



ABOVE: *Fish Tails*, black magnesia  
RIGHT: *Bleached Corals*, polished



## Impeccable porcelain

Vivienne Foley was first fascinated by porcelain aged 17. Now, after six decades exploring the medium, *Isabella Smith* discusses what keeps her captivated



VIVIENNE FOLEY'S LOVE OF PORCELAIN began when she was young. While on a trip to visit family in Devon aged 17, she was shown a small collection of 17th and 18th-century Chinese ceramics. It included a fine piece of imperial yellow – a vivid egg-yolk shade only the emperor and his household were permitted to use. 'That yellow was just incredible to me,' she recalls. 'I thought: "I've absolutely got to know more about this," and went steaming down to the British Museum to see more.'

The only handmade pottery the teenaged Foley had encountered before was what have been called 'honest pots': earthy, rustic wares by the likes of Leach and Cardew. Antique Chinese pieces were a revelation – and the beginning of a lifelong fascination with porcelain.

#### SCULPTURAL FORMS

Since the mid-1960s, Foley has been conjuring extraordinary forms from the famously recalcitrant clay body. Many are vessels with impeccable classic proportions, enlivened by sculptural necks and mouths that yawn wide, are tightly closed, lean off-centre or embody perfect symmetry. Titles give a clue as to her inspirations; recent pieces bear names including *Balloon*, *Fish Tails*, *Blackbird* and *Clover*. She also creates groups of objects: clusters of thrown and turned forms that recall spindles, twigs, microscopic life forms or spinning tops. She has begun to explore bronze, working with fabricators to turn bisque-fired one-off porcelain pieces into bronze editions.

In her six-decade career, Foley has worked with leading interior designers such as Colefax & Fowler and David Hicks, seen her work acquired for national collections and given as diplomatic gifts to then-heads of state, among them French president Jacques Chirac, US president Bill Clinton and Irish president Mary Robinson.

Yet, it was not always quite so glamorous. In the mid-1960s, Foley was a new mother living on a barge on London's waterways, when she enrolled in the Sir John Cass College in the East End. There she began to create what she describes as 'large-scale coiled stoneware craziness, as big as I could make.' But, though she relished working with clay, sharing the often-chaotic and crowded workshop proved challenging. The solution: building herself a small studio on dry land in which to house a kiln and electric wheel.

Foley never looked back; that same wheel, purchased from the Fulham Pottery in 1965, has stayed with her to this day. It has been with her through moves from that London barge to a spacious farmhouse on the banks of the River Shannon in County Clare, Ireland, in 1978; back to London in 1996, to a small studio in Little Venice; and to her current home-studio in Cheltenham in 2017. So attached is she, she says, that 'When my wheel goes, I go.'

#### PORCELAIN CHOICE

Though Foley's work has evolved over the decades, one constant has been her choice of medium. She discarded the stoneware of her student years as quickly as possible, enchanted by the beauty of porcelain. If her finished objects appear effortless, this is an illusion. Such forms require superlative skill to achieve.

**ABOVE:** *Clover*, butter glaze  
**RIGHT ABOVE:** *Tall neck vase in Turquoise II*; *Tall neck vase in Celadon*; *Tall neck vase in Turquoise I* **RIGHT:** *Rare Bird*, limited edition bronze



Images: courtesy of the artist, Agata Pec and Vessel Gallery



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ABOVE LEFT: *Apple Pair*, butter glaze  
ABOVE: *Triple Balance II*, limited edition bronze

Studying the composite forms of Hans Coper while at college was the starting point for developing her construction technique. 'His work inspired me to look at different sculptural forms and create something unified from thrown sections,' she says.

Living nearby, Foley made several trips to Lucie Rie's studio in the mid 1970s, driven to learn about Rie's porcelain. 'Lucie was quite austere and depreciating of her own work, but very hospitable and interesting,' she remembers. 'Barely anyone else was working in porcelain at that time.' She found 'an echo' between what each was making. 'I was looking at ninth-century Persian metalwork, which had influenced Chinese designs, so I was already doing these tall necks [like Rie].'

In 1985, work by both women was exhibited together at the Casson Gallery in London. Rie made composite forms, joining long necks onto rounded bodies, but her technique was 'rather brusque', says Foley – while 'I was in a manic precision mode. Everything I made was very carefully calibrated and that has been the whole thing ever since.'

Today, she works with David Leach Porcelain from Potclays, but this is a relatively recent choice, one borne of necessity. Her preferred body for over 40 years was a now-discontinued porcelain usually used for insulators on power lines ('It had exceptional strength'). In 2014, she wrote the how-to guide *Porcelain* (published by Bloomsbury as part of its *New Ceramics* series), which was later also translated into Chinese.

#### CHINESE FOCUS

That early fascination with pottery from China led to a lifelong study of the subject. In 1977, she joined a group trip to China organised by the Craft Potters Association. 'We were among the first potters to visit, after the fall of the Gang of Four. And of course, they didn't want us to see the traditional methods – they wanted to show us the new factories and were upset when we wanted to stop for dragon kilns we spotted going up hillsides.' Later, she undertook study courses with the auction houses Sotheby's and Christies, and with the Percival David Foundation.

She also became friends with Sir Michael Butler, the diplomat known for his world-class collection of 17th-century Chinese porcelain. 'When I first knew him, he had about 850 pieces in three Nissen huts in his garden,' she says (he later built a private museum). She helped Butler with this priceless collection, including taking photographs for his exhibition catalogues. She recalls hugging tight a unique Kangxi period (1662-1722) imperial vase decorated with nine dragons, carrying it across 'a very slimy, wet courtyard with the rain pouring down on me'; in 2022, that same vase sold for 6,048 million Hong Kong Dollars.

This intimate, in-depth experience of Chinese pots can be felt in certain works that recall these antecedents. Vessels with titles such as *Jade Melon with Foliate Rim* (J9) or *Aubergine* (V16) are reminiscent of historic pots in the shape of fruit or vegetables, albeit in stripped-back, minimal form; glazes of green titanium invoke the pellucid hues of celadon and jade.

#### GLAZING CHALLENGE

Glaze is a particular bugbear of Foley's, with spraying work her least-favourite task. 'No one ever thinks about the agony you go through with the glazing process. I am very precise and it is every bit as challenging as throwing.' She continues with spray-glazing – though 'being up to your



knees in glaze slop on a cold day is not ideal' – because spraying is the only way to achieve the uniform smoothness she seeks. She supports the work on a custom-built rig and now uses a spray gun on a bungee from the ceiling as it takes the pressure off her wrists. Finally, she fires in an electric kiln to 1250°C, over about 12 hours.

Foley has always formulated her own glazes, which over the years she has refined down to three or four basic glazes that she amends with colouring oxides. During her second period in London, an austere palette of pure black and white suited her both aesthetically and practically – downsizing her collection of glazes to fit the compact central London studio. She still works in black and white today, with the pure simplicity of classic form still closest to her heart, but has added a range of subtle hues ('just a puff of colour'): blues, greens, yellows, pinks, lilacs and purples, encouraged by the response of her gallerist at Vessel Gallery in Kensington.

She ascribes this chromatic turn to her 'enforced slow-down and changed state during the pandemic, as much as my new-found heaven, making a garden.' Alongside gardening, she found botanical painting very restorative. Today, she works from her garden studio, where plants and flowers growing on her doorstep provide constant inspiration in both colour and form; some rims of her vessels are floral or foliate in form, recalling abstracted natural forms as well as historic Chinese antecedents.

She is excited about the possibilities of bronze. Unlike porcelain, in which kiln height limits her options, with bronze 'the sky's the limit,' she says; she has hopes of making works of seven to ten foot tall. At 82 years old, Foley is full of ideas for new work and plans: 'I would be disgraced if I wasn't still going until 90 – at least.' **CR**

**FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE:**

*Ivory Crackle; Tall Flowers, polished; Tall Neck Petal, white magnesia*

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