

Islands noted for plethora of fine pottery

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Southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands are a magnet for creative people. Since the Second World War, they have come here, leaving behind Germany, which was being partitioned, England and its rationing, the U.S. and the Vietnam war, and suburbia. They were going to go back to the land.

In my childhood, "china" was usually Royal Doulton and Wedgwood. Arriving on this coast in 1974, I discovered the rustic nature of handmade earthenware and stoneware. In 1976, Doris Shadbolt presented a show of Wayne Ngan's work at the old Vancouver Art Gallery. It was a revelation. She drew on the assistance of Diane Carr, and became Carr's mentor and adviser when Carr opened Vancouver's Cartwright Gallery. Carr is the curator of the current exhibit at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

Inspired by the Ngan show, in late 1976, I hitchhiked up the Island, then walked across Hornby to visit Ngan at his Downes Point home. It was a snowy afternoon late in December, dark and silent. There was no electricity at his home of adobe and beach logs. By the fireplace were gathered great jars of rice and beans. This was like stepping into prehistory. Ngan led me to a dark shed where I picked out a tea bowl from the shelves of pottery and carried it home in my hands.

In the time this show covers (1970 to 1985) potters were springing up. Heinz Laffin joined Ngan on Hornby. Denman drew Gordon Hutchens. Larry Aguilar moved to Qualicum. Ian Steele for some time lived at Nanoose Bay. John Charnetski taught at Nanaimo. Mary Fox set up a pottery at Ladysmith, and Saltspring boasted Pat Webber, Gary Charnetski, Lari Robinson and Meg Buckley.

The recent exhibition and book *Thrown* (UBC Press, 2011), which documents the relationship between Vancouver potters and the Anglo-Japanese esthetic of Bernard Leach, inspired Carr to set down the story of ceramics on these islands. She noted a "huge bulge that happened in ceramic production."

It was something new. The First Nations here have no pottery tradition, and Emily Carr's efforts were rather poor. Yet our potters are, in my opinion, the best in Canada. The Bronfman Award for Excellence in Craft has been awarded to three local potters - Robin Hopper, Walter Dexter and Ngan. Once, I asked Dexter if that was because the clay here was superior. He told me that "we bring it all in - from Alberta."

The place is the magnet. Through cultural proximity to Asia and Britain, we mix British folk pottery and the Arts and Crafts revival with inspiration from the Japanese mingei folk art movement. Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada trained many potters at St. Ives in England, and inspired countless others through Leach's volume, *A Potter's Book* (1940). (The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria is home to a collection of Japanese folk ware, donated by Isabel Pollard.)

Another influence is the Bauhaus tradition. A brilliant school, a mixture of industrial production and modern esthetics, it broke up during the Nazi period, sending theories and skills to North America. Many creative people brought the influence to the coast, among them Leonard Osborne from England, Jan and Helga Grove

from Germany and Byron Johnstad, of Norwegian background, who studied design in Bauhaus-influenced Chicago and California.

An American influence of the time that resulted in Abstract Expressionist painting also drove potters to push the limits of the medium, creating painterly colours and forms beyond utility. Walter Dexter and Robin Hopper carry an artistic sense beyond the oatmeal-coloured mugs and casseroles that many identify with island pottery.

The book that accompanies this show is a basic text, with biographical information on 30 "first-generation" potters and a fine selection of photos, all in colour. The essays are a social history of the "movement" and captions for the exhibited work detail the materials of clay body and glazes.

Many of the potters are familiar, but surprises await. My discovery was the late Lari Robinson, a student of Ngan in the early days. He moved to Salt-spring Island about 1974, and his stall was a mainstay of the market on Saltspring for years. Carr described his temmoku-glazed teapot as "absolutely superb." Thousands of his pieces are treasured in homes on these islands. Robinson died three months ago, but it's never too late to discover a fine potter.

Back to the Land: Ceramics from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands 1970-1985, curated by Diane Carr, at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (1040 Moss St., 250-384-4171, aggv.bc.ca), until Feb. 3.

- See more at: <http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/islands-noted-for-plethora-of-fine-pottery-1.1842#sthash.qpl7o5LA.dpuf>