Celebrating Clay
Célébration de l'argile

Ada Brzeski

From Paper to Clay
Preserving Traditional Folk Art

Du Papier à l'argile
L'art folklorique en céramique

October • octobre
2021

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Preserving traditional folk art in clay

The strongest inspiration for any art is always something personal, something felt strongly and alive. I knew years ago that pottery was the medium for me, given the tactile quality of the medium and the surprise that comes from seeing the final products emerge from the kiln. After 5 years of studying the basic principles and with enough technique under my belt, I moved on to develop my expressions based on my love and familiarity with Polish folkloric motifs found in paper cutouts and embroidery. These folkloric works in paper and thread can be very intricate and are produced mainly by women. To further that inspiration, I returned to my Polish roots and studied under Maria Stachnal, an internationally acclaimed Polish artist in the renaissance of paper cutting. The technique is called 'Wycinanki' in Polish (pronounced 'Vee- chee- nan- kee) and dates from the mid 1800's. As recently as 2019, Maria Stachnal was teaching the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan the same cutting techniques.

The traditional designs are of everyday rural life - flowers, farm animals, birds (especially roosters and peacocks), wedding processions, musicians, men folk digging over gardens, horses pulling harrows, as well as medallions and the tree of life.

I use cutouts of these motifs as stencils for paper resist. The motif is designed, the cutout made from paper by hand, applied to the greenware then painted with coloured slips. Once hardened, the resist is removed; the design is revealed and ready for firing.

Each piece is unique because the individual paper cutout can only be used once.

I make these pieces from the heart, drawing on my pride in my Polish culture. I hope they bring joy to your table and an appreciation for old traditions as well as my fresh interpretations of these.

Ada Brzeski

Technical notes:

- All white stoneware pieces glazed in a clear or white glaze are food safe, dishwasher safe and microwave safe.
- Black stoneware should not be used in a microwave.
- Non-food safe pieces are marked as such.

Photographs by David Drapeau

Wycinanki paper cut by Maria Stachnal

From private collection of Ada Brzeski

This first series (Diamond Pattern) shows the simple black and white medallion design with clear glaze. I noticed that the slip created a relief pattern as well, so I started using white slip on white clay, glazing in white for a more muted effect. The third plate in this series is glazed in White Snake, a crackle glaze which is not food safe but creates an interesting texture on the black and white design.

Diamond Pattern 1

Black and White Plate

Material: White Stoneware and Black slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, black slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 11" diameter 2lbs 6oz

Diamond Pattern 2

White Plate

Material: White Stoneware and White slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, white slip, white glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 11" diameter 2lbs 12oz

Diamond Pattern 3

Black and White Plate

Material: White Stoneware and Black slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, black slip, white snake glaze (not food safe)
Dimensions / Weight: 11" diameter 2lbs 12oz

Over the years I developed over 30 different colored slips using Mason stains, oxides and white clay.

The next series is a play on colour with black clay and red, green, blue and yellow slip.

Red

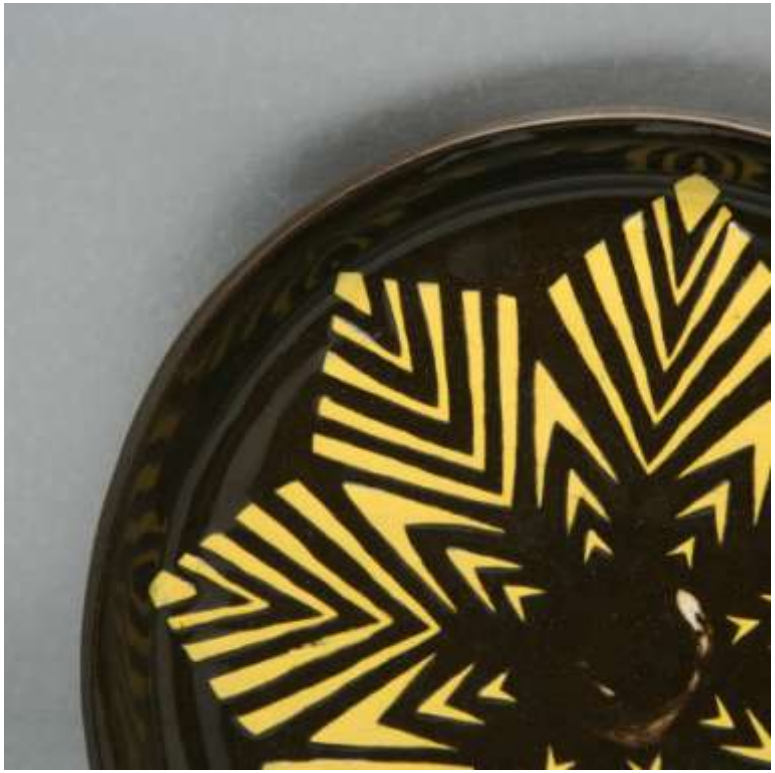
Black and Red Plate

Material: Black Stoneware and red slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, red slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9" diameter 2lbs

Green

Black and Green Plate

Material: Black Stoneware and green slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, green slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9" diameter 2lbs



Yellow

Black and Yellow Plate

Material: Black Stoneware and yellow slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, yellow slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9" diameter 2lbs

Blue

Black and Blue Plate

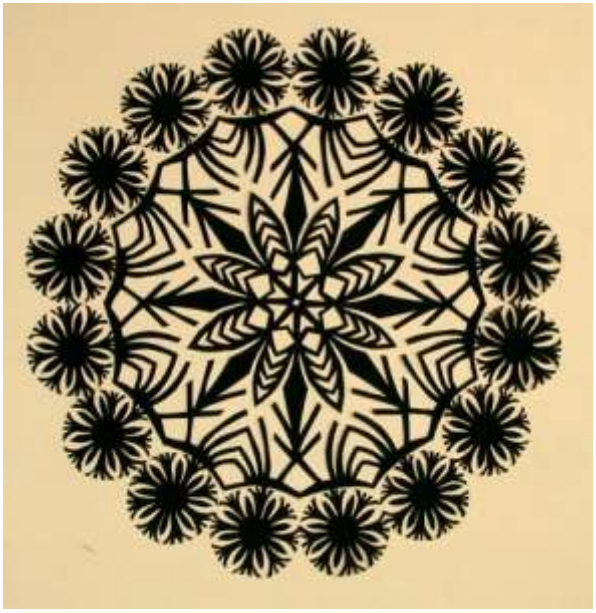
Material: Black Stoneware and blue slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, blue slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9" diameter 2lbs

Polish pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai world expo
Photo Credit: WWAA

Above: Lalka (Doll)

Below: Łowich Roosters

Below: Kurpie Medallion

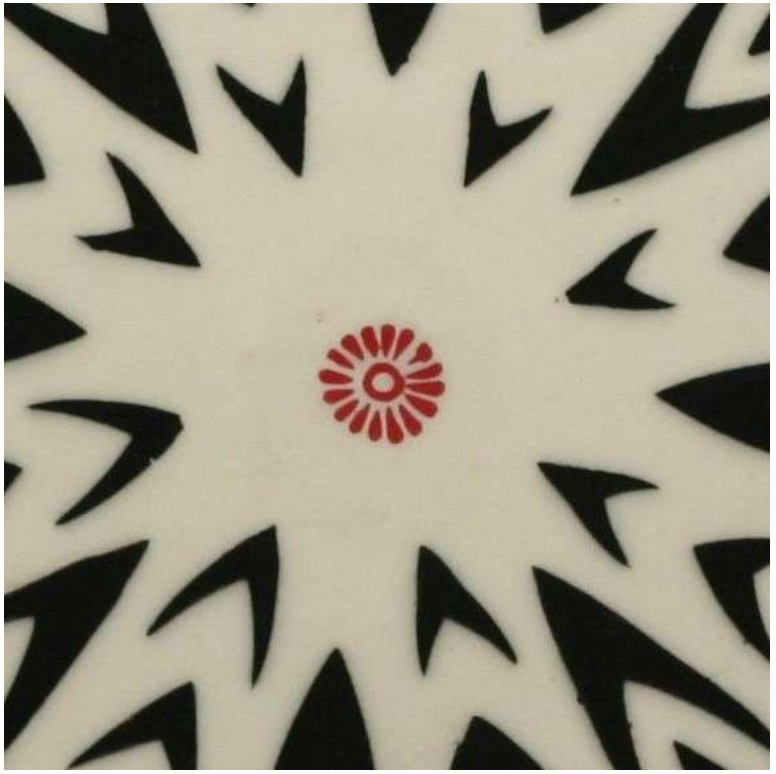


Each region in Poland has its own style of Wycinanki.

The following plates show medallions, birds and a doll.

Birds, particularly roosters, are popular in the region of Łowicz.

The doll, from the region of Kurpie, was engraved on the Polish pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai world expo ... a great example of tradition with a contemporary interpretation.



Black, White and Red

Serving Plate

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, black slip and red mishima flowers, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 12 1/2" diameter 4lbs 4 oz

Black and Red set

Plates - Set of Two

Material: Black Stoneware and red slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, red slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9" diameter 1 lb 8oz each

Black Bird

Plate

Material: Brown stoneware with white, black and red slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 11 1/2" diameter 2lbs 10oz

Lady with Bird

Plate

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 10 1/2" diameter 2lbs 4oz

Blue and White

Shallow Bowl

Material: White Stoneware and blue slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, blue slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 13 1/2" diameter X 2 1/2" h 4lbs 6oz

Sample of Kashubian embroidery

More recently, I have been exploring Kashubian embroidery designs.

The first Polish settlers to Canada, were from Kashubia, an area in the north east of Poland.

They settled in the Ottawa valley in 1858 and many have kept their language and traditions to this day.

Barns and houses are painted with the traditional designs.

Embroidery is kept alive through a group of dedicated volunteers.

Having spent my summers there, I was exposed to these traditions from an early age.

Kashubian Flowers

Bowl

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, carved lines, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 9 1/2" diameter X 3 1/4"h 2lbs

Flowers and Birds

Oval Tray

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Hand built, paper resist, coloured slip, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 10"l X 7 1/2"w 1lb

Kashubian mug set - hearts

Set of two mugs

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, carved lines, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 4"h X 3 1/2"w 12oz each

Kashubian mug set - yellow flowers

Set of two mugs

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, carved lines, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 4"h X 3 1/4"w 1lb each

Kashubian Flowers

Spoon Holders

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, carved lines, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 5 3/4" diameter 6 oz each

Łowicz Flowers

Spoon Holders

Material: White Stoneware and coloured slip
Method: Wheel thrown, paper resist, coloured slip, carved lines, clear glaze
Dimensions / Weight: 5 3/4" diameter 6 oz each

The Ottawa Guild of Potters is proud to present Ada Brzeski's *From Paper to Clay: Preserving Traditional Folk Art*, the Guild's second Virtual Celebrating Clay exhibition. Necessarily in these difficult times, her works are presented here online in a virtual exhibition, as a way to continue to present art that inspires and fires our imagination.

While the inherently tactile quality of pottery is absent in a virtual exhibition (think texture, balance and weight in the hand), the viewer will appreciate the depth of the artist's knowledge of the Polish traditions of paper cutting and embroidery and her skill in expressing those treasured traditional patterns in fired clay.

Many thanks to our webmaster, Dave Drapeau, without whom none of these exhibitions would be possible. Our thanks as well to Maria Moldovan for the poster design. With their help, the Guild plans to continue our Celebrating Clay exhibitions in this virtual form.

OGP Exhibitions Committee

Elizabeth Davies, Isobel Salole, Joanna Richardson

Biography

Ada Brzeski started pottery about 15 years ago under the tutelage of Anne Chambers.

Mainly self-taught, Ada's passion for clay led her to join the Ottawa Guild of Potters. She became involved in the organization as event coordinator and treasurer. She attended intensive pottery courses including ones at Haliburton School of Arts, Lunenburg School of Arts (with Walter Ostrom), Alfred University (with Bruce Cochrane) and La Meridiana in Tuscany.

Much of her work is inspired by her Polish roots and the colourful folkloric art works of that culture. She taught herself the art of Wycinanki [Vee- chee-nan-kee] the colourful art of Polish paper cutting. She studied in Poland under Maria Stachnal, one of the greatest folk artists there.

She shares a studio with three other artists at Studio Space Ottawa of which she is a founding member.

Her work is available at the Wilno Craft Gallery in Wilno, Ontario. She also sells through the Ottawa Guild of Potters' biannual sales. Pieces may also be purchased by contacting her directly. Ada.Brzeski@gmail.com

THE OTTAWA GUILD OF POTTERS
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