

*Hannah Savage, a member of York Art Gallery's Visitor Experience Team, provides us with a fascinating introduction to the life and work of the potter Ann Stokes, wife of the art critic and painter Adrian Stokes.*

### **ANN STOKES - POTTER (1922 - 2014)**



Anne Stokes, *Swan looking Glass*

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Ann Stokes once declared: 'Painting is what I pot for. It is to give myself something to put my leaves and animals on. Most potters do it for the pot itself'.

A talented, self-taught potter, Ann produced work that stands out as unique, with her themes of birds, fish, and the use of mirrors. Despite having no formal training, she gained recognition from the art establishment, and her work is now highly collectable all over the world.

York Art Gallery was very fortunate in acquiring four of Ann's pieces in 2017, after her death, with the help of her son Philip and the Art Fund. Ann's dramatic *White Wall Mounted Swan* looks down from its position above the CoCA 1 doorway, surveying the ceramics gallery.

Ann Stokes was born Ann Mellis, in 1922, in East Lothian, Scotland, the youngest of four children. Their father was a United Free Church Minister who had been a missionary in China. When she was a young girl, Ann liked to climb trees, and even slept in them - so earning the nickname 'Tarzan'! This passion never left her. She said, 'I love trees from the inside and the outside'. In 1935, when she was thirteen years old, Ann saw the film *Top Hat*, featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. She immediately wanted to become a dancer. Her sister's husband-to-be, Adrian Stokes, sent her the book *To-night the Ballet*, and, encouraged by this, she took up ballet, passed her exams, and trained at London's Royal Academy of Dance. Knee problems resulting from a pony-riding accident meant that Ann had to give up ballet in 1947, when she was twenty-five. However, the fluidity and 'miraculous movement of grace' stayed with Ann and greatly influenced her ceramics. She said: 'The spread of the arabesque and the lift, as in a "pas de deux", is much like the final swoop of the bluebird to her mate; this is what fascinates me in animals; where the line, elegance and grace exist naturally'. Dance was always to be part of Ann's life, and she continued to enjoy tap dancing, belly dancing, and salsa after she could no longer do ballet.

As a child Ann attended St. Leonard's Boarding School, where she became captain of the lacrosse team. At the age of seventeen she left school and moved to St Ives in Cornwall, where she lived with her sister Margaret and Margaret's art-critic husband, Adrian Stokes. The couple had married two years earlier, and they had a baby, named Telfer, whom Ann looked after. Ann, Margaret and Adrian mixed with a group of artists who had escaped war-torn London and were also working in St Ives, including Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, and Naum Gabo. Ann not only looked after her nephew Telfer, but also helped to look after Barbara Hepworth's triplets. Often there would be such a large gathering that Ann would have to sleep in the corridor of the house, thus allowing guests to sleep in her room.

During the Second World War Ann joined the Women's Royal Navy Service, serving as a radio operator using Morse code, and spending some time serving in France.

In 1946, at the end of the war, Margaret and Adrian Stokes divorced. A year later in 1947 he married his sister-in-law Ann, Ann being twenty-five and Adrian forty-five years old. Because British law would not allow such a marriage, they moved to Ascona in Switzerland, where the marriage of a man to a sister of a living former wife was legal. Surprisingly, Ann's parents approved of the match. They wrote to Adrian very warmly: 'We both think you and Ann suit each other to perfection in gaiety and

doings, and I know she will take good care of you, and sooth you, and keep you in perfect peace. If you aren't pleased with her, I'm afraid we haven't any more daughters. My goodness two is plenty'. Despite the unusual circumstances of their marriage, Ann and Adrian would still visit Margaret, her new husband, Francis, and son Telfer.

Adrian continued his work as an art critic, and also as a painter. Ann acted as his life model, posing nude for his paintings. In 1948 their son Philip was born, and three years later, in 1951, Ann and Adrian had a daughter, Ariadne. Sadly, she was diagnosed with autism, and was moved to a care home in her late teens.

By 1957 Philip was showing some interest in art, so Ann took him to Well Walk Pottery in Hampstead for lessons. She was immediately hooked on ceramics, declaring, 'I never got over the magic of it'.

Ann set about making her own potter's wheel, adapting a weighted car wheel as the flywheel, and she bought her first kiln five years later in 1962. Ten years later, Ann started to have sales of her ceramic work each Christmas at her home in Hampstead.

Ann's work was innovative. She wasn't tied down by accepted techniques, but was experimental, going against the conventions of the twentieth century pottery movement and working in a more sculptural way. She improvised her own tools and techniques, using mainly earthenware clay, and worked out how to produce new colours herself. She said, 'You had to keep guessing, you had to try it out!'

Ann felt that she had more in common with contemporary painters than potters. Her works were inspired by nature. Explaining why she rarely depicted the human form, commenting, 'I don't draw well enough'. John Golding, the painter, said of Ann: 'She is a purely instinctive artist. She pots as others might sing or hum to themselves, or as we all quite simply breathe'.

In 1966, at the age of 44, Ann started to learn Modern Greek. Inspired by the Ancient World and Mediterranean pottery, as well as *The Procession of the Trojan Horse into Troy* (1760) by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo at the National Gallery, she created ceramic tiles featuring Greek scenes, Greek sailing ships, fish, and horses. She went on to create a series of life-size crocodiles, which were illuminated from inside, and more than eighty mirrors decorated with birds, such as peacocks and swallows. She even made a strip cartoon of two doves for stair risers in her house. Ann also made decorative tableware, with one plate

measuring three quarters of a metre by half a metre. She purchased a new larger kiln in 1966, which enabled her to produce such large works.

York Art Gallery owns four of Ann Stokes' ceramic pieces – [\*The White Wall Mounted Swan\*](#), [\*The Trigger Fish Serving Platter\*](#), [\*the Globe Fish\*](#), and [\*the Swan Looking Glass\*](#).

They are eye-catching, bold, humorous and charming. The swan has come from the artist's own collection. It is made from several pieces of clay which were moulded into shape and joined together. Its head and throat are tubular and hollow. The wings have holes in them giving an abstract feel, whilst the neck gives a feeling of movement.



Anne Stokes, *White Wall Mounted Swan*  
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Adrian sadly died from a brain tumour in 1972. He had been hugely influential in Ann's work, sharing with her his love of art and his preference for the colours blue and green. However, after his death she found a sense of freedom and detachment and new opportunities to progress her artistic development. She was aided in this by Philip, who started promoting his mother's work.

Four years after the death of Adrian, Ann married the Orwell Scholar Ian Angus, who was Chief Librarian at King's College, London. They travelled abroad together, living part of the year in Tuscany, where she set up a studio.

In 1985, Ann showed her work at the Hayward Annual. This was the first and only time that a potter has been shown at the Hayward Gallery in London. From 1995, her work was represented and regularly shown at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London. Ann's first solo show there was held in 1998, which delighted her. She was thrilled that her opportunity had come at last, '.... even if I had to wait for my 76<sup>th</sup> birthday!'. For this exhibition, as a promotional card for her gallery, Ann chose an early photo of herself hanging upside-down in a tree. She continued exhibiting at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery until 2004.

Ann Stokes liked to tell of a meeting she had with Bernard Leach in the 1960s. He asked Ann what she did, and she replied loud and clear, as she thought him a little deaf, 'I pot, I am a potter'. There was a shocked silence, and she added, blushing, 'That is, I mean to be a potter'. She recalled that after that all went well.

Ann's enthusiasm, experimentation, and determination made her an original and innovative ceramicist. She was indeed 'a potter', who incorporated sculptural and painterly techniques to create her own unique style.

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September 2020