



Ceramic buttons

Lucie Rie

Not on display

Title/Description: Ceramic buttons

Artist/Maker: Lucie Rie

Born: 1945 - 1947

Object Type: Button

Accession Number: L64

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England

Celebrated as one of the most important studio potters of the 20th century, Dame Lucie Rie is famous for her distinctive modernist tableware and vessels. However, it is through Rie's lesser-known, early work making buttons in the 1940s that we discover the fascinating story of her arrival in London as an Austrian Jewish émigré, the establishment of her career, and how she came to develop her innovative array of glaze textures and colours. These small, wearable objects reveal a story of survival and collaboration at a poignant moment of international conflict.

Born in Vienna, Rie studied pottery at the Vienna *Kunstgewerbeschule* under decorative artist and sculptor Michael Powolny. In 1925 Rie set up her first studio in Vienna, and, over the next twelve years, established her place in the artistic community, winning a silver medal at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937. In 1938 she, like other artists such as Frank Auerbach, Naum Gabo and fellow ceramicist Hans Coper, fled Nazi-occupied Austria to begin a new life in London.

Upon arrival in London, Rie continued to work and volunteered for Home Defence duties. However, whilst establishing her studio in London and a new market for her work, Rie needed to make a living. Fellow Venician, Fritz Lampl, was re-establishing his glass manufacturers in London, successfully producing a range of modern decorative glass tableware and figurines for the luxury market. Lampl also began producing press-moulded and blown glass buttons and offered Rie and others work at his company, Bimini, to supplying glass buttons to fashion houses and department stores such as Harrods and Liberty's. [1]

Rie began to produce her own stoneware buttons in her studio at her house near Hyde Park. She made buttons on the wheel and by hand, producing up to two hundred buttons a week. In 1942 Rie hired Rudolf Neufeld, a fellow refugee, as an assistant. Together they developed a series of plaster moulds, which rapidly sped up the production of the simpler button shapes. The moulds remained on the shelves in her studio until her death. Rie developed a wide range of button designs and employed six people, including Hans Coper, in her studio to support production. Rie also developed a range of innovative glazes that contributed to the development of her distinctive later glaze textures and colours, that she's so well known by.

The more elaborate and expensive buttons were aimed at the couture market and were laid out on presentation panels so that visitors to the studio could pick out designs. Leading fashion designers of the period also sent fabric samples to the studio, and within a few days she would have to produce buttons to match. In 1980 Rie met the Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake, and their friendship resulted in the 1989 exhibition 'Issey Miyake meets Lucie Rie' at Tokyo's Sogetsu Gallery. In the same year, Miyake also used several of her wartime buttons in his collection. [2]

Rie later extended the range to include a variety of jewellery, umbrella handles, and frames for mirrors. For her, the business represented a pragmatic approach to generating an income during the war. However, today the buttons represent a fascinating insight into this lesser-known aspect of Rie's highly documented career.

Katharine Malcolm, April 2023

[1] <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/lucie-rie-a-secret-life-of-buttons>

[2] Ibid.

Further Reading

<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/lucie-rie-ceramics-buttons-coca/>
