



MONIKA
GASS

photo: Monika Gass

Armin Skirde

CERAMICS – once and for all!

STATEMENT :

"I believe that you have to find out for yourself what type of worker you are, what rhythm and approach suits you best; and this should flow into your own ceramics and be recognizable. During my training and studies I learned to work precisely, planned in advance and in every detail, but I realized that this way of working does not suit my nature. Spontaneity, improvisation and authenticity were more important to me. The more you manage to incorporate your own personality in combination with what you have learned into your work, the more honest and individual it is. And perhaps this is ultimately the decisive difference to industrially manufactured ceramics."

Armin Skirde was born in Würzburg in 1958, the son of a carpenter and a seamstress. In 1979 he passed his school leaving exams, specialising in mathematics and biology. After that he actually wanted to study biology. Admission restrictions made this plan difficult and so ceramics came into his sights. The ceramics course in Höhr-Grenzhausen also corresponded to his interest in scientific contexts so that he ultimately turned down the offer from Würzburg University, which had offered him a place to study biology through a lottery system.

Armin was interested in direct contact with clay. He became a guest student in Ernst Stauber's pottery in order to get a through grounding in throwing on the potters' wheels. Other ceramics students such as Thomas Nätke, Uli Witzmann and Therese Jänsch supported this. The internship that Skirde later got at Helmut Müller's pottery opened up for him the world of organic forms and the precise, meticulous working method. And much more - far

beyond pottery on the potter's wheel.

Skirde developed his ceramic horizons parallel to his studies, not only honing his throwing skills but also learning a lot from Helmut Müller, who was a master in chess and an expert on fungi, among other things.

photo: Helge Articus





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His graduation in 1984 as a ceramics engineer FH overlapped for a few more months: community service, internships and diploma thesis, - during which he continued to use the Müller workshop, but also got a guest place at the technical school for ceramic design. There, under the outstanding teacher Wolf Matthes, he was able to further his education in line with his interests. He qualified as a thrower in 1985 and studied ceramic design from 1988. However, financial reasons prevented him from setting up his own studio for the time being.

A good job offer came from Engers, not too far from the Westerwald, through Engers-Keramik (wall tiles). Design and glaze development interested Armin and it was possible to save for the future studio. He felt challenged in the company's laboratory and had freedom as an "in-house" designer. Contacts with external design companies, primarily in Italy, brought him to the partner company Gamma Due in Maranello (near Modena), where he got to know other approaches, working methods and processes, built relationships with people in charge, worked in design teams, enjoyed Italian life and culture and decided to learn Italian.

The motto of never stopping learning ("jogging for the brain"), always facing new challenges, constantly learning more, explains why Armin's ceramics appeal to us so much. "There are always new challenges. With ceramics, you never stop learning. There is always something new to discover. You can keep learning throughout your professional life and gain new insights, techniques and approaches through contact with others and their ceramic culture."

In 1992, with all his skills, Armin started his own ceramics workshop. In 1994 he worked in the former Grenzau train station, then his ceramics colleague Martin Goerg offered him workshop space in Brunnenstraße. The ceramics group with Martin Goerg, Fritz Roßmann and Susanne Altschweig was already established there. Andreas Hinder established his studio there almost at the same time. Perfect conditions for Armin from 1995 onwards!

Quote: "So, from here on, things really took off. Before that, there was more testing and experimenting, sometimes even internships in other studios. This was important in order to position himself with his own ceramics and his own style."

While working at Engers Keramik, Armin came into contact with cave paintings as decoration for a tile edition. Even during his time at technical college, he had a great interest in sketchy painting and was honing his own expressive style. He now built on this lasting inspiration, painting directly with a brush or slip trailer, using black glaze on sand-coloured shards. These designs also appeared on light coloured, poured glazes, fired in an electric kiln at 1240°C, simple, clear motifs, people, animals - skilfully expressive lines - reduced to essentials. Reduced art with graceful drawings that, as he says, "are archaic - with a playful expression". THE trademark for Armin Skirde!



photo: Armin Skirde

Vessel ceramics was and is Armin's subject. He loves communicating with ceramic artists and customers: "One factor that should not be underestimated is the direct, personal contact with customers." Each piece should show its sculptural production from soft clay, make the individuality of making by hand visible, often deliberately emphasized through deformation. His characteristic ceramics are only partially and only a touch thinly glazed, rather earthy:

"The archaic appearance is enhanced by reduced line drawings that are reminiscent of prehistoric cave paintings, simple yet dynamic. That is the beauty of ceramics. Clay is a plastic material, after firing, traces of creation, throwing rings, fingerprints, stamps, touches are left forever. I don't want ceramics to look like plastic. I want a ceramic material that has its own unmistakable character."

Steve Fullmer, a fellow ceramicist from New Zealand, says: "Once he might have wiped a drip, corrected a slip, but now he allows it to stay. It's a mistake and someone had to do it. In fifty years it will be

the mark of something made by hand."

Armin places great importance on quality in his craft: function, feel and aesthetics must be right, there is no need for uniform design in his ceramics. He looks for ways, the "points of contact" with the initially soft, malleable, earthy material..., is aware that he has not yet reached his goal, always ready to discover new things, looking for enthusiasm and motivation. So quitting is not an option: "It feels more like being on a ladder that you still haven't reached the top of. I still want to implement and realize a lot of things." Perhaps the focus will shift to one-off pieces – or to firing in a wood kiln.

He has never been particularly interested in competitions, except for the competition themes at ceramics markets:

"These offer an incentive to become involved with various topics, to think outside the box. Sometimes it is an avant-garde approach, which often leads to new ideas."

There are certainly role models: Fritz Roßmann with his ceramics philosophy

and design language, colleagues such as Hervé Rousseau, Johannes Peters, Michael Sälzer, Stefan Bang or Terry Davies - and many more at the foreign markets, broadening horizons in material and inspiration.

Also important to him in these many foreign markets is the mixture of wanderlust, short breaks and ceramic horizon expansion. Armin travels with his "goods" to England, Scotland, Belgium, Holland, Austria, Italy, France, Spain, registers working methods and styles, traditions, idiosyncrasies everywhere, makes friends - later using these connections generously, for example for the ceramics market in Höhr-Grenzhausen, where he was the main mediator. "I somehow felt responsible and was happy to show Höhr-Grenzhausen to my ceramics friends, to bring the ceramic world to the Westerwal, to Höhr-Grenzhausen."

One of his themes is the "cultivation of the imperfect": "In a world that feels like it's becoming more and more neurotically perfect, I think such considerations and accents are quite appropriate.

So the decision to become a potter

was the right one for Armin: ceramics once and for all. Another - conceivable - option might have been the life of a writer: Armin says he sometimes sees himself in a little house by the sea with good food and wine at the typewriter, writing down the stories that are going through his head, what he has himself experienced.

Armin Skirde believes that the value of contemporary, artistic and handcrafted ceramics is very high, both at home and abroad. "International exchange and public appreciation have a significant influence on this. It would be desirable for young people interested in ceramics today to have similarly good training and development opportunities as I have had."

(Text based on research by Roland Giefer, Höhr-Grenzhausen)

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photo: Helge Articus



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photo: Janos Wlacholub

Armin Skirde was born in Würzburg in 1958. Graduated from secondary school in 1979, degree as a ceramic engineer in 1984 at the University of Applied Sciences in Höhr-Grenzhausen, Westerwald. This was followed by an apprenticeship as a thrower, qualifying in 1985. In 1988 he took a degree as a ceramic designer at the FS in Höhr-Grenzhausen and from 1988 to 1992 he worked as a ceramic designer at the Engers Keramik tile factory. From 1992/93 he worked in various ceramics studios and since 1994 he has been a freelance ceramist, with his own studio in Höhr-Grenzhausen since 1995. Armin Skirde takes part in many exhibitions and ceramics markets in Europe. He has regularly received awards: 2010 Ceramics Prize, Drinking Vessel - Experimental, Waldburg Pottery Market. 2017 Ceramics Prize, Is it all just Packaging? (Amphora, bottle & Co. Romans showed us the deposit system), HWK Aachen, 1st prize. 2019 1st Open German Pottery Championship Höhr-Grenzhausen, 1st place and Creative Prize Insects - A Homage, HWK Aachen. 2022 Pottery Market Prize, Seat, Austrian Pottery Market, 1st prize. 2nd Open German Pottery Championship Höhr-Grenzhausen, 3rd place.

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