



VERNON POTTERY

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Our museum's galleries are filled with unique and one of a kind creations, each with a notable history that our visitors may never know. All too often these treasures are passed over with only a slight nod, the visitor unaware of the tenderness that was involved in the making. As a culture, we are so deeply inundated with mass produced trinkets that our eyes must be retrained to catch the truly handmade gifts of patience and skill. As a writer for our museum, it is a pleasure to lift such items out of their settings where they blend so easily as to go unnoticed. When standing tall in the spotlight, I find even the smallest pot can have a story worth telling.

The pottery of Eileen and the late Sid Vernon can be found in collections all over the world, and the attentive visitor will spot their wares throughout our galleries. Vernon Pottery is thrown by hand and extremely well made, reflective of an expert partnership spanning decades. Sid's masterful eye and Eileen's delicate precision allowed the duo to work harmoniously, sharing ideas and developing new pieces. In her article, "Behind the Wheel At Vernon Pottery," Sybil Harp describes the Vernons' home studio – a converted garage – which allowed the couple to share three of their passions: pottery, animals, and classical music.¹ "Almost every day in the Vernons' studio, classical music plays on the stereo while a menagerie of animals talk, squawk, chatter, munch and whistle over the hum of the pottery wheels," writes Harp. She describes the happy goings-on of birds, tortoises, a cat, and even a rescued squirrel, all relaxing in the tranquility of that creative space while Sid and Eileen produced their celebrated salt-glazed pieces.²

Sid fell in love with pottery at the young age of 18 while taking a ceramics class, discovering a passion that would become his life's work. Soon after, he became a teaching assistant for his mentor, the master potter Robert Eckles – an opportunity that would change his life in more ways than one.³ Eileen, a college student at the time, took one of Eckles' pottery classes on a



Two salt-glazed stoneware pots by Vernon Pottery. Sid Vernon formed the pots and Eileen Vernon painted the designs. Both pots are located in *The Wood's Apartment*, (Ron and April Gill, 2008). Exploring the World Gallery. Photos by Emily Wolverton.

whim, soon finding herself as keen on the assistant as she was with the clay. In an interview last year with Toni Guagenti for *The Virginian-Pilot*, Eileen reminisced fondly on that special time of their lives, noting that "[Sid] was so, so different...He just wasn't like the others."⁴ Eventually the two were married, and Sid found joy teaching pottery classes at Eileen's alma mater, the Friends School in Virginia Beach, where Eileen was working as a librarian.⁵ After a few years, the time spent kneading the large balls of clay eventually took their toll on Sid, causing terrible tendonitis in his wrists. This stroke of bad luck was not without a very special silver lining: at first devastated, Sid discovered he could still make pots if *he made them smaller*. In his 1997 interview with Harp, Sid joked, "I did the ultimate downsizing."⁶

At that time, neither he nor Eileen had an inkling that the miniature world they were about to enter was so vast, nor could they have anticipated how well-received and sought-after their work was to become. They became a team, with Eileen making all of the plates and bowls as well as handling all of the painted decorations, and Sid making the more intricate and difficult wares including jugs, lidded crocks, and miniature art pottery. Their business went from hitting the road with samples and

mailing their catalogs to shops to becoming a full-fledged operation, selling out at miniature shows and receiving lucrative commissions.⁷ In Sid's words, "I never expected – it never crossed my mind – that I would make a living making miniature pottery. It has been full of rewards, especially the nice people we've met wherever we've gone in the miniatures world."⁸ Sadly, at only 39 years old, Sid suffered from a heart attack, which was to be only the beginning of a slow deterioration in his health. In her article, Toni Guagenti details the heart-breaking struggle Sid faced at the height of his pottery career:

*"By 2002, he had his first stroke. He worked hard to regain his strength and to make pottery again, but by the time that happened, the seizures kicked in. When he could no longer work, Sid would sit in their studio, in that former garage, and watch Eileen throw as classic music played and the couple's African gray parrots chirped. She fashioned pottery, but hers wasn't as good as Sid's. Not being able to work with clay was hard for [him]... In 2008, Sid's body was worn out, and he died at the age of 59."*⁹

These days, Eileen runs Vernon Pottery alone, a tribute to the man she loved and the work they shared, while continuing to work at the Friends School.

Pieces of Vernon Pottery can be found throughout our collection, including *San Francisco Victorian* (Michael Lewis, 1979), *Forget-Us-Not Fairy Castle* (Ron and April Gill, 1998), and *Southwest House Casita Bonita* (Pat Arnell, 1992). Spotting one is a treat, especially if it happens to be located near a ceramic piece that was (*ahem*) mass produced, wherein the fine quality of the Vernon work truly sparkles. Knowing the joy that went into each pea-sized ball of clay gives them a tenderness that inspires a new appreciation. Just as a vase or chair in our home may have personal meaning and memories attached, any small-scale house or roombox in our galleries could fill a book with its collection of unwritten tales. And yet, with every new gasp of appreciation, each bright-eyed smile of wonder, new memories are made. We may never know all of the stories of love that went into each little plant or pillow, but there is a comfort in knowing that each, in its own way, will continue to delight generations to come.

Emily Wolverton
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Stoneware plate by Eileen Vernon. The photograph on the right reveals Eileen's signature on the back of the plate. This plate is located in *Southwest House Casita Bonita* (Pat Arnell, 1992). Exploring the World Gallery. Photos by Emily Wolverton.

5 Ibid.

6 Harp, Sybil. "Behind the Wheel At Vernon Pottery." *Nutshell News*. Volume 27, No 6. June, 1997. P 32.

7 Ibid. p 34

8 Ibid. p 34

9 Guagenti, Toni. "A Knack For Making Lilliputian-sized Pottery." *The Virginian-Pilot*. March 17, 2014.

Click [here](#) to read Guagenti's beautiful article for *The Virginian-Pilot*.

1 Harp, Sybil. "Behind the Wheel At Vernon Pottery." *Nutshell News*. Volume 27, No 6. June, 1997. P 32.

2 Ibid. p 32

3 Ibid. p 32

4 Guagenti, Toni. "A Knack For Making Lilliputian-sized Pottery." *The Virginian-Pilot*. March 17, 2014.