



THIS PAGE: a storage jar with akebia handles; 14x15cm



Less is more

While Charlotte Storrs works quietly at the wheel in her garden studio in Oxfordshire, her reputation for the fine, simple, functional stoneware she makes is growing fast

Words | Sue Herdman Images | Cristian Barnett

Charlotte Storrs hadn't meant to become a potter. Growing up in Holland, she studied languages at Utrecht University and then immersed herself in music, earning a conservatory diploma for violin. It was that love of chords and scores that brought her to Britain, where she came to study at the Guildhall School of Music. But throughout, in the background, there was clay. 'As a child I used to play with a friend whose mother gave us clay to model Christmas figures. That was how it began. I was always drawn to pottery – taking clay classes whenever I could.' Married to an Australian harpsichord maker, Charlotte had her children and gave music lessons. 'Then, when my youngest son left for university, I went back to college, took up throwing and became, quite simply, addicted.'

That passion for pottery saw Charlotte set up her studio at the first opportunity. There, with views out over fields flat enough to be her native Holland – and with the tips of boats bobbing on the Thames just visible – she works at making her understated, functional fine stoneware. It's a quiet form of pottery. In the main it is white and, when it comes to decoration, carries the deftest of touches. Decoration is limited to faceting, combing or a light application by ceramic roller. 'I think a love of simplicity comes from my Dutch background,' she says. 'My approach is down-to-earth, sturdy, non-fussy. I was born just after the end of the war, when life was simple and modest.'

Materials, too, are kept simple. One constant is the addition of akebia vine for handles, an idea picked up on a visit to potters in Japan. The akebia 'chocolate' vine, a fast-growing evergreen that grows small purple flowers, is imported, dried, from that country. Soaked in a bucket of water for a couple of days, Charlotte then uses pliers to weave it into the shapes she desires. 'It's a Zen-like occupation,' she says. Her clay and glaze come from Ireland. 'I wanted a glaze that worked well with my choice of clay, which is groggy and rustic. It's stony, not like porcelain. When you look at the bottom of my pots you see how rough it is.' On the day I visit, Charlotte is at her wheel, starting a tulip vase, her battered, clay-splattered book of notes beside her. 'This shape was suggested by a florist,' she says as she centres the clay on the wheel. 'When it's leather hard I shape it, folding and pushing the sides in. Then I decorate it with the roller and a comb before firing, glazing, drying and firing again, at 1240° overnight.'

Many of the pieces Charlotte creates are in response to suggestions from clients. 'I make useful stoneware – beautiful enough to be on show, but it's always to be used. I'm not really into "art". The William Morris line: "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful" has always chimed with me.' That beauty has led to her work catching the eye of interior designers. 'One wanted a series of ceramic pendant lights made in under a fortnight – so many still don't understand just how long ceramic wares can take to make, especially by a solo maker,' she smiles. She has also turned her hand to wash basins, lamp bases, olive oil pourers, curiously faceted

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: a salad bowl, which can come in three sizes (20cm dia; 16cm dia; 12cm dia); the tulip bowl in the making; the akebia vine, prior to being worked upon

toast racks and whole sets of dinnerware. Her minimalist style has earned her column inches in magazines such as *Elle Decoration* and *Homes and Gardens*, and space in outlets including Liberty of London, Daylesford Organic and Petersham Nurseries. Her clients, however, are by no means all gleaned from the world of fashion.

'The power of online is key for someone like me, working in a solitary way' she says, 'and through it you can reach the unexpected. One of my most satisfying recent commissions came from a 26-year-old man who had spotted my work online. He sent me a long email with specific instructions. He wanted a particular set of stoneware tableware made, the plates to have large lips around three-quarters of the rims, which would prevent food spilling over. It was only at the end of his email that he told me he was quadriplegic, with limited use only of his right arm, the result of a car accident. He was weary and demoralised by eating from the type of plastic utensils that one tends to use in such circumstances. He wanted something functional, but with a fine form, of natural materials. I want to do much more of this type of work.'

Charlotte also uses her site to run effective marketing, such as her 'lifestyle' competitions. 'The prize is one of my ceramic 'tokens' for a certain sum to spend on my stoneware. I ask people to send me images of my pieces in their homes, which I then feature on my site. Some of the pictures are simply fantastic. I've just received a terrific one from a client in New York, his kitchen full of my works. It's a fun way to connect with people who have bought my pieces – and for me it's wonderful to see how they are being used in their homes.' When starting out, Charlotte was quick to recognise the power of good photography. 'I worked with a photographer friend, Agness Clarke. Having quality imagery to send out to magazines and prospective clients has been a phenomenal help in getting my work seen. All publications want beautiful images.'

There is no greater marketing for her work, though, than word of mouth. Her well-equipped studio – with its upturned crates, green-check patterned curtains, fir cones and dried lavender, gleaming kiln and pots of tools – is often the site for open studio events. 'I want to get children such as young carers in here,' she says, 'the sort of child who has little time for such things. Each time I show a visitor how to work with clay, I see how making pottery can build their confidence.' The added pleasure of being able to take home a piece they have made is potent, too. The appreciation of the hand-made is on the rise. 'Like the Japanese,' Charlotte observes, 'more people now want something with "soul".'

To find out more go to charlottestorrs-stoneware.co.uk

Turn the page to read about the vacuum glazing technique that Charlotte's husband John has developed ➤



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THIS PAGE: Charlotte's Tulip vase, H.16cm

Finding a solution

When making large items – from bowls to basins – Charlotte found glazing a problem. To solve this, her husband, John, has created a vacuum glazing system. Here she explains how it works



Holding things with vacuum is a common industrial technique. When you reduce the air pressure on one side of a surface, the air pressure on the other side holds it in place. In a practical application you have to deal with leakage, maintaining low pressure on the vacuum side. Vacuum holding can be used for pottery glazing if there is an unglazed (wax resist) area on the piece where it can be held. The advantages include no finger or tong marks on the glazed piece; it is also physically easier, particularly when holding heavy pieces, and there is a better control of the glazing process.

To set up a vacuum glazing system you need:

- an industrial vacuum pump
- a vacuum tank
- a vacuum gauge
- an air valve
- plastic tubing
- a vacuum jig with rubber seals and a convenient handle

The vacuum pump needs sufficient air throughput to deal with leakage. We use an old industrial rotary vane pump, with more than enough capacity for the application. We vent the pump outlet to the open air. We use 15mm copper plumbing pipe to connect the parts and make the jig handle. The vacuum tank is a reservoir that provides the initial seal when the valve is opened, and improves

system safety. The vacuum gauge is fitted directly to the tank and must be visible during operation. Our vacuum jig is a block of plastic with air holes in the surface, on which we lay rubber seals appropriate to the workpiece. We make seals from soft round-section rubber cord, which can easily be formed and glued.

When using the system we always wear eye protection in case of failure (not encountered yet).

Here's what we do:

- prepare the slip by mixing (1)
- turn on the pump with the valve closed
- wait until the vacuum gauge shows say 90% of full vacuum
- position the rubber seal on the jig (2)
- put the piece to be glazed on the rubber seal (3)
- open the valve
- check that the piece is properly held and the gauge level is not falling
- lift the jig by the handle and put the piece in the glaze bucket
- wait 6 seconds
- remove the jig and piece from the glaze bucket, invert and allow to drain (4)
- return the jig and piece to the workbench
- open the valve and allow natural leakage to release the piece