

IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNIKA SVENSSON

by: Boel Ulfsdotter & Annika Svensson, December 13, 2021

© Sculptural tiled stoves (2001-2002) by Annika Svensson

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MAI meets Annika Svensson, a Swedish ceramicist/tiled stove maker/artist, who lives and works in Gothenburg, Sweden.

When asked to introduce her work, Svensson says:

‘My artworks encapsulate experiences, emotions and memories. I am inspired by nature and experiment with imprints and castings, creating reliefs. I am engaged in a diversity of artistic projects which range from functional wares to sculptures, such as ceramic objects, tiled stoves and public art. My work can be found in public places and in private homes.

I have participated in national and international juried exhibitions, had several solo exhibitions, and my work has been collected by museums and municipalities. In 2019, I became a member of the IAC—the International Academy of Ceramics – a leading organisation representing the interests of professionals in the field of ceramics worldwide. My book *ANNIKA SVENSSON—Contemporary Sensitivities* was released in the same year.’

MAI: Hello Annika! You are a well-known Swedish ceramicist with twenty-ve years of practice under your belt. What made you go into ceramics when you opted for a career in craft?

Annika Svensson: I grew up in a family where arts and crafts were always performed in response to both need and interest. My Grandma sewed, crocheted, drew, and photographed a lot with her box camera. And Nan weaved, using, for example, Flemish weaving techniques. She also sewed and painted porcelain. My mother dipped into silversmithing, knitting and lace making, but above all weaving, in addition to her daily job as a farmer. My older siblings enjoyed drawing, so it was a creative environment in the countryside where I grew up, and self-sufficiency prevailed. As a child, I picked up clay directly from the ground and shaped figures. I submitted an application for the practical arts program at Schillerska Secondary School in Gothenburg during national admission, based on my work samples. This particular program taught several different aesthetic courses based on image and plasticity, which fitted well with my interest in working with clay. My teacher helped arrange for me to have access to the ceramics workshop during the summer holidays. I then studied at a preparatory art program at the same school for a year. My interest in ceramics increased, as I found it easy to be creative in three dimensions. Even the different turning and glazing techniques were easy for me to master.

MAI: Did you venture into other forms of craft before you settled for ceramics?

AS: Clay is a special material without borders, offering endless possibilities. I had my first child just after completing my A-levels and then I went on to a local public art school to learn painting, drawing, sculpture, as well as art history. The subsequent program at the Academy of Art and Design also included studies in colour and shape, even glassblowing. As a result of these courses, several of my public art installations embrace a variety of materials and crafts, often in combination with ceramics. I, for instance, design all forged pieces for my tiled stoves myself, to the extent that my latest stove displays sculpted bronze details. And yet, working in ceramics is very demanding and has subsequently taken up all my creative energy for many years. Having said that, I still feel the need to investigate other materials and crafts when I get the chance.

MAI: Have your formative (academic) merits worked to your advantage in your dealings with commissioners, or do you find that yours is a profession that pivots mainly on practice?

AS: As an artist-cum-ceramicist-cum-creator of tiled stoves, I take on all sorts of commissions in order to develop my artistry further. The creative processes you learn at school can be applied to most materials and commissions. One's background, experience and attitude play a large part when it comes to running a business. I completed a one-year course in Entrepreneurship for the Arts at the University of Gothenburg in 2012 to learn new ways of reaching out professionally without having to compromise my artistic integrity.



MAI: You mainly work within three different areas of ceramics: official art installations, unique artisan objects, and tiled stoves. What particular characteristics of these different art forms speak to you, and how do you compartmentalise them from a creative point of view? Do you ever allow them to intersect artistically—or is it important to keep them apart?

AS: Clay always takes up one's time, so I put a lot of care and presence into my work. It is important to make customers understand that it is not possible to force the work into existence—neither practically nor artistically. The ceramics I create are of a wide range, and sometimes transition into larger sculptural forms. I want my works to be both artistically intuitive and technically well executed. They encapsulate experiences, feelings, and memories. Many times, the hybridised smaller forms form the basis for larger works. I find switching between different types of artistic commissions and projects very dynamic, because they replenish my creativity and feed from one another. From the initial desire to experiment to the finished result.

So far, my public art installations are mainly found in hospitals, schools, and other institutions. Regardless of the type of project or object, its physical presence and my artistic vision are paramount parameters when I choose what materials to work with. I always opt for materials that are environmentally safe and durable. After careful research based on, among other things, the site's (cultural) history and former activities, my idea emerged, and I transform it into an artistic shape before it is finally realised. The surface structure is designed to primarily harmonise with the surrounding architecture but should also interact with the social environment on the whole. Each unique detail should enrich the overall expression and create works of art with strong intrinsic value.

A combination of interlaced sensibilities is cradled in my unique ceramic objects: I am inspired by nature, and experiment with imprints and castings when I create reliefs. In the process, I distort and rene the shape in clay. My ceramics depict softness and asymmetrical movement, with budding contours and undulating lines in the quest to achieve organic balance. In my experience the artistic process tends to endow them with a life of their own: like creatures, which I both follow and control. During this process—which is an intuitive interaction between eye and hand—the most suitable final surface structure and glaze become clear to me. Once completed, the ceramics go on show in galleries, museums, and art galleries, mainly in Sweden.

As for my contemporary tiled art stoves: for more than two decades, I have worked actively to create an interest in the unique tiled stove as part of the interior scheme of modern homes. In these stoves, cultural heritage is combined with artistic endeavour, resulting in a dedicated work that includes a functional body of ceramics that expresses a unique architectural shape. I have shown my tiled stoves in a number of exhibitions, [and this] has led to commissions in both Sweden and abroad. My tiled stoves can be found both in private homes and public institutions. They mainly consist of hand-printed clay tiles made in plaster moulds, of which some get additional decorative applications. The tiles are then dried, plastered, scraped, glazed, and red. Sometimes they are cast to produce special reliefs and surfaces. Another construction method is based on the entire tiled stove being built in plastic clay as a self-supporting form, which is then cut up to form individual tiles.

These three creative elds obviously intersperse and enrich each other from a creative point of view. I find switching between small- and large-scale formats very rewarding. It is often the case that intuitively formed shapes take on a new meaning when transformed into larger shapes. Long artistic processes tend to kindle a desire in me to create art works that allow both a faster process pace and quicker results.

MAI: I am especially partial to your tiled stoves, I must admit. They represent a longstanding form of indoor heating in Europe, and were as such traditionally mounted by male craftsmen—is that still the case?

AS: Most tiled stove makers are men, but I see more and more women working professionally with tiled stoves.

MAI: How do you cope with this rather physically demanding job?

AS: I prepare myself through different routines, both physically and mentally. Yoga in various forms, and dance keeps the skin and agility going, I get my everyday exercise cycling in Gothenburg, and living four floors up without a lift. My osteopath since 2012 teaches Sadhana, which optimises my body posture—which is of capital importance when performing the heavy work duties involved in my job.

MAI: What kindled your interest in working with tiled stoves in the first place?

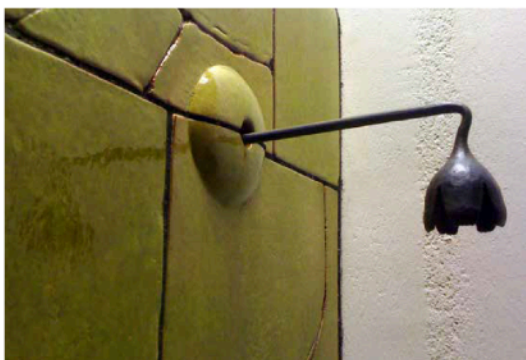
AS: I love their large-scale format and the technical precision involved, the puzzle of making them come together. The tiled stove is a good heating source with a great history that I find artistically challenging and rewarding to work with. My most successful tiled stoves involve a combined challenge that both tickle my artistic sensibilities and spur my technical curiosity.

MAI: Is this form of heating houses under debate for environmental reasons today, nationally and/or internationally? If so, how do you deal with that?

AS: My tiled stoves are basically made in the same way as [they were] 250 years ago and are set up according to Cronstedt and Wrede's flue system, launched in 1767. They are still very efficient as they extract a lot of heat from the wood before the flue gas is emitted. They respond to all measures within today's environmental requirements.

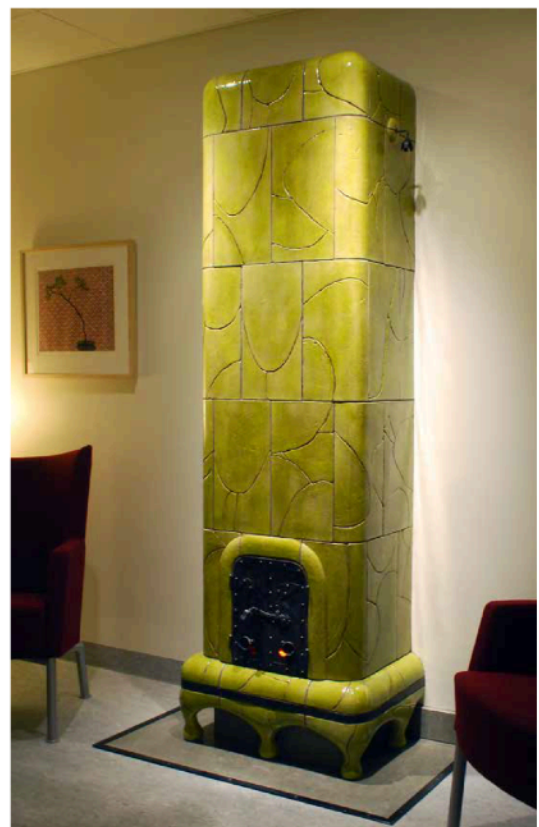
MAI: I know that you do not just create your own contemporary tiled stoves, but also are very interested in, and take on, commissions involving refurbishing, and even resurrecting old stoves. In your opinion, do tiled stoves represent an important architectural and aesthetic heritage in Europe?

AS: The tiled stoves are absolutely beautiful and magnificent historical works of art, with a cultural history expanding from the Alpine countries to Sweden, to Russia and the Baltic states. They are well worth keeping. From a practical point of view, it is however much more difficult to recreate a lost tile and blend it into the overall aesthetic patterns of an older tiled stove, than to artistically create and manufacture a new contemporary tiled stove.



Grön kakelugn med fema skulptörsmosaik 2010.
80,67 x H 2,10 x D 0,44 m. Konstnärlig utsmyckning på
Universitetssjukhuset i Örebro som ska utstråla värme
och trygghet, för patienter i ett väntrum intill CT-fet lokal
för strålbehandling. Kakelugnen har värmeledningar och
artificiell eld, då skorsten saknas.

Green tiled stove, based on the theme Forest Moss 2010.
W 0,67 x H 2,10 x D 0,44 m. Public art in a waiting room
at the University Hospital in Örebro, meant to yield
warmth and comfort to patients waiting for radiation
therapy. The tiled stove is fitted with heat coils and an
artificial fire, since there is no chimney.



MAI: What is the general procedure when restoring a historical stove?

AS: I begin working from original tiles from the stove in need of refurbishment, carefully studying each tile form in need of replacement. I go on to measure and calculate the shrinkage of the selected clay and make a plaster mould. Several glaze samples are weighed, mixed, and applied. I decorate the tiles by hand before they are test red, and then I compare them to the original tiles. This procedure is repeated over and over again until the result is satisfactory. All replacement parts of the stove are then manufactured and installed amid the original tiles. The procedure demands the complete dismantling and reassembling of the stove.

MAI: Do you have any preference for a particular form of commission?

AS: The variety of different artistic projects, choice of methods and techniques make the work with tiled stoves endlessly dynamic and inspiring for me—but on the whole I most enjoy creating my own new stoves.

MAI: Despite being a layman, I would suggest that you are an extremely technically advanced ceramicist—not least your ventures into Japanese ring techniques. Their impressions on, for instance, your large installation vessels signal a will to advance traditional ceramics by creating novel artistic expressions. Do you have an interest in the technical side of your craft as well?

AS: Technical skills guarantee success. They also grant greater freedom to create novel objects, I would say. Burning ceramics in wood-red kilns, such as Japanese style Anagama, is something I very much enjoy returning to at regular intervals. I carry with me a certain persistent fascination with the original process and combined results of fire, flame, clay, ashes, and embers—no matter what I work with.

MAI: Is it necessary to have an interest in the technical side of the profession if you want to succeed as a ceramicist?

AS: It is easier because the clay is a living material, and the glazes require knowledge of chemistry. I like to be able to build larger objects that demand load-bearing structures, in order to be exposed to the stresses involved with fulfilling my artistic vision.

MAI: Let's talk a little about your work from an artistic point of view. What generally inspires your creative process?

AS: Challenges to create novel objects that do not yet exist or are in need of improvement. I find inspiration in all sorts of experiences, and new visual impressions during journeys or in my everyday life. Flea market finds with surfaces or textures that can be used and converted into clay are a steady source of inspiration for me. A certain technique or method can also result in new thoughts and ideas. I am very inspired by nature, and experiment a lot with imprints and casts. During the ongoing process, new ideas often emerge. Evolving artistically seems to me to require an organic and intuitive interaction between eye and hand.

MAI: How do you balance the different areas in which you operate? **AS:** One thing at a time, and a fruitful variation of commissions and projects.

MAI: How do you balance the different areas in which you are active? Creating an official artwork for an institution like the lobby of a secondary school is, after all, very different from making a small Japanese-inspired teapot. Is it possible for you to work in one area at a time?

AS: Yes, that is the optimal MO, but it obviously depends on the type of project in play. I am sometimes obliged to work on more than one project at the time. Generally speaking, I enjoy the variation of more or less demanding commissions. Creating works for an upcoming exhibition represents yet another situation which is still framed by an overriding idea of theme and execution.

MAI: What are you working on right now?

AS: Many assignments have piled up as a result of a bicycle accident I experienced earlier this year. They will now take up the entire coming year (2022) to perform. Several tiled stoves are at the top of the agenda. I have received government support to work with Mosstroll's design of a tiled stove with a heated divan. This stove is designed to be an art object heavily influenced by different characteristics in Japanese, Italian and Iranian visual culture. The project allows me to explore the absolute limit of the tiled stove's aesthetic remit in relation to its practical purposes. But first of all, I have an assignment to sketch freely on a new tiled stove for a dining room in an older house dating from the 18th century. I also hope to realise a three-month stay at the Pottery Center in Jingdezhen, China, during 2022. I am also preparing ceramic sculptures to be exhibited together with paintings by Nils Ramhøj at Höganäs Art Center in autumn 2022.

MAI: Is there a particular project that you would really like to be involved in?

AS: I have a strong desire to receive more international assignments and possibilities to exhibit abroad, as well as participate in workshops and work stays. From a practical point of view, I would like to build a clay house with a studio, workshop, and showroom for myself. I also dream of designing more unique tiled stoves for common spaces like nursing homes, restaurants, spas, and hotels.

MAI: You have dedicated your entire adult life to ceramics. How do you view its future? Is it a sustainable art form worth counting on?

AS: Clay and ceramics are materials that have a profound impact on our daily lives, much more than we realise. The art form therefore merits its place, and already has a very long history. We also keep wanting to express our individual selves, and clay is a fantastically permissive material to do so. It is definitely worth working professionally as a ceramicist, although our working conditions and economical support systems need to be improved.

The general interest in ceramics has increased lately. More and more people from different professions engage with ceramics today, and the results can be seen at international art and furniture fairs. Because so many in the work force run digital tools today, there is a great urge for hobby courses in ceramics. In my view, the artistic merits and practical experiences encountered by all practitioners are important for the development of the ceramic discipline.

MAI: Would you recommend a young person to become a professional ceramicist?

AS: Definitely.

For more, visit Annika Svensson's website:

<https://www.keramik-kakelugnar.com/>



