LUCIE RIE – (1902 – 1995)

Over a lifetime that spanned nearly the entire 20th century, Lucie Rie produced a large body of work: elegant and austere, richly glazed in a once-fired oxidizing kiln; delicate and modern in a time when the ceramics world looked toward large and bold. One of the artists who fled the brutality of Adolph Hitler, the Austrian-born Rie became a British citizen and embraced her new country. Along with fellow refugee Hans Coper, she struggled at first to find acceptance in British ceramics, which was then under the strong influence of Bernard Leach, during times dominated by the difficulties imposed by World War II. In time Leach came to admire her work and to be a strong supporter of hers, and both Rie and Coper went on to careers whose separate paths and distinctive styles never altered their strong friendship, admiration and appreciation for each other. For over 60 years she made functional pottery, startling beautiful in its simplicity but always wheel-thrown functional pots meant to be used. At the time of her death Dame Lucie Rie had been honored with major retrospectives in both London and the United States and had received the distinguished awards from her adopted country of OBE, CBE, and DBE.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT – LUCIE RIE

“I make pots. Put flowers in them, use them. They are for use.”¹

“ I work in a completely unorthodox manner, no longer using any form of scientific method. I glaze my pots raw, often using a number of glazes on top of each other and sometimes between one glaze and the next layer of slip.”²

1. Quoted by Angus Stewart. “Dame Lucie Rie and Hans Coper.” Published in conjunction with Galerie Besson’s exhibition in SOFA NEW YORK, 2006.


RESUME – LUCIE RIE

1902 Born Lucie Gomperz, Vienna, Austria
1922-1926 Studied pottery, Kunstegewerbeschule, Vienna
1925 Established studio in Vienna
1926 Married Hans Rie
1937 Silver Medal, Paris International Exhibition
1938 Moved to England
1939 Moved to Albion Mews, Paddington, London
1940  Divorced from Hans Rie
1945  Becomes naturalized British citizen
1945-1947  Bimini Designs; designed and made ceramic buttons
1946-1958  Hans Coper joins and shares workshop
1961-1971  Lecturer (part-time), Camberwell School of Art, London, England
1968  Order of the British Empire Award
1969  Honorary doctorate, Royal College of Art, London, England
1981  Commander of the British Empire Award
1990  Stroke brings end to ceramic career
1991  Dame of the British Empire Award
1992  London, Crafts Council Retrospective
1994  New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Exhibition with Hans Coper

**BIOGRAPHY – LUCIE RIE**

Lucie Gomperz Rie was born in 1902 into a prosperous Viennese family, her father a physician and her mother a member of a well-known wine producing family. Her early education was with a private tutor but she was also enriched by the intellectual circle of family and friends, including Sigmund Freud and her uncle, Sandor Wolf who had established a notable collection including, among other things, Roman pots. The family’s idyllic existence was first shattered with Austria’s declaration of war on Serbia which took the life of the younger of her brothers, Paul. Paul had shown an early talent for art and encouraged Lucie to explore it as well. Following his death, she took his advice and enrolled in the art school of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Vienna. Although she studied all the traditional subjects of an art education, it was ceramics, and in particular working on the wheel, that became her focus. Working with her teacher Michael Powolny and designer Josef Hoffmann she began making pots and, under their tutelage, visiting museums and exhibitions to further her knowledge of the world of ceramics.

Following her studies, Rie married businessman Hans Rie and continued pursuing a career in ceramics. The pots she was making were simple and modern in style, made of earthenware and raw glazed. Initially she raw glazed because she did not have a kiln and had to take her pots a fair distance to have them fired, but in time the raw glazing became an important part of her style. She also made pots that were to be used, what she called “pots for the house,” and
that, too, did not change throughout her career. Her work was increasingly being included in exhibitions and shows, and in 1937 Josef Hoffmann included a special section in the Austrian Pavilion of the World Exhibition in Paris for seventy of her pots.

While the Ries were absorbed in their professions and in the life of Vienna, a more disturbing element was developing: the rise of Adolf Hitler and the concern that he would move to annex Austria. In 1938 Hitler entered Vienna and life for Jewish people as well as other groups became first intolerable and quickly, dangerous. The Ries were able to flee to England where friends arranged guarantors and helped them adjust to a new life. By now the Ries’ marriage, while amicable and friendly, had largely become meaningless because of their very different interests, and the couple agreed to separate and ultimately divorce with Lucie remaining in England and Hans Rie moving to the United States where Lucie’s brother helped him find employment.

Lucie Rie settled into a home in Albion Mews, Bayswater, and began working. However, England was not familiar with her work or reputation and the ceramics world at that time was dominated by Bernard Leach. The work Leach was doing was very different – influenced by Asian and medieval English pottery, and much heavier and more powerful than the delicate, simple pots Rie made. Leach initially did not care for her pottery and suggested she study with him to learn his style of pottery. For a time she did, and her work during those years was indeed more bold and powerful, but it was not her style and she never felt at ease with it.

With the outbreak of World War II, studio pottery, like other “non-essential” arts, declined, and Rie found work making earthenware buttons and jewelry as well as working in a lens factory which enabled her to survive the war years. The buttons she made were very popular, so much so that she needed helpers, and the work, though demanding, gave her the opportunity to expand her knowledge of glazing.

Lucie Rie became a British citizen in 1945, and shortly thereafter, the war ended. As a new era was beginning in Britain, one was also beginning for Rie. Hans Coper, also a refugee from Hitler’s Germany, came to Rie’s studio looking for work. He had been trained as a textile worker, but Rie taught him to make pottery and he helped her to produce not only the buttons and jewelry, but also tableware and other domestic ware. In addition, Coper encouraged Rie to follow her own style instead of emulating Leach, and their mutual support of each other played a highly influential role in the development of each artist. Coper soon developed his own style, much different from hers in that his forms were complex, often unglazed and textured, and he frequently rubbed the surfaces with oxides producing the effect of other materials, such as stone. Rie and Coper continued to share a studio for the next 12 years until Coper left to establish his own studio, but their strong friendship lasted until Coper died in 1981.

Slowly Rie began to establish her reputation not only in England but also abroad. She bought an electric kiln in 1948 which permitted her to develop a much larger range of glaze effects on the earthenware and in a few years porcelain ware as well. A visit to Avebury introduced her to the sgraffito technique which she began adapting to her pots. Leach, who had been critical of her earlier work, was enthusiastic about her new work and was very helpful in not only introducing her work to buyers, but also arranging for her to teach at Camberwell. She continued to show her work, and the London Arts Council exhibition in 1967 marked the recognition of her position in the world of ceramic art. The next year she received the Order of the British Empire award and the following year was given an honorary doctorate from The Royal College of Art. In 1989 she was named Commander of the British Empire, and in 1990 Dame of the British Empire.
Rie’s work evolved over the years as well. In the 1960’s she began making flared bottle forms which were thrown in two pieces. Often they were made using two clays, forming a spiral pattern in the clay. It has been said that “Formally she drew on almost every ceramic tradition but depended on none.” A major exhibition of her work was held at the Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, and later at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1989 her pots were exhibited along with the fashions of the noted Japanese designer Issey Miyake in Tokyo and Osaka. In 1992 the Arts Council, London, held a retrospective of her work in honor of her 90th birthday, and in 1994 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York honored her with an exhibition of her work and that of Hans Coper.

Lucie Rie suffered a series of strokes beginning in 1990 which prevented her from continuing her career and eventually made her increasingly dependent on others for her care. She had never remarried, and although she had several close friendships over the years, she lived and worked alone at her home in Albion Mews. While she considered herself fully British, she retained her Austrian accent and the formal manners and elegance of her Viennese upbringing. Somewhat stiff and severe with students and people she did not know well, she was warm and very supportive of her close circle of friends. At the end of her life, it was her friends who helped care for her at her home where she died on April 1, 1995, having lived nearly an entire century.

Lucie Rie remained true to her style throughout her life. She was at base a potter, devoted to the wheel and to the functional shapes made on it. From there, however, she followed her own vision rather than prevailing fashion or even accepted “rules.” She used glazes meant for stoneware on earthenware; produced delicate, understated pieces during a time when bigger and bolder was in style; created richly glazed pieces in a single oxidizing firing; and produced a large body of work that is delicate, sculptural, richly glazed, and still fully functional. She is rightly considered an icon of post-war ceramic arts and her work is included in the collections of major museums throughout the world.


**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – LUCIE RIE**

**Books and Catalogs**


**Periodicals**


**Video and Other Media**


**GALLERY REPRESENTATION – LUCIE RIE**

Garth Clark Gallery, 24 West 57 Street, Suite 305, New York, New York 10019

Galerie Besson, 15 Royale Arcade, 28 Old Bond Street, London W1S 4SP, England

**WEB SITES – LUCIE RIE**

http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/points_of_view/pots/rie/index.html
Victoria and Albert Museum web site; 6 people respond to “Teapot and Jug” made by Dame Lucie Rie in approximately 1936.

Metropolitan Museum of Art Rie and Coper bowl

http://www.criticalceramics.org/reviews/shows/riecoper.shtml
“Extracting Essence: Less is More.” Article by Forrest Snyder.

http://www.garthclark.com/Artist-Detail.cfm?ArtistsID=52&Object=
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Brief biography of Lucie Rie

http://www.ruffordcraftcentre.org.uk/ceramic/history/hist3.htm
Essay on Lucie Rie and Hans Coper by Edmund de Waal

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Article about English Heritage Blue Plaque established for Lucie Rie

Resume/biography of Lucie Rie

http://www.frankpishkur.com/lecture2.doc
Essay on British potters including Rie and Coper


http://www.godsonandcoles.co.uk/rie.htm
Biography of Rie

http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue005/keepingquiet.htm
http://www.vads.ac.uk/results.php?cmd=search&words=%22lucie+rie%22&mode=boolean
Link to VADS on-line art resource with numerous archived materials on Lucie Rie

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