

# ROBIN HOPPER

## Life as a Journey: Clay and Imagination as the Fuel

by Evelyne Schoenmann

Remember the “clay story” evening at NCECA Providence, where people could go up on the stage and tell their clay story? And suddenly, on a big screen, there was Robin Hopper, saying hello and talking about his lifetime with clay. We were all in awe, some were smiling, and some even had tears of joy in their eyes. Since Robin was too ill to travel to Providence, he talked to us via video about two Hans Coper pieces he once bought from the artist himself. Robin was sitting in the gallery in his Vancouver Island (CA) home, and round his neck he was wearing his pendant from Northern China, the three characters on it meaning “Hundred Family Protector”.

Born 1939 in London during WWII, his earliest visual memories were gas masks for children, dodging bombs, dealing with images of death and destruction and a sense of abandonment brought on by the removal of his siblings and friends. Strangely enough, the falling bombs exposed the blue clay on which London is built. After the war ended, primary education began for the boy at Woodside Green Elementary School, where much attention was paid to the arts, and little Robin learned to express himself through various art media.

At the age of seven he started his first business, making and selling jewellery made from self-hardening clay. Since he was living a short bus ride from many museums, he spent his weekends looking at art and geology. It was at the Horniman Museum that he first experienced ceramic objects from different cultures, and he was fascinated by their patterns and symbolism. Black, red and white became his favourite trio of colours and remains so to this day. For him, pots were the connecting rods between nations. Entering secondary education, he was put into the academic stream choosing arts and humanities.

It was at this time that he also developed a strong interest in theatre, hence his short professional acting career later. Education continued at Croydon College of Art, where Robin, accidentally, discovered the pottery department and was soon hooked on the cyclical nature of the material. He now had touched base with the clay of his early childhood. His instincts told him that this would become his life’s direction. Soon he became the first student member of the British Craftsmen Potter’s Association. The ten years Robin worked in England after college, he was continually changing from theatre to travel to pottery. In 1964 the time was ripe to open up his first pottery studio. It was almost impossible to sell one-of-a-kind artwork at that time, so he started to design and produce a range of functional pottery that continued for over 45 years. He began to feel claustropho-



photos - Judi Dyelle



Calendula

bic in England and dreamt of moving to Canada. He was convinced that a headstrong young artist might be able to make his mark there. He applied for and received a teaching position in Toronto and in June 1968 he and his young family arrived in Canada. He became a member of the Potters’ Guild and started selling his ware at craft markets and in galleries. Later, he was offered a position at Georgian College in Barrie to start a ceramics programme to train young artists as entrepreneurs.



Bridge

Robin Hopper was born and raised in England. His interest in pottery started already in college. At the age of 25 he opened his first pottery studio there. In 1968 he moved to Canada to be a teacher in schools and colleges. Later he opened up studios, first in Ontario, then in Metchosin (BC) and quit teaching for studio work. Over 30 years he gave multiple international workshops, wrote books about the ceramic spectrum, functional pottery and how to make marks, followed by educational videos and his autobiography, *A Lifetime of Works, Ideas and Teachings*. During his career he got prizes like the Saidye Bronfman Award and got invited to China to teach ceramic techniques lost during the Cultural Revolution. His work can be found in collections all over the world.

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Axe Jar

Then, in 1977, the big move to Metchosin on Vancouver Island, where he developed his home and studio from a derelict farmhouse and outbuildings. He received the Saidye Bronfman Award, Canada's highest visual arts award and became the first president of Ceramic Masters Canada. After 25 years of intense personal research on ceramic materials he was asked to write about it. This became his first book, titled *The Ceramic Spectrum*. He later went on to write *Functional Pottery, Making Marks*, and his autobiography, *Ceramics, a Lifetime of*

*Works, Ideas and Teachings*. Unfortunately his first marriage broke down, but after a time of reflection came a time of new love, and he married his second wife, Judi Dyelle. After a year in Montreal they moved to Robin's Victoria home and renamed the pottery studio. Chosin Pottery was born and the choreography of life

was recharged with new enthusiasm and energy. They started *Fired Up - Contemporary Works in Clay*, an annual show and sale by fourteen of British Columbia's top ceramic artists, which continues to excite. *MISSA*, the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts followed, a high-energy, alternative art school that has made a difference to many people, from teachers to students and full-time professional artists. Finally, in 1993, came the call to produce educational videos. There is so much knowledge that Robin Hopper has passed on to other ceramists that we all have a personal debt to him; let us help others develop when the opportunity arises!

Robin says, "My life seems to have been a journey over which I have had only limited control. There was someone else pulling the strings and leading me to all the places that I was supposed to go, helping me learn an odd and diverse assortment of skills that I would need on the journey and making me do things that I was meant to do. Accident, luck and the ability to spot opportunities have been my greatest allies, but you have to learn to read the signs as they come along."

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glazed slip trail