

Obituary for Morgen Hall

Moira Vincentelli writes a memory of Morgen Hall and her connections with Aberystwyth, drawing on interviews and lecture recordings held in the Ceramic Archive at Aberystwyth University.

Morgen Hall was a very special person whose bubbly enthusiasm overflowed into whatever she was doing. As a teenager her life followed an unexpected trajectory from an ‘alternative’ fishing village in northern California to a close ‘Church of Scotland’ fishing village in northern Scotland. Her parents had run a restaurant, dealt in antiques and had a smallholding, all activities that left their mark on Morgen’s future enthusiasms. In Scotland the family were deemed the ‘crazy Americans’ - but they found a welcome and survived. Morgen identified early on a vocation for ceramics and even at school worked part time in a local pottery before undertaking an art degree at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen. Part-time jobs in local potteries and a summer work placement with Joe Finch at Appin Pottery imprinted the ideals of wood-firing and the anglo-oriental tradition and when she was accepted on the MA in Cardiff her original plan was to develop research in salt and soda firing. Her work, however, soon took a different direction after a visit to the museum in Stoke on Trent.

In a talk she gave in 2007 she describes the liberation she felt when she saw at first hand the early industrial pottery of Staffordshire.

It really wasn't till I came down to Cardiff in 1983 to do this postgraduate degree and they took us to Hanley Museum in Stoke on Trent in the first weekend of the course and the penny suddenly and fabulously dropped - that there was more than one tradition and it was - Whoa look at all these pots and I fell in love with the Elers brothers and I particularly loved the nasty uptight turning that you can get on Leeds creamware –EVIL EVIL whoa ! And I was so excited by these pots. It was a real eye-opener - and it changed my life.

(Gregynog talk soundfile)

Following the MA she established herself in a studio in Chapter Arts Centre and found a place at the centre of a lively art scene.



Fig.1 Morgen Hall in her studio in Chapter, 1992 (photo Anna Hale)

Morgen had started in studio pottery in the 1970s and one of the central doctrines of that tradition remained with her throughout her career. She wanted to make pots that people would use every day, especially tableware to complement food and celebrate the joy of eating. In another sense her ceramics broke from the ‘studio pottery’ look where the colours of the earth and the mark of hand and fire are valued. She made precise forms, beautifully turned and playfully patterned with colourful swirls and dots on a tin glaze. Nevertheless Morgen makes a telling connection between the two modes.

I really enjoyed the richness of the red earthenware, just the colour and the richness of the clay itself, plus there was a connection because, the tin glaze had, in certain respects, similar qualities to... woodfiring...that summer I was lucky enough to get a place with Joe Finch at Appin pottery..

I notice that certain qualities of colouring and surface tone from the wood-fired pieces were actually echoed almost in the tin glaze earthenware...I mean that where the tin glaze broke thin on the edges it would allow the rich orange through, and kind of echoed the way a shino (glaze) was on the wood fired pieces so I was enjoying getting to grips with a new area that I hadn't ever worked in before. (Interview with Anna Hale 1992)

She had a special relationship with Aberystwyth and was one of the young artists whose work was selected for a one-person show in *Ceramic Series* in 1988 when we first acquired a

number of pieces. For many years she and her husband Rob were important figures in the presentation of the International Ceramics Festival. Rob was in charge of the early video projections and recordings while Morgen worked tirelessly backstage supporting the demonstrators on stage, lugging on huge bags of clay, moving equipment and cheerfully participating in the on-going banter between potters and helpers.

In 1993 Morgen was invited to be a demonstrator at the Festival and she chose to turn her appearance into an opportunity for a piece of performance art. At the opening evening she came on stage as a dinner lady wearing a traditional floral pinafore and wheeling a tea trolley. Out on the field she fired pastry pots, which were nevertheless beautifully made. She was a true performer.



Fig.2 Morgen Hall firing pastry pots at Aberystwyth

In 1994 Sara Bowie arranged a major touring exhibition of Morgen Hall's work, which started at Llantarnam Grange and toured to seven galleries in the UK. The show was entitled *The breakfast, lunch and dinner party* – a clear reference to Judy Chicago's groundbreaking feminist project from the late 1970s. The show was imaginatively stage-set with designs by

Morgen of tables, sideboards and tea trolley to set off the riotous display of serving dishes and sweetie jars with knobs like jesters' hats, teapots, spiral-handled spoons, and egg cups guarded by a little container for toasted soldiers. In an interview many years later she recalled how the show did much for her profile but less for her income. By contrast for three years running in the early 1990s she showed at Chelsea Craft Fair where the popularity of her work and the system of direct selling was very welcome financially as she '*doubled her income overnight*'. (Interview with Moira Vincentelli 2006)



Fig.3 Catalogue image of Breakfast lunch and dinner party 1994

Official bodies in Wales were soon to recognise Morgen's work and she won prizes at the National Eisteddfod in the 1980s and, in 1990, the Craft Masterpiece Gold medal. In 1991 she received a Special Award from the Arts Council of Wales. It was £1000 and, at that time, the most that had been given to a craftsman. Many years later, in 2005, she was again the recipient of a major award for Creative Wales but this time for £20,000. It signalled a rising status for ceramic art in Wales.

Morgen's slow and meticulous production system meant that she struggled to produce enough work for her customers and her potential market. She wrestled with the dilemma that goes back at least to William Morris - the cost of production by hand means the selling price is high and the work too expensive to be used on an everyday basis. With her love of high precision and excitement at developments in new technologies Morgen was keen to experiment always hoping that it might resolve some of that dilemma. A three-year research fellowship at (UWIC) Cardiff Metropolitan University in 1997 gave her the opportunity and she bought a ram press, a plotter cutter, a new computer and software. She was excited by the creative possibilities of such things. Using stencils based on the unusual vegetables that she loved to grow she applied these to new designs for tableware.

It still seems a miracle to me that you can grow in the garden things like beans and then translate them into fine stencils and keep the freshness that could never be achieved with a scalpel. Nor are you restricted by scale, as they can be made larger or smaller.

(Interview with Moira Vincentelli 2006)



Fig.4 Earthenware ram-pressed plate with tin-glaze decoration with images of celery, 2001

Her joyful personality and boundless enthusiasm shone out in the work but she always felt concerned if it was suggested that her ceramics were merely playful. She knew that her techniques were both painstaking and time-consuming. Although she embraced the new technologies they did not actually pay off either in time or financially but did allow her to produce a body of original new work.

Morgen Hall's beautiful tableware is treasured and will continue to delight long into the future. She has left us far too soon but will not be forgotten.

Interview with Anna Hale for Potters in Wales, 1992

Interview in Chapter, Cardiff with Moira Vincentelli, 2006

Recording of a talk at *Making Good, Women Artists in Wales* conference, Gregynog, 2007