



Antonia Salmon in her studio, March 1991

The Elemental and the Mysterious

Antonia Salmon's elegant finely honed burnished and sawdust fired ceramic forms celebrate skilled making and an acute awareness of form. Here Antonia Salmon describes how she became a potter and how her ideas have changed as she became aware of the qualities of her chosen material.

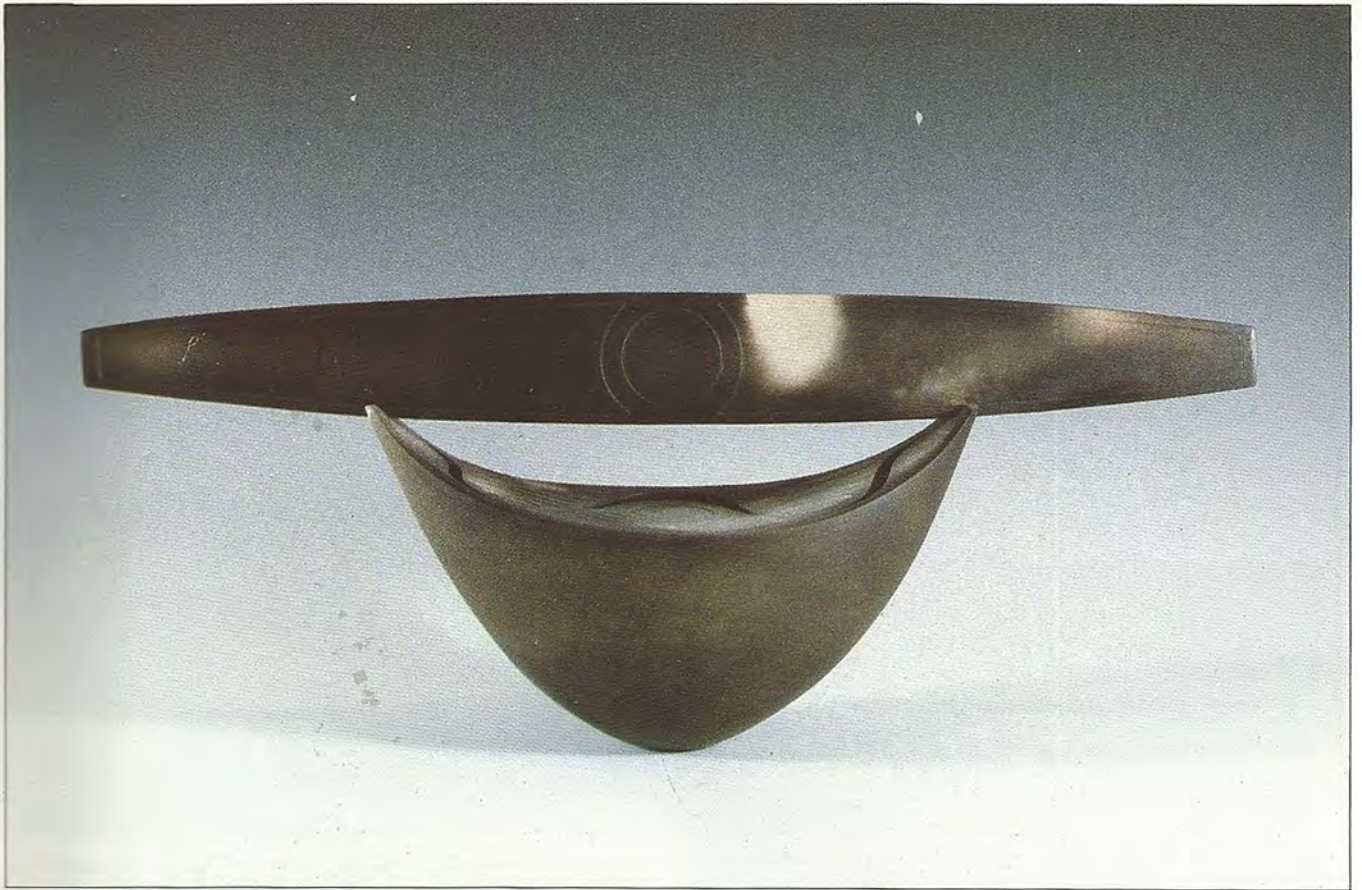
My first attempts to pot, aged four, were in my grandparent's garden. This may have left me with burning hands, for when I later came to pot I never felt a stranger to clay. At Sheffield University studying geography I had a strong sense of wanting to stay in touch with an activity that was challenging physically, intellectually and emotionally. Evening classes and summer jobs with potters helped maintain the link until I embarked on the two year Studio Pottery course at Harrow (1981-1983). My original intentions were to train as a domestic ware potter for which this course was ideal. I had equated 'functional' and 'domestic' with straightforward, honest and wholesome, and I still lean towards simple and spirited forms with uncluttered decoration. For the past six years I have produced more sculptural work. This apparent contradiction with my original aims has made me ask questions about my approach to work, which I continue to explore.

At Harrow I was always more excited by the form of objects rather than their glazes. That interest in form extended mostly to sculpture and landscape as well as to ceramics. Perhaps for this reason the work in clay that interested me most, then, were series or set of pots, such as tea-sets, where the aspects of form, proportion and scale of the related items were my main focus of experiment.

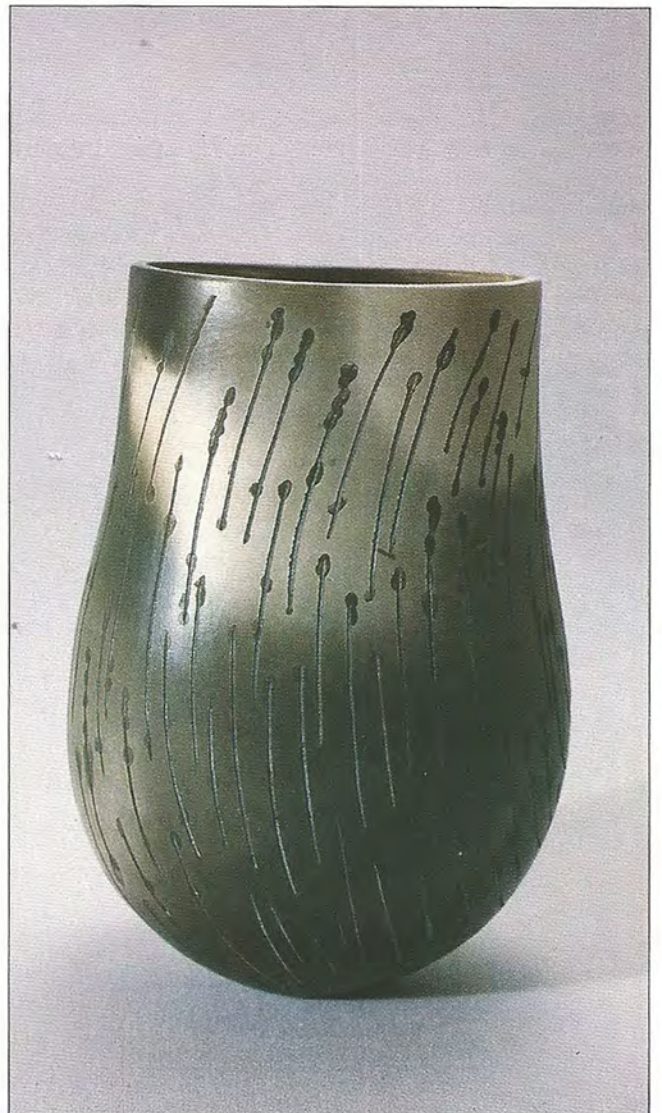
I was also fascinated by geometry in form and pattern. I became intrigued with the architecture and arts of the Islamic tradition that use geometric structures as building blocks for spacious and visually expansive mosques and palaces. Islamic pattern making is used extensively to bring life to vast areas of roof or wall space by filtering sunlight through a myriad of geometrically carved screens. Although this work is highly controlled and within strict rules of symbolism, I found that it had given rise to works of vibrancy, boldness and dynamism that excited me. By contrast, it also opened my eyes to the forms and patterns of the natural world, which in its apparent randomness and spontaneity has also evolved from geometrical growth structures.

These interests led me to explore shapes that became a meeting point between the formal and the informal. It gave rise to a series of screens based upon Egyptian carvings and silhouettes of leaves in treetops. These screens were made in burnished red earthenware. So at this time I discovered the pleasure of working with low-fired clay. Since then the gulf between functional and non-functional work has not seemed a problem. I feel that the visual challenge of structure, volume and surface are common to both types of work. The limitations of producing a lively and functional vessel is an intense challenge, but so also is the freedom to make a 'non-functional' piece that still has this sense of purpose, discipline and spirit.

After leaving Harrow I wished to see the Islamic architecture and arts that had intrigued me. I thought that a journey from Europe, through the Middle East and into India would give me a better understanding of the spread and transition of this culture. However, during the ten



Antonia Salmon – ABOVE Carved Boat Piece, thrown and altered with separate top piece, ht. of body 14cm RIGHT Vase, thrown and altered with manganese dioxide dripped pattern, smoke fired with sawdust, 19cm tall BELOW Plate, thrown, carved and burnished, 26cm

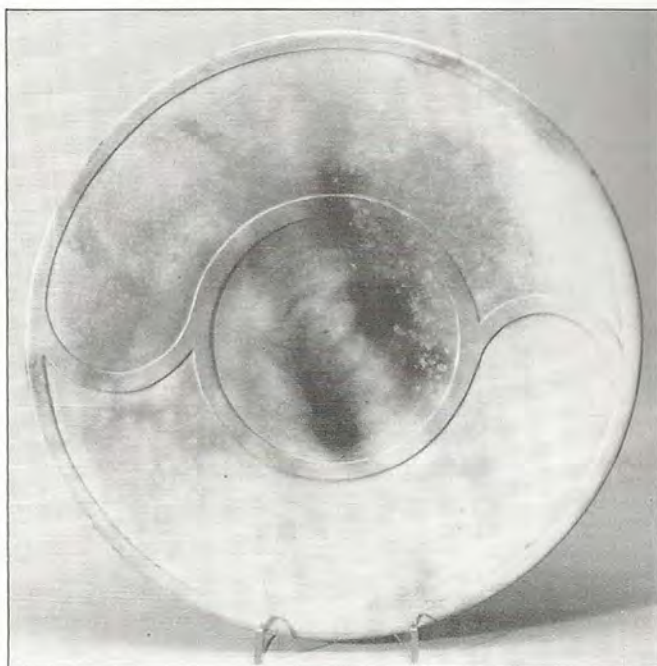




Antonia Salmon - 'Boat Piece' 1990, sawdust fired ceramic

months of travelling the strongest impressions I had were from the attempts by people to bring order or meaning into their environments, which were often overwhelming landscapes that overshadowed human habitation. These impressions, such as some small but haunting primitive shrines in the mountains, the view of a thousand rice terraces climbing the hillslopes or the cowpats hand-slapped on to the tree trunk to dry, cut across any particular cultural interest that I had. Where I saw people working in close relation to their landscape the visual results were very moving, showing a mixture of boldness and delicacy, of courage and charm beyond their immediate cultural and religious bounds.

Antonia Salmon - 'Plate' 1990, sawdust fired ceramic



I returned to England with ideas for forms that would echo the sense of humanity as a tool in landscape. I wanted these forms to have a strength to stand alone, uncluttered and sure, resisting any tendency to add unnecessary decoration.

Now, my work is made in white stoneware, in slabs or thrown and altered, and then simply carved. All the work is burnished and sawdust fired. This method of production, working for long hours with leather-hard clay, answers my need for controlled and patient work. The firing is a balance to the purist forms with its capacity to affect their surfaces in a spontaneous response, producing a combination of dramatic and subtle patterns. The pots are all biscuit fired to 1060°C prior to sawdust firing. This high biscuit burns off the burnish, but it gives me the confidence to produce some delicate shapes that are physically strong. I burnish the clay for the smoothness it creates, and each piece is finally wax polished, which imparts a soft glow.

Although I have a compulsion to carry on with clay I find that the process of working on new shapes is often tortuous and slow. I often refer to past note books because certain themes re-occur, particularly if they have not yet been turned into clay. Whenever I see something, anywhere, that interests me I will try to capture it in a sketch. I never analyse what it is that moves me, it is just important to imprint it in the brain at the time of seeing. I am certain that, later, these numerous small impressions help to give substance to intuition.

Exactly where ideas for forms come from is sometimes hard to say. The beginnings are less ideas than a feeling of excitement about particular relationships of line and form. For example, I have been very interested in lines that run at a tangent to a sphere and, also, in the axe head form.

Verbalizing the background to a piece is difficult since it may not be clear to me at the time of making, and it may take away from the energy I put into the work itself. Also, I do not think that it necessarily helps people to see my work with more understanding. For this reason I do

not title the pieces because it focuses the vision in too particular a way.

When I think of work that has inspired me it is often anonymous ethnic pieces or those of ancient origin whose feeling of purpose and freshness has survived the centuries. I am thinking of small items, such as farming implements, combs, stools, mirrors, wristbands whose forms are uniquely related to function and whose craftsmanship is to be cherished for its dignity. From this century I have admired the sculptures of Gill and Epstein, mostly for their dynamic and passionate qualities expressed with great tenderness. It is not surprising that Coper's work, which

combines the elemental and mysterious with a human quality that is almost impersonal, has inspired many a budding potter. A walk across the open moorland, perhaps stumbling across a forgotten gate post in the dry heather, or a view of the shifting cloud mass at dusk are also some of the numerous and uncollectable discoveries that feed the spirit rather than give instant access to ideas.

Antonia Salmon's exhibition 'Burnished Earthenware' is at Contemporary Ceramics, 7 Marshall Street, London W1 July 9-20.