

Siglinda Scarpa

by Raymond Anderson

For Italian-born clay artist Siglinda Scarpa, getting the job as studio manager of New York's Greenwich House Pottery was the culmination of a dream. Only a year before, in 1985, she had left Rome to take her chances in the United States.

"Life never came easy in Italy, and being a woman made it still harder," says Scarpa. "I had some bitter times, for sure. But I had good ones, too. For a while, I even had my own ceramics school. And I loved the work I was doing—functional, for the most part. But I wanted more than that. The art environment in the United

States seemed to encourage taking risks and going beyond limits. Even though a lot of what is produced in that spirit is unsuccessful, the 10% that does work is wonderful, full of imagination, and possible only here. I wanted to be part of that spirit."

Scarpa's interest in art began with an experience during her youth in the north of Italy. This is how she tells it: "I remember a feeling I had in the mountains, crawling along the moraine of a Mont Blanc glacier, alone, no sound but the sharp whistle of wind, thin and pure, like the air itself. I had a sense of belonging—of be-

longing to everything around me, to the blue shadow of the ice, to the water of the spring, to the wind. I was aware that a cluster of crystals I found among the rocks, this stone, that first star and I were all the same; we were all equal, each with an equal right to exist and each equally beautiful. Identical planes within the crystal echoed one another, just as the star echoes the crystal itself and the stone. I realized that in perceiving the beauty of each, one perceives one's own beauty." What took shape that afternoon was more than an aesthetic insight; it was a credo, a way of looking at the world,

*Siglinda Scarpa (artist-in-residence at the Garrison Art Center in Garrison Landing, New York) sketching ideas for a series of forms inspired by the James Joyce book *Finnegans Wake*.*





ABOVE *"Malizia #2,"* stoneware with white porcelain slip and sulfate, 12 inches in height, \$1800.

RIGHT *"Fiori per la Sofferenza,"* 20½ inches in height, stoneware and bronze with acrylics and patinas, \$2400.



Patina Finish

by Siglinda Scarpa

As an alternative to glazes, I surface my work with organic compounds. This patina exploits the color and texture of the clay itself, and is especially effective when not only the look but the feel of the clay is important. The work acquires a soft sheen, deep and luminous. On tan clays, the result is a color with the richness of aged maple or walnut, or of much-handled leather. On white clays, the color varies from golden honey to amber. On my own, much lighter version of earthenware, the patina reproduces the color and feel of a natural Italian terra-cotta floor. The finish protects the surface, and with light buffing after an occasional wash with soap and water, it looks, if anything, even better.

The procedure involves heating (in the kiln) the piece to be patinated to a temperature that will still allow for handling. It must be evenly heated.

The piece must be sufficiently po-

rous to absorb the patina. For example, a stoneware that vitrifies at Cone 10 can be fired to Cone 6 for an entirely satisfactory patina, or only to Cone 4 for a deeper one.

The necessary materials and equipment include beeswax, paraffin, linseed oil, turpentine, common liquid roofing tar (alternatives include pigment or potentially toxic aniline dye), a hot plate, a good protective respirator with filters and several brushes.

Melt $\frac{1}{4}$ pound beeswax and $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon paraffin on the hot plate. Remove and add 1 cup linseed oil, 2 cups turpentine, and a few drops to no more than a $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon tar (or you can substitute pigments or aniline dyes in like amounts).

Mix the ingredients well, then brush on evenly, applying more where darker color is desired; stop brushing when the piece is too cool to absorb patina. Allow to dry 24 hours and buff to a velvety sheen.

About the pigments: Holbein pigments (available from Pearl Paint Company, Inc., 308 Canal Street, New

York, New York 10013) work very well. They are ground superfine, and a truly porous clay body can absorb them (they do not dissolve, but rather are suspended in the patina medium). Experiment! The slightly gritty effect is surprising and pleasing.

Aniline dyes are available from W. D. Lockwood & Company, 81 Franklin Street, New York, New York 10013. Though brilliant, the colors are also, to varying degrees, unstable. Like watercolors, they are altered by direct sunlight. It is best to follow Van Gogh's advice (to himself) about the colors of the impressionists: "Use them boldly—time will tone them down only too well."

Also, be sure to exercise caution in using aniline dyes—the previously mentioned respirator is essential.

Finally, a word about purple! Apply it last, because just a trace will contaminate all other colors. Except for purple, unwanted colors can be removed from the piece by firing it (where there is good ventilation) at low temperature.

at the universe, and at everything grand or small within it.

Her life in clay began soon after Nino Caruso provided her workspace in his studio in Rome. "Nino was just beginning his career in ceramics. I can't say I thought he was a great artist then—Van Gogh was a great artist to me—but Nino was a magician, and I learned. Today, of course, a lot of people (I'm one of them) think only a handful of living ceramic artists are his equal." Scarpa also spent several years in the studio of Ugo Attardi, learning to work with bronze and wood, a circumstance with special relevance for her present work. "Clay is central to everything I do, but I've always had the urge to combine it with other materials—wood, bronze and glass, even plastic. Always, I want to experiment.

That first year in New York was one of adjustment and struggle. In the beginning she rarely touched clay. To pay the rent and buy time, she edited film for a producer of documentaries, one of those skills—"sculptural in its own way," she points out—that artists acquire along the way to earn a living. In Scarpa's case, it was in the Italian film industry. (Remember Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie*

Point? She does. Every frame.) Later that year she had the rewarding experience—and all the bureaucratic frustrations—of teaching street kids how to work with clay at a city-run project. It was good to feel clay again, and the kids (several with promise of becoming artists, if they could avoid prison or worse) were great.

Finally, at the urging of Cliff Mendelson, Scarpa sought out then Greenwich House director Susan Wood, and asked if she could have a job teaching and a studio where she could work. After several conversations and a close look at her slides, Wood offered her the job of studio manager, which Mendelson was giving up, some courses to teach and a large studio over the kiln room. "I worked and taught all day and evening in the pottery, and at night, upstairs, I made my own things, with the fires underneath warming my feet in winter and making the sweat drip in the summer. Many times, too tired to go home to Brooklyn on the subway after watching the kiln reach temperature and doing my own work, I fell asleep on a broken-down cot in the corner of my studio. It was paradise up there!"

The first pieces that Scarpa made in the United States were vessels. De-

spite all their skyscraperlike protrusions and geometric angularity, these works were still bound conceptually to the traditional characteristics of containment. But she was reaching for something else.

Scarpa describes the spring of 1988 as the period when she "broke the vessel." First the rim—stretched, thinned and twisted beyond recognition—disappeared from her work. Later, so did the foot. "If Giacometti put big feet on his slender pieces to fix them to the earth, I got rid of the foot so that mine could fly."

These pieces for her first solo exhibition in the U.S. were begun on the wheel, but their ultimate shape retained only an echo of their origin. Scarpa created a series of related curves and unexpected turns and dips that play against and with each other. Surfaces were stained in brilliant reds, yellows, oranges, greens and blues (the result of an Etruscan technique, adapted for use with contemporary materials, involving aniline dyes and hot wax).

The heart of these works was a series of 14 "creatures" (her word) based on that centuries-old Italian improvisational theater, *commedia dell'arte*. With their bright colors ("The colors

in my work are all Italy," Siglinda says, "and the Italy I carry inside me is all color.") so reminiscent of Harlequin and Pulcinella and Columbine, and with their shell-like contours, the series was inevitably called "La Commedia del mare (The Sea Comedy)."

After this show, Scarpa began to seek ways to put more time into her work. Her two years as studio manager at Greenwich House Pottery had been as exhausting as they were exciting—more than 300 students almost every day; three large gas kilns and as many electric kilns.

Then came the opportunity to serve as an artist-in-residence at the Garrison Art Center, an hour north of New York City, nestled on the east bank of the Hudson River. She would be provided with a private studio, in exchange for revitalizing the center's small pottery. Compared with Greenwich House, the challenge sounded like a vacation; she accepted. That was five years ago. Since then, she has had the satisfaction of seeing Garrison come alive, and its 100-cubic-foot kiln is firing once more. She built a new raku kiln; classes and workshops are

BELOW "Commedia del mare #1," 12 inches in height, porcelain with patina of beeswax, paraffin, linseed oil, turpentine and aniline dye, \$450.



ABOVE "E un fiore per tua felicità, Elena," stoneware and bronze, 66 inches high, \$4000.



"Fiori per l'imperatore," 21 inches in height, stoneware and bronze with acrylics and patinas, \$2400, by Siglinda Scarpa.

thriving. Even solvency, a condition most not-for-profit enterprises dare aspire to, is not beyond reach.

Meanwhile, other shows followed. For one exhibition at Elaine Benson Gallery in nearby Bridgehampton, she produced a series of figurative pieces painted in brilliant acrylics, inspired by James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and the wondrously preposterous words with which he peopled his novel, like Lipoleum and Zephiroth and Thyacinth. Why? "I wanted to add something to that world we make to set

against the sometimes desolate one we see around us," Scarpa explained.

A solo show at Greenwich House contained still further departures: new pieces in her continuing series of "bouquets" (two 6-foot ceramic stalks with specially composed music by Gregory Kramer emanating from the flowers at the tops), and human figures (two torsos in unglazed stoneware that wear their wounds like sad corsages and testify to how pain can tear you apart). Not surprisingly, several of these same pieces—taken together, one woman's

response to violence in the world—formed the heart of a benefit exhibition in 1991 on behalf of Amnesty International. Displayed together with several of her poems (an integral part of the show), they make a powerful statement at once intensely personal and political—and thus altogether characteristic of Siglinda Scarpa.

The author *New York City writer Raymond Anderson teaches English as a second language and is an art consultant for Hudson River Gallery, Ossining, New York.*