



*Elisa Helland-Hansen,
Pouring Pitcher, 2011.
Stoneware, reduction
fired to Cone 10 in gas
kiln, 9 x 6 x 6 in.
All photographs by
the author.*

A Norwegian Potter's Perspective:

STUDIO POTTERY PRACTICES IN NORWAY

& THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

BY ELISA HELLAND-HANSEN

On a winter morning in 1950, I was pushed into this world at New York Hospital in Manhattan.¹ Six months later, my parents moved to my father's native country. Raised in Bergen and having lived most of my life in Norway, I fully identify as Norwegian both socially and culturally, yet I see Norway through slightly different glasses than do the majority of Norwegians, probably as a result of growing up with an American mother. I am a dual citizen holding two passports, which allows me to travel to most any country in the world—a privilege I am increasingly aware of as refugees struggle to enter European countries.

While studying ceramics in the mid-1970s at The National College of Art and Design in Bergen, I and my fellow classmates were influenced more by the Leach-Hamada tradition and English studio pottery practices than by Norway's relatively short ceramic history.² We had no textbooks in Norwegian. We read the English magazine *Ceramic*

Review, had English guest teachers,³ and devoured Bernhard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, Michael Cardew's *Pioneer Pottery*, and Danish artist Finn Lynggård's *Keramisk Håndbok*. We were also acquainted with magazines like *Studio Potter* and *Ceramic Monthly*. Altogether, these were the written texts about ceramics we were exposed to at the time, and they certainly influenced my thinking and development as a potter. As opposed to many of my classmates, who after completing education gradually moved away from making utilitarian pots, I continued to practice within this philosophy of utility and self-sufficiency. I experimented with natural clays, collected wood ash, built wood-fired kilns, and mixed glazes from scratch. I devoted my time to making functional pots for daily use in the kitchen and for serving food.

My deep fascination with the link between aesthetic qualities and utility has followed me to this day. Made early in my career, this priority was shaped more by reading



▲ Helland-Hansen's studio at Seimfoss, Norway, overlooking the Hardangerfjord, 2017. Studio designed by architect Helge Shjelderup.

Bernhard Leach's *A Potters Book* than by Norwegian ceramics practices. I acknowledge, though, that the direction my work has taken over the years is also influenced by Nordic aesthetic values present in the Scandinavian design in all materials that surround me.

Having family ties in America, I started combining private visits across the Atlantic with professional opportunities early on. I attended a number of ceramic conferences and taught and was a visiting artist at some universities in the United States. Through these experiences I have noticed one major difference between the two countries that I believe results in distinct practices within the ceramic field. In Norway, the tradition of holding or giving workshops is nearly nonexistent. As a potter in this country for nearly forty years, I have attended numerous theoretical seminars on craft, but there have only been

two international ceramic symposiums (in Oslo in 1990 and 2003), and I have only attended three ceramic workshops in my country during that time. I believe the lack of demonstrating workshops is both good and bad. American ceramics students have abundant possibilities to attend workshops and courses with professionals who demonstrate all kinds of highly refined technical methods of handling clay. In addition, the U.S., as opposed to Norway, has numerous well-established craft schools and residencies, such as the Archie Bray Foundation, Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. Without such offers and institutions in Norway, a country that has only two higher education institutions that teach ceramics, emerging artists are forced to find a way to express themselves without

the influence of other ceramicists showing them “how to do.” It might result in a less resolved and more awkward treatment of clay, but it may also encourage a more personal approach. There is a vast group of highly skilled ceramic artists in the United States mastering all kinds of elaborate

techniques from carving, decorating, and stretching to the intricate assembly of slabs and coils. I wonder, though, if this technical perfection can at times be an obstacle distracting the individual from finding and developing an artistic voice.

The world today is different from how it was when I was trained in the 1970s. Travel has become exceedingly accessible, especially for citizens of privileged nations such as Norway. The Internet has changed the way I communicate since I got my first e-mail address in the early 1990s. In addition to radio, television, newspapers, books, and magazines, the Internet and social media provide new and expanding sources of information.

Forty years ago, I had access to a limited number of photos of ceramic work, mainly found in books and magazines. Today I am constantly exposed to images of pottery through social media (in addition to an increasing number of books and magazines available on ceramics). Now I realize that I spend more time on the Internet than reading things in print.

How does this affect our work and thinking? Can we have too many influences? My answer is no. I believe the availability of so much visual information forces me to take a stand on how I want to express myself and how I define my aesthetics and practice. My understanding of the qualities I am seeking in my own work become clearer through more exposure to material, both physically and virtually. These experiences also lead to my being more critical about what I think constitutes good work and more selective in what I value in the work of others.

Ceramic education in Scandinavian countries is moving away from utilitarian practices. The ceramics field is influenced by fine art and increasingly dominated by idea-based work, crossover with other mediums, installations, site-specific works, and nonfunctional expressions. Being deeply rooted in the utilitarian clay movement, I find less resonance

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► Some of Helland-Hansen's Instagram followers she met at NCECA in Portland, Oregon, 2017.



ARTIST NARRATIVE

*Elisa Helland-Hansen,
Kimchi jars, 2017.
Stoneware reduction
fired in gas kiln,
9 x 6 x 6 in.*



in the work of colleagues in Norway nowadays. But at the same time, virtual media has opened up a larger ceramic community for sharing views across geographical boundaries. Thirty years ago, I communicated with American potters by meeting them at conferences, workshops, and private visits, and through writing letters. Today, I communicate daily with potters across the world mainly through Instagram—watching and commenting on virtual images of ceramics and getting responses and questions from distant countries. Activity on my Instagram account has resulted in several invitations to write articles for magazines like this one and has increased demand for my work internationally.

I credit Ayumi Horie with being a pioneering force in spreading valuable knowledge throughout the ceramic field via social media. Knowing I was a passionate amateur photographer, she pushed me into using Instagram back in January, 2015. This happened at the same time as her establishment of Pots In Action (@potsinaction). Ayumi began Pots In Action to encourage potters and ceramic lovers to take better photos of pots in natural environments. Since its inception, the site's reach has exploded to more than 100,000 followers worldwide, and it has become a vital virtual community. It has also become my best source of daily ceramic information at every level: history, tradition, technology, and everyday life. In addition, it touches on endless themes and challenges within the worlds of utilitarian practices and ceramics. Though Instagram is primarily a visual medium, the lengthy captions on Pots in Action posts provide valuable information about artists and ceramics.

Because Instagram has been so valuable and influential for me, I'll share some of the ways I use Instagram. I try to limit the number of accounts I follow to what really interests me. I follow museums, art institutions, and galleries as rich sources of information, and individual accounts for the pure pleasure of nice photos. I follow a few friends and family members, some photographers, historians,

artists, collectors, and many potters. Social media can be so time-consuming that I have been forced to select one platform which corresponds best to my interests.

Being a visual person, I have chosen Instagram over Facebook as my preferred social media. My guideline is never to post images of persons without permission and never pictures of recognizable children. My aim is to share a visual diary without breaching my own privacy and to post varied motifs. Those might be a potent rhubarb sprout, a special landscape, a story about Hardanger slate roofing, or images and short videos of my pots and working methods. I like knowing there is no obligation for my followers to continue to follow me, or for me to post content that interests them. Admittedly, being aware of having many potters following me makes me strive to post images of pots regularly.

While attending the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) in Kansas City in 2016, I was overwhelmed by the number of potters telling me they followed me on Instagram. At the 2017 conference in Portland, Oregon, I was more prepared for interactions with my many followers who are potters. I asked permission to take a photo of every person who approached me saying they followed me on Instagram. In a few days, more than sixty Instagram names became flesh and blood in front of me. My meetings with people I follow were also special moments. I regret I did not take the opportunity to investigate more carefully what kind of experiences we have using Instagram as a boundary jumper, sourcing information, or establishing personal bonds across borders.

Having moved from the city of Bergen five years ago (the result of an Internet

date!) to a rural village in the countryside of Hardangerfjord, I find my daily life changing in an unexpected manner. I spend more time in my new studio, am more occupied with locally produced food and traditions, and go hiking in the mountains and fishing in the fjord more frequently than ever before. At the same time, through social media I feel increasingly connected to a larger world—sharing interests, pots, and landscapes by pressing some digits on an iPhone. Access to a wider world through Instagram has also resulted in a greater consciousness about the different circumstances we live under. Through my images, I share an awareness of what is typical of the place where I live and work.

As some people start their morning with a newspaper, a cup of coffee or switching on the radio, I lie in bed opening Instagram on my mobile. I am greeted by a number of visual moments, mostly from people I don't know. I don't need to respond with words or likes, but I get glimpses into different lives and the work I enjoy watching and reading about. It might be a picture of wallaby bones with a caption about life on earth millions of years ago by Janine in South Australia; a photo from Kyle in Oregon, sharing his excitement about discovering the first mushroom of the year; a shot of a handmade wooden box posted by Katsuhisa in Japan or horses running across wild landscapes by Elisa, living in Iceland; a *National Geographic* photo of a rhino baby with a caption about wildlife organizations working to save threatened species in Kenya; amazing shots of birds in action by photographer Andrea in Florida; or a watercolor sketch of a dancing figure that pops up from Bjørn in Oslo.

Through Instagram, I get to follow the artistic developments of students I supervised fifteen years ago. I am surprised by the unex-



pected bonds with individuals that form just from sharing a few photos, whether of pots or landscapes. It is hard to define the impact of this virtual connection. I can only describe it as a joyous adventure. I am in control of what I want to be exposed to, and I have the freedom of unfollowing or adding new accounts at any moment. While I'm lying there in my bed in the tiny village of Seimsfoss, I feel connected. How can I ever feel lonely with so many positive voices out there in the virtual world responding with comments like “*Thanks for sharing this photo!*”?

ENDNOTES

1. New York Hospital is now New York-Presbyterian Hospital.
2. Potters from Germany and Holland arrived in Norway in the sixteenth century. Before that, Norwegians traditionally made domestic objects out of limestone, wood, and iron. There are no naturally-occurring deposits of stoneware in Norway.
3. Because Norway is a country with only 5.5 million people, the Norwegian government decided to mandate the teaching of English in public schools. Ever since the 1950s, English has been taught as the compulsory second language.

BIO

Elisa Helland-Hansen is a Norwegian studio potter based in Rosendal by the Hardangerfjord in western Norway. She was trained at the Bergen National College for Arts and Design in the 1970s, and has worked as a full-time potter making utilitarian work since then. She has traveled extensively and exhibits internationally.

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