

Art in Brief: Alice Federico

The False distinctions between art and craft began eroding in the early 20th century. Interaction between modernism and the crafts was intense in the prelude to World War II. Although the relationship began as a romance with the capacities of machine production, renewed respect for handwork exploded in the 1960s and continues.

Nowhere is that regard more prevalent than in ceramics. The work of such masters as Bernard Leach — godfather of modern studio ceramics — Shoji Hamada, Michael Cardew, and Dame Lucie Rie affirmed the unity of art and craft. Ceramist Alice Federico creates in the tradition of these earlier artists who understood that seriousness of purpose transcends the boundaries of what George Bernard Shaw called "easel-picture despotism."

Although she draws from a variety of sources, Ms. Federico's deepest attachment is to the fluid, sensual forms created by the Viennese-born Lucie Rie (1902–90). Here are tall necks with flaming lips and rising pots that belly out above small feet. Classically simple shapes with delicately modulated monochrome glazes, the collection is intended — as was Rie's work — to harmonize in a domestic setting. Form and surface are inseparable here. Subtle texturing blends with the shape to heighten, not decorate, the character of the vessel. Simple lines of graffito accentuate structure. Ms. Federico's design decisions keep faith with Bauhaus emphasis on form and avoidance of surface ornament. Modern as these pieces are, they speak powerfully of the past. One vase rises like a Ionic column, its swelling almost imperceptible. Another billows at the base in the manner of a Grand Feu design. In each object, structure is key. This is a spare, elegant collection that insists on clarity of form. Its architectonic austerity makes the old formal vocabulary (e.g. pots, potter) seem inadequate or inappropriate. Because of the myriad ways of treating it, clay is a great imitator of surfaces. It can take on the tactile dimension and character of other materials with great conviction. Ms. Federico's lightly pitted surfaces (created by firing techniques acting on the chemistry of glazes) are particularly evocative of weathered walls and artifacts. Several are fired with dark, metallic glazes that approach the iridescence of lusterware, an effect heightened by surface irregularities. It is often said that good sculpture makes you want to run your hands over it. By that gauge, Ms. Federico is a highly refined contemporary sculptor. Her contours are seductive and invite caress.

-Maureen Mullarkey

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