

Dame Lucie Rie & Hans Coper

by Angus Stewart



Among the many paying homage to Dame Lucie Rie and Hans Coper are London's Victoria and Albert Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum. There, as in many other museums around the globe, thousands of people have paused and reflected on pots that are strange and rare, enchanting and mysterious—the work of two minds engaged with earth, fire and water.

Whilst developing their skill these two potters overcame a common upheaval. Both were dispossessed by the rise of Hitler, forced to flee their homeland, and then to establish themselves in a foreign country.

Now the names and work of Rie and Coper have been inextricably linked for sixty years. The partnership between the two potters remains unparalleled. Like Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev in dance, each potter petted and provoked a part of the other's core. But unlike the star crossed lovers in *Giselle*, the friendship linking Rie and Coper deepened and enriched the individuality of each.

A.
Hans Coper
Large globe with ring, 1964
stoneware, 17.5h
photo: Alan Tabor

Two potters—two workshops

For a brief period Rie and Coper collaborated on the production of domestic ware. On those items both seals were impressed. But while Coper was painstakingly exploring different ways of expressing form, distilling one which would embody his own temperament, Rie was extending her range. By the end of the forties Coper was making pots which had no obvious reference to those of Rie.

Rie was to spend the next decades making bowls and dishes, vessels and bottles used in the home. Within these categories her invention was infinite and the number of people wanting her work grew. The mix of elegant shapes and subtle tones which had first won her international status changed out of recognition. The surfaces became more varied, the colours were slipped in and out of view—feeding off each other—and the textures ranged from the light and silky to the volcanic.

Coper too was experimenting and he took some years of enquiry before settling on his own path. Alongside his first pots he worked on architectural embellishment, tiles and wall panels. Simultaneously he was throwing 'pots' and forming shapes by hand, moving towards the production of a final work that was an amalgamation of parts. Once this approach had satisfied him, he followed it thereon.

A Lucie Rie pot was published in *The Guardian* in 1981 and I thought it marvellous. I went to interview her and she changed my understanding of pots. We became friends and at her urging I went to see Jane Coper. Jane had met Coper in 1954 and they married in 1974. It was Jane who, in a casual aside, made me realise that the distinction between the two potters was made obvious by their workshops.

Rie's workshop was divided into two sections. The entrance lobby, with a table and floor to ceiling deep shelves, was for display; the rear was for potting. The opening display was of a hundred or more pots; some precisely positioned; others in serried ranks or piled one on top of another. In the adjoining workshop pots were marooned on every available surface.

Being among the display with Rie herself, white haired and in her invariable white garb, was rather

like being on a beach. There was silence, space and the sense of being in a refuge. Each pot was a variation on white/grey, or the palest of blue. In places there was a flicker of diluted yellow or a soft creamy pink. These subtle shades were quiet and reticent. Added sparkle came from the occasional sight of iridescent turquoise, rich gold, brilliant emerald and sizzling mustard.

Once the eye had adjusted to the variety of shapes, sizes and ornamentation, it was already seduced. The onlooker could not but become a hunter, longing to explore and comprehend this cornucopia, the delicious profusion of form, the twists and turns that sent the eye spinning from one shelf to the next. The pots themselves may be the epitome of peace but they have the power to attract like a magnet sucking up pins.

Upstairs Rie's sitting room also contained pots, but they were of a different realm. No longer was one on a beach; the impression here was of objects made for a Romanesque chapel, or an Aegean temple. The colours could be bluntly described as cream, black and brown. But that is simplistic. These were votive objects, bewildering in their enticement, and colours dipping in and out of prominence, the apparently casual markings made with deliberate precision. These pots had been made by Coper and given by him to Rie. One of them, a flattened form with a disc top, made in 1970, is here at SOFA NEW YORK with the Galerie Besson. It need not be described for it can be viewed.

Rie sent me to the last studios where Coper worked. They were in Somerset. They were larger than Rie's and their size and content, their arrangement and orderly disorder had a distinction that could best be described as workmanlike. Behind the blinds, stacked on shelves, were shapes bewildering in their diversity, awesome in their splendour, massive when small, near-overwhelming if large.

Rie and Coper understood each other. Their separateness was one of closeness. Their affinity was a kinship of purpose. The respect of each for the other can best be acknowledged by appreciating the distinction that enabled each to admire the other.



C.



D.



E.

C.
Lucie Rie
'American' yellow bowl, c. 1970
porcelain, 6.5d

D.
Lucie Rie
Footed bowl, c. 1975
porcelain with light blue
crackled glaze, 6d
photo: Alan Tabor

E.
Lucie Rie
Vase, 1928-38
earthenware, buff glaze, 8.5h
signed 'L.R.G. Wien'
photo: Alan Tabor



F.
Lucie Rie
 Footed bowl, 1981
 stoneware, bronze band running
 into grey/white body, 7.2d
 photo: Alan Tabor

Lucie Rie, by her own admission, was an indulged child. She was born Lucie Gomperz, in Vienna in 1902. Hers was an extended and prosperous family circle, one that indulged in education, research, art and travel. Her great pleasure was exploring Roman ruins and collecting shards. Among her father's colleagues was Sigmund Freud; and in time, it was Freud's son Ernst, the architect, who was her boon and support in London.

In her eighties, Rie spoke with fondness of her extended family and childhood. But her memories were tinged with apology, for with hindsight she was humbled by the recall of her lavish and privileged years. She mourned the death of Egon Schiele in the great influenza epidemic in 1918, bewildered that her talent was able to ripen, when his, worth so much more in her eyes, was extinguished.

In 1922, having decided against following her father into medicine, Rie went to art school. She tried the potter's wheel and was immediately 'lost' to its sensuality and its promise of such shapes and textures as made her 'shiver'.

Success as a potter came early. In 1925 her work was exhibited at the International Exhibition in Paris. Thereafter she was established, gaining medals and praise seemingly without effort. As she herself said, she fell in love with the wheel, and it was to be her life and salvation for seventy years.

Photographs of Rie in the twenties show her as petite, neat, attractive and sporty. She loved to walk and ski. She was drawn to Ernst Rie, a buccaneer on the slopes, who was found frozen to death in the Alps. She was to marry his brother Hans, and then to dismiss him. Her marriage, she described as an 'accident' — "We talked more on the telephone when he had gone to America than we did when we were married."

In London, Lucie Rie's day was disciplined; the morning was for work, in the afternoon she would accommodate visitors. Courteous to her friends and admirers, Lucie received and dismissed them within the time she had allocated for their pleasure and her own. Her hospitality was simple and elegant, but also formal and touched with majesty.

On people she was fierce, either flattering or annihilating; for example, she venerated Sigmund Freud and excoriated his grandson, Lucian. Such verdicts did not allow contradiction, but as her manner was gentle and her tone unvarying, her praise and condemnation were delivered with equal weight. As she could sum up a pot with a glance, so she was perceptive about people. Comments she made which seemed questionable at that moment turned out to be prescient; alert and keen-eyed, her judgments were delivered in stringent phrases.

Rie's preference was to be with individuals rather than crowds, so time spent with her was of its essence intimate. However, she tended to disguise her feelings and to reject the emotion of others, though her own experience seeped out as she spoke of her early decades, and those who had peopled her life but were by then dead. Julius von Schlosser, like Rie, a refugee from Vienna, wrote: "There is no such thing as art, there are only artists." Rie's greatness as an artist is in her work, her ambiguity, curious and beyond resolution. It was that unresolved aspect of her being that made her a rare and precious friend.



G.
Lucie Rie
 Large turquoise bowl,
 manganese border, c. 1975
 stoneware, 4.25 x 13.5
 Harriman Judd Collection, USA



Lucie Rie at Albion Mews, 1978
 photo: Professor David E. Apter

Hans Coper was born in Saxony in 1920. When he was sixteen, his Jewish father killed himself to ease the plight of his non-Jewish wife and their two sons. The sons endured racial persecution at school. Coper's brother went to South America. Briefly Coper studied textile engineering in Dresden but eventually fled to England in 1939. He was not to see his mother again.

Coper was arrested in London, confined as an enemy alien, and then shipped to Canada. This was a voyage of the damned; the interns held in awful conditions, under the threat of torpedoes and drowning, sealed under battened and locked hatches. Those who shared the experience commented sourly that German prisoners of war were better treated than refugees. While the prisoners were protected by the Geneva Convention, the refugees remained suspect.



*Hans Coper at his
Hammersmith studio, circa 1966
photo: Jane Coper*

Returning to Britain, Coper joined the Pioneer Corps (a non-combatant task force) in 1941. His economic condition after the war and discharge was precarious. He was without either qualifications or focus.

Lucie Rie and Hans Coper met in 1946. Rie was an established potter. But her work was not to the English taste. Warmly liked by Bernard Leach, she had responded by momentarily following his advice, to the detriment of her self-confidence and success. To survive, she made extravagant and amusing ceramic buttons, jewels without gems or precious metal, and domestic items of stunning elegance and utility. Coper joined Rie's workshop to support that manufacturing process.

By this time Rie was forty-four, divorced, minute, contained and fastidious, and determined to be

British. Coper himself was twenty-four, with two daughters by two women, both born in 1944. Photographs of him then show a dark, brooding, outdoor matinee idol. His face suggests curiosity; and a certain promise. His hair is swept forward as if he had a tonsure. Because of his dark eyes, Goya may well have chosen to paint him as a young novice, alert and mischievous.

Today we must talk of Rie and Coper as single individuals, for although they were closely linked by mutual ambition and comparable skills, their way of working and their pots were not comparable. Rie was proficient, Coper became so. She, knowing instinctively from her first sight of Coper that he would achieve his objective once he had discovered it, responded to his wish to work with clay by advising him to learn from a professional instructor.

When I first talked to Lucie in 1981 she described Coper as the greatest 20th Century potter, and from that she did not waiver. She knew her own value, and had no false modesty, but she wanted to stand aside and watch Coper appreciated as the genius that she herself proclaimed and acknowledged.

By 1951, Rie's belief had been widely endorsed. At the Festival of Britain, a national celebration of the country's resurgence after the Second World War, a time of innovation in art as in industry, among the work of British born artists was that of our two refugees. That some of the creators of the 'new' were of foreign origin was not a handicap. This was a time of welcoming divergence of race and origin. The Viennese graduate and award-winner with thirty years of experience, and the tyro with five, were natural choices.

Proud to have become British, delighted to be made a Dame of the British Empire, Rie in retrospect believed great innovations and advances had come about from the danger facing the country and the energy which overcoming that peril had released. Rie was disdainful of the fuss made of 'swinging London' and the sixties. In her view the great leaps forward in art and design were made in the forties and fifties.



*H.
Hans Coper
White composite vessel
on black base, c. 1972
stoneware, 7.5h
photo: Jane Coper*



I.

I.
Hans Coper
Black bottle with disc top, c. 1965
stoneware, 5h
photo: Jane Coper



J.

J.
Hans Coper
Shouldered form with disc top, 1970
stoneware, 7.25h
photo: Jane Coper
Private collection, England



K.

K.
Hans Coper
Flattened form with disc top, 1970
stoneware, 7.25h
photo: Jane Coper



In the sixties Rie found herself out of place when asked to teach. The students themselves she liked, but she found them soft and unable to accept the discipline she had imposed on herself. They thought freedom was theirs, and in a way it was. But her experience had taught her that freedom had to be fought for, won, and paid for day after day.

Coper's approach was gentler. He could produce the few words needed to reveal to a student what they had achieved and how they could move forward. Unsurprisingly he became the preferred instructor. Coper was much praised as a potter and had a philosophy in tune with the time; he was like a character out of a book by Camus. His introduction to an exhibition of his pots in 1969 at the Victoria and Albert Museum makes, or at least suggests, his jumping off point:

A pre-dynastic Egyptian pot, roughly egg-shaped, the size of my hand: made thousands of years ago, possibly by a slave, it has survived in more than one sense. A humble, passive, somehow absurd object —yet potent, mysterious, sensuous. It conveys no comment, no self-expression, but seems to contain and reflect its maker and the human world it inhabits, to contribute its minute quantum of energy—and homage. An object of complete economy made by MAN: Giacometti man. Buckminster Fuller man. A constant. This is the only pot which has really fascinated me. It was not the cause of my making pots, but it gave me a glimpse of what man is.

L.

My concern is with extracting essences rather than with experiment and exploration.

The wheel imposes its economy, dictates limits, provides momentum and continuity. Concentrating on continuous variations of simple themes I become part of the process; I am learning to operate a sensitive instrument which may be resonant to my experience of existence now—in this fantastic century.

Practising a craft with ambiguous reference to purpose and function one has occasion to face absurdity. More than anything, like a demented piano-tuner, one is trying to approximate a phantom pitch. One is apt to take refuge in pseudo-principles which crumble. Still, the routine of work remains. One deals with facts.

In the V&A archive is a letter from Coper (1968) in which he writes: "As you know, I should prefer to say nothing."

After Coper died in 1981 Rie refused to define the qualities of her work or his. It was enough, in her opinion, to see, hold and receive them. For herself, she was uninterested in membership of any group; she was displeased if called an artist. "I make pots. Put flowers in them, use them. They are for use."

The pots Coper made, Rie thought more valuable. For decades she told those who came to buy her pots that it would be better for them to have those made by Coper. His were superior. Asked if he was an artist, she would reply, "He is a genius."

Rie, as her life neared its end, sought to ensure that Coper's work, and to a lesser extent her own, should have focal point in London's West End. She did all she could to encourage Anita Besson to open a gallery off Old Bond Street. When this came about the potters' continuance was in the hands of Anita Besson.

L.
Lucie Rie
Bottle, c. 1968
stoneware, slightly pitted glaze
13.25h
photo: Alan Tabor

Anita Besson was born to risk. In 1933 Zurich was her birthplace, and her first three years were spent on Majorca. Her first upheaval was the Spanish Civil War; the second was her parents' divorce. From both parents she inherited a plentiful supply of creative and unusual relatives; and her father provided Anita and her sister Miette with three half-siblings. So, while their nationality was Swiss, their contacts were international, and they bobbed about Europe like privileged gypsies, with Anita settling in London in 1956.

Galerie Besson was launched in 1988. Well into her eighties, Lucie Rie was present at the opening, an exhibition of sixty of her pots. By then Anita Besson and Lucie Rie had been friends for forty years, Anita having met Lucie and Hans, on her arrival from Switzerland. A qualified translator, with French, Italian, German, Spanish and English to hand, Anita fitted naturally into the potters' multi-national circle of artists, musicians, writers and architects.

It had been in 1960, almost by chance (on answering an appeal in the personal column in *The Times*) that Anita became registrar at the Marlborough Gallery run by Frank Lloyd, infamous for the quote "I don't collect paintings, I collect money," and Harry Fischer, renowned for his discrimination and scholarship. With them began Anita's familiarity with London's great stars—Francis Bacon, Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore—and her contact with artists and collectors from Europe and America. During this decade the Marlborough's exhibitions were ground breaking—eighteen self-portraits by Van Gogh in 1960 and his drawings in 1962, Vantongerloo sculptures and drawings in 1961, Miro in 1966, and Egon Schiele in 1969 and 1979. These shows and many others stimulated and thrilled London and attracted worldwide attention.

After Harry Fischer launched Fischer Fine Art he invited Anita to be a director in 1972. A lesser person would have been overwhelmed by Fischer's appetite for art. He attempted and achieved the impossible and showed Schiele, Picasso, de Chirico, Magritte, Bomberg, Arp, Giacometti, Kandinsky, Calder, Delvaux, Lipchitz, Cezanne, Monet, Lindner and Vlaminck. In 1984,

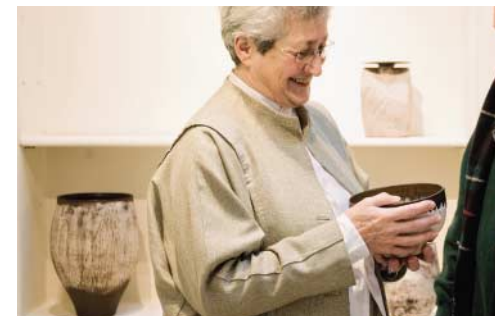
as an act of kindness and indulgence Fischer allowed Besson to present *Lucie Rie and Hans Coper*. I remember the opening, Rie was there and Anita was on full throttle.

Four years later the opening flag flew over the Galerie Besson. Since then there have been over 150 exhibitions of potters from twenty countries. Work has been collected from every corner of the globe, from established potters to those inching into their professional status. I have watched Anita's progress, sometimes 'tut-tutting', often amazed and always a little in awe. Like a vessel with many sails she can catch a slight wind and turn it to advantage. She is not adverse; she is an adventuress and there are many who have achieved an ambition because of her encouragement.

Matthew Hall and I asked Anita to help with *Gwen John & Lucie Rie*, an exhibition of Lucie Rie pots shown with the paintings and drawings of Gwen John in 2000. With her help 150 pots were shown in proximity to 132 of John's pictures. It seems unlikely that this assembling will be repeated. These two women were independent, but the perfect alliance of volume, tone and texture in their work was firmly demonstrated. The conjunction enhanced the work of both women.

Every action has consequences—often unanticipated but fortuitous. Matthew Hall joined Anita at the Galerie Besson bringing with him his experience of curating and designing exhibitions on John Constable, Keith Vaughan, Edward Burra, Francis Bacon, Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, and others. His presentation of the ceramics in the first British exhibition of Phoenician art was a visual high spot.

Louisa Vowles brings an unrivaled ability and interest, with her fluency in Japanese and her enthusiasm for ceramic wares from the east. Her experience in Japan and North America underlines the Galerie Besson's role as the London centre for studio ceramic art from around the world. With Anita herself to inform and enthuse, the gallery maintains the high status due to Rie and Coper, who were truly among the giants of 20th Century art and craft.



Anita Besson and Angus Stewart
at Galerie Besson, 2006
photo: Simon Turtle

Angus Stewart has written on art for more than fifty years. He has been involved in theatrical and opera productions, in films and exhibitions—having curated thirty exhibitions on painters, sculptors and the decorative arts. His subjects have included Tibetan religious art, pre-Christian Middle Eastern culture and Francis Bacon, Henry Moore, John Constable and Jane Austen. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and an executive member of the UK's International Association of Art Critics.

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