

Charmian Johnson, 1939-2020

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"I have long since noticed how many of Charmian's bowls have that pure intense beauty that stabs you in the heart."

—Doris Shadbolt [1]

On July 20, 2020, we lost one of British Columbia's and Canada's finest potters, **Charmian Johnson**. *The following tribute was written by fellow potter and friend, Amy Gogarty.*



Charmian Johnson in her studio, 2011. Photo by Amy Gogarty.

Characterized by a fierce intelligence and dedication to her craft, Charmian Johnson produced some of the most beautiful ceramic works seen in this region. Her mastery of subtle glazes and clean, graceful forms ensures her place in the Canadian canon of ceramic art, but the true value of her legacy exceeds the material residue of her creative practice. Charmian Johnson was keenly attuned to qualities of craft, form and vision that come together to create beautiful functional objects. She recognized and noted these qualities in work made by others, enhancing our appreciation of the ceramic arts.

Born in Pouce Coupe, BC, in 1939, Charmian attended Delta High School in Ladner and later the University of British Columbia. In the 1960s, she taught elementary and secondary school. She attended graduate studies at the Faculty of Education at UBC, where she studied with [Glenn Lewis](#). She taught for one year at the University of Saskatchewan and in the Faculty of

Education at UBC from 1971 to 1977, at which time she left to pursue “a potter’s life.” She augmented her education with travels to Britain, Turkey, France, Morocco and Malaysia, interacting with local artists and viewing international ceramics collections.[2]

In 1970, she purchased a house, backyard studio and 36-cubic-foot gas kiln from fellow potter and Leach apprentice [Michael Henry](#). The house was located at 557 13th Avenue East, where she lived until the last year of her life. The kiln has an interesting history. Possibly the first of its kind in Vancouver, the original kiln was built by Ricardo Gomez in a studio used by Glenn Lewis and others on West 4th Avenue under the Granville Street Bridge. After the city closed down the studio in 1966, Michael Henry painstakingly relocated the kiln to its new home.[3] He shared the kiln and his vast knowledge of firing with others, including Charmian and [Gathie Falk](#), who were in the process of building a large updraft kiln in the garage behind Gathie’s house on 51st Avenue east of Fraser Street. Charmian moved in with the express intention of “maintaining the quality of pottery made there.” In time, the kiln showed its age, so, in 1976, she rebuilt it, christening it “Bertha—my most excellent and eccentric kiln.”

The studio she took over from Michael measured 20 x 30 feet, with 12 foot ceilings. In addition to the kiln, the studio incorporated an area for throwing, a kick wheel with motorized assist, a glazing area, storage for pots, clay and glaze materials, all organized to the standards of a science lab. In an early issue of *Western Potter*, published by the BC Potters’ Guild, Michael provided a detailed drawing, which would be of use to any young potter setting up a studio.[4] My impression of Charmian’s studio was that the layout was very little changed from Michael’s model, with the exception of the addition of a gas stove, which kept things toasty in the winter. The studio was invariably spotless, light and airy--a wonderful place to work.

After leaving teaching, Charmian threw herself fully into the life of a potter. In 1978, with encouragement from Michael Henry, she spent several months at the [Leach Pottery in St. Ives](#), Cornwall, photographing and cataloguing Leach’s large and diverse collection of pots. The experience of handling this extraordinary collection honed her own aesthetic, committing her all the more firmly to her chosen medium.



Charmian spent many hours with Bernard Leach, who, by this time, was nearly blind. In the afternoons, she would read back to him portions of a manuscript he was completing and gather information for the cataloguing work. [5] The two often discussed glazes and the importance of drawing. In 2010, when I interviewed her for a review of an exhibition of [Doris Shadbolt](#)'s collection at the Gallery of BC ceramics, she told me the story of a beautiful azure celadon glaze she used on pill boxes Shadbolt had treasured. While cataloguing a pot with this glaze, Leach asked her if she used this celadon. He was pleased to learn that she did.

She mentioned she found it difficult to master, to which he agreed, adding that when one did, it was worthwhile, so she should continue on. This was great encouragement to a young potter, and, master it she did, producing a range of achingly beautiful glazes to complement her graceful bowls and boxes.[6]

On that trip, she met and examined the collections of other potters whose work she greatly admired, [Lucie Rie](#) and [Michael Cardew](#). She continued on to Tangiers, Morocco, where she lived from 1978 to 1981, studying with the Berber master potter Malem Ahmed Cherkaoui. Conditions were primitive, but she was thrilled by the experience:

Their clay arrived on the back of a camel, and fuel for their large, simple, updraft kiln was collected about town. For one firing, the fuel was worn-out boots and shoes. . . “It was very heavy work,” Johnson recalls, “and at barely survival income.”[7]

Coincidentally, it was while she was in Tangiers recovering from a serious illness that she began working in her second major area of interest, botanical illustration. Charmian had always loved gardens, something she related to her childhood and her mother's beautiful English garden. Using black ink and an assortment of extremely fine pens, she built up her drawings with layers of tiny marks, creating light and shadow of such subtle gradations the drawings appear to be filled with colour. While sufficiently detailed and accurate to be included in exhibitions of botanical art, they are also magnificent compositions that convey the experience of place and sensation of being in the presence of the flower. The drawings functioned as a sort of diary, showing “her own state of being . . . in those places at the time they were drawn.”[8] Drawings produced in Morocco include fragments of architecture that conjure visions of North African courtyards; works produced in Hawaii balance dense foliage against a spatial vastness of air and sea, and those completed at home in Vancouver explore increasingly subtle and intricate compositions.

For years she worked on them alongside her ceramics, leaving her drawing board set up in her living room, but they received little exposure until a solo exhibition of 37 large drawings at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1989 revealed them to the wider world. More recently, a number

of these stunning works were shown in a group show, *Nature*, at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver.[9] Charmian saw close connections between flowers and pots, writing in her 1989 artist statement that “flowers unfold on the page in their own inimitable way, just as a delicate and translucent bowl unfolds in the hand.” [10] With her drawings, she wrote, “I express a personal vision, with a wonder-filled discipline and genuine love.” [11]

Over the years, Charmian continued to make and sell her pots, often from her back garden, and to exhibit in solo and group exhibitions, where her work attracted critical acclaim. In 1985, Glenn Allison curated her first major solo exhibition, presenting 99 out of approximately 4000 bowls he estimated she had thrown in the previous eight years. Allison asserts in his curatorial essay:

The form offers to her the ultimate intellectual challenge, that of reconciling foot to bowl, inside to outside, glaze to body and pot to kiln location.[12]

A brief, unsigned review of that exhibition stated “Johnson. . . is a potter who can bring infinity inside the circumference of a five-inch tea bowl.” These comments, alongside deeply appreciative assessments of her sensuous glazes, indicate the esteem with which her work is held. It has been avidly sought by collectors, many of whom purchased multiple pieces. Doris Shadbolt (1918-2003), curator and associate director of the Vancouver Art Gallery for many years, was a passionate supporter who wrote movingly about her pots. [John Chalke](#), himself a Governor General Award winner, wrote of her work:

One can tell a Johnson pot from 20 metres away. They are distinct, sometimes they break form unpredictably, but they have that same considered contemplative quality so calmly redolent of Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott’s work. The character of the potter can be read here without difficulty.[13]

This last quote comes from John Chalke’s review of the catalogue for *Thrown: Influences and Intentions in West Coast Ceramics*, a major exhibition of BC ceramic work from the 1960s and 70s. Charmian worked with Lee Plested and Scott Watson curating the exhibition, which was held at the Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, in 2004. Researching the exhibition and assisting with the catalogue were enormous undertakings into which Charmian threw herself. Her dedication is evidenced in the voluminous notes she made, corrections she offered, and in her thorough documentation of John Reeve’s potters’ marks included in the catalogue.[14] The exhibition recognizes the influence of Bernard Leach on ceramics in this region as transmitted by four of his apprentices who returned to Vancouver. These four introduced their knowledge and appreciation of that ceramic heritage, stimulating other potters, who transformed it into something new and authentic to this region. The project offered Charmian an opportunity to express her deep appreciation of and admiration for her fellow potters.



I first met Charmian in 2006 shortly after moving from Calgary to Vancouver. With colleagues Mireille Perron and Ruth Chambers, I co-edited the anthology *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, which included an excellent essay by Paul Mathieu about *Thrown*.^[15] We hoped to use images of the exhibition to illustrate Paul's essay. I was tasked with getting permission from the artists whose work appeared in our selected images--Tam Irving, Michael Henry, [Ian Steele](#) and Charmian Johnson. Little did I realize what a fortuitous opportunity this was, as it introduced me to some of Vancouver's most esteemed ceramic artists.

Charmian was incredibly gracious and accommodating, inviting me into her house and studio and helping me make contact with the other artists. In the end, I think it was more my little dog Elvis she adored (and he, her), but, for whatever reason, we became friends. As we lived within a few blocks of each other, we were often in each other's homes and gardens. Many of the plants I used to transform my barren Vancouver Special yard came from her, replete with detailed instructions as to their care. When I was hit by a car and bedridden for several months, she sat and regaled me with tales of her time spent in Tangiers or her adventures in Malaysia and Brunei. On summer days, I helped her wedge clay or sieve glazes in her sunny back yard and studio, and, while she insisted on firing her kiln Bertha solo, I would visit and watch while she did so. The sight of her updraft kiln roaring, black smoke pouring from the chimney in reduction, was unforgettable.

Her home was an Aladdin's cave: open any cabinet door and out would come a treasured pot, either an historical Chinese or Japanese masterwork, or a contemporary one she admired. We took tea poured from a Linda Sikora tea pot, drank from a selection of her beautiful cups or nibbled fruit from one of her bowls. Listening to Charmian expound on pots, glazes and fellow artists was magical and mind-opening, but she was also interested in current affairs and politics, particularly those touching on the environment. We would discuss almost anything on our many trips prowling around second-hand stores or collecting vegetables from one of Richmond's many market gardens. Having grown up in Delta, she was disturbed to see the province abandon its commitment to agricultural reserve land and to witness development that was so blighting her beloved region.



She was invariably helpful to my research. For a paper I was writing about Arthur Erickson’s ceramics collection, she took me to visit his historic home and garden at Courtenay and West 14th Avenue, near where she once lived. [16] She recounted stories of friends who had skinny-dipped in the pond he constructed in front of his tiny home. She arranged for me to have lunch with Gordon Smith, who also loved pots and who lived in a house designed by Erickson. She and Gordon had been colleagues at UBC, and she had been a dear friend of Gordon’s wife Marion. She took me to meet Jean Fahrni, who graciously spent the entire afternoon showing us her marvelous collection of Asian ceramics. Listening to Charmian and Jean reminisce about their experiences, pots and people, I felt I was in the presence of ceramic goddesses.

Being new to the city, I would not likely have had these opportunities, and these are but a few examples of Charmian’s generosity to younger artists and writers. Health issues often prevented her attending artist talks or openings, but she got around to exhibitions and was very positive about young ceramists like Gailan Ngan and Lisa Henriques, who had apprenticed with her long-time friend Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. She also appreciated the work of scholars like [Paul Mathieu](#), [Carol Mayer](#), [Nora Vaillant](#) and [Debra Sloan](#), and their efforts to preserve the history of ceramics in our region.

Charmian Johnson was the “real deal.” She was fiercely independent, meticulous in her craftsmanship and completely dedicated to her vision. She built a rich, creative life that supported her commitment to a total way of life as an artist-potter. She brought her aesthetic sensibility to bear on everything she touched--her beautiful garden, her knowledge of materials, her intellectual curiosity and her friendships. Her near-endless variations on familiar forms marked by simplicity and clarity highlight her exquisite glazes. Her work calls out to be handled and loved; her bowls live with you and direct your attention not as much to the maker as to the beauty around us. We are fortunate that her pots remain to console us as we mourn her loss.

NOTES:

*All images of Charmian's work (above) are by Ray Gogarty.

- [1] Quoted in Tom Graf, unpublished curator statement for *Ron David and Charmian Johnson*, Pendulum Gallery, Vancouver, 2002.
- [2] Much of this essay is based on conversations and disparate notes and articles given to me over the years by Charmian. I have tried to cite specific sources for information where possible.
- [3] Unpublished notes. Nora Valliant has collected much of this information in her excellent essay “High-Fire Culture in British Columbia: A Chronology, circa 1950-1970,” in Scott Watson, Naomi Sawada and Jana Tyner, eds, *Thrown: British Columbia’s Apprentices of Bernard Leach and their Contemporaries* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, 2009), p. 54.
- [4] Michael Henry, “A Pottery Workshop in the City,” *Western Potter* 6 (1966), pp. 23-25.
- [5] Jim Weaver, “Charmian Johnson,” *Ceramics Monthly* (April, 2001), p. 63.
- [6] Amy Gogarty, “The Doris Shadbolt Collection,” *Ceramics Art and Perception* 85 (2011), p. 71.
- [7] Weaver, p. 64.
- [8] qtd. in Jill Pollack, “Art Line: Flora,” *Vancouver Courier*, April 26, 1989.
- [9] “Rebecca Brewer, Rochelle Goldberg, Charmian Johnson, Christina Mackie, *Nature*, January 26–March 3, 2018,” Catriona Jeffries, online: <https://catrionajeffries.com/exhibitions/nature-january-26-march-3-2018> Accessed July 26, 2020.
- [10] Artist’s Statement, “Charmian Johnson,” Brochure, Vancouver Art Gallery, April 15 to June 5, 1989.
- [11] Unpublished letter, Charmian Johnson to Lorna Farrell-Ward, curator, November 9, 1988.
- [12] Unpublished manuscript, Glenn Allison, “An Exhibition of Bowls by Charmian Johnson,” 1985.
- [13] Unpublished manuscript, John Chalke, supplied by Barbara Tipton, July 26, 2020.
- [14] Charmian Johnson, “John Reeve: His Potter’s Marks,” in *Thrown*, pp. 197-209.
- [15] Paul Mathieu, “The Brown Pot and the White Cube,” in Ruth Chambers, Amy Gogarty and Mireille Perron, eds, *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007), pp. 45-56.

[16] The Erickson Garden, Arthur Erickson Foundation, online:
<https://www.aefoundation.ca/tours>. Accessed July 26, 2020.