

## For Use and Ornament: The Salt glaze Studio Ceramics of Jane Hamlyn

It was my sister Barbara who first introduced me to the work of Jane Hamlyn. We were at the 'Earth & Fire' Fire at Rufford Park, in Nottingham (which is an annual contemporary ceramics fair) when Barbara spied a poster advertising Jane Hamlyn's Annual Open Studio Week. It was Sunday afternoon and this was the last day of the 'Open Week' and not wanting to miss this opportunity we set off in search.



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Jane Hamlyn and her husband Ted live on the outskirts of a village in North Nottinghamshire. This rural retreat provides plenty of space for Jane's two kilns (an old one that is on its way out and a new one which is just being getting used to) as well as Ted's painting studio. A couple of the work rooms are converted into display and sales areas and Jane's main work room is tidied up and decorated with chairs and a table full of delicious home-baked goodies to eat (Macaroons, Cheese Straws etc), a big pot of tea, a bottle of wine in a chiller bucket and to further complete the scene the table is resplendent with a display of flowers from the garden. Jane, Ted and their friend Sally are all there to greet the visitors, who are free to look at the exhibitions of Jane and Ted's work, browse the 'shop' area of Jane's domestic wares, or sit and have a cup of tea and a chat with Jane and Ted about their work or indeed anything in general. The atmosphere of the place (like their work) is wonderful.

Jane Hamlyn specialises in ceramics decorated by a very beautiful but highly technical process called salt glaze. This is a fascinating process, which requires years of practice in order to become skilled yet alone a master at it. Clay is a mainly a mixture of alumina and silica and when salt (sodium Chloride) is thrown into a hot kiln, it turns to a sodium vapour and melts the particles of silica that are on the surface of the pot. This silica (which makes glass) forms a glaze which covers the surface of the pot. This may initially sound like a relatively simple process, however there are numerous variables for the potter to consider. The ratio of alumina to silica within the body of the clay can make a significant impact, with more alumina producing a more matt surface often with golden or reddish brown hues, while more silica will give more shine. The addition of sand to the clay can cause a greater 'reticulated' (bumpy like orange-peel) surface, where the larger particles of silica do not completely melt. However, the really tricky element of the process is how much salt to actually throw into the kiln. Too little and the pots will come out dull and matt in appearance. Too much and not only might the colours be bleached out but there is a real danger that the pot will 'melt' and stick to the shelves of the kiln!

Jane loves the beauty of the effects created by salt glaze, the 'seductive, elemental, luscious, dripping, melting qualities of salt and the rich colours' and feels that as a process it is a 'special kind of dialogue between kiln and materials' (Cochrane, 2001, p.60). The use of salt glaze as a process means that even though these pots are mainly functional or 'domestic' ware, they are still one-offs.



Jane's work can be found in many important ceramic collections from The Crafts Council and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London to Nottingham Castle Museum and Hanley Museum in Stoke-on-Trent, as well as in European collections such as the Keramion Museum (Germany), Westerwald Museum (Germany) and the Princessehof Museum (Netherlands). The interesting point to make here is that Jane's work has been predominantly 'domestic' or tableware ceramics rather than some grandiose, large scale works of sculpture that while beautiful are completely un-useable. For Jane, like many other makers of domestic ware, it is vital that the pots are actually used or to quote potter and author Josie Walter 'put to work' (Walter, 2002, p.107). This is a point that is not easily taken into account when they are displayed within a museum context and probably reflects the 'ornament' rather than the 'use' element of Jane's work. So how is Jane's work actually used? In her book 'Pots in the Kitchen' Josie Walters notes a change in attitude towards domestic ware and its makers, with the most renowned being seen as artists as well as craftsmen. A fact that she states 'must push prices up'. The result of this being that many potters make 'pots with a more celebratory function such as serving dishes' rather than casseroles and bakers that they may have previously created. The greater expense of the items (placing them above the ordinary) making many customers 'unwilling to use them in quite the same way' (2002, p.48).

However, there is another school of thought that maintains it is less to do with the actual cost of the items as to the change in people's everyday habits. Are serving dishes that go on the table more desirable than casseroles that go in the oven because less and less people actually make their food from scratch? Is the growing consumption of read-prepared meals (and I am thinking more of M&S rather than 'Vesta chow mein'!) the reason behind this change of emphasis? My sister Barbara lovingly uses all her Jane Hamlyn items, for example she often, eats her dinner off a Hamlyn plate, drinks her tea out of a Hamlyn mug as she insists that this is what they were made for and that it is an intrinsic part of the enjoyment of ownership of such items.



While I do indeed ‘use’ my ceramics made by Jane Hamlyn, it is often more for purposes of adornment than function. I do have a large beautiful shallow bowl into which I place my fruit, however, I always feel guilty about it and feel that it is a shame that the Braeburns, Oranges and Lemons are hiding both the attractive form and the gradations of colour and texture. For me the items are best enjoyed visually even though I know that they will work perfectly. I am completely with the author Paul Greenhalgh who when discussing a salt glaze jug that he owns by the potter Michael Carson stated that ‘It could actually work as a jug, but it doesn’t want to; it is a swan, not a duck, a protected species fabricated to be observed, not used’ (Greenhalgh, 2002, p.18).

Whatever the owner eventually does with their purchases, the one point of agreement is that they are bound to be cherished, not only for the intrinsic beauty of the item itself but because the maker herself is valued.



Recommended reading:

Rosemary Cochrane, *Salt-Glaze Ceramics* (The Crowood Press, 2001).

Josie Walter, *Pots in the Kitchen* (The Crowood Press, 2002).

Josie Walter, *Brampton Pots in the Kitchen* (The University of Derby, 1999).

Paul Greenhalgh, *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* (A&C Black, 2002).

Jane Hamlyn, ‘Empty Vessels’, *Ceramic Review* 204, Nov/Dec 2003.

[www.saltglaze.fsnet.co.uk](http://www.saltglaze.fsnet.co.uk)

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