

# WORKING POTTER

# FINN DAM

# RASMUSSEN

I have made ceramics on a full-time basis at two different periods in my life: first, for 5 years, as a young man beginning in 1967 and then again starting in 2007. Each time, my intense need to spend as much time in my studio as possible led me to work as a professional potter; it was not so much to make a career. But of course doing what you want the most and at the same time earning a living from it is an attractive option, even though often economically difficult. Identity-building is an important decision if you are a potter. You may have to take on work outside of the studio to survive, or take on a full-time job, and make pottery when possible. So to me, claiming to be a professional potter is the expression of an important priority in the way people form their own lives, even though the actual time spent working in the studio may vary out of necessity.

## A Potter's Life

My idea of a potter's life has not altered very much during my lifetime. The focus has always been centered around what is going on inside the studio. However, the whole social arrangement of producing arts and crafts has changed a lot and society at large has changed radically. The making of pottery had to adapt to new social conditions, and also in its own way tried to influence the direction of the development.

When I started making pottery in Denmark, we still had many potteries producing functional ware for the household, but they were slowly withering away. They were rooted in an agricultural society now being supplanted by an urban, industrial society with totally different ways of living. Industrial production, often imported from countries with very cheap labor, replaced the small potteries. Industrial prod-





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1 Rasmussen applying sinter engobe onto leather-hard clay. 2 Stele box, 16½ in. (42 cm) in height, stoneware, sinter engobe. 3 Cylindrical vessel, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, sinter engobe. 4 Plateau dish, 13 in. (33 cm) in diameter, stoneware, black glaze.

ucts were often better in a functional perspective, and also cheaper. The answer for me as a studio potter was to move to stoneware and porcelain and focus on the aesthetic side of my products. I believe that the *raison d'être* for the studio potter in modern conditions is to create works that give the user a tactile and artistic experience. For me, putting that belief into action also explains a general move from simple functional ware toward more non-utilitarian vessels.

### General Development

For my work, this has meant a concentration on the specific quality of my materials and lots of experiments with clays, engobes, glazes, and frings to develop the adequate sensual and tactile qualities of expression.

I think this general societal development and industrial production have given studio potters the same role that haute couture designers have in fashion and the Michelin-chefs have when it comes to dining. We develop new expressions, which later are taken over by industry and turned into reduced and simplified versions. Thus, we studio potters are laboratories of the future cultures of clay.

For me, a very difficult decision was whether I should return to full-time studio pottery again, after many years of rather limited practice with clay. For many years, I still thought of it as an easy possibility to go back to pottery, to take it up again where I left it many years earlier—just much better, and rejoin the world of

ceramics. I had seen so much mediocre ceramics throughout the years that at least I knew what not to do.

I took the chance and started my new studio, soon realizing I had to start from scratch. It took many years of hard work before I reached the level I had imagined before rejoining the world of ceramics. I had a lot of disappointments, but nevertheless enjoyed all of it and never regretted the decision I made.

### My Home Studio and Gallery

I built my studio as an addition to our house and added a shop/gallery. My hope was to sell directly to customers and not share the income with shops and galleries. This didn't work very well, most likely because my gallery is quite remote and seems to be in a setting that is too private. People seem to feel shy and do not want to intrude. The location was not chosen with a studio and gallery in mind; we rebuilt and moved to our old summer cottage, so the location was already a given.

I am very conscious about having the right height of my working tables. Therefore I use second-hand, adjustable office desks. Likewise, I have mounted my electric throwing wheel on an industrial adjustable table, so I can get the right height according to the size of the pot I am throwing just by pushing the bottom.

I sell most of my work at art galleries, ceramic galleries, and other exhibitions. I also participate in several juried markets all



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5 In early 2018, Rasmussen delivered a large collection of tableware for the famous restaurant NOMA in Copenhagen. All are wheel-thrown stoneware, salt glazed. 6 Lidded jars, to 6 in. (15 cm) in diameter, stoneware, salt glaze. 7 Large broad cone, 15¾ in. (40 cm) in diameter, stoneware, sinter engobe.

over Europe, managed and coordinated by potters' organizations. For me, the most important fair has been Ceramic Art London, where many top makers are represented.

#### Preparing, Organizing, and Being Present

I have a website I refer people to, but I am not yet very active on social media. No doubt selling directly on these platforms is an attractive option, but also very time consuming. I think the more these direct and private forms of selling grow, the more important it becomes for studio potters to participate in the public sphere through shows and fairs to establish a name for themselves. In my own organizations, we are struggling to make our exhibitions attractive to a larger public. Preparing, organizing, and being present at these fairs consumes a lot of time and with that taken into account, these events may not be any more cost effective than working with a professional gallery. And at the same time, these fairs are competing with the professional galleries, making their business more difficult to sustain. These dilemmas have no easy solutions, especially not



in the present situation where marketing is said to be the highest art form. Potters are rarely experts in these fields.

One important thing about fairs is networking with colleagues. For most of us, studio work can be quite an isolated way of life, so we need friendships, debates, and advice from other artists to balance that solitary time.

I experienced a nice compromise when it comes to selling at Villvin, a fair in Risør, Norway. A professional local gallery arranges everything, including the selection process. Artists pay a small participation fee and a very moderate percentage of their turnover. The gallery gets their work paid for and the artists' expenses are reasonable and predictable.

#### **Sculpture and Painting Unite**

My way of making is directed by the artistic aim I try to achieve. Creating contemporary vessels is central to me. My works draw on the achievements of modern abstract art forms and my aim is to make vessels that unify sculptural and painterly qualities. I work with sinter engobes and my colors, slips, and glazes are results of many experiments. I also do salt glazing because of its tactile qualities and subtle variations in color tones and surfaces.

#### **Advice as a Mentor**

When I started out as a young man, I was self taught, but I learned a lot from experienced colleagues and paid many visits to their studios. They helped with many technical questions and we discussed the more artistic aspects of our work. I have never worked as an assistant nor had a mentor—even though it would have been very relevant. Later, when I started my studio practice the second time, I took courses and attended master classes, and lately I have taught and given demonstrations for colleagues. But all in all, it has been a lonely journey to get where I am now, and I miss daily contact with kindred spirits.

My advice to artists who want to be professional potters is to look for a location from which it is easy to



## **CAREER SNAPSHOT**

### **YEARS AS A PROFESSIONAL POTTER**

5+10 (total 1967–72; 2007–present)

### **NUMBER OF POTS MADE IN A YEAR**

100–200 larger pieces, and hundreds of pieces for all the smaller stuff

### **EDUCATION**

Self-taught, with help along the way from colleagues and friends

### **THE TIME IT TAKES (PERCENTAGES)**

Making work (including firing): 85%

Promotions/Selling: 15%

Office/Bookkeeping: 0% (I am so lucky, my wife does it!)

### **WHERE IT GOES**

Galleries: 40%

Craft/Art Fairs: 40%

Studio/Home Sales: 20%

### **WHERE TO SEE MORE**

Ceramic Art London

Villvin Market in Risør, Norway: <http://villvin.no/smile>

Internationale Keramiktage, Oldenburg, Germany

### **LEARN MORE**

Website: [www.finnkeramik.dk](http://www.finnkeramik.dk)

Facebook: [finndam.rasmussen](https://www.facebook.com/finndam.rasmussen)

### **SPECIFIC TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT**

I use rubber kidney ribs to apply several very thick layers of my sinter engobe. I also like several of the firm MudTools ribs. I do salt glazing and firing, and therefore the kiln is an integral part of the creative process. I built my own kiln three years ago and coated it with high-alumina bricks, which don't absorb the salt.

### **CHANGING MATERIALS**

I started out using slips that I later applied glaze over, but now I unite the two in sinter engobes.

sell directly to private customers to secure your bread and butter. Then, combine this with participating in public events where you can try to make a name for yourself.

I would also advise artists to be part of some sort of collective or social network, both when it comes to producing and selling. Sharing workspace with other potters means you can share rent, expensive equipment, have a helping hand when needed, and have critics and advisers at hand. It is important to recognize that it demands mutual standards and respect—you will get all the hardships of a marriage, but not all of the joys.