

# Miranda Thomas Pottery: *A Labor of Love*

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson

Miranda Thomas is in it for the long haul. Working from her pottery at the historic Bridgewater Mill in Woodstock, Vermont, Thomas and her team have been champions of the handmade for 32 years and have built a successful operation that has put her designs in the hands of many people, including presidents, popes, and heads of state. Thomas' approach to making pots is grounded in a tradition that marries form, decoration, evidence of the hand, and good old teamwork.

Born in the US and raised in Italy, Australia, and England by two globe-trotting British creatives and introduced to pottery at the age of 16 in Australia, Thomas was classically trained in England, where she got her BA in ceramics. Thomas' style emerged during her one-year apprenticeship with British master potter Michael

Cardew, and her life-long journey in clay began. From there she took a two-year appointment at Alan Caiger-Smith's Aldermaston Pottery, where her focus on decoration solidified. "I realized I wasn't falling into that conceptual modern world. When I could make my own pots, it's like I put everything from my life into a vat and stirred it around, and what came out were the universal symbols of the countryside that surrounded me—birds, fish, rabbits, trees, flowers. When I brushed those symbols on my pots, people wanted them. It was extraordinary," Thomas stated. With a focus on making traditional functional pots with brushwork, she flourished and soon realized there was a path in front of her. She needed to start her own pottery.





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### Beginning a Pottery

The lure of a job and a potential grant brought her to the US. There, she was reacquainted with two Irishmen who soon changed her life: her future furniture-making husband, Charles Shackleton, and craft entrepreneur Simon Pearce, who convinced her to start her pottery on his compound next to his glass-blowing studio and commercial gallery in Vermont. For five years, Thomas honed her designs, built a team and a following, and successfully sold her work using her name under the Simon Pearce brand. There she learned the ropes of how to run a pottery and a business, then in 1987 she and her husband decided they needed to break away and start their own workshops. ShackletonThomas was born.

With a bank loan and a vision of making handmade objects for daily use, they built a furniture workshop in nearby Bridgewater and a pottery studio in the basement of their ranch house in Quechee, Vermont. While Simon Pearce continued producing a few of her designs, Thomas worked to balance starting her own pottery, growing a business, and raising a family. Using the same

symbols she had developed in the UK, she started carving through black slip on her pots, making a line of work that echoed her previous brushwork designs, but with a different flavor (replace? impression, sense, style?). While this new work gained traction, her bread-and-butter came from commissioned commemorative pieces that celebrated important times of life, such as weddings, births, and anniversaries. Adorned with cobalt-brushed fish, along with flowers and other botanical symbols, bowls, plates, and platters were personalized with the traditional lettering she had learned on the job at Aldermaston Pottery.

Like her mentors, Thomas knew early on that she wanted to work with a small pottery team in a workshop, not a factory, and she slowly started hiring workers. "You can get through life that way," she explains. "Working with others allowed me to take care of my kids while growing my business." While everyone on her team works together on most aspects of the pottery business, Thomas learned to hire experienced throwers allowing her to focus on decorating. Others she trained to take on various tasks, even





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designing some slab-built pots so she wouldn't be confined only to wheel-thrown objects. Paid hourly, most worked out of her small pottery. "I built it up like a bird's nest. If I hired experienced potters instead of those that needed training, I could get more done. If I could just decorate, I could get more done. If I hired someone to watch the kids and help in the house, I could get more done. It was divided labor at its best."

### A Growing Business

With new energy in her studio, new symbols entered her repertoire, such as peonies, the tree of life, and other inspirations from local hunting culture and New England gardens. Although they were selling more and more pots and the business was growing, Thomas and her team had still not figured out the matrix of how to make money. The cost of doing business still outweighed the proceeds coming in and they were barely getting by. "Pricing is so important. Everybody knows what they will pay for a mug, and you can't charge much more than that. It costs us \$40 to make a mug, so all I can charge is \$68. But when it comes to a platter that hangs on a wall, the average person doesn't know what that should cost, so they'll pay more, which can give a higher profit margin. For custom work, people will pay on average 30% higher."

As her business and her local following grew, people kept wanting to visit her studio to buy pots, but her basement studio wasn't really suited for visitors. So, in 1996 she expanded by moving her pottery near her husband's furniture workshop in the historic Bridgewater Mill and opening a showroom. Shackleton had built up his wholesale woodshop to 29 furniture makers, and together their workshops were a powerhouse of making. "We were champions for everyday use, making art visible with good design, usable materials, and a handmade process."

### New Opportunities

Around this time, Thomas was asked by one of her wholesale galleries to make a piece for the holidays, so she designed a bowl with a slip-carved dove and called it a *Peace Bowl*. It was 1999, Bill Clinton was president, and the US had achieved the longest stretch of peace in decades. On a whim, Thomas decided to send a letter and one of the bowls to President Clinton, urging him to take this "humble token" as a reminder to keep the peace in the new millennium. Through a friend who knew the Chief of Protocol at the White House, her package made it to Clinton and it made an impression. Clinton loved the pot and Thomas's letter, and Thomas soon got a call from the president's office asking if she could make sixteen of her signature turquoise and gold pieces for him to give to dignitaries during his next tour to the Middle East. It did not stop there.

Three weeks later, in the midst of Christmas chaos, she was asked to make a large 18-inch porcelain bowl with her peace dove design for President Clinton to give as a personal gift to Pope John Paul II. But she had only six weeks to get it done. "Can you do it?" they asked. It seemed impossible, but she and her team, which included Michael Cardew's grandson Ara, threw six large bowls, carved them and got them fired. All of them warped, except for one. She triple-boxed it, got it there on time, and then watched Clinton give her bowl to the pope on national TV.

Thomas's work with the White House led to work with the United Nations Associations, which asked her to make gifts for various heads of state and international diplomats, such as Secretaries General Kofi Annan, and Ban Ki Moon. She was also commissioned to make centerpieces for high-end charity auctions and gala events, coming up with new designs each year for each gala theme. This work continued through Barack Obama's presi-

dency and while Thomas is not working with the current administration, she hopes it will reignite in the future.

### Staying the Course

Two years ago, as online pottery businesses took the world by storm, Thomas and her team made a decision to stay the course, making pots by hand. “Yes, people are making money with their mechanized slip-cast and dip-glazed(?) potteries, but we decided to keep the evidence of the hand.” To compete, they developed an online business model, using primarily consistent oxidation-fired pieces and broke down the offering of Thomas’s designs into 160 SKUs. For example, her slip-carved bowls can be purchased in small, medium or large, in three patterns only. As people are buying through a photograph, making most electric-fired work assures consistency. “We have essentially created an Amazon for ceramics,” she says. “In the showroom, however, we feature more one-of-a-kind and reduction-fired works, ‘unAmazon-able,’ if you will. These are more unusual pieces that people can touch and feel. Currently, 75% of our business is Charles’s furniture, and my pottery is about 25%. In the end, word of mouth is still the most effective marketing tool in selling, but for sure, selling is more expensive than making.”

Making pots for important figures certainly gave Thomas’ business some clout, but it did not change how she and her husband run their daily operations, nor did it change the extreme labor and risk of running a pottery business. Seismic changes, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the economic crisis in 2008, and a flood during hurricane Irene in 2011 all took their toll. Damage from Irene cost the whole business \$500,000, and it took years to recover. Thomas shares that 2015 was the first year they made an actual profit.

She and her team, currently five potters (three at almost full time), work every day, and Thomas declares she can’t retire. “I tell people I cook with rocks,” she laughs. “Clay is wonderfully humbling. It makes you realize that you just need to do your best. We have approximately \$300,000 in pottery sales annually, but it basically costs the same to run the pottery—labor and marketing being the biggest expenses. It’s a terrible business model, but it makes sense for us, as it does for other potters. We are spending our lives doing what we love and making a lot of people happy. We work within a tradition, expressing ourselves, contributing our voices, and speaking the same language with pots. It is the richest, most rewarding life. My goal is to make beautiful pots. Our job is to draw beauty out of the natural material. It can last for 3000 years—it has to be beautiful. It’s a labor of love.”

Recently, during the COVID-19 crisis, Thomas and her team have been concentrating on online sales while their showroom is closed. In response, they are making little pinched porcelain sky-blue birds of hope, and giving them to customers for free with their orders. “They are the perfect token to give to a loved one or someone working on the front lines,” she explains. Our work is symbolic. It connects us to one another, and now more than ever, we need that.”

**the author** Leigh Taylor Mickelson is an artist, writer, curator, and independent consultant working with arts businesses and nonprofits to help them develop and grow. Visit her website at [www.leightaylormickelson.com](http://www.leightaylormickelson.com) to learn more.

How are specific forms developed? Are there any favorites to make and decorate?

How does the team divide labor now? What roles do each of the potters play?



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## Decorating with Slip by Leigh Taylor Michelson

Before beginning to apply slip to the surface, prepare your work area. Have a board or bat ready to place your slipped pots on so that you can move them around, as you won't be able to touch them after you slip them. Always wear an apron, and have a small bucket of clean water, a sponge, and small towel within easy reach for quick touch up. Keep your hands as dry as possible before and during slipping.

After making, the slab dishes are dried evenly to a leather-hard stage (1). **Pots that are not leather hard will not absorb enough water from the slip to create an even coating or dry evenly, and they may warp due to the excess moisture added by the slip.**

The slips must be extremely well stirred before dipping or ladling (2). Water tends to settle on the surface of the slip. It might not look like it, but it will be too thin on the pot, which you can only tell after glaze firing if not mixed properly. To mix, bring the bottom of the bucket liquid to the top in a strong circular plunging motion.

Ladle slip into the dish and turn and tilt the dish to cover the entire interior up to the rim edge and then pour it out (3). Use a squeezed-out sponge to clean any slip that dripped on the outside, before placing the dish down on the table.

When dipping a pot, make sure your fingers and hands are dry before taking the plunge. Always stop before your



**1** After making, the slab dishes are dried evenly to a leather-hard stage. **2** The slips must be extremely well stirred before dipping or ladling. Bring the bottom of the bucket liquid to the top in a strong circular plunging motion. **3** Ladle slip into dish and move around edge and pour out. Use a squeezed out sponge to clean off outside. **4** Set aside until leather hard, or decorate directly into the slip with combing, or dragging with a blunt ended tool.

fingers holding the pot reach the surface of the slip. Draw the piece out of the slip bucket slowly as you reach the rim of the pot. Shake off by bending your knees up and down rather than moving your arms, as you could easily drop the whole pot into the bucket!

Set the pot aside until leather hard, or decorate directly into the slip by combing or dragging with a blunt-ended tool like a porcupine quill, as we did at Michael Cardew's pottery (4). Once leather hard, using a rounded ended tool, a blunt pencil, a piece of bamboo or porcupine quill, draw directly into the slip (5). Do not worry about burrs or crumbs at this stage. Once drawn, carve out the negative spaces through the slip, back to the clay (6). The tools we

use are a 4-inch length of bamboo, with the inner pith shaved down to a ¼-inch end (not touching the smooth side of bamboo) in the shape of a flat-head screwdriver.

Dust off any crumbs using a soft shaving brush before they get too dry, then remove burrs with a green kitchen scouring pad before bisque firing (7).

Glaze with your favorite glazes. Remember the slip colors the glaze from underneath, adding extra depth to your pieces (8).



5 Once leather hard, use a tool to draw directly into the slip. 6 Carve out the negative spaces through the slip, back into the clay. 7 Dust off the dish using a soft shaving brush and then remove the burrs. 8 Finish the piece with a favorite glaze. 9 XXXXX.