



ANTIQUES OF THE FUTURE

# Inspired by the East

A year in Thailand opened up a new path for ceramicist Frances Priest

FEATURE CAROLINE WHEATER PHOTOGRAPHS SHANNON TOFTS

Ceramicist Frances Priest begins most days with a bracing five-minute walk from her home in Leith to a shared studio overlooking the Water of Leith.

'Leith has a working-class heritage that isn't as rarefied as Edinburgh, which is why I like it so much,' she says. Her second-floor studio is in the Coburg House Art Studios, a converted 1930s warehouse that is now the base for 70 artists and craftspeople. Frances, 34, moved in last year and shares a space with five other ceramicists. 'My work requires lots of concentration but it's always been important to me to be with other people. We banter, play music, listen to Radio 4 and share kilns, equipment and knowledge.'

Sharing is at the heart of Frances's philosophy. Her collections of highly-patterned stoneware ceramics are designed to be conversation pieces rather than functional objects. Where some see seashells, others see marrows, flowers or fruit. 'I was never motivated to make domestic things.

My pieces are about an experience, a moment. I like the idea that each person goes off in a different direction when they see them,' she says.

## Early promise

Frances was set off on the maker's path by her parents. 'I have strong memories of making clothes and baking. I was always drawing, too,' she remembers. Aged 18, her drawing skills won her a place on an art foundation course at Dewsbury College of Art, where she met a kindred spirit in tutor and potter David Roberts. 'The course was a bit like boot camp and helped us identify our natural skills,' she says. 'David is a raku expert and his work is all about making drawings on clay. He taught me how clay can take up marks and I found I liked constructing things. He was very influential and now we exhibit in the same galleries!'

When Frances left home in 1995 to study ceramics at Edinburgh College of Art, she was the first person in her family to go to university. »



This page, from top Part of the collection Frances made for her solo show 'Objects of Touch and Travel'; the vibrant colours of a hot climate are reflected in Frances's ceramics Facing page Frances in her Leith studio, where she hand-builds hollow shapes to decorate with patterns and colourful glazes

‘Where some see seashells, others see marrows, flowers or fruit’







'I was pretty determined to do well,' she says – and she did, gaining a first class degree and winning a scholarship for a one-year post-graduate diploma.

As soon as she left college and established her own practice, her work turned heads. 'Back then I made bone china pieces in monochrome colours – it was in response to the graphic style of the St Ives artists, people like Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth,' she explains. Her first break came when she was offered a showcase at Dundee Contemporary Arts in 2000 and invitations to attend important craft shows, such as SOFA in Chicago and Talente in Munich, followed.

Frances never wanted to compromise her work by having to make money from it, so she juggled several jobs to pay the bills. One was as an assistant to Amanda Game, who ran the influential Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh. 'I met amazing artists,' says Frances, 'and I learnt about setting up exhibitions and how to use the space.'

The Scottish Gallery offered Frances her first solo show in 2003 and a creative development award from the Scottish Arts Council allowed her to develop a body of work for it. When the National Museum of Scotland bought a piece from the 'Line & Form' show for its contemporary ceramics collection, Frances was bowled over. 'To be part of a historical collection was a real high point in my career and gave me more confidence.'

Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum and the V&A have also since added her work to their collections.

#### Adventure calls

Despite early success, Frances began to get restless as she approached her 30th birthday. 'I hadn't had that gap year! And I was still hedging my bets about being a full-time artist, so I wanted to run away for a while,' she says. An artist's residency came up at an international school in Thailand and Frances had no hesitation in taking up the post. From autumn 2005 to summer 2006, she threw herself into school life, helping infants to 18-year-olds express themselves artistically. She also travelled widely in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Japan, soaking up the atmosphere and the visual landscape. 'I noticed the abundance of bright colours and patterning on everything from temple mosaics to kimonos. There is a depth of craft skills that we are losing in Britain – they commit time to each piece.'

She came home with over 4,000 digital photos cataloguing her experiences, which formed the basis for her next project, 'Objects of Touch and Travel'. A departure from her previous work, these hand-built ceramics are smaller in scale and brilliantly colourful. Their tactile shapes range from diamonds to objects that wobble. There are small boxes too. 'They can be odd, silly, curious,'

‘The tactile shapes of her brilliantly colourful ceramics range from diamonds to objects that wobble’

This page, clockwise from top left **Incising a vessel with a scalpel; Frances loves organic shapes; she tests numerous glaze combinations; drawing on pattern is a time-consuming process** Facing page, from left **Using a cookie cutter to make a leaf shape; Frances took over 4,000 photos during her travels in the Far East and uses them as a visual reference for her current body of work**

explains Frances, 'but they are all familiar without being obvious.' The pieces are all intricately patterned, too – inspired by things such as strings of beads or Ikat weaving techniques. Frances's favourite task is to spend hours incising patterns freehand into clay, using a scalpel, cake decorating implements and modelling tools.

Once the object has been fired to biscuit stage, Frances can begin to inlay the incised pattern with clay oxide colours – currently the turquoises, yellows, oranges, greens and reds inspired by her year abroad. After firing again, the objects are sanded back. Finally, she paints on glazes and fires again to give richness to the colours and a glossy, shiny finish. 'Sometimes I apply a layer of wax to protect them, after they've come out of the kiln,' she says.

The process of exhibiting the finished collections is all part of her work. She runs handling sessions, during which visitors can pick the pieces up and even rearrange them – although not many do. 'I'm surprised people don't move them around more,' she says. 'I believe in the power of making things – it's a route into creating conversations and bringing people together. My work feels much more democratic now and I'm reaching a wider audience.' The delight that people take in her ceramics, and the stories they trigger, will always be what makes Frances tick.

✪ Frances will be showing with the Scottish Gallery from 14th-17th May at 'Collect', The Saatchi Gallery, King's Road, London ([craftscouncil.org.uk](http://craftscouncil.org.uk)) and from 15th May-28th June as part of 'Meet Your Maker' at Timespan, Helmsdale, Sutherland ([craftscotland.co.uk](http://craftscotland.co.uk)). Prices start at £175 for a decorative box and £300 for a tube. Contact Frances on 07879 636358 or see [francespriest.co.uk](http://francespriest.co.uk)

#### COLLECTING FRANCES PRIEST

One of the *Antiques Roadshow's* chief potaholics, Eric Knowles, took an instant liking to Frances Priest's work

'What makes a ceramicist stand out is the originality and quality of their craftsmanship. It's always form that grabs my attention first, then an interesting use of glaze. Frances's forms borrow from nature and nature rarely gets it wrong. I'm attracted to a style I call restrained-elaborate, which means decoration within a frame. Pieces by Frances are like mini pictures filled with intricate pattern. I love her choice of glazes too – these are happy colours that create the effect of looking at them in sunshine.'

'As Frances already has museum credibility, she is collectable. But I would buy something because I loved it, not because it might be a good investment. My rule of thumb is if, in 10 years' time, what you bought was worth less than you paid for it, would you mind? If you would, don't buy it.'



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