



Minotaur plate

BRONWYN WILLIAMS-ELLIS

TIM SAUNDERS

“With Covid-19 there has been no tile work for months,” admits Bronwyn Williams-Ellis, who is based in Bath, UK. Her tiles can be found throughout England and Wales. For instance, she was commissioned to produce sea fish panels for the restaurant and washrooms at the 4 star Hotel Portmierion & Castell Deudraeth in Penrhyndeudraeth, North Wales. She was asked to make a series of large mounted tile panels of colourful, cheerful, flying parrots to enliven a dark corridor and lift area at Ysbyty Glan Clwyd Hospital, North Wales. At Musgrove Park Hospital, Somerset a series of her framed panels of large white swans against a glowing deep blue are in the orthopaedic recovery area. Bronwyn’s handmade clay Neolithic tiles, reflecting the history of the area, can be found in the reception at Julia’s House Children’s Hospice in Devizes, Wiltshire.

“Despite the doom and gloom, a looming exhibition and an impossibility of working at home unexpectedly produced more than 60 ceramic pieces during lockdown,” reveals Bronwyn, who had been asked to make pieces for an exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, to open this last July. Sadly it was postponed for two years due to the pandemic and will now tentatively open on 12 January 2022.

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“I was asked to create a series of ceramic panels and chargers (large decorative dishes) on the theme of a mythological bestiary to relate to a companion exhibition at the gallery,” she adds. “It was a new subject area and a real challenge for me. Ideas needed researching and developing and I also needed to create a visual language and techniques to suit the form.

“The images grew naturally from a broad variety of sources; sea tales of monsters, often early descriptions of identifiable real creatures, classical and Middle Eastern myths, then British, Celtic and Northern European tales, often similar in form. Finally, the feeling that real creatures that are rapidly becoming, or are extinct, will attain mythological status, simply because we can cope with that.”

These new pieces are all freely made, different shapes and sizes, nearly all with a grogged white clay and an earthenware slip with coloured stains applied loosely by brush, mixed by eye but using test samples. “I used hand cut stencils, plaster stamps, and roulettes and sag moulds,” she explains. “After bisque firing, cuerda seca (Spanish for dry cord; an outlining technique used when applying glazes to ceramic surfaces) drawn outlines are applied and then the chargers are partially glazed by brush and spray. Finally they are fired at 1025° Celsius.”

With the delayed exhibition and studio costs needing to be paid, Bronwyn has made the decision to sell some pieces now. She will create new replacements so that there is a complete show available when finally needed.

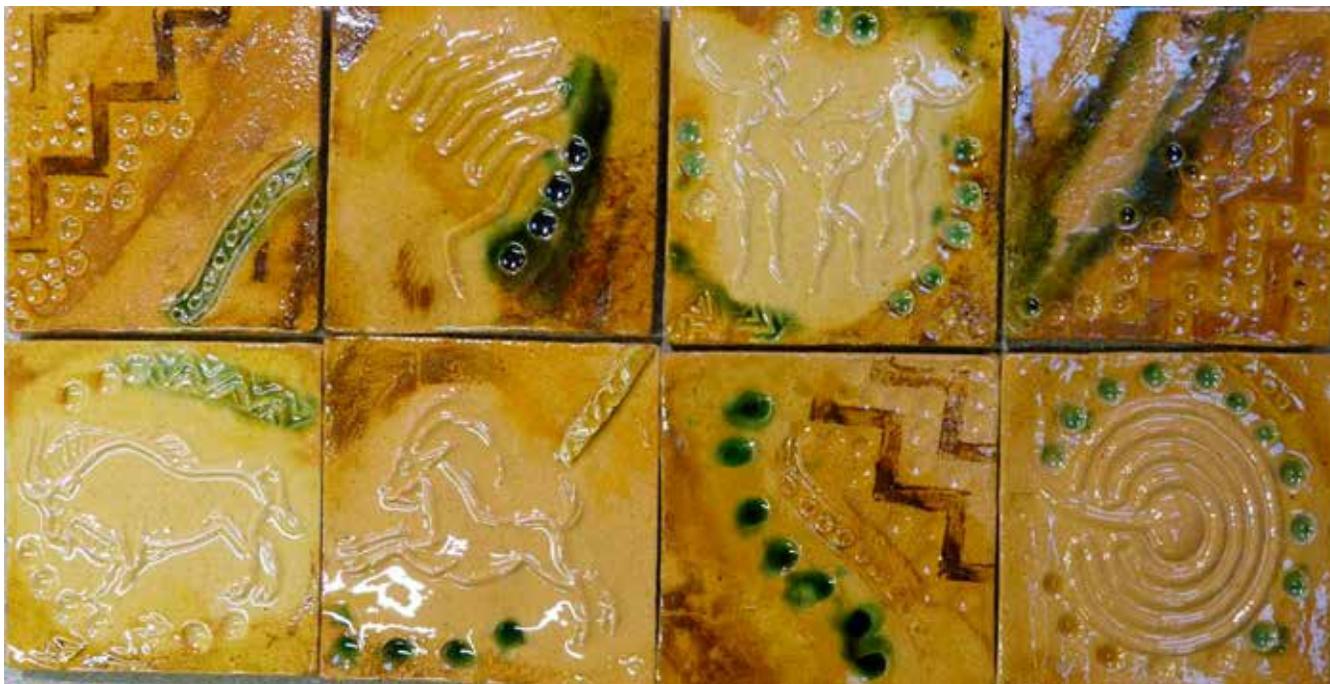
A tilemaker for over 40 years, pre-Covid life was different for Bronwyn because she



Sea Monster Sail Fish

Phoenix / Firebird, Mythological Beasts series





Neolithic Designs tiles for Julia's House Children's Hospice nr. Stonehenge Wiltshire

Salamander plate



was in demand for producing work to commission. Mainly tiles. She would design and produce distinctive unique, often colourful, figurative and abstract handmade tiles, hand decorated tiles and tile panels for interior walls. "Such projects introduce you to very different ideas and forms so my commissioned work varies a lot in style, process and character," she says.

The lively and colourful handmade ceramic tiles are designed as features and range from a simple handmade tile splash back to bathroom tiles, kitchen tiles, dado tile panels, individual tile panels, single tiles and border tiles, swimming pool tile surrounds with mirrors, jacuzzi surrounds to walls and rooms of ceramic tiles.

"Making and designing tiles is relatively quick," she reveals. "Far more time is absorbed at the clients' end with decision making and also waiting for the areas to be tiled to be completed and then measured. It is disastrous making something for a wall that may change size and shape before it is complete."

Bronwyn uses earthenware clay because of the richness and warmth of the colour and texture. "The clay and glazes used depend on the project concerned, e.g. grogged white clay, raku grogged sandy coloured clay. I work using my own glaze recipes to give a good range of colour and finish," she says. "I love high alkalis to produce copper turquoises but they are quite unstable so can only be used in the right project or area of it."

As well as hand making clay tiles Bronwyn will use standard bisque tiles on many projects "where they work best, for example where they have to fit precisely and have to be waterproof or hygienic or

there is a time constraint." In winter clay tiles can take up to four weeks to dry naturally. The size is somewhat variable and loss rates are usually a lot higher.

New ideas and techniques ensure that Bronwyn stays at the top of her game. "If you don't have examples to show people you are unlikely to be asked to make something! Also it is important not to get stale. What people want changes over time." She carries a small amount of stock in the studio to show visitors.

As with all artists and craftspeople the passion is in the making. The business side is something that has to be endured. "I am a one person business so have to do everything from communicate with the client to design and make what they want and this can be a challenge in itself but is absolutely vital to get right and this can be very difficult when there is no direct contact with the client. I must take into account the size and shape of their walls," she smiles, adding that there are always design challenges and physical demands on the body that require regular treatments with a good osteopath. "Then it will be necessary to work to deadline, liaise with other contractors and handle the stress of it all. I must pack it all and chase payment. A larger business would have a number of people dedicated to each task."

Her journey began in the 1970s making fireclay high fired stoneware garden figures and troughs in North Wales and then in 1983 she established her business in a studio in Bath. Almost four decades later she has learned that any project will often involve more than just the commission. Unsurprisingly, she prefers working on smaller projects with shorter communication lines and more control.

Her work is that of only a handful of contemporary makers to be featured in the British Museum book 5,000 years of tiles by Hans Van Lemmen.

TIM SAUNDERS

is a British journalist. He regularly contributes to publications on subjects including art, ceramics, travel and motoring. He enjoys making pottery and paints under the pseudonym, Ted Wates.
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EXHIBITION

A Mythological Bestiary
The Victoria Art Gallery, Bath
27 November, 2021 to
26 February, 2022
www.victoriagal.org.uk



Her studio

Bronwyn Williams-Ellis is an elected member of the Royal Cambrian Academy. There are only 150 elected academicians at any one time. Constituted in 1881 by Queen Victoria, the Royal Cambrian Academy is a centre for artistic excellence in Wales. Bronwyn is both an artist and highly skilled independent designer craftswoman. An established ceramist, she creates individual and lively figurative and abstract ceramic panels. The work is contemporary and somewhat Mediterranean in feel and explores enthusiasms for figures, landscape, history, architecture and archaeology... with drawing and colour integral to the pieces creating both pattern and rhythm. The panels are usually two dimensional and easily wall mounted. Bronwyn also specialises in designing and making ceramic tiles for interior walls to commission and her tile work can be found in most books on contemporary tiles. Each design for ceramic wall tiles is unique; with the emphasis on good drawing and composition, from a small tile panel to a complete room of tiles to suit the client and enhance the particular interior.

BRONWYN WILLIAMS-ELLIS

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