

# CERAMIC SERIES

ANTONIA SALMON

by David Whiting



What is immediately apparent in the ceramics of Antonia Salmon is a strong sense of history, and a major source has been the story of mankind in the landscape; cultures where man, even in isolated places, has drawn out a kind of order on the natural world around him. It would be simplistic to read any direct references here — her work, burnished and ranging from simpler vessel forms to more sculptural pieces, is the result of a thought process by which ideas are taken, combined and reassembled into a very personal response to the continuity and common experience of disparate cultures and their place in the natural order. These are pots to quietly contemplate — vessels which we can enjoy for their formal balance and sensual lines, but also for their rich language of association.

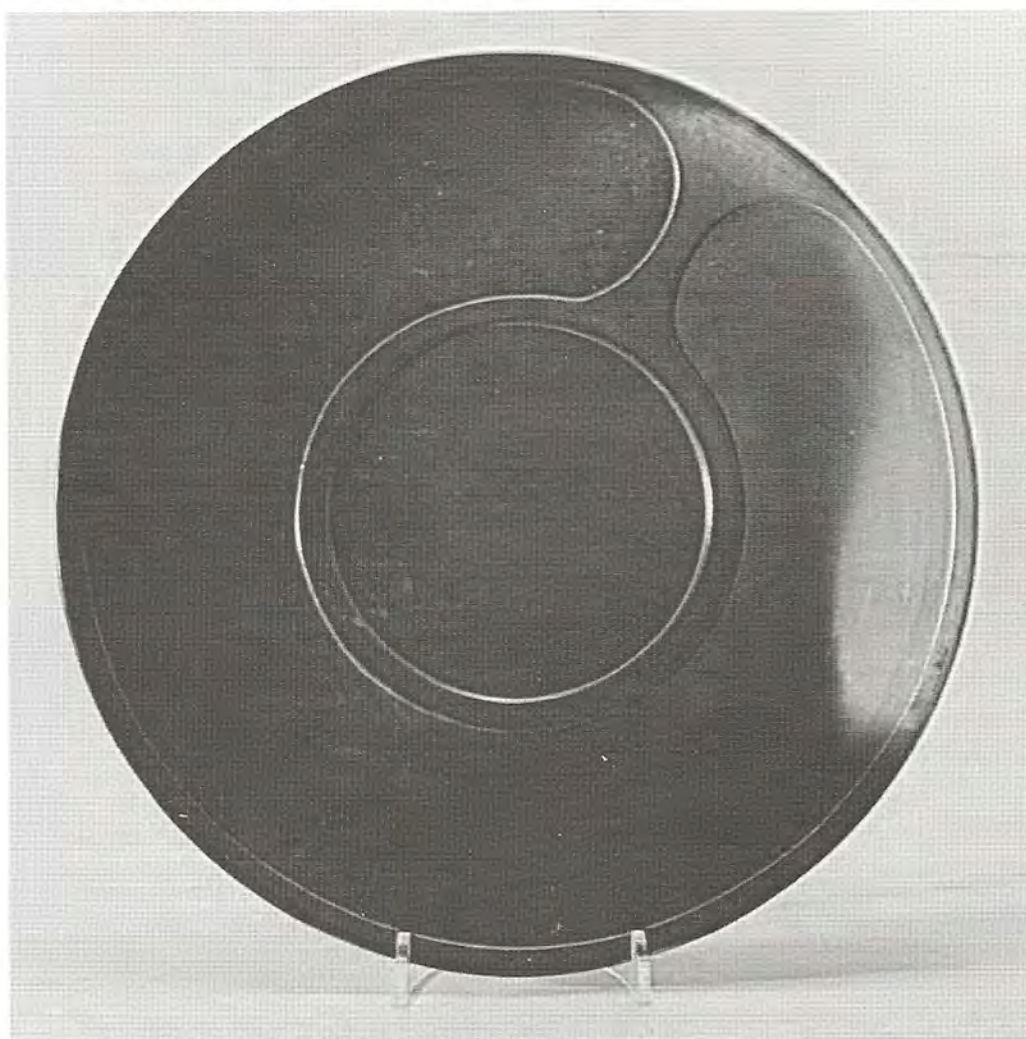
Antonia made her first pots at the age of four in her grandparents' back-garden. She grew up in a visually inclined household and her grandmother was an amateur potter of some flair. Her early experience must have, as she said, left her with "burning hands" for while at Sheffield University (reading Geography) she attended pottery classes, making coil pots and throwing. During the summer she worked with a potter in Dorset, throwing more and gaining general workshop experience. At the end of university, she knew she had to take up pottery — she was intuitively drawn to it.

So she went to Harrow, attending the two year pottery course between 1981 and 1983. It opened doors, providing not only the technical skills, but giving Antonia an appetite for new creative ideas. Mo Jupp encouraged her to explore without insisting that there should be an obvious conclusion, and Wally Keeler's quiet and assured approach made an impression.



Siddig El' Nigoumi was making his dignified burnished work, encouraging to Antonia, who was beginning to experiment with the method at this time, finding it had an attractive immediacy. She also realised that she was becoming more interested in the form rather than the decoration of a piece, and that the leather-hard stage of clay was the texture she liked to work with, controlled but offering up all manner of possibilities with carving (a process she liked because it reminded her of working with wood or stone).

She became increasingly drawn to the architecture and arts of Islam, a culture where forms are based on geometric structures and patterns. This intrigued Antonia because of the close relationship to similar patterns in nature, for instance cell growth or canopies of tree foliage — organic development and energy as well as disciplined form. She began to look at objects that are made from the natural world: practical tools, artifacts and prehistoric sculpture in the landscape. She was much taken with the lone megalithic stones in the low rolling scenery of Dartmoor, ancient self-contained forms piercing the horizon, man marking out the wildest areas. Meanwhile, her weekends during the Harrow course were spent at the British Museum, filling sketchbooks with drawings of stone or wooden tools, ironwork, celtic jewellery, precolumbian pots, cycladic heads, Egyptian and Assyrian sculpture — notably where much of the decoration of an object is in the form itself. She was to integrate some of her ideas about technique and form into a series of burnished sculptural screens made in red clay.



A journey to the Middle East and India rekindled Antonia's deeper interests. While she went with the intention of seeing first hand the Islamic forms that had so intrigued her, what touched her most were the different ways in which man, in different landscapes, had tried to make an impression, however small, on the country in which he lived and worked.

Such unconscious statements lead to an affirming sense of integration, a kind of wholeness achieved through a meeting of natural and man-made forms. She recently wrote: "the impressions, such as small but haunting primitive shrines in the mountains, the view of a thousand rice terraces climbing the hillslopes or the cow-pats hand slapped onto the tree trunks to dry, cut across any particular cultural interest that I had".

Antonia returned to England fired with ideas, and her forms have since developed some of the themes she began to think about at this time. The domestic ware that she



had produced before her trip abroad was relinquished, and she began to work as she does now, with slab built or thrown white stoneware which is then altered and carved. These pieces are then burnished, an ideal method for achieving clean tactile surfaces with a soft sheen, a quality which relates to many of the man-made objects she has particularly admired. After burnishing, the pots are biscuit fired and then saw-dust fired before being finally wax polished. This is a long and time consuming method, but is a satisfying process for Antonia, who also relishes the smoked quality left from the saw-dust firing — an unpredictable and spontaneous effect after the rigorous control of carving and burnishing.

Such control and order, combined with the more accidental, seems central to Antonia's aesthetic, fascinated in the organic as well as the consciously ordered. Much of the strength of her best work lies in the directness of the shapes, whether we are looking at the contained quality of the vessels, or the more open movement of the balancing pieces (examine for instance her boat forms) which explore relationships of volume, surface contour, and space. She likes "lines that run in tangent to a sphere", and this counterpoint of shapes can produce the most engaging and resolved objects. Titles are deliberately left open so that we can approach the work in any way we want.

What comes across to me is an archaic and almost ritualistic quality, a sense of ancient ceremony in the forms, and the patterns she applies (engraving that "focusses the eye" and "centres a piece"). For Antonia, the special quality of Hans Coper's work is that it is obviously personal, but also contains so much of the universal. This is what we look for in the best art, but of course we find it too in the beauty of the most direct carving, modelling or constructing of the simplest objects from history. Because Antonia's sources are more intuitive than intellectual, she achieves a quietly assured vocabulary of form that is all the more impressive; her best work has an almost timeless classical quality, modern pots but drawing on the mysteries of the ancient past.

