

Lucie Rie - 1902-1995

Dame Lucie Rie [née Gomperz] was born on 16 March 1902 in Vienna, the third and last child of Professor Benjamin Gomperz (1861-1936), an ear, nose, and throat specialist, and his wife, Gisela (1873-1937), daughter of Ignaz Wolf and his wife, Hermine. The Wolfs were a prominent Eisenstadt family whose fortune was based on wine production. The Gomperz family, too, was prosperous and Lucie's childhood was spent between their home in the Falkstrasse and the Wolfs' country house at Eisenstadt. She was educated by a private tutor. Through her father, a friend of Sigmund Freud, and her uncle, the collector and Zionist historian Sandor Wolf, she was also in touch with the rich intellectual life of early twentieth-century Vienna. After contemplating a medical career she decided instead to enter the Kunstgewerbeschule, the art school attached to the Wiener Werkstatte, in 1922. There she was, she said, instantly 'lost' to the potter's wheel. She was taught by Michael Powolny, whose strengths as a ceramist were technical rather than aesthetic. Her work was nevertheless noticed by the co-founder of the Werkstatte, Joseph Hoffmann, who sent her pots to the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Modernes in Paris in 1925.

Over the next decade she developed her own style. She herself later said in an interview with the author that the work of these years was 'hardly at all important', but critics have disagreed (The Guardian, 31 Aug 1988). She combined a plain, modernist aesthetic with the technical daring that Powolny had encouraged in her, somewhat perversely, by telling her she would never be able to imitate ancient glazes. She used earthenware, raw glazing the pots, that is applying glaze to unfired clay. This ancient but difficult technique was at first a practical necessity as she had no kiln of her own and had to transport her work some distance to fire it. Raw glazing became, however, an essential feature of her pottery; form and glaze fused in a single firing. She was then, as always, interested in pots 'for the house'. Whether functional or decorative, her work was always concerned with the domestic interior.

In 1926 Lucie married Hans Rie (1901-1985), a young businessman who worked in the Bruder Bohm hat factory. He was one of the Gomperz family circle, an easy-going man but with little in common with his wife beyond a fondness for skiing. The marriage never really took and Lucie Rie devoted herself increasingly to her work. She also became close to the architect Ernst Plischke, giving him one of his first commissions designing furniture for her apartment.

By 1938 Rie's refusal to take seriously the 'stupidity' of Nazism was no longer tenable. She and her husband escaped to England intending to move on to the United States. Her decision to stay in London, alone, determined the course of the rest of her life and work. She moved into a house in Albion Mews, Bayswater, where Freud's son, Ernst, adapted the interior for the Plischke furniture she had brought with her. Hans Rie went on to America and the couple were amicably divorced.

Rie found England stimulating after Vienna but not immediately receptive to her work. Her reputation had not reached England, and the revival of studio pottery there was dominated by Bernard Leach. The two became friends, but his heavier oriental and rustic aesthetic exerted an unhelpful influence on Rie at first. She later learned to take his advice selectively. The gallery owner Muriel Rose and William Honey, keeper of ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, were early supporters. The prevailing mood in England was encouraging. There was an eagerness for design reform, cast in an English Arts and Crafts tradition, with an emphasis on the individual maker and on the social and moral value of craftsmanship. Rie benefited from this, but her own work remained cosmopolitan, urban, and informed by a view of craftsmanship rooted in architecture. During and after the Second World War Rie made earthenware buttons and jewellery of great, if simple, charm. To these were added, in the mid- to late 1940s, a range of domestic wares. They included salad bowls pulled into oval shapes, their slight but decisive variations on conventional form showing how her strong formal intelligence could work easily within the limits of function.

In 1946 Hans Coper (1920-1981), also a refugee from Nazi Germany, and trained as a textile engineer, came to Rie's studio looking for work. She taught him to make pottery

and the two were soon working side by side. Coper counteracted the influence of Leach on Rie, who always regarded her former pupil as being in a higher category than herself. 'I am a potter', she said in the same interview, 'but he was an artist' (The Guardian, 31 Aug 1988). The two shared a workshop until 1958 and although their styles remained distinct the effect of each was critical on the other. Their friendship lasted until Coper's death in 1981.

In 1948 Rie acquired an electric kiln and began to make stoneware and porcelain in which a greater range of glaze effects was possible. It was from this point that she began to create the work that made her reputation. She continued to produce domestic ware as well as one-off pieces. She insisted that all her work was functional, yet a strongly sculptural sense of form runs through it. After a visit to Avebury, Wiltshire, in 1948 she was inspired by prehistoric pots to use sgraffito in her own work. In this and in her use of subtly contrasting white glazes her work can be related to contemporary English abstraction, particularly the work of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth.

Recognition of Rie's work accrued slowly but steadily. She showed pots at the Festival of Britain in 1951 and in 1967 an Arts Council exhibition of her work established her importance in a broader context. It marked the acceptance of a potter whose work, as George Wingfield Digby wrote in the catalogue, went against the national grain by having 'no nostalgic undertones of folk art'. The following year she was made OBE, and in 1969 she received an honorary doctorate from the Royal College of Art. She was promoted CBE in 1981 and DBE in 1990.

Rie's work continued to develop. The flared bottle forms that are among her most characteristic pieces emerged only in the 1960s. These were thrown in two pieces and, after 1967, sometimes made with two clays, creating a spiral pattern within the body of the pot. Formally she drew on almost every ceramic tradition but depended on none. The qualities most often cited in relation to her work—restraint, elegance, and clarity—are not infrequently countered by moments of exuberance, even brashness in pink and turquoise volcanic glazes. In contrast to Coper she was prolific. Not every piece was a success and the standard of the work she chose to exhibit was sometimes uneven.

Rie never remarried. She had several close friendships with men over the years but she continued to live and work alone at Albion Mews. Although she was disparaging about Vienna and the Viennese she always retained the formal, somewhat severe manners she learned in childhood. She never lost her Austrian accent or her appetite for intellectual conversation, although she declined to discuss her own work in theoretical terms. 'I make pots, it's my profession', was her typical way of closing the subject.

Rie's standards were inflexible. She was too rigorous to be sympathetic to students, although she was a part-time tutor at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts from 1960 to 1971. As a member of the Design Council she caused embarrassment by rejecting the work of the potter Michael Cardew, and when collecting her OBE insignia she was disappointed by the standard of conversation at Buckingham Palace. She remained elegant, even pretty, into old age. Her somewhat steely courtesy did not preclude humour or warmth. She had a circle of close friends and always made time for anyone who took a serious interest in pottery.

Rie continued to exhibit and to work into her late eighties. In 1989 the Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake arranged an exhibition of her pots alongside his own sculptural clothes in Tokyo and Osaka. Rie's work sat naturally with Miyake's. Despite the generations that separated them both were playing similarly on form and texture at the limits of tradition and function. After a series of strokes she was finally forced to stop working in the early 1990s. Lucie Rie died at her home, 18 Albion Mews, on 1 April 1995 and was cremated. Examples of her work are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Dartington Hall, Devon, and Paisley Museum and Art Gallery.