



EXPRESSIONISM WITHOUT DOUBT – A STRONG PRESENCE – abundance without superfluous gestures and at the same time incorporating elements from art history.

These are the first impressions of my visit to Åsa Hellman's exhibition in the Salo art museum in late 2011. A similar feeling was conveyed during our meeting at her garden studio in Porvoo, where she has worked since 1993. Porvoo is a picturesque medieval town on the southern coast of Finland.

Åsa Hellman's book *Ceramic Art in Finland*, 2004 is a salient reference work on Finnish ceramists. She is a member of the Helsinki Fat Clay group and an active participant in the Association of Finnish Designers Ornamo.

Roots

Hellman's parents, both artists, have had a significant bearing on her activities: "All through my childhood summers I was dragged into museums. I was barely three when we camped in Spain for the first time. The Louvre, the Prado and the Uffizi all gradually became familiar. Our family spent most summers in the Mediterranean region. It was boring

for me as a teenager to spend hours in museums but now I love them and visit them whenever possible."

All this had bearing on selecting a profession, but initially inversely. Hellman began her art studies by reading archaeology as well as art history at the Helsinki University. Simultaneously she attended

evening classes at the University of Art and Design. Her plastic arts

teacher, sculptor Heikki Häiväoja, known in Finland for his many public statues and medals, recognised Hellman's ability and encouraged her to apply for a place at the department of ceramics.

"Being such a free spirit, I sometimes found conforming to the department of ceramics difficult. During the second year, three of us set up a workshop in a basement in Helsinki and this competed with our studies.

In the workshop one could quietly practice throwing on an old kick wheel – the clay was totally absorbing. We were there all the time, we even slept there attending our kilns, using cheap night electricity rates."

In the 1970s, applied arts and ceramics were both powerfully on the ascent in Finland. "It was trendy to

A Review by Teija Isohauta



use rough clay bodies with added grog. Everything thrown, brown and rustic, sold as hotcakes. The style was so different from that of the Arabia factory-made products that it seemed to people like coming from a different world. At that time private sales of ceramics were unusual. A sale at the studio drew lines of customers and everything sold."

The education at the University of Art and Design was quite different from studying at the Royal College of Art in London, which Hellman, with the intention of broadening her prowess, entered in 1978 with a grant from the British Council. "The Royal College of Art laboratories offered every possible type of technology; industrially produced colour stains and small test kilns, gas kilns and so forth. My teacher in Finland, internationally celebrated ceramist Kyllikki Salmenhaara (1915–1981), had emphasised that all colour pigments had to be made by hand using traditional methods, only metal oxides were allowed. When I later returned and began to create brightly coloured ceramics; pink, lilac and orange, I felt that all doors stood open for me."

Between 1973 and 1993 Hellman was part of the Pot Viapori group on Suomenlinna, an island with historical significance close to Helsinki. There she also produced functional ware and frequently participated in exhibitions in Finland and abroad. At the same time she wrote art reviews for *Hufvudstadsbladet*, the Swedish language daily in Helsinki but, increasingly, she devoted her time to her own art.

Hellman's early exhibitions already imbued Finnish ceramics with an exotic addition. Her debut took place in 1973 in the lower level of Taidesalonki (a well-known Helsinki exhibition venue) showing abstract sculptures. Yet, already in the 1980s there were wall plaques with jungle motifs inspired by her



visit to Sri Lanka. "My journeys, both internal and external, have left their trace on my art. I have always enjoyed travelling, in my thoughts and dreams as well as actual trips to foreign countries. Brilliantly coloured nightly dreams as well as daydreams represent those internal journeys. I quickly jot down the images that rise from my subconscious."

SIRENS, DOLPHINS, CHARACTERS FROM ANCIENT MYTHS

In Hellman's world of topics the Nordic landscape blends with motifs, which emanated from North Africa and the Middle East and, via Persia, evolved into age-old themes of image and form. Hellman's

Facing page, top left: Winter Garden. Stoneware tile composition with slips and lustre glazes. 77 x 77 cm.

Facing page, top right: Sea of Violets. Tile composition with slips and lustre glazes. 77 x 77 cm.

Facing page, below left: Iznik. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes and ceramic mosaics. 57 cm/d.

Facing page, below right: White Tulip. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes with ceramic mosaics. 47 cm/d.

Above: Cosmos. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes with ceramic mosaics. 49 cm/d.

Below left: Snowflower. Relief of stoneware, slips and lustre glazes with ceramic mosaics. 44 x 32 cm.

Below right: Black Tulip. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes with ceramic mosaics. 40 cm/d.





Above: Zanzibar. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes. 51 cm.
Below: Åsa Hellman in her studio.

interpretations of ancient figures and mythology are drawn from various directions and cheerfully bob up without strict regard for absolute fact. The thrill of the Hellenic world is transferred to the face of Penelope and Poseidon's dolphins, fishes and mermaids swim on the surface of the pots. Hellman adapts her subject matter into the present as if the ancient cultures would have extended until today, escaping the industrial revolution.

Among the motifs from antiquity, fish and organic plants in a reduced form are often repeated, not as painted decoration but as part of the object's shape and surface structure. Platters, pots and jugs are large and combine the primitive with delicately coloured lustre glazes. The forms are enhanced by black-and-white details and metal gloss – stripes and dots disperse them while they also bring an animalistic edge to the works.

"I use coloured slips in layers, frequently combined with lustre glazes. The technique is time

consuming and additionally, firing sizeable works repeatedly is combined with a certain risk of cracking during the process.

Almost as if with gratitude, however, the method generates shimmering colour effects; mother of pearl, purples, platinum and copper tones, as from *The Thousand and one Nights*. Excessive use of lustre glazes may, however, make one think of cheap baubles rather than of splendour. Finding a balance is always a delicate matter."

Something from the Moorish culture and its abstract ornamentation has adhered to Hellman's art. It is seen in the wall reliefs built of small components with colours and radiance approaching the ceramic mosaics of the Alhambra. Where the strength of the Moorish culture lies in repetition and precision, Hellman's forte is the ability to make her ornamentation three-dimensional and to interpret it, for instance, as a field of pansies.

Tulips are central decorative motifs in ceramics and rugs from the Ottoman empire. The wild tulips spread from Anatolia to Europe and they grow in Hellman's own garden. The tulips now blooming on her platters spring from both sources.

This interconnection of cultures is also visible in works whose origin is not so self-evident. For instance, Egyptian influences are clearly perceived in the artist's lotus flower motifs but the impact in some of the wall reliefs comes rather from the manner of depiction. In her relief *Dreams*, the two-dimensional perspective is of Egyptian provenance, whether done consciously or not. On its white surface are tufts of grass giving the impression of perspective but the pools of water in the marsh, covered by mosaic pieces, are seen head on. They do not correlate to the eyes of Egyptian deities but in the same spirit they open doors to another world, to the hereafter.

THE TOUCH OF CLAY

"I sometimes sense that my hands have shaped clay in an earlier time and that form and decoration find each other naturally."

The profusion and radiance of colour together with the strong trace of handwork combine to make Hellman's works baroque-like. In Finland they primarily are comparable to those of Arabia artist Birger Kaipiainen (1915–1988), who likewise commanded the luxuriant world of form and fantasy. Kaipiainen's oeuvre is based on brilliant draughtsmanship, while Hellman's strength lies in yielding to the plastic form in combination with fabulous colour and incandescence.

Åsa Hellman's sculptural pieces, as well as her big pots, convey vigour and lift to the viewers and users – they make the everyday a celebration.

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Translation from the Finnish by Solveig Williams.

