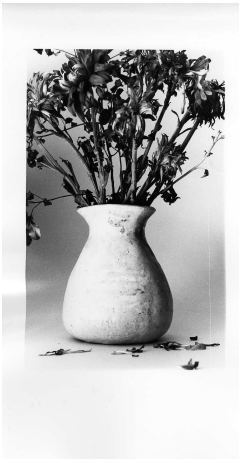
Craft & Design Profile - Margaret Gardiner
Written by Liz Tagert, 2013



It's always interesting to learn how the journey of an artist begins – some seem to know from childhood what they want to do and others come to their art by the most seemingly serendipitous events. It was such serendipity that led to Margaret Gardiner becoming a potter. She tells me that "it was one of those epiphany moments when I was sharing a huge flat in London when I was about twenty. One of the people was doing a ceramics course and he used to leave all his rejects outside his door and when I saw them, I lusted after them. It was only then I realised that people could actually make pots – it just hadn't occurred to me."



Looking at her work, it's hard to believe that she hadn't always wanted to become a potter. However, once she realised that it was possible, she quickly found a path. Beginning with evening classes in Camden where she was taught and mentored by Carol de Jong, she progressed to the very same course her former flatmate had been pursuing. It was the now legendary Harrow ceramics course where the tutors read like a who's who of the ceramics world – Wally Keeler, Mo Jupp, Colin Pearson, Mike Dodd, Mick Casson et al. "It was just heaven. We were there from 8.00 in the morning to 8.00 at night and fully engaged." From there she applied to the Dartington Pottery Training Workshop and was accepted as one of four founder trainees, her motivation being to work with Peter Starkey, a leader in salt-firing. "It was hellish… a shock after living in London. I only did four sizes of jugs for six months. I hated it but it was the best training I could have had – repetition throwing and throwing to someone else's designs. In the evenings and weekends we could make our own work and fire it in the salt kiln. It was an extremely valuable experience."





After leaving Dartington, she converted the attic of her London home into a workshop and shared a salt kiln with Joanna Stills in Wiltshire, producing work that was sold to Liberty's, Macy's in New York and many other galleries. It soon became apparent that she needed her own salt kiln and this is where the story takes an unusual turn. She says, "to set up a kiln I needed money." As her other great passion is music, she was able to draw on her contacts in the music world. "I went to work for Pink Floyd at Britannia Row for three years." Whilst organising their studio and the many artists who passed through it (including the likes of Bob Dylan, Monty Python and Donovan), there was apparently also a good deal of time spent pouring over maps searching for the ideal place to establish a kiln. In 1982, Margaret, her partner Peter Lemer and three other couples bought a thirty three room old rectory within three miles of Stansted airport, which provided living accommodation and basement space for two music studios, a photography studio, and her pottery workshop.

"I began making paper-resist, decorated, cut-sided, white stoneware. I knew I couldn't draw but I loved patterns. I did combing and slip-trailing and facetting which Mike Dodd taught me. I also used some porcelain. Whilst at Harrow, Wally Keeler taught me how to fume with various substances. I experimented with copper and manganese but I especially liked the effect produced by stannous chloride and thought that one day, when the pots are right, I'll come back to that."



That time turned out to be further away than Margaret might have guessed at that point. As happens with so many women, life took over and during a ten year gap she produced two children and cared for ailing parents. In between she taught pottery in schools and adult education.



After this lengthy hiatus, she had what she called 'her middle-aged kiln' built, one that she could experiment with without having to fill a large kiln. "That way I could learn more quickly." In fact she spent two years making mugs. "I was looking for the perfect mug for me. I was concerned with the shape, feel and decoration. It had to be lovely to put to your mouth, it had to be light. I like tall,

elegant shapes. I started working in porcelain, and spraying on slips. The different colours and patterns were reminiscent of something else I'd always loved – sea urchin shells and abalones – the little dots and the iridescence. I started to guiltily accept that not everything had to be functional." So having mainly produced what she calls 'useful', Margaret progressed to the beautiful. That beauty lies not only in the fineness of the porcelain and the elegance of the shapes, but in the ethereal beauty of the colours and iridescence produced by her mastery of the fuming techniques. What Margaret calls "the magic".







Since then she has worked intensely to produce that magic. She did her first show in 2002 at Potfest in the Park where she had a banner saying "Serious Ceramics". What she meant by this was she says, "working 24/7." That was how she felt about the urgency of the work. Whilst that sounds intense, Margaret clearly loves what she does. "I enjoy the peace and pleasure of making. Each pot is a challenge and when I'm making it, everything else disappears. I'm totally in that moment."

When asked where her current focus lies Margaret says she aspires to validate her work by selling it and reaching a wider audience. She also says that she welcomes having apprentices work with her. "I've had a series of wonderful young (and not so young!) potters working with me for the last three years to especially learn about salt and porcelain. I want to teach people what I know and what they want to know." If they are experienced throwers, this allows her more time to decorate, although each part of the process is important to produce the finished piece: the form, the decoration, the cutting into the clay, the patterning, the spraying, slip trailing and finally the position in the kiln.



What advice does she offer to up-and-coming potters? “If you want to throw, learn to throw properly. Do repetition throwing. Create your own opportunities as well as your work - make it happen! And find your hunger… if you’re not hungry for the work forget it, it’s no easy life.”

Margaret’s own hunger shows no signs of abating.

