

# KATHLEEN COX AN IRISH POTTER OF THE THIRTIES

**Peter Lamb** traces the short-lived career of a talented and unusual artist

Twenty years ago, I began collecting modern Irish pottery and quickly discovered it was a rather rare commodity. Less than half a dozen potters worked in Ireland between the 1880s and 1920 (not counting Belleek and its off-shoots) and they were equally scarce in the 1920s and 30s. Although efforts had been made to stimulate pottery manufacture by the Department of Agriculture & Technical Instruction at the turn of the century, and investigations into Irish pottery clays had been made, nothing much happened until the late 1920s when the Carrigaline pottery was established in Co Cork.

At about the same time, a small group of students emerged from the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. Two of them opened pottery workshops. The group who had overlapped in the School from 1926-29 included Kathleen Cox, (Fig. 6), a star pupil of Oliver Sheppard, who won the Taylor Prize three times and who opened her pottery studio in 1929. The others were Stella Rayner from Clontarf, who became Kathleen's assistant, and Edel Dill-Williams who had a pottery studio in Dun Laoghaire in the grounds of Knapton House throughout most of the 1930s. Kathleen specialised in figures, the other two in tableware.

Kathleen Cox was born on 2 July 1904 at Wo Sung, China, the eldest daughter of Dr R H Cox, the Port Health Officer at Shanghai, one of the Cox family of Dundalk. Kathleen spent the first seven years of her life in China which made a deep and lasting impression on her, not only visually but culturally.

In 1911, the family returned to live in Ireland, settling in Howth in an old house with a big garden called Hawthornden. Kathleen grew up in idyllic surroundings; her father, who was also an amateur geologist, modelled in clay and spent his retirement inventing useful things including a periscope which was used by the Navy during World War I.

Kathleen was educated at Alexandra College – she did not do

well at exams and her father decided to enter her, at the age of seventeen, in the Metropolitan School of Art. There she remained from 1921 until 1929, proving to be an excellent student under the Master of Sculpture, Oliver Sheppard. She won the Taylor Prize for the first time in 1925 with a sculpture entitled *Adam* and again in 1926 and 1927 with *An Excavator* and *A Dancer*. She visited Paris for a few months in 1929 with the £50

she had won as a prize for her work. Oliver Sheppard was clearly the major influence on her artistic development.

There was another side to her, however. Her talents as an artist were matched by psychic and spiritual gifts, commented on by many of her contemporaries, and ultimately the development of these gifts became the main priority of her life. She was highly independent and detached herself from the belief system she was born into, developing a new one of her own, which included a belief in the universal soul, the great spirit present in all things. When she subsequently met some theosophists she found her views coincided almost exactly with theirs and she joined their ranks and frequently spoke at their meetings. She also became a vegetarian early in life.

It was when she was in Paris that she had an extraordinary visionary experience that was to be inspirational throughout her life. It happened unexpectedly in the street and took the

form of a moment of divine enlightenment in which she simultaneously knew herself to be both the centre of, and at one with, the entire universe. Like others who have had the mystical experience, she became a person who radiated love and goodness in the world, and this had a profound effect on her work.

Following this, she came under the influence of Rev Will Hayes, a former journalist who came from England to live in Dublin between 1929 and 1933. He lectured extensively on comparative religion and founded the Order of the Great Companions, a group dedicated to the promotion of world



1. Hilda ROBERTS (1901-82): 'Strange Spirit'. Kathleen Cox in her studio. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50cm. Signed. (Private collection). Cox opened her studio in Schoolhouse Lane, off Molesworth Street, Dublin in 1929 and worked there until 1935 when she abruptly gave up pottery and smashed all her moulds.

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2. Kathleen COX (1904-72): *The Seed*. 29cm high. 1932 (Private collection). For her more popular designs, Cox was influenced by the type of figure groups produced at the time by the Doulton Burslem factory.

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brotherhood. She absorbed the influence of mystical writers and drew inspiration from the illustrations of William Blake and Kahlil Gibran. Many of her friends said she seemed to be on another plane but she had a strong practical streak and a good sense of humour which helped her to keep her feet on the ground. By the time she left college she had developed both her artistic skill and her spiritual outlook to a point where she was ready to begin work.

She opened her pottery studio at No 7 Schoolhouse Lane, off Molesworth Street in Dublin. There she also lived in an apartment furnished with deck chairs and decorated in her idiosyncratic way: the curtains were orange (the colour of life) painted with flames (to represent the life force). Outside her door hung her sign (Fig. 18), a wooden board also painted orange with her logo painted in gold. The logo represented a vase and a naked woman (both



3. Dermod O'BRIEN (1865-1945): *Still-life*. Oil on canvas, 60 x 35cm. (Private collection). The pottery bowl in the foreground, left, was made by Kathleen Cox in 1930 and must have been acquired by Dermod O'Brien as it features in several of his paintings.

vessels) from which stream golden flames symbolising the creative energy of the life force shaping and forming the pot and the woman.

Womanhood is the major theme in Kathleen's work: woman as mother, as worker, and as spiritual being. Many of her women are shown with closed eyes lifting their heads up to the light or deep in some private and ecstatic reverie, others are full of the wonder of new life as are her many Madonnas with their children, others abandon themselves to the great forces of nature, wind and water, or contemplate her beauties; all seem to have an intense inner life. Judging from the portraits that exist of Kathleen she was just such a woman herself (Fig 1).

She was joined in the studio by her college friend, Stella (Estelle) Rayner, Kathleen making mainly figures but also occasional cups, saucers, plates and bowls, and Stella making tableware and occasionally



4. Kathleen COX: *Bowl*. 6.5cm high. 1930. (Private collection). This is the bowl which was acquired by the painter Dermod O'Brien who used it as a prop in several of his still-lives. Most of Cox's work is in the form of figures although she occasionally made cups, saucers, plates and bowls.



5. Kathleen COX: *The Lavender Man*. 27cm high. 1932. (Private collection). By this stage Cox had decided to produce some pieces that were more commercial and she modelled this figure on a well-known Dublin character of the time.

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terracotta buttons. They experimented with clay from Howth but it lacked plasticity and they resorted to Wenger's clay imported from London. They fired their ware in a small electric kiln (see photograph in *The Daily Sketch*, 18 February 1933), the first of its kind in Ireland, and despite the fact that elements kept breaking, they persevered with it right through to the close of their potting careers at the end of 1935, a period of about six years in all.

Among the first pieces produced are a *Madonna and Child* plaque (Fig. 10) in which the Madonna with out-turned, raised hands, gazes in rapture at her baby. Another dated piece from 1929 is the *Portrait Mask of Norris Davidson* (Fig. 7), a friend and neighbour whose film



6. Kathleen Cox. Photograph taken in her studio, c.1930.

*Suicide* starred Mary Manning. Norris commissioned a poster from Kathleen for this film and also a bird bath in the form of St Francis with up-turned hands.

The following year, 1930, she exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy for the first time. Her superb *Portrait Mask of Brigid O'Brien* (Fig. 9) was priced £2. Brigid had been a fellow student under Oliver Sheppard and was a daughter of Dermod O'Brien, the painter. Dermod must have acquired a little bowl (Fig. 4) that she made that year as it became a familiar prop in his paintings, turning up frequently in the foreground of his flower pieces (Fig. 3). That year, she also exhibited a pair of *Madonna and Child* bookends (Fig. 8).

In 1931, she exhibited again at the RHA and also held an



7. Kathleen Cox: *Portrait mask of Norris Davidson*. 23cm high. 1929. (Private collection). This is one of Cox's early portrait masks, a form which was relatively unusual for a potter. The film director Norris Davidson was a friend and neighbour of Cox's.



8. Kathleen Cox: *Bookend in the form of a Madonna and Child*. 20.75cm high. 1930. (Private collection). Cox exhibited a pair of these bookends at the RHA in 1930.



9. Kathleen Cox: *Portrait mask of Brigid O'Brien*. 21.5cm high. 1930. (Private collection). Cox exhibited this piece at the RHA in 1930 where it was priced at £2: the subject was the daughter of the painter Dermod O'Brien.

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10. Kathleen COX: *Plaque with the Madonna and Child*. 35.5cm high. Dated 1929. (Private collection). This is one of the first pieces produced by Cox after opening her Dublin studio in 1929. At first she experimented with the use of clay from Howth but later imported Wenger's clay from London.

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11. Kathleen COX: *Nude Figure of a girl*. 17cm high. c. 1931. (Private collection). It is fairly certain that the pose of the girl with head thrown back was inspired by an Augustus John drawing, *Nirvana*, in the Tate Gallery, London, a postcard of which was among Cox's possessions.

exhibition at her studio in Schoolhouse Lane. Included was her figure *A Woman Carrying Something*, (a mysterious burden hidden beneath the woman's shawl) (Fig. 17). She issued this piece in various colourways. Her editions of each piece were limited to six. From this period also comes a small nude figure of a girl with head thrown back basking in light (Fig. 11), clearly inspired by Augustus John's *Nirvana* in the Tate Gallery of



12. Postcard of *Nirvana* by Augustus JOHN (1878-1961). This Tate Gallery postcard was among the potter's possessions.

which Kathleen possessed a postcard reproduction (Fig. 12).

By 1932, Kathleen was finding it difficult to keep going financially making purely 'Art' pieces. She decided to do a commercial line as well and made a number of figures based on the style of Leslie Carradine of the Doulton Burslem factory. These included an *Old Woman Selling from a Barrow*, and

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13. Kathleen COX: *Bookends in the form of male nudes*. 26cm high. 1932-33. (Private collection). This extraordinary design is inspired by a story of a drowned girl whose spirit in the form of a bird sits on the young man's shoulder.



14. Kathleen COX: *Bookends in the form of a Sea Woman*. 18cm high. 1932-33. (Private collection). These bookends are among the most beautiful of all Cox's designs with the naiad-like figure rising from the waves.

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15. Kathleen COX: *Plaque – The Barge Woman*. 25cm high. 1932-33. (Private collection). One of Cox's last pieces.



16. Kathleen COX: *The Fruit-Seller*. 19.5cm high. 1932-33. (Private collection). The somewhat angular treatment of the drapery in this figure marks a new development in Cox's style.



17. Kathleen COX: *A Woman Carrying Something*. 24cm high. 1931. (Private collection). This was Cox's own title for the figure which she made in both plain white and in colour.



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the charming figure *The Lavender Man* (Fig. 5), modelled on Michael Clifford, a well known Dublin character, who sold his wares from a tray, on buses and street corners. He was a native of Genoa and was recorded by other Dublin artists, including Harry Kernoff.

*The Seed* (Fig. 2), a group of three women in shawls admiring a baby, was also shown in 1932, as was the seated nude girl, *Eternity* of which she made a special inscribed copy for Sarah Purser.

In the 1932/33 period she produced the male nude bookends, (Fig. 13), depicting the story of a drowned girl whose spirit in the form of a bird sits on a young man's shoulder and whispers in his ear. Also the extraordinary *Sea Woman* (Fig. 14) bookends in which woman, horse and waves seem to blend together in ecstatic union. The lovely contemplative *Fruit Seller* (Fig. 16) and the serene *Barge Woman* (Fig. 15) are from this period. The latest dated piece to come to light is a *Portrait Bust of Maureen O'Brien* (sister of Brigid) inscribed 'Jan, 1934'. In 1934 she also made an art-deco teaset with a sign of the zodiac painted on each cup. The current whereabouts of this teaset is unknown.

During the mid-1930s Kathleen gradually stopped making pottery, the end being brought about by a combination of factors. She felt trapped in an ivory tower and, as an artist, unable to influence society or change the world. In the face of the rise of Nazism in Germany and the looming World War II this sense of futility increased. She also came to feel very strongly that pottery should be useful and not merely ornamental. Her visit to the Chinese Exhibition in London in 1935 confirmed this. She returned to Dublin and smashed all her moulds and closed down the pottery and, from then on, avoided talking about her work.

L S Gogan, a former Keeper of the Art Industry Division of the National Museum of Ireland described her (in a letter to the author) as 'a somewhat fugitive genius' whose work was 'surprisingly sophisticated' who 'in normal circumstances ought to have become the founder of quite a factory.'

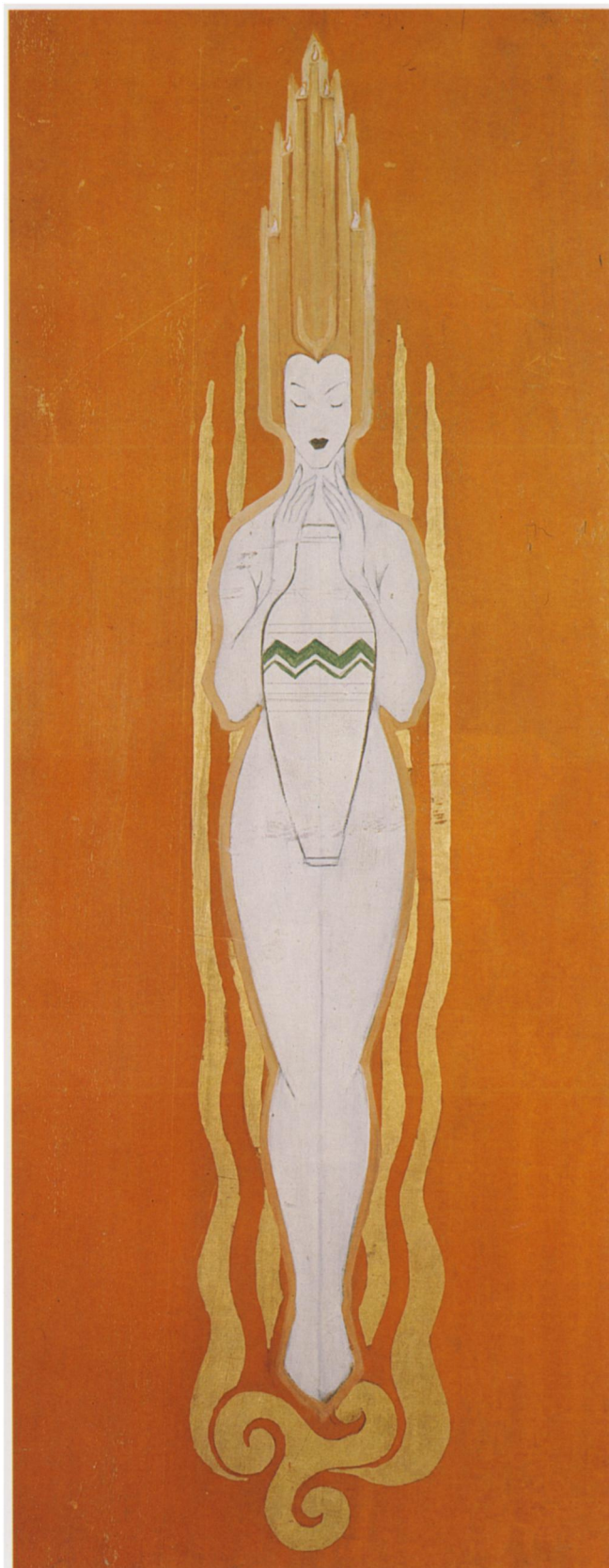
In 1937, she married and moved to London. She spent the war years with her husband, a conscientious objector, running a farm at Meopham, Kent, next door to her old friend and mentor, Will Hayes. In 1950, she returned to London to raise her two daughters. She wrote and illustrated a book for children called *A Story of Stories* (published 1970 by Volturna Press) about the great religions of the world. She travelled to North Africa where she was accepted to their hearts by the native people. A photograph of her published with an interview by Jill Tweedie in 1971 shows an extraordinarily open, joyful face.

She died in London in 1972.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to all the people who have helped me with information about Kathleen Cox; I am particularly thankful to Stella Rayner, Alan Palmer and Grania Balfour for their assistance in writing this article.



18. Kathleen COX: *Studio signboard*. House-paint on wood, 100cm high. (Private collection). The orange of her studio sign represented the colour of life; the woman with a pot surrounded by flames symbolised the creative energy of the life force.