such a place? And, to what degree does a backdrop like this influence ones work? These are the topical questions for Rosana Antonelli, an Italian potter who was born in Argentina, came to Rome at a very young age, studied, and set up her ceramic studio here.

## **The Influence of Geography and History**

The journey behind her work starts at school, at the ceramic department headed by Nino Caruso, a charismatic artist who since the '70s had influenced

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the teaching and the perception of ceramics in Italy. To pursue her studies further, in the early '80s she moved north to Faenza, a small town of great importance for the history of ceramics in Italy.

It should be said that up until the mid 20th century in Italy, ceramics was almost exclusively associated with the low-fire techniques of majolica and terra cotta. This is due to the geological structure of the Mediterranean, where high-fire clays are scarce. The ancient practice of low-fire ceramic production was shared around the entire Mediterranean basin, be it Egyptian ware, Greek vases, Arabian tiles, Portuguese azulejos, Moroccan earthenware, or Roman pots. During the first half of the 20th century, Fascist regimes in the region banned the importation of any materials extraneous to Italy or in competition with locally available materials, making the little amounts of stoneware and porcelain that had started to appear unavailable. With the end of World War II and the Facist regimes in control at the time, these materials and the correlated aesthetics became of great interest to a young generation of ceramic artists. The fulcrum of the activity and excitement was in Faenza, where artists like Carlo Zauli, Guerrino Tramonti, and others fostered innovation by studying and using high-fire materials, discovering a new visual vocabulary, and articulating a contemporary expression.

### A Lonesome Warrior

Antonelli discovered Zauli and Tramonti during her year in Faenza, and her fascination for stoneware and porcelain was ignited. When she returned to Rome in 1984, the city was far from being a lively ceramic center. In her words, "it felt like working enclosed in a bubble, with only very few like-minded young ceramic artists present in the city." A lonesome warrior, she built her own kiln, found her own materials, opened her own studio, and eventually sold her work in art fairs and shows all over Italy.

To help her make ends meet, she collaborated with Bottega Sarti, a traditional ceramic workshop, located in the Trastevere district of Rome. Half of her time was spent decorating majolica ware commissioned to the Bottega, a job that helped her to develop superb craftsmanship. The other half of her time was devoted to research, the production of her own ceramic art work, and to teaching.

### Raku Dolce

Today Antonelli is among the most appreciated ceramic artists in Italy who practice the ancient Mediterranean technique of terra sigillata in a contemporary interpretation. The ancient Greeks and Romans were masters of the terra sigillata process. Terra sigillata (meaning sealed earth in Italian) is a fine slip applied to the surface of leather-hard clay. When fired, it produces a satin-like finish with an array of earthy tones.

Antonelli is known for her technique of overlapping the terra sigillata with a raku-fired surface. This extra step in her process adds deep blacks and a subtle craquelé that is difficult to achieve



in any other way. Variation can be obtained by moistening the surface with sponges or brushes and by using resist techniques. She learned this technique, called Raku Dolce from the Italian ceramist Giovanni Cimatti who first researched the combination of terra sigillata with raku. While the overlapping raku process adds excitement to the work, it also conditions the possibilities due to the stress of the thermal shock. Forms that can best withstand this combined technique are closed shapes, cylinders, and relatively small bowls.

Antonelli's forms are lucid and elegant. The cultural nature constitutes the core of her work. This is more radically visible in her sculptures, where relics of the ancient city seem to emerge to the surface, awakening memories of something long gone. The series titled, *Khamsin* is named after the Middle Eastern desert wind that lasts for fifty days, developing a destructive power impossible to resist. She builds arches, with fragments of keystones that seem to be torn between falling to the ground or flying away on the wings of the desert wind, leaving behind the cornerstones, mute testimonies of a glorious past. Other sculptures show a rhythm similar to the flow of water or sand dunes of the desert, covering or inserted into bold blocks, with faint residues of once glowing orange terra sigillata.

These works are built in stoneware. They revolve around Antonelli's persistent memory of living in a time of destruction and loss, her observation of constant transformation and radical change, the surge of technology, the alteration of social bonds, the constraint of individual freedom, economic, social, and cultural decline.

Her rather pessimistic outlook is tamped by her passion for teaching and exposing her students to ancient ceramic processes. During her 35 years of making and teaching, she has built a loyal following local students in Rome and of international students at the La Meridiana, International School of Ceramics in Tuscany.

Antonelli's studio includes a gallery and the headquarters of Keramos, an association for the promotion of ceramic arts that



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she and her colleague Evandro Gabrieli founded in 2010. As if to remind Rosana constantly of her roots and of her future, the premises are built on the foundations of Porticus Aemilia, a huge warehouse of the Roman era, where wine, oil, and other goods were stored in clay amphorae. In a symbolic way, Roman potters are constantly challenged, nurtured, and sustained by the past.

To learn more about Rosana Antonelli, visit [www.rosanantonelli-ceramics.com](http://www.rosanantonelli-ceramics.com) or [www.keramosart.it](http://www.keramosart.it).

Claudia Bruhin is the Director of La Meridiana, International School of Ceramics in Tuscany ([www.lameridiana.fi.it](http://www.lameridiana.fi.it)), an internationally renowned center for the ceramic arts, where Rosana Antonelli will teach a one-week workshop on raku dolce in June of 2018 and she will present a hands-on workshop for the ICAN Tour of Tuscany in September 2018.