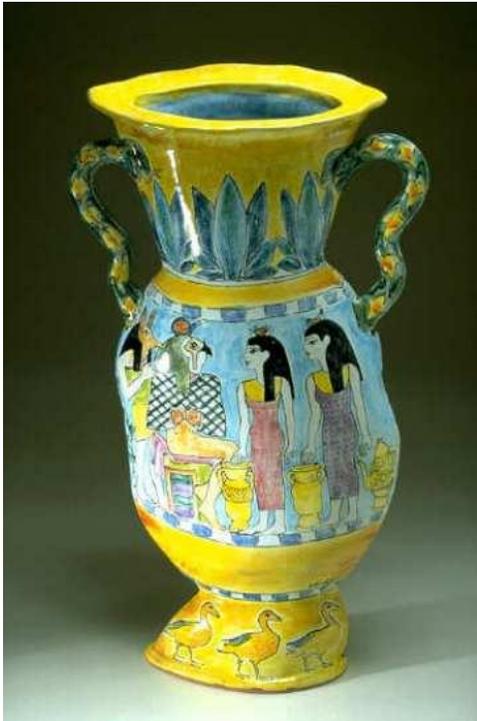


The Artful Potters

By Ruth Kelly

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In the early '70s, they sold their pots wherever whim took them - a gypsy pottery caravan, if you will. In the mid-'90s, they are among Canada's preeminent ceramic artists, their illusionistic majolica vessels sought after by museums and juried shows and galleries around the world.

"We're more famous than rich," laughs Richard Selfridge. But Richard and Carol Selfridge have managed to marry commerce and art, supporting themselves with their talent for the past 25 years. It is not a simple feat, as even this successful couple would attest.

"We'll build the pieces together, especially the large pieces which may require four hands to move them around," explains Carol. "We both have our strengths. Richard has a tremendous amount of energy. I can paint forever. But the work is really a blend of our strengths."

The essence of Selfridge Pottery is informed whimsy. Mythological and literary references run rampant through their pieces. A narghty swan casts a covetous eye on Leda's

bare breasts. Eve holds up a half-eaten apple, tempting you to join her. This is art for the adventurous collector who can appreciate its subtle wit along with its tactile nature.

They have built their business like they build their pots - with dedication and studied excellence. The foundation is their passion for the clay; the texture under their hands, the secrets which are revealed in its shape. It can be an unforgiving taskmaster. But over the years they have learned to dance with it, imposing order upon its often unruly nature.

The endless experimenting with techniques and glazing brought them to majolica which allows them to combine their pottery craftsmanship with their love of painting. The result is fantastical images slathered upon shapes which trick the eye into seeing round where it isn't there and size where it doesn't exist. It's a collaborative exercise for the couple. They both build; they both paint, often on the same piece. Though clients often want to know who was the artist for a particular work, both Carol and Richard agree that it's impossible to define their art that way.

"Ceramic art, as a medium, tends to attract people who are interested in more cutting edge pursuits," muses Richard. "This art doesn't automatically have the stamp of approval of being museum or fine art kind of work. But people respond to our work. It's up, it's bright, they find themselves drawn to our pieces."



Peter Ohler of Calgary's Master Gallery concurs. "All you have to do is put a Selfridge piece in the window, and you get nose prints all over the glass. Their pottery sells well. It's quality work, with a unique nature and the prices are very reasonable for what you get."

Masters Gallery, one of the 18 galleries in North America which represent Selfridge Pottery, has handled the pieces for the past year.

Though Ohler commends the couple for their talent, technical ability and drive, he also notes that it was the Selfridges themselves who had a large part to do with his decision to take on their art. "We like what they do but we also like them as well. They are professionals, who know how to present their work. They market themselves well."

And that certainty is the second element in Selfridges' success. Richard and Carol are astute marketers who recognize that, like any other business, the creation of their pots is just the beginning.

Then you want each one of those quality pieces to sell the next piece of work. To do that, you need a direct path back to you in some way."

The Selfridges have established that direct path in a variety of ways. Each of their pieces, from the \$2200 diptych to the \$16 coffee mugs, are signed. They only place their art with galleries who value it. "You can't let your best teapot be sold in a store with four other pieces by beginning artists who, because they use similar colours, may be confused with you." Richard goes on.

"As artists, we know we are very unique because we have lived exclusively by our work for the last 25 years," Richard explains.

"When we talk to other artists, they always ask us how we do it. There are three or four things we've learned over the years that I think are incredibly important.

"First of all, the amount of work any one or two artists will do in a lifetime, even working all the time, is not really very much, in the grand scheme of the world. So it's important that each of your pieces be made with quality.

"You sell your work by your reputation," Carol adds. "It's important to let our local market know that our pieces are valued internationally."

Which is one of reasons they submit to the significant juried shows around the world, from Texas to New Zealand. The Selfridges have capitalized on their critical acclaim by creating a series of postcards which they send out to their current client base as well as to



prospective galleries. The postcards also direct people to their website www.selfridgeceramicart.ca which offers a more thorough examination of Selfridge Pottery, including a retrospective exhibition.

Richard and Carol may be ahead of their marketplace with the development of the website. Most galleries are not yet sufficiently wired to access the site. However, the Selfridges are not discouraged.

Carol: "Our plan was not to create a catalog of our art that people would order from. Richard and I felt that if we got on now, then over the next 10 years, it would become a good vehicle for galleries, to let them look at our work. "We include a listing of our galleries on our website," Richard notes, "for browsers who may have their interest piqued by the images.

*** living if we weren't sufficiently outgoing to enjoy meeting these people who want desperately to see 'the artist'." The bonus, Richard hastily adds, is that generally, they like these people.

"Oh yes, it's very gratifying when they absolutely love your work or if they've made a special trip or brought someone else over," Carol agrees. "Some artists think if they give up their privacy, they'll die.

Actually, giving up some of that privacy means that you get constant feedback on your work. It's kind of like constant 'atta boys". That keeps you psychologically able to do your

"The presentation of yourself in the artists," he continues. "That's why We've done our own photography, demanding about that kind of stuff, It's all of a piece."

Another word of advice: stay in the things about being successful as people want to meet you.



world is incredibly important to we created our website ourselves. our own writing - we're very the same way we are with our work.

contact with your public. "One of an artist," Carol explains, "is that

work." And so even though their work is available in galleries and displayed in museums, the Selfridges still maintain a small shop at the front of their home and still host an open house biannually for 200 to 300 of their loyal clients. "All these years, as people have collected our pieces, we have been collecting people," Carol laughs.

"When we started, it was possible to live on \$300 a month. Any extra money would buy us a bottle of wine." Now their pottery is in Prime Minister Chretien's collection and at the

We're lucky there are two of us. It means there is always one person to meet the public. We couldn't have made a

***'Picasso' Museum in France. They have served their muse well. In return, it has rewarded them.