



THE OTTAWA GUILD OF POTTERS

Fired UP!

This article is the first of a series of periodic explorations of Ottawa area ceramic crafts people for the Ottawa Guild of Potters. Your contribution is invited at newsletter@ottawaguildofpotters.ca

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Newsletter Editor*

Leta and Don Cormier

Leaders in the Ottawa Arts World

By Wade Vienneau



Don and Leta today

Credit: Nicole Woodcock

Leta and Don Cormier have been partners in clay for over 35 years. They married in the early 1970's and began a journey together that started off similar to many young couples, moving away for work. Don was educated as an architect and Leta in Early Childhood Education. They moved from the Maritimes to Ottawa, then to Vancouver and finally back to Ottawa. They were amongst the first members of the Ottawa Guild of Potters in 1975.

While Leta was in Nova Scotia she taught school while Don worked as an architect. The Halifax Board of Education was dedicated to strengthen its visual arts program at the Elementary School level and offered an opportunity to study at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. It was as a participant of this program that Leta's childhood passion for clay and pottery was rekindled. 1972-73 saw the Cormier's in Ottawa but fresh opportunities presented themselves to Don and off to Vancouver they went. There were no teaching positions available in Vancouver which opened a new opportunity for Leta to renew her passion for clay.

The couple decided that Leta should have the opportunity to follow her new passion and take more pottery classes for the duration of their stay in Vancouver. She found many wonderful instructors and mentors at the Vancouver School of Art and Douglas College which included Fred Owen, Walter Dexter and Wayne Ngan. Soon Don followed her into the world of clay and helped create their displays.



Leta and Don at the OCC Raku Show in 1988

Credit: Ann Tompkins

After two years in Vancouver Don's work as an architect brought them back to Ottawa. Leta was now fully committed to following her passion and set up a studio in the basement of their townhouse and started to make raku fired work, one of the first in Ontario.



Stoneware Teapot by Leta Cormier

Once again Don and Leta were surrounded by a community of artists and crafts people. They joined local, provincial and national associations and made many lifelong friends. Students turned into colleagues, curators and fans. Their journey in clay propelled them to travel. While travelling they visited many potters, galleries and museums like the Victoria & Albert, British Museum in England and the Mingei-Kan and Ohara in Japan. They surrounded themselves with other ceramic artists, craftspeople, enthusiasts and their work reflected their passion.

Like many of their contemporaries, Don and Leta were attracted to the Japanese tradition, taking inspiration from Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. Appreciation of Hamada's fidelity to his craft inspired Don to look more carefully at his own work as a potter and as an architect. Both pursuits required a mindfulness of space. This concern for spatial relationships is also evident in Don's choice of decoration methods and his balanced structures. He always considers the balance between the inside and the outside of his forms. By examining the rhythmic attributes of a piece he finds complimentary surface decoration, or chooses no decoration at all.



Patterned Stoneware Bowl by Don Cormier

Leta's work reflects her passion for balance and the natural movement of her body. She brings in the colours, textures and rhythms into her vessels which reflect her love of nature.

Leta always said "you can tell my pots from Don's because we decorate them very differently. Sometimes I throw them and he decorates." They use the same materials in different ways. The forms, content, gesture and weight of their pieces are different and are decorated very differently. But a symbiotic partnership has always benefited them. They have a ritual of spending time loading and unloading the kiln together.

While they unload the kiln and set the pieces out to cool, they discuss them. Often times they work their way through the kiln in the morning and speak about their work all through the day and revisit their work after it's cooled, bringing them to the dinner table like honoured guests.

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Leta's first foray into the Ottawa art world was a solo exhibit titled *Raku* at Eric Rusmiser's gallery *Between Spaces* on Flora Street in 1976. The following year Don and Leta exhibited together at Eric's gallery in their show titled *Stoneware and Raku*. Before this, and for many years after, Leta and Don sold their wares at craft fairs and the Ottawa Guild of Potters' annual sale at the Glebe Community Centre. And later at the Well's Gallery and Ufundi Gallery on Sussex Drive, The Pottery Shop, Guild Shop and Ashton's in Toronto. Their work was entered into juried shows as well.

Stoneware Bottle by Leta Cormier

As Ontario Potters Association members, now known as FUSION, Don and Leta were fortunate to participate in the many education presentations by such illustrious ceramic artists as Paul Soldner, Michael Cardew, David Leach, Michael Casson and Tatsuzo Shimaoka. Being amongst the first of many to join the fledgling associations, like the *Ontario Potters Association* (OPA) and the *Ontario Crafts Council* (OCC), as well as Arts Court and the Ottawa Art Gallery, they helped to build the foundations for these grassroots organizations. These organizations are now responsible for educating other future artists and crafts people, part of our community's art history and structure.



They still lead by example, openly and happily sharing their knowledge. They truly enjoy teaching. Don and Leta's best advice to potters is to work and explore, to find and follow your own true path, always be open to others' work, and be willing to share and support others on their path. The responsibility of the *Ottawa Guild of Potters* members should not stop with the individual. We are all part of a Guild and should make a real effort to educate the public, especially our youth. Like Leta and Don, we will enrich our lives as ceramic artists within this community.

The End

For more information about the Ottawa Guild of Potters and our work, visit www.ottawaguildofpotters.ca



The author, Wade Vienneau, is a potter with the Ottawa Guild of Potters.

