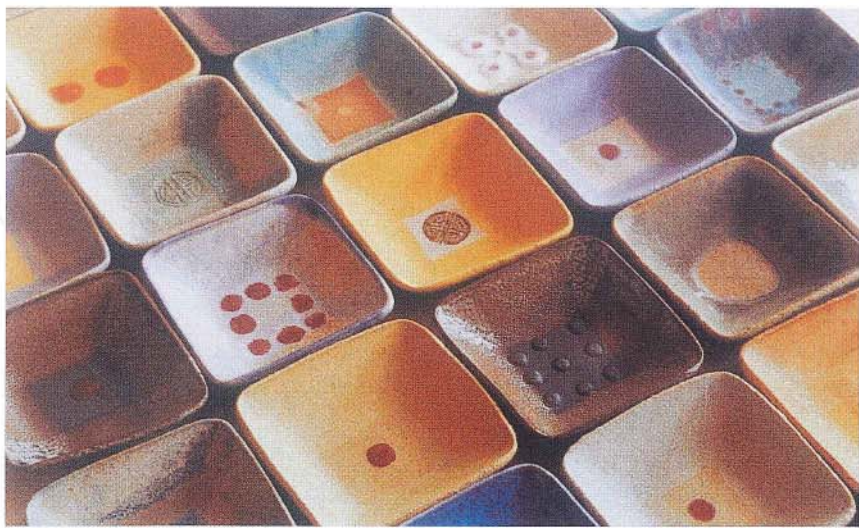


# Book Reviews

MARCH/APRIL 2005

CERAMIC REVIEW ISSUE 2012



## **CERAMIC ART IN FINLAND – A CONTEMPORARY TRADITION** EDITED BY ÅSA HELLMAN THAMES & HUDSON £40

Although Finland's place in the history of art and design has long been assured, this is the first book to draw together the loose threads of one of Europe's great ceramic nations. Along the way it reveals a host of often enigmatic characters struggling with personal and economic realities to establish ceramics as a central aspect of Finnish culture.

Compiled in two distinct sections, the first offers a critical history where the reader will find certain parallels with other European countries. Anglo-Belgian painter A W Finch is generally accepted as founding father for example, but there were no Bernard Leach figures to extol the virtues of the independent artist-craftsman in a country where basic materials were largely unavailable until the 1970s. Instead, as Hannele Nyman points out, 'the emergence of a powerful concentration of ceramic artists in Finland was something that took place precisely in the industrial sphere'. The award-winning work of the Arabia factory's celebrated art department remains for many the jewel in the crown. Amongst others, former residents Kyllikki Salmenhaara and Birger Kaipiainen are sketched lovingly here by contributing writer Jennifer Opie of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The second and larger of the two sections is a credit to the editor, Åsa Hellman, whose personal efforts to rediscover some of the lost provincial pioneers of early Finnish ceramics carried her the length and breadth of this sparsely populated country. Hellman's meticulous research constructs a wide record, rather than simply reasserting the achievements of those famous artists it necessarily includes. As a chronological directory, it offers the reader countless leads for further study with a generous serving of colour illustrations. In a sense it is the democratic version of events, giving additional attention to the later generations of makers who did not benefit from an industrial backing, notably the Pot Viapori group or Kim Simonsson, who captured the nation's imagination by winning the 'Young Artist of the Year' award in 2004.

As Hellman herself recently asserted, 'now, finally we [Finnish ceramists] have a history!' This comprehensive work certainly fits the fundamental pieces of the jigsaw into their rightful place.

**Marcus Holmes**

## **AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SORTS** **MIKE DODD** CANTERTON £27

*An Autobiography of Sorts* steps outside what we have come to expect or understand as a 'pottery book' in that it most definitely is not a 'how to do it'. Breaking from tradition, even the dust jacket does not carry the almost com-

pulsory image of a pot. Instead the shadowy image of a hanging plant says more, in some ways, about Mike Dodd the person than a pot ever could.

To recount one's life and then to publish it, even self publish it, is a brave and, some would say, egotistical or presupposing thing to do. The genre of 'autobiography' has become cheapened by the cult of celebrity whose careers it has been drawn upon to endorse, money being the other driving force behind these frivolous and meaningless volumes of pap.

In *An Autobiography of Sorts* Mike Dodd makes no excuses for leaving out his 'rocky personal life'. There are undoubtedly deeper, significantly personal reasons why this book came about other than to brag, titillate or provoke the voyeur within the reader. Dodd has self produced this book and, while obviously feeling the need to document a distinguished, varied yet somewhat nomadic potting career (including a period in Peru), it is also obvious that there are other forces at work, close to Dodd's heart, that pressed him to put pen to paper. Dodd intermittently uses the text to convey heartfelt and for him life-changing feelings about the way we inhabit the planet.

This book is not in any way egotistical. It is a gentle, thoroughly absorbing recollection of a life to date, more or less well spent. Dodd's writing style is engaging, descriptive and

painterly and one wishes for more narrative like the passage where he describes an interview with his headmaster at prep school concerning a possible scholarship to Bryanston public school. Then, while at Bryanston, his relationship with the charismatic Donald Potter, his first pottery teacher, is detailed.

I particularly enjoyed the beautifully written episode recounting a meeting with the aged and almost blind Bernard Leach in his flat, Barnaloft, in St Ives.

I heartily recommend this book. Dodd has, in his usual inimitable, mildly eccentric style, produced something out of the ordinary. Apart from his own narrative he has included a compilation of articles and essays written both by him and about him that provide a balanced view. There are dozens of colour plates, of increasingly good quality in line with their chronological order, that illustrate what a fine and hugely significant potter Dodd has become.

**Phil Rogers**

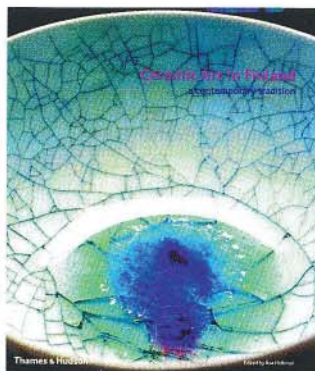
*An Autobiography of Sorts* is available direct from Mike Dodd. Email [mdodd@clara.co.uk](mailto:mdodd@clara.co.uk) or if in USA available from The Potters Shop [pottersshop@aol.com](mailto:pottersshop@aol.com)

## **SONG DYNASTY CERAMICS** **ROSE KERR** V&A MUSEUM £30

This is a gem of book – 116 pages of full-colour pictures of Chinese Song ceramics (960-1280 AD), from the Victoria and Albert



designs for Harker. The guide does have some small deficiencies: only one manufacturer's mark is pictured for each manufacturer; though described, variant marks should also be shown. And there is one curious omission: Royal China, one of the most prolific American producers of inexpensive stoneware, is not covered at all. It will also be difficult for readers to trace company mergers and changes of ownership without a close reading of the text; this information is buried in the articles, when it might have been better to list alternate company names in the article headings. While few of the articles in this book are detailed enough to satisfy avid collectors of a single manufacturer's output, it is an excellent compendium that will serve antique dealers and their customers well, helping to identify those mysterious pieces that turn up in every china buff's travels.



*Ceramic Art in Finland* (Thames & Hudson, hardcover, 272 pages, \$45) manages to be both a scholarly work and a coffee-table feast for the eyes. Roughly the first third of the book is a series of seven essays edited by ceramist and art historian Åsa Hellman. Three interrelated essays — one by Hellman and two by museum curators Jennifer Hawkins Opie and Hannele Nyman — give an

excellent overview of the extensive range of Finnish ceramic art. Another essay by Arabia Museum director Marjut Kumela is a detailed exploration of the Arabia company's art works, as opposed to its commercial production of dinnerware and decorative wares. Architect Esa Laaksonen, who is director of the Alvar Aalto Academy, contributes an authoritative look at a seldom-considered field: architectural ceramics. The black-and-white illustrations in the essay section work best when they are picturing artists; the subtle coloration of the works shown is lost entirely. That small lack is more than compensated for in the other two-thirds of the book, in which the majority of the volume's 262 illustrations are larger and in color. In that section, dozens upon dozens of ceramists and manufacturers are given their own brief articles, with biographical highlights and photographs of representative works. It becomes clear that there is no one defining aesthetic in Finnish ceramics: the minimalism, classicism and somber hues of Kurt Ekholm's stoneware vases could hardly be farther from the surrealist wall reliefs of Anna-Maria Osipow. And there is a great deal of technical wizardry on display here: the diminutive Liisa Hallamaa-Walden throws pots big enough to hide a small child; Anneli Sainio produces astounding raku pottery — quickly fired, then cooled in a sealed environment to yield subtle, unpredictable effects; and Ulla Kujansuu transforms clay into screens made of linked ceramic chains. Every conceivable technique is used by Finnish ceramic artists, and *Ceramic Art in Finland* is a breathtaking look at them all. ■

**Sandy McLendon** is a freelance writer based in Atlanta. He is editor-in-chief of *Jetsetmodern.com*, an online publication. His first book, *PreFAB Elements*, is scheduled for Summer 2005 publication.

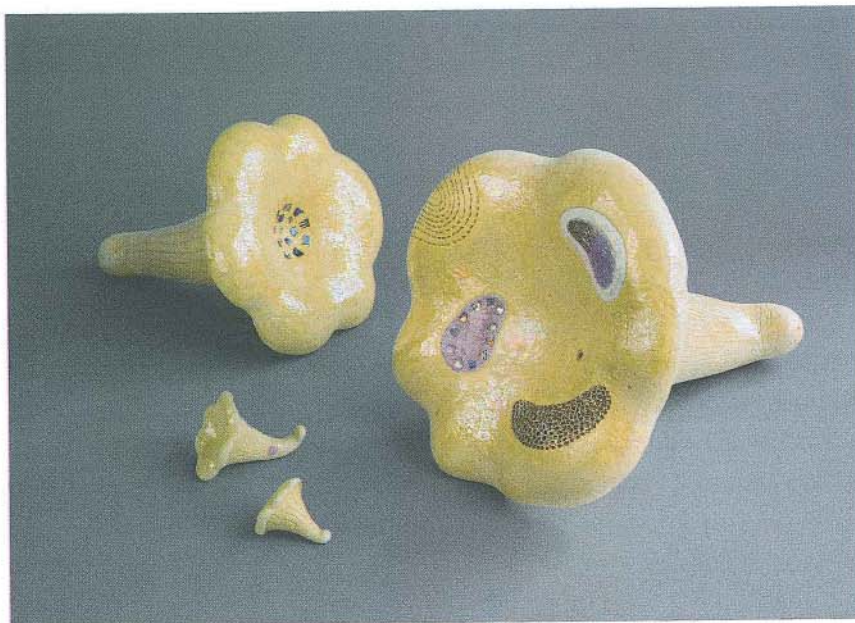
MODERNISM MAGAZINE  
SUMMER 2005





# Finland

DESIGNED ENVIRONMENTS



Photographer: Johnny Korkman

Åsa Hellman  
Finnish, born 1947  
*Summer of Chanterelles*, 2012  
Ceramic  
Largest: L. 22 13/16 x Diam. 18 1/8 in. (58 x 46 cm)  
Smallest: L. 3 9/16 x Diam. 3 9/16 in. (9 x 9 cm)  
Courtesy of Åsa Hellman



Written by  
Jennifer Komar Olivarez  
Catalogue of  
Minneapolis Institute of  
Arts 2014

The ceramic artist and writer Åsa Hellman makes clay sculptures that are distinguished by their color and luster. She created *Summer of Chanterelles* for the exhibition *Oasis and Floating Gardens* at the Copper Smithy, a venue in Fiskars Village, in 2012. This whimsical ceramic grouping of variously sized chanterelles—a mild golden-yellow mushroom that is abundant in southern Finland—spawned further pieces in the series. The concept marks her recent return to the Finnish landscape as an inspiration, and it affectionately acknowledges the growing interest in Finland, especially among people living in urban areas, in so-called wild foods. “Everyman’s right” and “freedom to roam” are common expressions, signifying the generally accepted belief that Finns can forage for naturally growing fruits and vegetables on public or private land.

Hellman’s outsize stoneware chanterelle mushrooms are generally displayed on a bed of moss, evoking a forest floor. With mosaic elements and lustrous glazes, the artist has emphasized the mushrooms’ monumentality as well as the play of light and shadow.

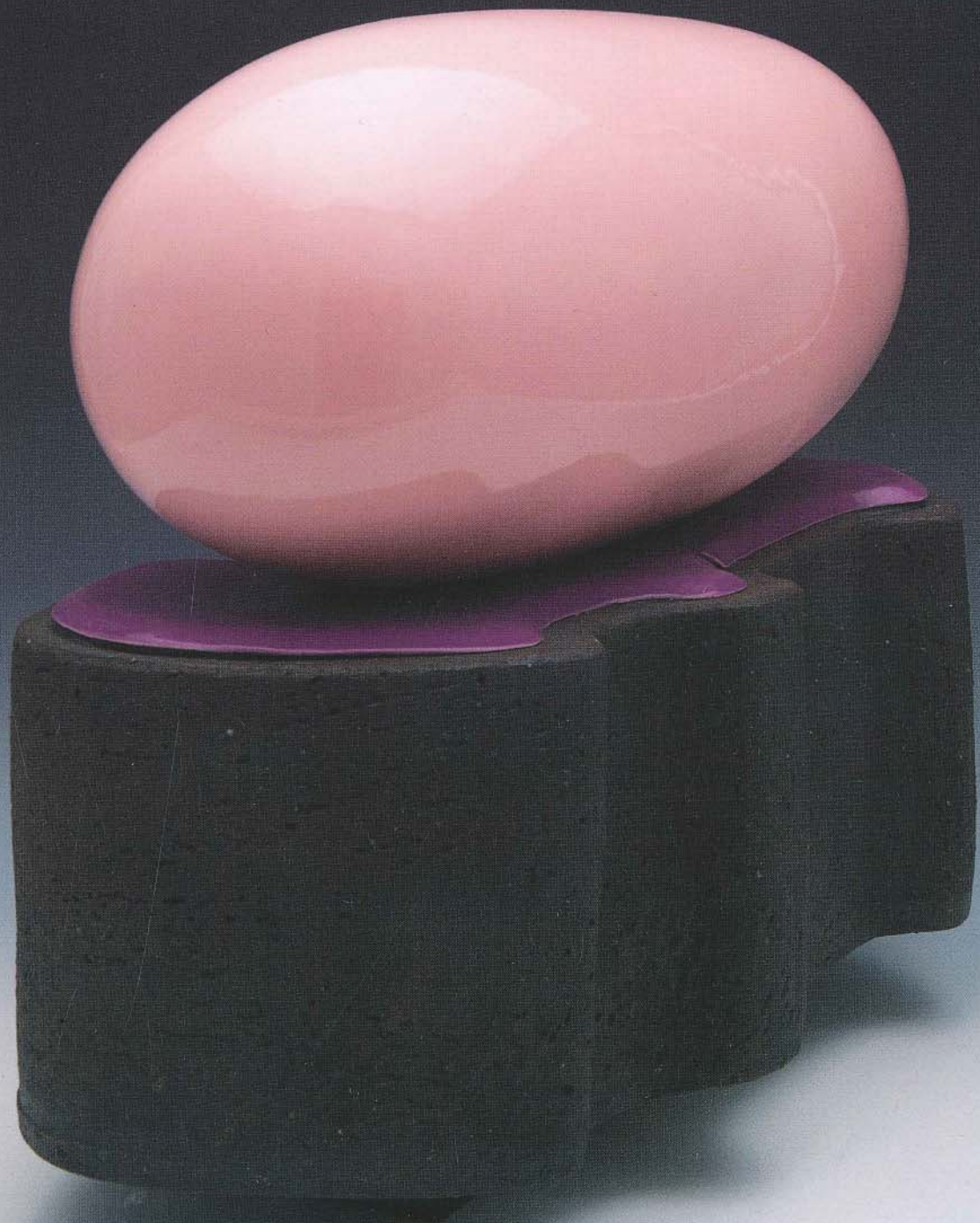
—JKO

# Ceramics

Art and Perception

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**E**XPRESSIONISM 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."

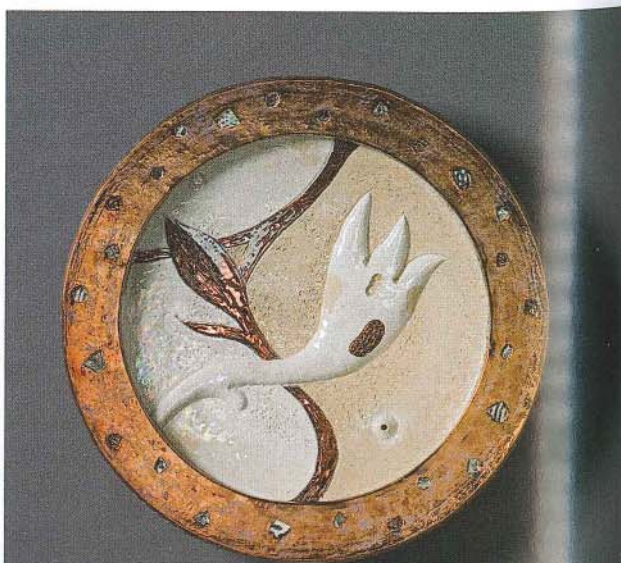
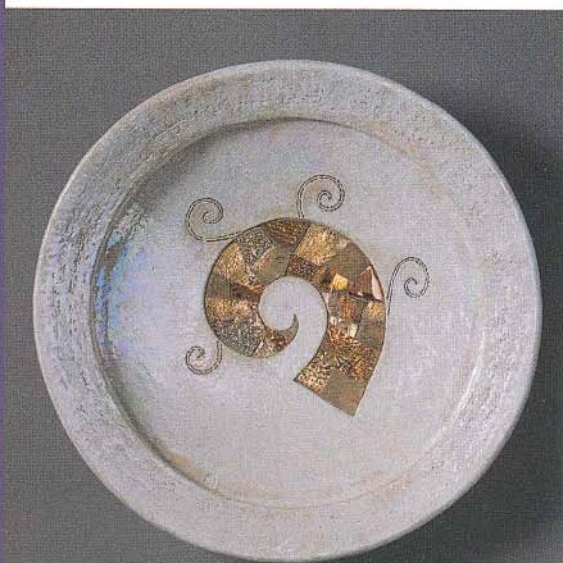
All this had bearing on selecting a profession, but initially inversely. Hellman began her art studies by reading archaeology as well as art history at the Helsinki University. Simultaneously she attended evening classes at the University of Art and Design. Her plastic arts teacher, sculptor Heikki Häiväoja, 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.

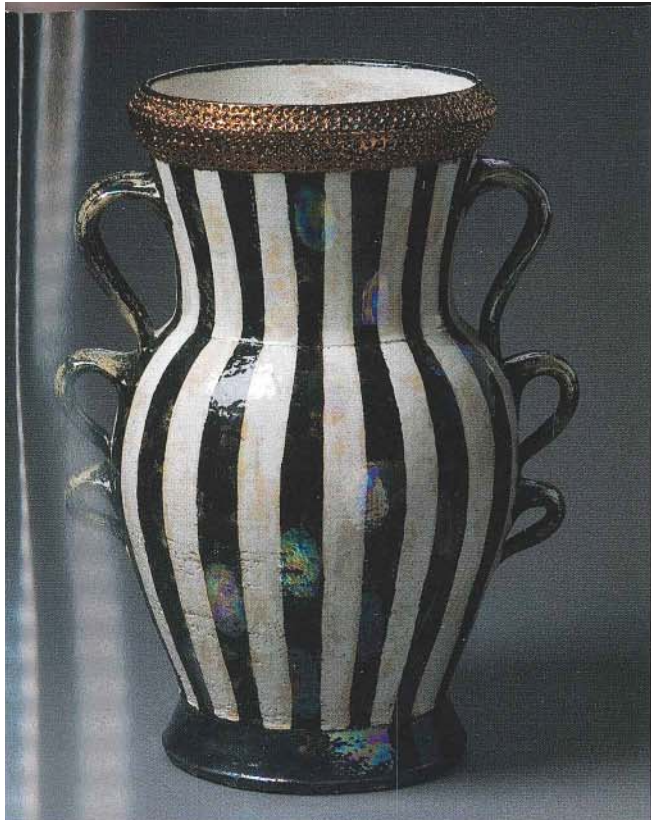
Above: **Cosmos**. Stoneware, slips and lustre glazes with ceramic mosaics. 49 cm/d.

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 thrall 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.

Teija Isohauta, MA, is an art historian. She has been a curator at the Alvar Aalto Museum for 25 years and is now a free lance writer on architecture, art and design.

Translation from the Finnish by Solveig Williams.