



C E R A M I C  
S E R I E S •

**Michael and Sheila Casson**

**Aberystwyth Arts Centre**



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# Michael and Sheila Casson

To talk to Michael and Sheila Casson about their life together is to become aware of a particularly close and fruitful creative partnership. It is true that one of them, Mick, has been more ‘public’ and vocal than the other, but he firmly doubts that this would have happened had it not been for the support of his wife - who has been in any case, as committed and persuasive a potter in her own right. Committees, teaching and their family aside, both craftsmen have actually been making pots for some fifty years and demonstrated rather eloquently the validity of pottery as a **way of life**, both in the city where they began their marriage, and in the country - deepest Herefordshire - where they are now based.

They met at Hornsey College of Art. Mick, an aspiring painter, had already attended Saturday drawing classes at the college before the war, but the conflict disrupted his creative endeavour, and it was only in 1948 (via some making of slab pots at evening class and a spell of teaching) that he decided to study art full-time at Hornsey.

Meanwhile Sheila Wilmot had enrolled in 1946 - at the age of sixteen and straight from school. She had vague notions of becoming an architect, but Hornsey provided the chance to experiment and explore. Both discovered the possibilities of clay, and Mick recalls the excitement of seeing the exhibition of Picasso’s ceramics at the Hanover Gallery in 1950. It was his affinity with a more sculptural aesthetic that had lured him to some of the taproots of European and Mediterranean pottery. He looked at Greek Attic vases, Cycladic and Minoan work at a time when potters like William Newland, Nicholas Vergette and James Tower were also drawing most from the ceramic history of the warm South, as well as keeping their eye on developments in Paris.

Both potters found Hornsey woefully inadequate as a place to learn technical skills, but there was a camaraderie among students which helped to give a sense of purpose (Eileen Nisbet and Victor Margrie were among the contemporaries who became close friends) and as Sheila said “a good feeling” about pottery as their chosen vocation. Technical know-how and practicality, largely through a process of trial

and error, had to come later, as Mick soon discovered when he set up his first pottery in Georgian Bloomsbury in 1952 - in the tiny basement of a house in Marchmont Street. Subsidised by the Ironmonger’s shop he and his brother ran at this time, he began to produce individual tinware inspired by the Mediterranean, Picasso and the avant garde. Sheila meanwhile had gone to teach for a spell at a school in Somerset.

Eventually she joined him in the workshop and they were married in 1955. Supported by teaching in the evenings (and for Mick a day at Harrow School of Art beginning in 1952) they worked on a run of pots that were sold at stores like Heal’s, Liberty’s and Harrods, and by 1960 at the newly established Craftsman Potters Association off Carnaby Street. While Mick made more individual work, Sheila concentrated on tin glazed functional ware, always having had a preference for “making pots you can use”.

If conditions were cramped, these were still heady cosmopolitan days for two young potters working in the centre of the capital with an established urban market. However, the wish to start a family made city life impossible, and a year after their first child was born they moved to Prestwood in Buckinghamshire.

It was a time to reassess their roles as potters, and the greater space at Prestwood meant they could develop a solid standard range - influenced as they were at this time by Bernard Leach’s more utilitarian outlook and the philosophy of “A Potters Book”, which was now making more sense. Despite Sheila’s increasing family commitments, she was able to help in the production of Leachian tea and coffee sets, casseroles and jugs in temmoku, dolomite and ash glazes with brush and resist decoration. Mick continued to produce more one-off pieces as well - both Oriental and European in inspiration. Pots were marketed locally and at the C.P.A, an organisation Mick was instrumental in founding, and which Sheila joined in 1958. There was also the “learning experience of Harrow”, of Mick helping (with Victor Margrie) to establish and then teach on the Harrow Studio pottery course, and bringing this knowledge home. The understanding of clay was truly becoming a life-long process.

By the early seventies, in a climate when galleries were beginning to demand more individual work, Sheila began to make some one-off pieces in porcelain with celadon glazes and attachments, and Mick began to concentrate on the big jugs and storage jars for which he is now famous.

Increasingly absorbed by the processes of ceramics, they soon wanted to escape the increased urbanization of Prestwood and move to a place with room to experiment and build kilns. In 1977 they moved to Wobage Farm, a derelict Elizabethan farmhouse on a hill above the village of Upton Bishop in Herefordshire. It is the sort of property most potters would envy - commanding magnificent views towards May Hill and the Welsh borderland, here were plentiful outbuildings ripe for conversion into workshops and showroom, projects in which they were ably assisted by potter and son-in-law Andrew McGarva. Andrew, who was to spend several years at Wobage, proposed the idea of woodfiring saltglaze - and this became, via a circuitous route of other kilns, their ultimate goal. Now Mick was (more or less) a full-time potter with fewer outside commitments and Sheila could concentrate more on her own work. She began to make porcelain with incised and resist decoration, drawing on the patterns of the Herefordshire landscape, while Mick produced Greek-influenced bowls, jugs and vases, some with inlaid decoration on dry glazes. His jugs have become known for their sturdy handles, thick lips and strident sponged or incised surfaces, and such scale transferred well to the salt kiln which has produced wonderfully variegated colours and textures.

Sheila has since gone on to make smaller-scale pieces in saltglaze. These have included articulated jugs with long Cretan spouts, cut and altered, the clay wrapped around the pouring section like a soft metal. More recently she has developed a range of simple footed bowls with varied attachments - a new found purity that seems a far cry from the more decorative concerns of the eighties. Likewise Mick's work, while still monumental in scale, has grown more abstracted and austere, as if, as he gets older, he is getting increasingly to grips with those essential (but elusive) components of ceramic form.

Wobage Farm appears to be the realisation of a dream for the Cassons; a practical and lively crafts community, but without all that pre-war Utopian dogma. There are seven other makers working here now - four potters, two woodworkers (including their youngest son, Ben) and one jeweller. There are still projects in hand; repair of the building was only completed in 1996, the Cassons want to build another big kiln, and there is further investigation to be done with salt and soda. There are fresh developments in the work too - Sheila has been making small handbuilt pots inspired by pre-historic vessels in the British Museum which have a particular hands-on directness and warmth. Mick meanwhile has been making some simpler

cylinder jugs based on Puisaye forms he admires. There are bigger stoneware teapots as well, echoing the more familiar forms he has made in porcelain.

Michael and Sheila Casson are passionately attached to the notion that the materials and processes of clay should be central to our understanding and appreciation of pottery. As Mick said "It shouldn't be dominated by ideas - otherwise it will just be a quest for novelty". The last words come from Sheila; "We are losing our ability to **make** things, and an understanding of our materials. I loathe the current concept of "design" when there is no accompanying knowledge of those materials. Human beings are **makers** by instinct". Mick and Sheila have spent their creative marriage trying to uphold this simple belief.

### David Whiting



Teapot, Salt Glaze ▲ 8½ inches **Sheila Casson**

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C Y F R E S O

G E R A M E G

**Michael a Sheila Casson**

**Canolfan y Celfyddydau Aberystwyth**



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# Michael a Sheila Casson

Wrth siarad â Michael a Sheila Casson am eu bywyd gyda'i gilydd, daw rhywun yn ymwybodol o bartneriaeth greadigol arbennig o agos a ffrwythlon. Mae'n wir i Michael Casson fod yn fwy "cyhoeddus" a hyglyw na Sheila, ond mae o'n amau'n fawr a fyddai hyn wedi digwydd onibai am gefnogaeth ei wraig, sy'n grochenydd mor ymroddgar ac argyhoeddiadol ei hun. Heblaw am bwylgorau, dysgu a'r teulu, bu'r ddau grefftydd yma wrthi'n gwneud potiau ers rhyw hanner can mlynedd, gan amlyu mewn ffordd huawdl iawn, ddilysrwydd crochenwaith fel ffordd o fyw yn y ddinas lle y dechreuodd eu priodas, yn ogystal â'r wlad - perfeddion swydd Hertford - eu cartref erbyn hyn.

Cyfarfu'r ddau yng Ngholeg Celf Hornsey. Roedd Mick, a'i fryd ar baentio, eisoes wedi mynychu dosbarthiadau llumiadu ddydd Sadwrn yn y coleg cyn y rhfel, ond torrwyd ar draws ei uchelgais creadigol gan yr ymladd, a dim ond ym 1948 (ar ôl gwneud rhyw ychydig o botiau slab mewn dosbarthiadau nos a chyfnod o ddysgu) y penderfynodd astudio celf llawn-amser yn Hornsey. Yn y cyfamser, roedd Sheila Wilmot wedi ymgofrestru yn y coleg ym 1946, yn un ar bymtheg oedd, yn syth o'r ysgol. Roedd ganddi ryw syniadau niwlog ynglŷn â mynd yn bensaer, ond yn Hornsey, cafodd y cyfle i arbrofi ac i anturio. Dyma'r ddau'n darganfod posibiliadau clai ac mae Mick yn cofio'r cyffro wrth weld yr arddangosfa o gerameg Picasso yn Oriel Hanover ym 1950. Ei berthynas agos ag estheteg fwy cerluniadol a'i ddenodd at rai o ffynonellau crochenwaith Ewropeaidd a gwledydd y Canoldir. Roedd wedi edrych ar ffiolau Atig Gwlad Groeg, gwaith Cycladaidd a Minoaidd, ac ar adeg pan oedd crochenyddion megis William Newland, Nicholas Vergette a James Tower hefyd wrthi'n tynnu o hanes cerameg gwledydd cynnes y de yn ogystal â chadw llygad barcud ar ddatblygiadau ym Mharis.

Cafodd y ddau crochenydd fod Hornsey yn ganolfan ddiffygol ar y naw o ran dysgu sgiliau technegol, ond roedd yna gyfeillgarwch ymhlið y myfyrwyr a oedd yn helpu i gynnig pwrrpas (Roedd Eileen Nisbet a Victor Margrie ymhlið y cyfoedion a ddaeth yn ffrindiau agos) yn ogystal, meddai Sheila, â meithrin "teimlad braf" tuag at crochenwaith fel yr alwedigaeth o'u dewis. Deuai gwybodaeth dechnegol ac ymarferoldeb yn nes ymlaen, yn sgil proses o arbrawf a hap, fel y darganfu Mick pan sefydlodd ei grochenydd cyntaf yn y

Bloomsbury Siorsiaidd ym 1952 - mewn llety llawr gwaelod bychan bach mewn ty yn Stryd Marchmont. Drwy gynhaliaeth y siop gwerthu pethau haearn a gedwid ganddo a'i frawd yr adeg honno, dechreuodd gynhyrchu gwaith tun unigol wedi'i ysbrydoli gan wledydd y Canoldir, Picasso a'r avant garde. Roedd Sheila, yn y cyfamser, wedi mynd ati i ddysgu am gyfnod mewn ysgol yng Ngwlad yr Haf.

Yn y diwedd, daeth hi ato yn y gweithdy ac fe'u priodwyd ym 1955. Drwy gynhaliaeth gwaith dysgu gyda'r nos (ac i Mick ddiwrnod yn Ysgol Gelf Harrow a ddechreuodd ym 1952), buont yn gweithio ar gyfres o botiau a werthwyd mewn siopau megis Heals, Liberty's a Harrods, ac erbyn 1960 yn y Gymdeithas Crefftwr Crochenyddion newydd yn Stryd Carnaby. Tra bu Mick wrthi'n gwneud gwaith mwy unigoliaethus, bu Sheila'n canolbwytio ar wneud llestri swyddogaethol wedi'u gwydro. Roedd yn well ganddi bob amser gwneud potiau "y gellwch chi'u defnyddio nhw" Os mai cyfng oedd yr amgylchiadau, diwrnodau cosmopolitan, cyffrous oedd y rhain o hyd i ddau crochenydd ifanc yn gweithio yng nghanol prifddinas Lloegr a chanddynt farchnad ddinesig sefydledig. Fodd bynnag, golygai'r ysfa i ddechrau teulu ei bod yn amhosibl dal ati fel hyn, a blwyddyn ar ôl genedigaeth eu plentyn cyntaf, dyma nhw'n symud i Prestwood yn Swydd Buckingham.

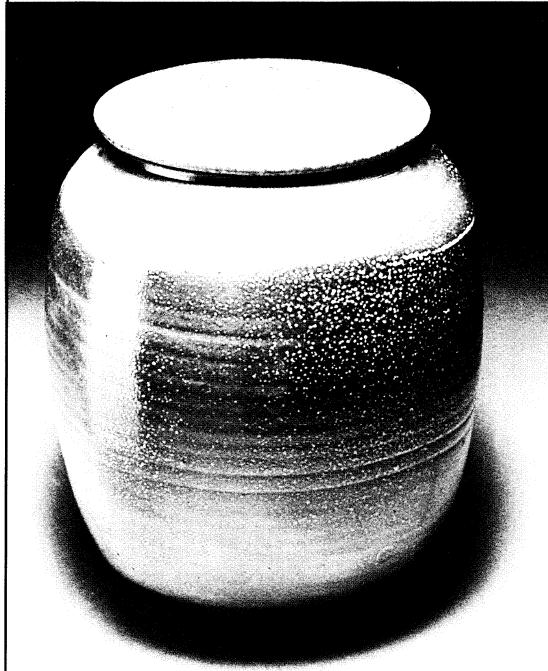
Roedd hi'n adeg iddynt gael ailasesu eu gwaith fel crochenyddion, a golygai'r gofod ehangach yn Prestwood y gallent ddatblygu amrediad safonol, solet - o dan ddylanwad, yr adeg honno, agwedd fwy iwtilitaraidd Bernard Leach ac athroniaeth A Potter's Book a oedd erbyn hyn yn gwneud mwy o synnwyr. Er gwaethaf pwysau cynyddol y teulu ar Sheila, gallodd helpu wrth gynhyrchu setiau te a choffi yn null Leach, caseroliau a siwgiau, gwydreddau dolomit a lludw gydag addurniadau brwsh a gwrthsafol. Daliai Mick i gynhyrchu darnau mwy unigryw hefyd - wedi'i ysbrydoli gan y Dwyrain yn ogystal ag Ewrop. Byddai'r potiau'n cael eu marchnata'n lleol a chyda'r C.P.A., cymdeithas y bu Mick yn un o'i sefydlwyr. Ymunodd Sheila â'r C.P.A. ym 1958. Bu "profiad dysgu Harrow", lle y bu Mick, ynghyd â Victor Margrie, yn helpu i sefydlu cwrs crochenwaith Siwtio Harrow a'i ddysgu, gan ddod â'r wybodaeth yma adref. Roedd deall y clai'n dod yn broses einioes.

Yn ystod y saithdegau cynnar, mewn hinsawdd lle'r oedd orielau'n dechrau gofyn am fwy o waith unigol, dechreuodd Sheila wneud rhyw ddarnau porslen gyda gwydreddau ac atodiadau celadon, tra bu Mick yn canolbwytio ar y siwgiau a jariau cadw mawr sydd mor enwog erbyn hyn. Wrth iddynt ymgolli'n fwyfwy yn y prosesau cerameg, yn fuan, roeddent am ddianc rhag nawr gynyddol drefol Prestwood gan symud i

rywle lle y byddai ganddynt ddigon o le i arbrofi a chodi odynnau. Ym 1977, dyma nhw'n symud i Wobage Farm, adfail o fferm o Oes Elisabeth ar fryn uwchlaw pentre Upton Bishop yn Swydd Hertford. Dyma leoliad a fyddai'n destun eiddigedd i'r rhan fwyaf o grochenyddion gyda'i olygfeydd diguro i gyfeiriad May Hill a'r ffin â Chymru. Yn y fan yma roedd yna ddigon o dai allan i'w trawsnewid yn weithdai ac ar gyfer projectau arddangos. Cawsant gymorth parod a medrus yn hyn o beth gan y crochenydd Andrew McGarva, eu mab-yinghyfraith. Andrew, a fuasai'n byw yn Wobage ers sawl blwyddyn, a gynigiodd y syniad o wydredd halen wedi'i danio â phren - a hwn, ar hyd llwybr trofaus arbrofi gyda gwahanol odynnau, a ddaeth yn brif nod iddynt. Erbyn hyn roedd Mick, fwy neu lai, yn grochenydd llawn-amser gyda llai o rwymedigaethau allanol, a gallai Sheila hithau ganolbwytio'n fwy ar ei gwaith. Dechreuodd wneud porslen gydag addurniadau endoredig a gwrtysafol, gan dynnu ar batrymau yn nhirlun swydd Hertford. Bu Mick wrthi'n cynhyrchu powlenni, siwgiau a ffiolau Groegaidd eu dylanwad, gydag addurniadau gosod mewnol ar wydreddau sych. Adwaenir ei siwgiau drwy eu dolennau cadarn, min tew ac arwynebedd sbrynglyd neu endoredig, a throsglyddwyd yr eitemau llai hyn yn llwyddiannus i'r odyn halen sydd wedi cynhyrchu lliwiau a gweadau amrywiol.

Ers hynny, mae Sheila wedi symud ymlaen at ddarnau ar raddfa lai mewn gwydredd halen. Ymhlieth y rhain, cafwyd siwgiau cymalog gyda pigynnau Cretaidd hirion, wedi'u torri a'u haltro, y clai wedi'i lapio o gwmpas y darn sy'n toltti fel metel meddal. Yn fwy diweddar, mae wedi datblygu amrediad o bowlenni troedio gysyl gyda gwahanol atodiadau - mae'r purdeb newydd yn yr rhain, yn wahanol iawn i'r addurniadau a welwyd yn yr wyltdegau. Yn yr un modd, mae gwaith Mick, er ei fod yn anferthol o hyd o ran maint, wedi dod yn fwy haniaethol a llym, fel pe bai'n mynd i'r afael yn fwy â hanfodion gwahanol gydrannau'r ffurf gerameg, wrth iddo synd yn hŷn.

Ymddengys Wobage Farm fel breuddwyd a wireddwyd i'r Cassoniaid. Dyma gymuned grefft fwyiog, ymarferol, ond heb y dogma Iwtopiaidd a geid mor aml cyn y rhyfel. Mae 'na saith o bobl eraill yn gweithio yma erbyn hyn - pedwar crochenydd, dau weithiwr coed (gan gynnwys eu mab ieuengaf, Ben) ac un gemydd. Mae 'na waith dan law o hyd. Ni chwblhawyd gwaith adfer ar yr adeiladau tan 1996, ac mae'r Cassoniaid am godi odyn fawr arall, ac mae yna fwy o waith arbrofi i'w wneud gyda halen a soda. Mae yna ddatblygiadau newydd yn digwydd hefyd. Bu Sheila wrthi'n gwneud potiau bychain â llaw wedi'u hysbrydoli gan lestri cyn-hanes a welir yn yr Amgueddfa Brydeinig. Mae rhyw naws agosatoch i'r potiau hyn.



Lidded Jar, Salt Glaze ▲ 14 inches Michael Casson

Yn y cyfamser, mae Mick wedi datgelu rhai siwgiau silindr syml wedi'u seilio ar ffurflau Puisaye sy'n gymaint testun edmygedd iddo. Ceir tebotiau crochenwaith caled hefyd, sy'n atseini o'r ffurflau mwy cyfarwydd y mae wedi'u gwneud mewn porslen. Mae Michael a Sheila Casson yn credu'n angherddol yn y syniad y dylai deunyddiau a phrosesau clai fod yn ganolog i'n dealltwriaeth a'n gwerthfawrogiad o crochenwaith. Yn ôl Mick, "Ni ddylai gael ei ddominyddu gan syniadau - neu gwest am newydd-deb yn unig fydd hi." Gan Sheila y mae'r gair olaf. "Ryden ni'n colli ein gallu i wneud pethau a'n dealltwriaeth o ddeunyddiau. Mae'n gas gen i'r syniad cyfoes o "ddylunio" pan na fydd 'na wybodaeth berthnasol ynglyn â'r deunyddiau dan sylw."

**David Whiting**

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