





CLAY ARTIST SUSAN FOX HIRSCHMANN

Creations for the Ages

BLENDING POTTERY WITH FIBER, PAPER AND GLASS | BY JANET SHARP



Susan Fox Hirschmann

Annandale artist Susan Fox Hirschmann began her pottery business 40 years ago as a hobby while raising her three children. She grew up near the ocean in Wildwood, New Jersey, and painted for fun during her school years. In 1964, she moved to Washington, D.C., to attend American University. After graduating with a major in European history and a minor in art history, she studied painting and interior design at Northern Virginia Community College. She also studied ceramics, sculpture and fiber art at the Corcoran School of Art. Some years later, she enrolled in classes in clay offered by Fairfax County and “got hooked,” as she puts it. She was drawn to clay, she claims, because it was like playing in sand at the beach. She pursued this passion by taking workshops all over the country.

At first, Susan participated in local craft fairs; her work sold so well that she opted to turn it into a

business. She credits her marketing and other business skills to her father, who owned a men and boys’ clothing store. With her family’s support, she hired a local architect to design a spacious studio and had it built in her backyard. Besides her work space, the studio currently houses two potters’ wheels and four kilns because, she explains, “everything has to be fired twice.”

In the 1980s, she sold to galleries, National Parks—especially pieces with leaves sculpted in the clay—and even to Disney World, and she won a lot of awards. “I used to do craft shows nationwide,” she recalls. Now, however, she stays closer to home. “I’m concentrating on more custom work for people, galleries, interior designers, model homes, weddings and bar mitzvahs—art and functional pottery both,” she says. “I love the variety of custom work.”

Susan creates both stoneware and porcelain. She



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especially enjoys creating large and small vases for weddings and bar mitzvahs; the large ones hold flower arrangements, while the small ones serve as party favors for each guest. She uses a high-temperature pencil to inscribe the honorees’ names, event date, and optionally her initials on the bottom.

Last fall, Susan filled a client’s request for 50 Christmas ornaments. She drew the item first and allowed the client to choose the desired design. A recent custom order consisted of a full dinnerware set for eight that required two months to complete. It included small

and large plates, bowls, mugs and serving pieces, and featured a carved shell design in the center of each bowl.

Susan specializes in mugs, plates, bowls, vases and serving pieces of all colors and sizes. One of her best-selling series includes her “Circle of Friends” design, with carved seashells that include faces in profile. All her functional pieces are lead-free, food-safe, and oven-, microwave- and dishwasher-durable. She sometimes responds to friends’ suggestions by creating specialty pieces: small plates to match her mugs, spoon rests, a



Page 38: "Circle of Friends" vase, stoneware, hand-carved, crystalline glazes, 10" x 5"
 Photograph by Greg Staley

Page 39: "Me & My Friends Bowl," stoneware, hand-carved, stains and glazes, dyed and natural reeds, grapevine, 11" x 5"
 Photograph by Jerry Anthony

Opposite clockwise from top: "Circle of Friends," mugs, stoneware, hand-carved, 4 1/4" tall (10-12 oz.)
 Photograph by Greg Staley

"Bamboo Dunes Vessel," stoneware, painted and airbrushed glazes, wild grapevine, dyed reeds, 12" x 7"
 Photograph by Jerry Anthony

"Sabino Teapot," porcelain, airbrushed glazes, dyed reeds, glass beads, 12" x 6"
 Photograph by Jerry Anthony

Above: "Berry Bowl with Matching Plate Set," stoneware, hand-carved, mid-century modern glazes, natural reed handle, 6" x 5"
 Photograph by Greg Staley

teapot and a small bowl to beat two eggs.

Susan has maintained her Wildwood ties and kept many of her childhood friends. She likes to replicate the ocean waves in her art, as in her *Sea Bubbles* series. "The ocean energy ends up influencing everything I do," she says. She also finds that a custom order sometimes leads to a close relationship with a client. "As an artist, I love to create alone," she confides, "but it takes the energy of being with others to be part of my inspiration."

Each work starts with a ball of clay. Susan designs and creates each piece, dries it, fires it at 1,800 degrees F and then glazes it. Before the initial firing, she adds a design using metal or wooden tools and hand-carves on wet clay. She mixes all her own ceramic glazes. Some are sprayed on, others airbrushed, and still others hand-painted. In one wide-mouthed vase, she used a combination of techniques, painting the inside and airbrushing the outside. Once a piece is glazed, she fires it again at 2,400 degrees for about 16 hours. After firing, a pottery piece will last hundreds of years. According

to Susan, "we know a lot about our history because of pottery shards."

When other artists started to copy her technique, Susan learned to make handmade paper from cotton and linen fiber; she now sometimes adds both painted or natural paper and dyed reeds to decorative clay pieces. She also recently became skilled in flamework and occasionally adds a handmade glass bead to a completed work.

Susan supports the community by donating pieces to Life With Cancer and other local charitable groups. In 2018, she won the First Place Award in Sculpture at "Spotlight on the Arts," a benefit that supports Bright Paths, an organization to help homeless people.

A few years ago, Susan converted her garage into a private gallery and holds a Studio Show there twice a year, the first weekend of May and the first weekend of December. To get on her mailing list for an invitation, please contact her through her website. é

Susan Fox Hirschmann | www.potteryart.biz