

# Life Transitions As The Catalyst To Create.

Alexandra McCurdy's porcelain boxes are a metaphor for structure and a life of origina



THE CHOICE FOR BEAUTY

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**Mark Raynes Roberts**

A bell's toll can represent so many things in life: death, a wedding celebration, the end of a boxing round, even one's survival from disease...for the time being!

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But for Alexandra McCurdy, an internationally-recognized ceramicist and printmaker, it reminds her of her childhood and of how it saved lives.



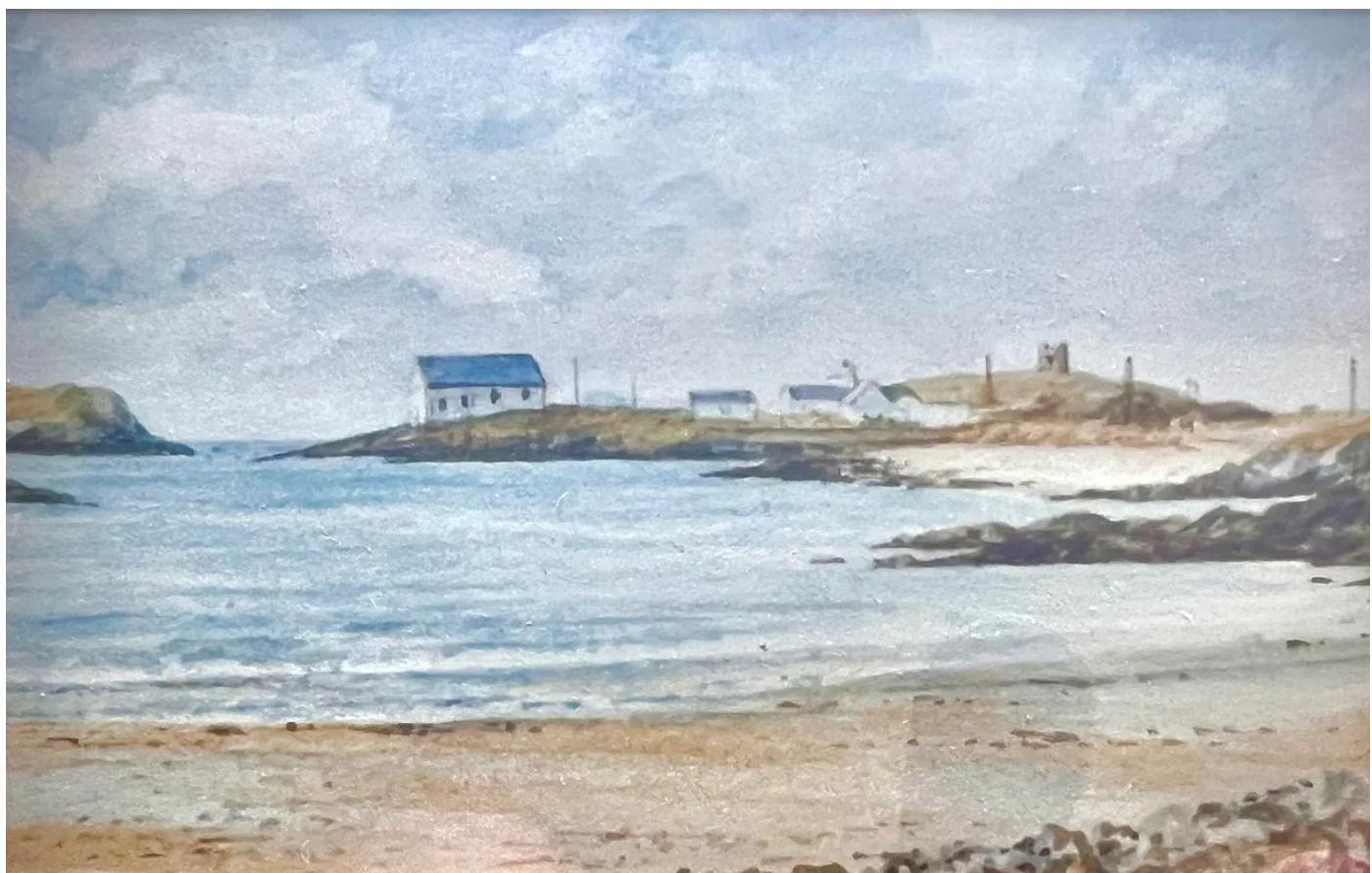
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*A family heirloom bell that Alexandra treasures from her grandmother's home 'Pen-y-Craig Rhoscolyn, on the Isle of Anglesey in North Wales.*

Alexandra's summers as a young girl were spent with her grandmother, Gertrude Folkes, at the family cottage known as 'Pen-y-Craig' (head of the rock) in Rhoscolyn North Wales. Located on their family property was a large boathouse which also acted as the Rhoscolyn Lifeboat Station. It was first built there in 1830, and it was here that the bell would be rung to rally volunteer lifeboat men when there was a disaster out to sea. Over its years of operation, close to 100 lives were saved by the Rhoscolyn lifeboat before it was replaced by a larger facility servicing the same coastline. Alexandra was given the bell by her British relatives when her beloved grandmother died. It now hangs proudly at her home in Chester, Nova Scotia, a reminder of family and the many lives it saved.

Born in 1944, Alexandra grew up at her grandmother's 17th century family home in the rolling countryside of Kinver in Staffordshire, England, after her father, an RAF pilot, had gone missing during a World War II mission. She was the granddaughter of a successful Midlands industrialist, who owned the Lye Forge (John Folkes Ltd.) in Stourbridge, (just 3 miles away) a large metal foundry in the heart of the 'black country.' The company was founded in 1697.



*This delicate watercolour by Julia Roberts is a reminder of the 'Pen-y-Craig' family property and Rhoscolyn Lifeboat Station (with its blue roof) on the Isle of Anglesey.*

As was the case for many families during those wartime years, their home became strongly influenced by the women in the family while the men were away fighting. [mother, aunts and grandmother, maintained the home front with the expectation that Alexandra do the same. The home was filled with stained glass, antiques, and beautifully-patterned and embroidered fabrics. It was these refined surroundings, often with a patterned order, that stayed in her memory. These memories would be inspiration that found their way into her own porcelain creations years later.

When her mother remarried after the war, Alexandra was initially sent away to Godstowe Preparatory School for High Wycombe Abbey near London. It was a world away from her home environment, where walks in the local fields and woods

developed her life-long love of animals. It wasn't long though before her new step father, Jeffrey Vanstone Brock, was appointed Canadian Admiral of the East Coast, which meant that the family (now with two younger half brothers) moved to Halifax Nova Scotia, from England in 1956. Alexandra was a young teenager.

Immigrating to Canada and attending new schools wasn't an easy transition for Alexandra. It always meant feeling "different" with an English accent in Canada. She felt alienated at times. Alexandra's two half brothers were 10 and 13 years younger than her, which often meant she was tasked with babysitting them. Her mother would often leave her in charge when she returned to England to visit family. It was challenging. Her stepfather, although an admired naval officer, was an alcoholic, a taboo, secretive illness that put great pressure on the family. Not only that, Alexandra felt she wasn't fully accepted by him as she was a constant reminder that his wife had lived with another man.

During the late 1950s, Alexandra went to the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Halifax a boarder for a time. But as her stepfather was moved to various naval bases across Canada, she had to follow, resulting in attendance at fourteen different schools before finally graduating.





*A photo of Alexandra and her mother, Patricia Elizabeth Brock, (circa late 1940s) with their pet cat 'Tinkerbell'.*

Alexandra's first connection to Chester came when her parents acquired a summer cottage on the Chester back harbour for weekend entertaining. It was during those summer vacations that she first met Peter McCurdy, who would become her husband. Peter's family also had a cottage in Chester. Their friendship grew and by 1966 they married, welcoming a daughter, Holly, a few years later. After marriage, they bought their own house in Halifax. This was the first time Alexandra finally felt she had room for her own family.

For a time, Peter and Alexandra moved to Montreal, where Peter attained a Master's degree at McGill University in social work. They settled on the west island in the Pointe-Claire / Beaconsfield area, where Alexandra began her love affair with clay at a local community centre. Her early years of uncertainty and constant relocation had subconsciously manifested in creative designs with motifs and patterns - all childhood reminders of the need for consistency, continuity and individuality.





*Celebrated ceramic artist Alexandra McCurdy, holding one of her many hand-made porcelain bowls.*

*creations.*

After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design in 1980, Alexandra went on to complete her Masters in 3D Design at the Cardiff Institute of Higher Learning in Wales, which had a profound effect on her. It transformed the way her work evolved, encouraging a deeper conceptual approach and broadening her creative practice.

She was exposed to new materials, techniques, and critical theory while gaining a rigorous studio discipline that emphasized research-led creative. The benefit of enjoying collaborative discussions with her peers expanded exciting new perspectives, allowing her to develop a more thoughtful, intentional process. It was during this time that she began to integrate narrative, personal history, and symbolism which continue to shape her artistic practice.

Long inspired by decorative arts, Alexandra began exploring the traditional roles of women and the domestic sphere through the medium of ceramics. Her home in Chester is a testament to early hand-craft, where she displays many beautiful unsung textile works including embroidery, quilts, rug hooking and weaving. By observing these original works, she began introducing surface treatments to her own ceramic forms, incorporating patterns and stitching into a fine art context.

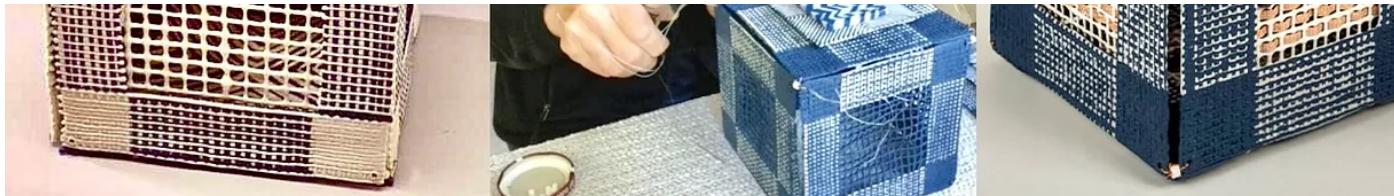




An small selection of Alexandra McCurdy's unique stitched ceramic bowl creations. Clockwise from top left: - 1. Apricot and taupe large bowl with copper stitching, porcelain, copper wire 2. Green and red footed bowl with cutouts (1994) 3. Yellow and green sea glass bowl, white stoneware, sea glass 4. Blue and red footed bowl with ladders (1996).

Alexandra's work has always emphasized delicacy, precision, and strength--qualities that parallel the undervalued labour often associated with women's work. Her practice and interest have been in creating a dialogue between form, function, and cultural memory, challenging the boundaries between craft and art, and honoring the contributions of creative women. Patterns figure in all her work, exploring themes of femininity, domesticity and cultural traditions, becoming visual metaphors for continuity, memory and transformation.





1. *Blue box, porcelain, wire and beads 2007, 13cm x 13cm x 13cm*
2. *Alexandra in her Halifax studio, threading wires to connect the porcelain panels.*
3. *Blue Box with Copper Wire and Embedded Garnets: Porcelain, copper wire, garnets explore the tension between structure and ornament, containment and expression. The vibrant blue ceramic "woven" surface offers a calm, stable foundation, while the copper wire disrupts its smoothness with lines of energy and movement. 16cm x 16cm x 16cm*

Alexandra has spent over forty years as a professional ceramic artist, winning many awards. She is an inductee of both the International Academy of Ceramics and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. Between 2011 and 2013, a touring retrospective exhibition entitled 'The Fabric Of Clay' was showcased at the Burlington Arts Centre Ontario, at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, New Brunswick and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery in Nova Scotia.

As respected cultural writer Gloria Hickey commented in 'The Fabric Of Clay' 2010 catalogue, "The feminists of 2000 or 2010 are not the same as those of 1980. Gloria Steinham, Judy Chicago and Naomi Klein would all define feminism differently. The changing feminist perspectives offer new interpretations of McCurdy's ceramics, as a fresh assessment of conceptualism and abstraction in the visual arts and aboriginal from the hyphenated world of the margins to the center stage of mainstream culture. McCurdy's creative process is not linear and discrete, but has a characteristic aesthetic and sensibility which has visual impact through surface pattern and color."





*Selection of Alexandra's "blue" series, with covered bowl and platter 1986. Alexandra creates her ceramic work at her Halifax studio, but has also set up a second studio with a kiln at her residence in Sanibel, Florida.*

To fully appreciate and understand what Alexandra creates in porcelain is to truly recognize a master at her craft. A single six-sided decorated box can require up to twenty panels to be made and fired before ensuring the finished box is completed with perfect joins. That requires not only an understanding of process, but a heightened level of patience and exemplary craftsmanship. In a world that predicts AI will eventually replace human creativity, her work stands as rebuttal to that argument. I believe that most of us would prefer knowing a work of art was created by a living artist who has devoted their life's passion and soul to adding beauty into the world.





*Platter, 25cm x 36.5cm; heart-shaped box, 11cm x 5cm; and covered jar 1986, white stonew coloured underglazes and slips, 16.5cm x 12cm*

At 81, Alexandra is as energetic and passionate about her work as she always has been. That's an exciting place to be for any artist. Those many geographical changes early in her life have been the catalyst in remaining curious, always moving forward, forging an inner resilience and strong oeuvre of work. All characteristics of a true original.

“One of my favourite things to do in Chester is to take our Cape boat out to one of the islands to gather sea glass or to simply drive down to Hirtles Beach in Kingsburg to walk at low tide. I think my love of patterns and intricate work originates from having limited control as a child and teenager, and to some degree even now as an older woman. The only time I feel truly myself is when I’m in my studio. I allow myself to be who I really am,” Alexandra comments.

This past Fall, Alexandra was invited to exhibit her work at ‘What Holds - Ceramic Boxes and the Language of Containment,’ at the Vessels and Sticks Gallery, in Toronto and from February 27 to March 1st, 2026, she will be part of the Craft Alliance, exhibition “The Power Of Objects - Voices of Contemporary Craft” which showcases selected artists work from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland & Labrador, at the U.K’s premier COLLECT Art Fair at Somerset House, in London, England.



*Alexandra rings the Rhoscolyn lifeboat bell which now hangs proudly on the back porch of*

*'Cove Point' in Chester, a house originally built by the Colfelt family of Philadelphia in 192*

So if you're in London during those dates, please take time to view Alexandra's work which can be seen alongside many of the world's most creative and exciting artisans.

Hope you enjoy the read, Sarah and I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and Happy and Peaceful New Year. We will return in 2026!

Mark

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Jennie McGuire 17 Dec Edited

Liked by The Choice For Beauty

A thoughtful and inspired essay of a very talented woman. Alexandra's ceramics speak to her all the while moving forward. As an artist this resonates deeply with me.

Kudos to Alexandra for her amazing work and thank you to Mark for sharing her story.

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