

Toini Muona's career with Arabia 1931–1970

MY FRIEND THE CLAY

□ Toini Muona had an unbroken, consistent and extensive career as a ceramist. Her friendship with clay began when she was studying under W.A. Finch at the Central School of Industrial Design, from where she qualified as a ceramist in 1929, though her interest in sculpture had caused some problems choosing a career.

Toini Muona was engaged by Arabia in 1931. The following year the art department was founded there, giving the promising young potter a chance to develop into a leading artist.

FORMS EMERGE

Toini Muona became particularly skilful at the wheel, a fact for which she gave the credit to her teacher Finch. Another feature she inherited from this great pioneer of Finnish ceramics was her precise eye for proportion, trained partly by studying ancient Chinese ceramics.

In the '30s, Toini Muona's output reflected newer, freer features, side by side with the classical approach typical of the day. These she achieved by making the thrown piece asymmetrical and adding relief or impressed patterns to the surface. Her glazes were often thick, uneven or crackled.

In paring down the shapes of her pieces, Toini Muona ended up with certain types that she systematically reshaped and varied over the next few decades. They included the tall, slim, sculptural vases which began

"Clay – you are my dearest friend. When you softly caress my hand, it begins to submit to my will. Forms emerge one after another. Creative dissatisfaction constantly casts you into new moulds until at last I feel I must break everything down into primary elements and start all over again. That's how you are – my friend the clay."

*Helsinki, January 7, 1954
Toini Muona*



to appear in the early '40s. Another basic type of infinite potential was the shallow dish. She developed glazes by experimenting with the Arabia laboratory. Shaping this experimentation was both light-hearted and committed; the outcome depended totally on the spirits of the kiln. Her increasingly ascetic shapes were counterbalanced by the richness of the glazes: matte and shiny whites or a delicate green celadon, often crackled, and above all glowing copper glazes with tones from red to violet and turquoise are typical of Toini Muona's work in the '40s and '50s. Her works from this period are part of the great breakthrough of Finnish industrial design, and some of its best-known and most sought-after achievements.

CREATIVE DISSATISFACTION

Toini Muona was recognized as a pioneer very early on. She received almost nothing but encouragement and praise publicly, taking concrete form in the numerous prizes and grants she was awarded. The then curator of the Museum of Applied Arts, versatile designer Arttu Brummer, wrote in 1949 of his former pupil, "The team of ceramists working for the Arabia factory are largely responsible for demonstrating in foreign exhibitions the high quality of this branch of the Finnish arts. First among them is Toini Muona. In her vases she does not favour ornamen-



Porcelain vase and dish with copper glaze, 1950s.

continued

tation, but like the ancient Chinese potters expresses her artistic intent using purely ceramic means, through shape and glaze. For this art bound to tradition she has created completely new forms which also distinctly express the artist herself and the times."

Toini Muona understood very well what was going on. She traveled a great deal, to begin with to European centres of the arts and ceramics, but in the '60s she also had the chance to visit China, Egypt and the USA.

Nature was her primary source of inspiration and she always stressed its importance for her work. During long summers spent at her mother's childhood home of Leppävirta in eastern Finland, she absorbed the forms, colours and movements of the Finnish countryside down to the

smallest detail, later working them into the shapes, surface structures and glazes of her ceramics. She made a special study of movement through the dance.

It is interesting that her impressions of her surroundings almost always took form as pots. It is here, perhaps, that her spiritual affinity with the Song dynasty potters of China comes out, in the search for perfection spurred by 'creative dissatisfaction'.

...AND START ALL OVER AGAIN

This instinct for pots began to be displaced by a growing sculptural quality in the mid '50s, when the old slender grass and reed vases and dishes grew to monumental proportions, yet without losing their deli-

Thrown reed vases with copper glaze, 1940s. The decoration round the mouth was typical of her work at this date.

Toini Muona used impressions made with plants on cast wall plaques from the late '40s onwards.



continued

cacy. The colours of the glazes tended nearer to earth shades. White, which had always been so important in Toini Muona's output, became more crucial than ever.

This was the beginning of a great new period of creativity, in which form was stripped down to the bare essentials, while harmony of proportion lightened the strict geometry of the shape.

The geometric quality is repeated in the colours, where the effect of optic art comes out clearly. The large dishes are often glazed in white, black, and bright yellow, blue or metallic glazes reminiscent of road signs. Toini Muona also used several other forms of ceramic decoration, including a black

poured frit glaze, an interplay of matte and shiny glazes, or plastic additions such as bands or split egg shapes.

Constant renewal was not an end in itself for Toini Muona, for her new work always contained references to what had gone before. In an interview, she once said, "There has to be a sense of style and discrimination. One should never act in a fervour of emotion, but pick out the best and pare it down."

Toini Muona retired from Arabia in 1970, and died in the summer of 1987. The exhibition arranged in her memory by the Arabia Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts is in homage to her important and dynamic life's work. □

Stoneware dish, 1970.

Porcelain vase with celadon glaze, 1941.

