

A TALE OF LIBERATION

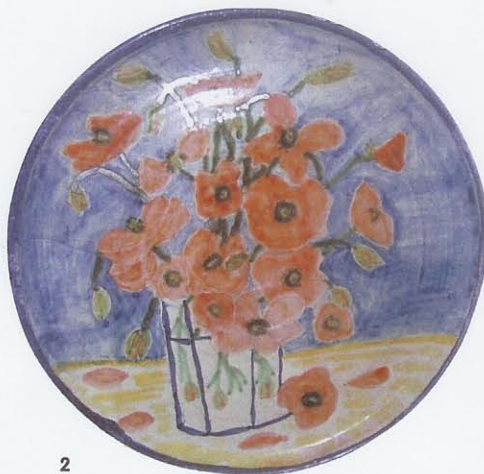
MIKE STRANGE WRITES FROM A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE LIFE-CHANGING INFLUENCES ART AND CERAMICS COURSES OFFERED IN THE 1970S AND EARLY 80S AND THEIR SAD DEMISE.

My interest in art was stimulated at an early age through the enthusiasm of my father and uncle who were both good amateur artists.

However, my interest in art remained dormant (one might say actively repressed) during my time at a very conventional boys' school and I ended up studying social sciences at London University and spending most of my working life teaching politics and sociology in further education. In 1975 I suffered a mid-life crisis and became a single parent, struggling to hold down a full-time teaching job and cope with a myriad of problems on the home front. Sensing I needed a break from such an all-consuming existence, friends suggested that I enrol for a Teachers' Workshop evening class at what was then the St Albans College of Art and Design (now part of the University of Hertfordshire). In those days such courses were designed in a highly imaginative way as a means of providing a form of practical art therapy for a variety of teachers, many of whom, like myself, taught in disciplines totally unrelated to art. I was amazed at the great variety of choices available; while I gleefully signed up for ceramics, other teachers opted for sculpture, photography, painting, silk printing – the sky was the limit.

I had the great fortune to study under Hugh Spenlove, a superb craftsman potter working in the tradition of Bernard Leach, and Ed Smy, another inspirational teacher, who introduced me to the art of majolica decoration. The effect of the course on me was truly uplifting. It rekindled my interest in art and was highly therapeutic in raising my spirits, helping me cope well with the isolation of a one-parent existence. By the time Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election and set about the systematic destruction of the kind of joyful further education courses described so well by Peter Cosentino (CR233), I was well and truly hooked and, when the Teachers' Workshop classes were axed, I signed up to an extramural evening class in ceramics.

Eventually my personal life straightened itself out. I met Lisbeth – a beautiful Danish girl who was also a lone parent and passionate about pottery. We set up home together with her son and daughter and my two sons. Our 'reconstituted family' was soon further extended by the birth of our daughter Louise in 1985. Although our home life increasingly revolved around the changing of nappies, sleepless nights and rebellious teenagers, our passion for pottery never faltered. I spent three summer holidays building a pottery at the bottom of the garden, mainly out of recycled material. We both enjoy camping in wild locations like Brittany and Cornwall and some of the inspiration for our work comes from the colourful sub-tropical beauty of the flora and fauna viewed against the sea and cliffs and fishing villages of these special places.



While Lisbeth takes a more abstract approach, concentrating on a variety of contrasting textures, I try to represent more directly the images I see. I am influenced by the bright colours, which can be achieved by the use of majolica glaze, and I decorate my bowls with vivid paintings of fruit, flowers, boats, fish and other images, which express my love of the sea and countryside.

These days, twenty years on, we have an annual sale at home of our pots, as well as exhibiting at a number of local venues. Lisbeth has retired and I am nearing the end of my teaching career. Louise is twenty-five and is

cross-pressured between her love of painting and the practical needs of earning a living.

In some ways I will be glad to quit the world of teaching. However, I have no regrets in following the career path I decided on in the 1960s. My great good fortune was the opportunity, which I took, to enjoy the best of both worlds by developing my interest in art and ceramics via Teachers' Workshops and extramural classes as a balance to my main career in teaching. As a consequence, I can look forward to an exciting and creative retirement. My great regret is that the opportunities available to me in the 1970s have all but vanished. In addition to the loss of specialist Teachers' Workshop classes, the wide range of adult non-vocational courses traditionally offered in further education colleges have virtually ceased to exist. The utilitarian writ of Thatcherism has been visited on later generations so that almost all adult education is seen in terms of training, throughput and certification. At a time of rapid social change and rising unemployment seeing a well-ordered career as simply an end in itself stifles the aspirations of those seeking a variety of life experiences. It is time educationalists and policy makers revisited a more liberationist view of education and think about the development of the whole person. Just as halfway through my life I was encouraged to follow in the artistic footsteps of my father and uncle, so my daughters' generation deserve the same life-fulfilling opportunities. ☐