

ORIGIN



maker's marks

STORY BY

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FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH

florian gadsby

For as long as potters have been making ceramics, either as an artistic endeavour or more commercially, they have been marking their creations with their initials or a personal symbol—something known as a maker's mark.

Pottery is as old as the most ancient of civilizations, but as a modern craft, it has built up its own culture and its own traditions, including various marks left by both artists and larger manufacturers.

The meaning and significance of the maker's mark has changed over time, from conferring official authentication and value; to marking production dates, country of origin and royal approval; to the highly personal symbol used by artists today. As a tradition, and as a personal mark—gently impressed by an artist into a finely crafted, handmade object—the maker's mark can be filled with meaning, and reflect an artist's connection to their craft.

Maker's marks also appear in such crafts as jewellery, metalwork and leatherwork. On ceramics a maker's mark can be painted on or, more commonly, stamped into the wet clay before it is glazed and fired in the kiln, placed discretely on the bottom side of a ceramic object as a form of signature. Ceramicists can, of course, also scratch their name into the clay with a sharp tool, though this is more difficult and awkward, and arguably lacks that certain something that can accompany a centuries-old tradition.

Maker's marks have their origin in the first European ceramic and porcelain manufacturers, starting with Dutch Delftware in the 1600s, and especially after the introduction of hard-paste porcelain in 1708. European ceramics were inspired by imported Chinese and Japanese ceramics, on which potters often impressed marks to indicate region or the dynasty under which it was made. European manufacturers began using similar markings on the underside of their pottery as well, by way of authentication. Often this was an underglaze stamp—an image painted onto the surface of the clay prior to adding glaze.

The first hard-paste porcelain was created by two Germans: the scientist Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and the chemist (and alchemist) Johann Friedrich Böttger. Funded by the Elector of Saxony, Böttger set up shop in the royal factory at Albrechtsburg castle, at Meissen, where he began producing porcelain.

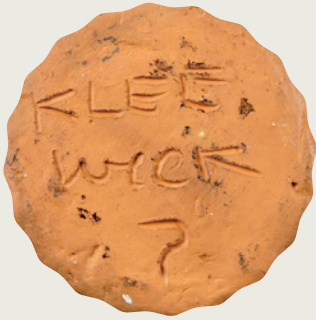
Although he kept his process secret, other manufacturers began producing their own porcelain as well, and in 1720, amid rising competition and the threat of imitators, the Meissen factory created a logo to establish the authenticity of its wares: two crossed swords (based on the arms of the Elector of Saxony), fired in blue underglaze.



Much of the history of trademarks and logos begins here, as does an often complicated tradition of marking ceramics with manufacturer logos, symbols to denote dates, official royal and national hallmarks, and the like—all of which are used today by collectors and auction houses to determine the value of historical ceramics.

By the early 1800s, nearly all major companies and factories were marking their ceramics. Crests and coat of arms were popular. Josiah Wedgwood, who founded the English company Wedgwood in 1759, was one of the first manufacturers to mark his pottery with his own name—initially using moveable type. Another English pottery, Minton, used an array of different symbols (or ciphers) to mark the year of production over the course of an entire century. The American company Rookwood—the first large manufacturing company in the United States to be run by a woman—included lines evoking rays of light, radiating out from the company logo, one for every year in production.

Amid all of this official marking, space slowly opened up for the individual employees of these large manufacturers to add their own marks as well: often their initials, or a small symbol off to the side. These were thrower's marks, glazer's marks. Later, as pottery democratized and was made just as readily by independent artisans—particularly in the 1960s—the tradition continued, and today potters routinely add their own initials or symbols, their own maker's mark, to the underside of their work.



Emily Carr: the questioning mark of an artist

For a brief period early in her career, around 1924 to 1930, the painter Emily Carr, who would become one of Canada's most cherished artists, took up pottery. It was a difficult and precarious period for her: she was on the leading edge of modern art, but working in what was then a provincial town in a colonial territory far removed from artistic circles. Unable to sell her work or find students, Carr was forced to close her Vancouver studio and move back to her home in Victoria, where she proceeded to cobble together various desperate sources of income.

She set up and ran a boarding house (her "House of All Sorts"), bred Old English Sheepdogs and made pottery to sell to tourists, building her own wood-fired brick kiln ("a crude thing") in her backyard. For 15 years she all but gave up on art, aside from the pottery, which, although she loved the material, brought her little pleasure: "Stacking, stoking, watching, testing, I made hundreds and hundreds of stupid objects, the kind that tourists pick up," she later wrote.

As a painter, Carr used an impressionistic, modernist style to explore the significance of the Canadian wilderness, as well as her deep respect for the Indigenous communities along Canada's West Coast. She continued exploring Indigenous imagery and iconography through her various ceramic pots and bowls. It was a creative outlet, but the commodification also crystallized her thoughts on appropriation: "I ornamented my pottery with Indian designs—that was why the tourists bought it. I hated myself for prostituting Indian Art."

The Nuu-chah-nulth people, whom she had visited and come to know, had taken to calling her "Klee Wyck," or "Laughing One." It was this name, Klee Wyck, that she used to sign her pottery. It was, perhaps, an acknowledgement of her Indigenous sources; perhaps even a form of apology. Or perhaps it was an expression of a certain loss of identity: this was not the work of Emily Carr, the painter, as she knew herself.

For she didn't just sign her work "Klee Wyck," she also added another symbol, her maker's mark: a single, lonely question mark. "Is this me?" it seems to ask. "Am I still an artist?" As a mark and a gesture of doubt and uncertainty, I find it remarkable. It leaves me rather breathless.



florian gadsby



Florian Gadsby is a ceramicist working in North London whose craftsmanship and generous social media presence (including in-depth and informative YouTube videos) has gained him a large following and much respect in the world of contemporary ceramics.

His own maker's mark is a simple, elegant and rune-like "F," which he sets into the base of his ceramics using his own handmade porcelain stamps. It is something that he actively encourages other ceramic artists to do as well, for the personal connection it creates with one's work. Today's ceramicists may be tempted to use plastic and metal 3D-printed stamps, easily purchased online. But Florian creates his own stamps, using the same care and craftsmanship that he brings to his ceramic pots. For him, these handmade tools are indispensable.

As a material, porcelain shrinks around 15% to 20% after drying and being fired in a kiln. This, Florian says, allows him to carve a slightly larger stamp that will then shrink down to a smaller, more discrete size. Porcelain is also strong and durable, and smooth, making it easier to carve finer details.

CORREY *Why do you think it is important for ceramicists to make and use their own stamps for their maker's mark?*

FLORIAN The way I look at it is this: I can't imagine a fine artist, who has worked tirelessly to paint a beautiful canvas, to simply stamp their work with a 3D-printed seal that was made by a computer or somebody else. It feels inherently wrong. It doesn't match the handmade quality of the work, and in some way it's either another person's hand that's signing your work, if somebody else created your maker's mark, or it's a machine, both of which I think are terrible ways of finishing something that was made entirely by your hands. It feels far more personal when the stamp is made by the potter, like a handwritten signature, as compared to a perfectly legible printed bit of plastic.

It's situational, of course—it depends on your craft and the work you're creating. But for artisanal, studio potters, a handmade maker's mark is crucial, in my eyes.

CORREY *Why use a stamp to mark your ceramics, as opposed to carving a mark or signature?*

FLORIAN A stamp is a good solution to mark a surface that isn't necessarily always flat. It can be pressed into curved surfaces and still show, they can show through glazes and they're quick and easy to use when producing pots in large quantities. They're also easy to use; or rather, it's hard to mess up signing a pot with a stamp. Some potters do scrawl their signature across the base, loosely, into the clay, often with a biro, as it leaves a relatively clean impression, although it destroys the pen. If you have to sign several hundred pots like this, you have to be more careful—there's a higher chance at making a mistake that could damage the foot, such as flicking the nib into the pot's foot ring, or, perhaps more likely, signing it badly. Clay isn't the easiest material to draw in; it's rough, there's coarse particles in it and you need to make sure the material is in the perfect condition. Additionally, work signed with a handwritten signature requires some tidying up after the fact, as you often need to brush away burrs of clay. There's a tradition of stamps too, especially for studio potters.

CORREY *Can you talk about the process of designing your maker's mark? What did you want your mark to convey?*

FLORIAN Initially my designs were more complex. They were busy with interweaving lines in an attempt to interlock "F" and "G" ("Florian Gadsby"), and more often than not this led to designs that were difficult to carve—and once stamped the mark itself became illegible when meshed with the groggy (meaning textured) stoneware clay. I typically dislike marks that are too fiddly and cursive, so a strong, angular character was what I sought, perhaps partly as it matches the style of pottery I create. I went with a far more straightforward "F." It was easier to carve in the brittle porcelain blocks I was using and it was more readable once stamped.








My mark resembles the Elder Futhark “F,” which is actually an “A.” [Elder Futhark is an ancient Germanic runic alphabet.] “F” is “ƿ,” so perhaps if I could go back to my early twenties and change it, I would. I wasn’t thinking about runes back then; rather I was after a slightly off-kilter, simple “F.” My family name, Gadsby, is Anglo-Saxon.

Knowing this, I sometimes think I might change it, but with so many of my pots impressed with my “F,” I don’t think I can change it, as people have come to associate it with me and my brand. I do, occasionally, use a more decorative mark. It’s a square “G” that encircles an “F.” It’s used for printed literature or for the web, but I may begin using it for very special ranges of one-off pots.

My stamps also tend to be rather small. I don’t want them to overwhelm my pots, or to obliterate one side of them. They’re a simple, small notch on the base of my pieces that’s sometimes relatively hard to find amongst the clay’s texture. I’m a relatively quiet person, introverted and shy, so my stamp works in a sort of similar vein—I’d rather let the pots themselves do the talking.

CORREY *When did you develop your maker’s mark? Has it changed over time?*

FLORIAN During my first year on the DCCI [Design and Craft Council Ireland] Ceramics Skills and Design Training Course in Ireland, all 12 of us students had to design a mark to sign our pots with. This means since 2013 my stamp has remained more or less the same. The “F” has changed slightly over time, with the next big change occurring during my apprenticeship with Lisa Hammond [of Maze Hill Pottery] a few years later. Here, I carved a new batch of stamps from porcelain that I then fired in her natural gas soda kilns. These are some of the most sentimental objects I own, as they mark a very important time in my ceramic education. My friend Mark Tallowin, a leatherworker, kindly crafted a leather pouch for them too. I’d be utterly distraught if I were to ever lose them.

This year I decided to carve new versions of my stamps that were again more refined, neater and fired with new glazes coating their handles that align closer with those I’ve been using these past years. 

floriangadsby.com

My Hands
Florian

READING

By My Hands: A Potter’s Apprenticeship

BY FLORIAN GADSBY

Florian’s first book, *By My Hands:*

A Potter’s Apprenticeship, will be released in September 2023 in the UK through Penguin Random House and in November in the USA by Ten Speed Press. “This is the ‘secret project’ I’ve been working on this past year, writing tales on paper, as well as throwing and firing clay,” says Florian. “It isn’t a how-to book, rather it tells my personal story of learning the potter’s craft, describing the pots that shaped me and the apprenticeships where I honed new skills.”

