

# Mary Fox

Ladysmith, British Columbia, Canada



## Just the Facts

### Clays

Seattle Pottery Supply's Raku Clay, Msculpt by Plainsman Clays, Laguna Industrial Raku, Laguna B-mix 10 stoneware, and Darcy's with Mica low-fire clay from Clay Art Center in Tacoma, Washington

### Primary forming method

wheel throwing and altering, coil building, and carving solid forms

### Primary firing temperature

lithium glazes: cone 08–06; crawl glazes: cone 05–06; *Peasant Ware*: cone 04; stoneware: cone 6

### Favorite surface treatment

my lithium glaze: 95% lithium carbonate and 5% copper carbonate (see amphora on page 37)

### Favorite tools

metal ribs and the silicone ribs made by Mud Tools to remove throwing lines; and my adjustable throwing chair made by Creative Industries

## Studio

I live in Ladysmith, British Columbia, Canada, a small town on Vancouver Island. Since moving here in 1991, I had my studio in what used to be a garage, right beside the house. In 2008, I started on one of the biggest undertakings I've ever embarked on—lifting and rebuilding my house to accommodate a larger gallery and studio space on the ground floor. Though I was scared at times by the size and cost of the project, I am so glad that I persevered and didn't chicken out. I've been a potter since a young age, and have had many dreadful studios. For the first time, I was able to design a studio exactly to my specifications.

No longer do I have to run for the phone or get up to turn the music down when someone comes in; the phone and the stereo are now right beside my wheel. I have a separate area for sculpting and two sculpture stands that I use at different heights. I used to spend a lot of time each day just clearing a space to work, but now I have a lot of room and can be working on a few things at once. I really love not having any of the glaze stuff in my main work space; it's all in the old studio with the kilns.

I now think of my old studio as my glazing, equipment, and storage room because it is crammed full of the stuff I don't need all the time, like the slab roller, packing supplies, clay, etc. I have three electric kilns, the biggest one (17 cubic feet) is for the stoneware and large sculptures, I use a 10-cubic-foot kiln for bisque firing, crawl and lithium firings, and use the smallest kiln, which I refer to as my trash kiln (it's the one I used to learn about crawl glazes in—they spit all over and took out chunks) for firing the smaller lithium work as it's hard on the kiln, and for doing raku firings. When I do raku, I take the top ring off, have someone lift the lid, I grab the pot, and whisk it out side to a nest of straw that I then put a can over.



STUDIO AND GALLERY PHOTOS: TEDDY MCCREA

On the other hand, the room where I create work is tidy, well organized and inspiring. I have two of my favorite paintings by Jamie Evrard in front of my wheel. I can see out the double doors of the studio to the courtyard garden and often stand and gaze at the garden when I am taking a break. I create beautiful vessels to inspire people and I have created an inspiring room for me that I absolutely love to work in. Now I am truly living the dream, doing what I love daily, with an inspiring studio and a gallery to show off my work.

My studio is on a quiet residential street; people who come have usually searched me out or have seen the sandwich board by my artist sign on the highway. Visitors and collectors walk into a beautiful 400-square-foot gallery where my sculptures, vessels, and functional wares are displayed to their best advantage. For me this is ideal as it gives my customers a space where they can take their time looking at the work without feeling that they are disturbing me.

My work space is a separate area in the back, but customers are welcome to come in and explore there, too. Many love to see the work in progress, and I thoroughly enjoy their questions and interest in how pieces are created. I don't have customers every day and when I do, I stop working if I'm throwing and spend time with them. If they're here for a while, I have lots of other jobs that I can do, like loading

the kiln, brushing slip on pots, etc. I don't like to throw when people are here, if at all possible. I think of the throwing time as my time and am in my own world then.

## Paying Dues (and Bills)

I have been making pots full time since I was a teenager and have never regretted deciding to become a studio potter. I am self-taught, learning from books and from all of my mistakes over the years. I used to get upset about all my seconds and garbage-can candidates but realized early on that getting down on myself about the heavy loads going out to the garbage wasn't getting me anywhere, so I reframed it and started to refer to those mistakes as my art school training. As soon as I changed my way of thinking, I started to feel okay about mistakes and eventually came to realize how much I have learned from them.

I have never done anything else for a living and have never wanted to. I have always treated my obsession as a job, which is in part, why I have been successful. My gallery has set open hours and if I am away, I hire someone to open the gallery. I try to work set hours—but I am a creative junkie and it is hard to stop sometimes!

I also try to keep on top of things and not let them pile up. No one really loves the paperwork part of our job and it's easy to let the





PHOTO: MARY FOX

unanswered emails add up, so I have a rule of tackling them as soon as they come in, or if I am swamped, writing back and letting the person know that I will get back to them in a few days. I also don't hesitate to farm out work that I am not as good at, like designing ads or brochures, getting help with writing and, until recently, photography.

In the last few years, I have added workshops to my repertoire of activities, and I am really enjoying this. It's a change of pace and offers a new way to interact with people who are interested in ceramics. Some key areas I focus on are the creative process, developing a personal style, and paying attention to good body mechanics and safety.

Because my work is fairly high-end, I'm often the go-to person when people are looking for a quality gift for a special occasion, or even just giving themselves a special treat or reward. The majority of my work is sold here at my own gallery but I also exhibit regularly and have select galleries that represent me.

I also work with interior designers who are shopping for unique work for their clients' homes. As I do such a wide range of work, I can usually find the perfect series of pieces for someone's home or office. At times, I am asked to do a site visit and create something for a particular space. I like that challenge, and as long as time isn't a big factor, I can usually make the customer happy.

## Body

Being a full-time potter can be hard on the body. This is something I realized early on and I have always kept on top of that. I go for physiotherapy and massage as needed, and that has kept the injuries at bay—or at least made it possible to work through injuries and learn how to avoid re-injuring myself. When I give workshops, I spend time talking to participants about good body mechanics and how to avoid injuries. People always want to watch me throw, and while I am happy to do that, I tell them I can help more by watching them throw. As I

have been doing this since I was 13, I can spot the problem areas very quickly and help people find a better approach.

## Mind

When I first started out, my main source of inspiration was the Classical time period, especially the Classic vase form. Simple forms with the least interruption to the eye were my favorites. I would draw inspiration from going to local potters' studios and poring over art books at the library. And when *Ceramics Monthly* magazine arrived in the mail, I would head straight to the bathtub (my favorite reading station) and not reappear until I had read it from cover to cover. After I had been a potter for about 20 years, I realized I had a style that was uniquely my own and was no longer looking outside myself for inspiration.

These days the act of creating inspires me, and the problem now is finding the time to make all the work that I am constantly visualizing in my head. I learn the most from studying my own work, and I have kept some of my best pieces for many years. This has been invaluable to my growth as an artist. Recently I was asked if I would sell some of the pieces from my personal collection. In the past when I was asked this I always said no. As this buyer has a very impressive collection that will one day end up in museums, I decided to document the work so I could continue to reference it, and to part with some pieces. As I was photographing the pieces, I found myself looking at them in a different way, seeing the qualities in each piece that made them special. Before giving pieces to the collector, I took some of this work into the studio and produced a whole new body of work inspired by pieces I had made almost two decades ago. If I had not kept the work all these years, I would not have learned as much as I did.

At times I am asked why I still make functional wares, since the demand for my decorative vessels could keep me busy all year round. I enjoy and need both types of creativity. I usually work on the sculp-



tures and decorative vessels until the highs and lows of that process start to get to me, and then I know it is time to take a break. With the sculptural work, the lithium and crawl glazes I use are challenging, and opening the kiln is either like hearing the Hallelujah Chorus or experiencing Armageddon! That's when I switch over to functional wares. To me, the repetitive work is calming and restorative. There is something reassuring about glazing a load of work for the kiln and knowing that, for the most part, it will all turn out as planned.

The majority of my functional ware is cone 6 stoneware. People have four glazes to choose from, a blue with purple highlights, light green, forest green, and a brown glaze. And although I swore I would never introduce another line of functional work, I did just that a few years back and now offer *Peasant Ware*, earthenware dishes created with a lot of love for all the people out there that cook with a passion.

Sometimes late at night, just when I should be falling asleep, ideas for new work pop into my mind. This was the case with *Peasant Ware*. I had watched a cooking show in which Jamie Oliver was exploring family restaurants in Italy. I found myself thinking, "What would Jamie Oliver like to use for his cooking dishes?" Before the night was over, *Peasant Ware* had been designed. I wanted it to be, as Jamie Oliver would say, "easy peasy." There are no handles sticking out, just a thick rim that gloved hands can easily slip under. The work has a thick cream-colored glaze and is very durable. I create spouted bowls, mixing bowls, serving bowls, lidded casseroles, open bakers, and pie plates.

Though there may come a time when I need to cut back on functional ware to meet the increasing demand for my decorative work, for now, I love both too much to give up either!

## Marketing

I have an online presence in the form of a professional website and a Facebook page. I hired someone to build the website, and now I

manage the content and do my own photography for it. People can sign up on the site for my email newsletter, which comes out two or three times a year to let people know about upcoming exhibits, group shows, and my annual studio sale. I also have a section called Insights where I post updates about what I'm currently working on.

With my Facebook page, I post very regularly, often with photographs that provide glimpses into the studio and show works in progress as they develop over several days. It's more immediate, and the feedback provides useful information about what appeals to people.

## Most Valuable Lesson

Being true to myself is the most valuable lesson I have learned. Many years ago when I was just starting with the one-off works, a gallery called to order more pieces. They had sold a pair of raku vases with a gold glaze and wanted a dozen more. I remember the moment like it was yesterday, my stomach dropped as they were excitedly telling me how they felt they could sell a lot of these pieces for me. I realized that agreeing to their request meant this is what I would be making for a while and I asked myself how that was that different from production work, which did not interest me. So, much to their surprise, I turned them down and am I ever glad I did. If I had gone down that road I wouldn't be creating the wide variety of work that I make today.

[www.maryfoxpottery.ca](http://www.maryfoxpottery.ca)

[www.facebook.com/MaryFoxPottery](https://www.facebook.com/MaryFoxPottery)

## Process and Recipes

Mary Fox shares some process images, along with her research into crawl glazes, and we share Robin Hopper's recipe for a crawl glaze online at [www.ceramicsmonthly.org](http://www.ceramicsmonthly.org).