

# Lucie Rie: The Adventure of Pottery

[By Sarah Carpenter: Holburne Future Collective Member](#)



Lucie Rie was an Austrian-British artist who is renowned as one of the most important ceramic artists of the twentieth century. She is remembered for her innovative approaches to glazing and firing and her clean, modernist forms.

Rie was born in Vienna in 1902 to secular Jewish parents. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be an artist, and immediately gravitated towards pottery after seeing a pottery wheel for the first time. In 1922 she began studying pottery at a school of arts and crafts in Vienna. In 1925 she established her own studio in Vienna and continued working there for the next twelve years.

In 1939 she fled Nazi Austria, emigrating to London where she established a home and studio at 18 Albion Mews near Hyde Park. After arriving in London, Rie supported herself by producing glass and ceramic buttons under Franz Lampl who was also an Austrian refugee. Rie's years of button making allowed for experimentation and collaboration which greatly impacted her later work. She created her own moulds which she would press clay into to produce buttons and also made thrown buttons on a wheel. During this time, Rie also began experimenting with mixing her own unique glazes.



Rie experimented with combinations of ingredients to produce glazes with textured and pitted finishes, and especially loved glazes that bubbled at the surface when fired. She referred to these highly textured, bubbling glazes as her 'volcanic' glazes. She also chose to use a very unusual single-fire glazing process in which glaze would be applied to raw clay rather than the traditional application of glaze after an initial bisque firing. She initially chose to fire her work this way out of convenience as she had to transport her pots across the city by tram to be fired, but she continued to use this process long after acquiring her own kiln.

In addition to her experimental glazing work, Rie is also known for her surface techniques. On many of her works, she used a sgraffito technique, coating her pieces in coloured slip and scratching it away to reveal the original clay colour beneath, creating linear patterns or crosshatching. She also experimented with combining different coloured clays into a single piece and used a technique called 'flashing' in which she would apply powdered clay to the outside of a pot before firing to create subtle variations in colour.

In the late 1940s, Rie switched from using earthenware clay, known for its durability, to stoneware and porcelain which could be thrown thinner, creating lighter more delicate pieces. Many of the bottles and vases that Rie made during this period feature thin, undulating rims, drawing the viewers' attention to the spinning motion of the pottery wheel on which the works were made.



Rie's clean, modern forms show the influence of the modern artists and architects that she crossed paths with when she was still working in Vienna, as well as movements such as Jugendstil and Japonism. This preference for clean, architectural forms contrasts with the work of her contemporary Bernard Leach with whom her work is often compared. Leach advocated for highly organic forms which contrast with Rie's refined and minimalist forms. Her preference for these refined forms sets her apart from the predominant movement in British ceramics at the time.



However, as can be seen in her experimental glazing, Rie did not seek a look of pure refinement in her pots. Her work shows a synthesis between these two contrasting approaches to pottery: that of fine, uniform pieces with clean lines and the expressive, organic work of artists such as Leach. One of my favourite of her pieces is her pink bowl (pictured) which is an exquisite example of the way she combined expressive, experimental

techniques with great refinement of form. It features a great variety of glazes and techniques which are unified and elevated by the thin, precise shape of the thin-walled vessel.

Rie's legacy continues on in the work of ceramicists today who are inspired and informed by her experimental approaches to materiality, firing, and glazing as well as her clean, modernist forms. Her work inspired a generation of potters and continues to be recognized for its remarkable quality today.

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