

KRISTEN KIEFFER

The Impact of Daily Elegance

by Lauren Karle



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When you cradle one of Kristen Kieffer's cups in your hands and touch it to your lips, it speaks to you. Attuned to the communicative potential of art, Kieffer understands that successful utilitarian objects convey feeling and connection in ways that cannot always be articulated. She enjoys the small challenge of making elaborately decorated, functional work that is appealing for daily use. To her mind, these types of

pots need not be reserved merely for special occasions. Kieffer creates pots that are intentionally celebratory, with the desire that the people who use them allow themselves a moment of luxury during their daily routines. Although many potters create work specifically to bring people together, she envisions a person using an ornate cup in a solitary moment. Ideally, users who permit themselves the pleasure of beauty reinforce their own value and self-worth. The result of Kieffer's formal decisions as a maker is an ornate alternative to the typical "every day" cup or jar. Her unique aesthetic counteracts the austerity of contemporary manufactured wares and rejects the idea of saving the "good China" for special occasions.

While Kieffer did not set out to make feminine pots, she is associated with that genre because our contemporary culture perceives ornamentation as feminine. The elaborate gilt decoration on the hilt of a royal sword was once a symbol of power, but now intricate gold forms such as these are viewed as “unmasculine.” By employing delicate, ornate surfaces, Kieffer elicits a similar response from contemporary viewers. Her use of colors, patterns, vessel forms, and tactile qualities yields soft, joyful, and elegant work to which our culture responds as feminine.

The word used most often to describe Kieffer’s work is *Victorian*. As clothing and silver vessels from this period are among her many influences, this makes sense. Wanting to determine her own category, she refers to her pots as “Victorian modern,” suggesting a contemporary interpretation of an era based on eclecticism, cross-cultural influence, and ornamental abundance. When looking at her stamped cups, you notice the precision of her stamping, which produces symmetrical patterns further accentuated by the fluid lines, dots, and swirls of slip-trailing. This kind of orderliness and indulgence of ornamentation also exemplifies Art Nouveau. In 2010, she began to add stripes and polka dots of underglaze color, which enhanced the “modern” aspect of her approach. The addition of these playful bits of color serves to draw the viewer’s eye around the form, giving a colorful backdrop to some of the raised, slip-trailed patterns and increasing the sense of festivity while retaining connections to the everyday.

Although the surfaces of her work make a striking initial impression, her forms are equally important. Part of what distinguishes Kieffer’s work is the way in which she relates pattern to form. The decoration is not simply laid on top, but rather form and surface are carefully integrated. By stamping her pieces in their wet, moldable state, a stage she refers to as “suede,” Kieffer actually changes the forms as



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1 Wall/mantel tiles, 5 in. (13 cm) square, handbuilt porcelain with slip-sponge, slip-trail, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2010.

2 Flower vessel (*Corset* series), 13½ in. (34 cm) in width, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, pulled handles, slip-trail, slip-sponge, and carved decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2010.

3 Small dessert plate set, 7¼ in. (18 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain with slip-trail, slip-sponge, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2011.

4 *Clover cup*, stamped bowl, small, and medium plate, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain with slip-trail, slip-sponge, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2012.



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she applies patterns. As each stamp is pressed into the clay, she uses her fingers behind the stamp to push outwards, creating a fluted effect and voluptuous appearance. The result captures the softness of wet clay. Each stamp is carefully designed by Kieffer to create elegant negative spaces and appealing shapes. Her slip-trailed swirls and dots undulate across the forms, drawing the viewer's eye and fingers over each pot's curve. A hasty glance might lead one to equate *decorated* with *delicate* and assume that the pots are fragile. However, always keeping function in mind, Kieffer gives an intentional plumpness to her pots. The resulting robustness of a handle, for example, leaves the user feeling quite comfortable with her cup. She embraces the idea of feminine pots looking and feeling strong.

Kieffer's choice of monochrome color and satin glazes for the exteriors accentuates form, while simultaneously emphasizing tactility, drawing her users in to touch the lush surfaces and use the pots in their homes. Taking a cue from the silver service pieces that she loves, simplified color helps insure that the surfaces won't dominate the forms. Just as a woman might wear a dress of a single color to set off her figure, a monochrome glaze can draw the viewer's attention to the sleek form of a vessel. The type of surface chosen by Kieffer also affects her interest in setting off her pots' forms. Glossy glazes reflect light, obscuring both a pot's shape and pattern when placed on the exterior. On the interior, they ensure the functionality of the pots. The satin glaze on the outside pools in carved and stamped lines and breaks over ribbed and slip-trailed edges, making the surfaces touchable as well as allowing the forms and decoration to be most visible.

Function, form, and surface are constantly pushed and pulled in Kieffer's work. At times, she allows one of the three to have priority over the others, but all are always pertinent to each piece. She considers her large covered jars and *Corset* series to be sculptural vessels, though each is still based on function, filling the role of storage or flower display, respectively. The large surface area of these pieces allows her the most space

5 Large pear jar, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain with slip-trail, slip-sponge, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2012.

6 Stamped vases, each approximately 8 in. (20 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, stamped, with slip-trail decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2011.

7 Stamped cups, to 4 in (10 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, stamped, with pulled handles, slip-trail, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 oxidation, 2012.

8 Teapots and saucer sets, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, altered, and handbuilt porcelain, stamped, pulled handles and spouts, with slip-trail, slip-sponge, and underglaze decorations, fired to cone 7 in oxidation, 2012.



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to play with layered pattern and the greatest opportunity to make formal design decisions, but form ultimately takes precedent over both function and surface. When she creates wall tiles, her focus is mainly on surface. Raised two inches from the wall by their thickness and with convex surfaces tapering towards each corner, the tiles are not simply flat ceramic paintings on unconsidered shapes. Pattern takes precedence, but Kieffer's tiles are successful because she also carefully considers the volumes, which allows them to be easily hung on the wall.

While she admires artists who make work that addresses serious political or social issues, Kieffer prefers that her art influence the world in other ways. Today's social media can interfere with quiet self-reflection, and as technology gains an ever-stronger hold on

our culture, we experience an increasing need for tangible, simple, but beautiful things. Creating objects of beauty in her studio brings Kieffer a joy that she seeks to share with other people. Her intention is to make objects that gently remind their users of what it feels like to be human.

Despite the financial responsibilities that she and her husband share of paying the bills, Kieffer has never sought to change her work to increase its salability. She continues to create from an inner resource, staying true to her inspirations. Her work is constantly evolving as she creates, however, because she never allows herself to feel completely comfortable. If she finds herself falling into routines when looking for a visual solution, she deliberately challenges herself to discover new answers. Although opportunities for play with the medium are

sometimes waylaid by deadlines, she reserves time throughout the year to experiment. Above all, she hopes that every person who interacts with her work feels the passion and positive energy she puts into each piece when they use her ornately functional pots.

Check out Kristen Kieffer's video clip "Stamping Suede Surfaces" in the online digital version of Ceramic Monthly's September issue (<http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly>). Kristen's tip is excerpted from her DVD, Surface Decoration: Suede to Leatherhard, available through her website, <http://koefferceramics.com>, where you can also see more of her work.

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