

Vally Possony

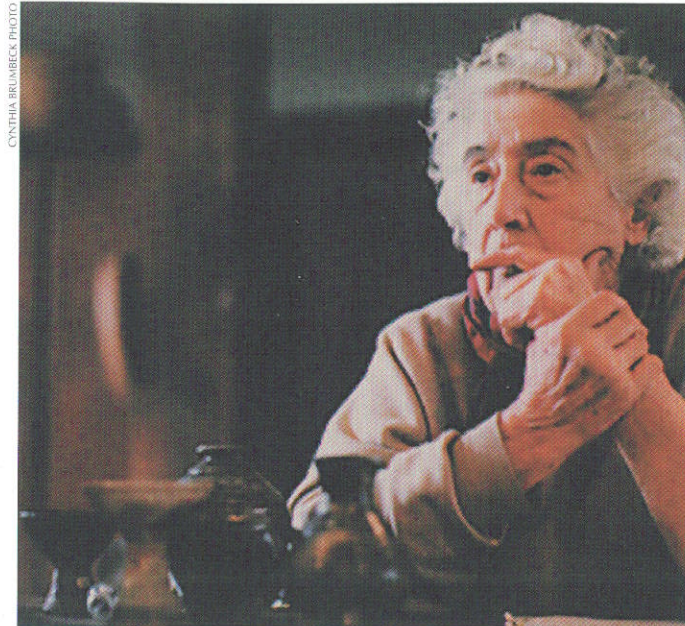
BY ROBERTA WAGNER

Vally Possony's pots are masterful, her way of life inspiring. She influenced so many people and received so many accolades in her career as a potter. Why isn't her work better known now?

I asked that question of Alex Giampietro, a ceramics professor at Catholic University and a long-time, great friend of Vally's and he said, "Because she led an integrated life, full of cooking and gardening and pottery. That's what mattered to her. You must read the recent issue of *Studio Potter* on the Ethics of Pottery. That's how she lived."

When I asked the same question of Ming Wang, an artist and long-time collector of Vally's teapots, he said, "Because she was a true artist. She wasn't thinking of fame."

That is undoubtedly true but when I look at Vally's pots and think of the profound influence she had on the lives of so many of her students, I want more people to know of her and her work.



Vally Possony

So on the third anniversary of her death, I started to write this article. When I first conceived of writing it, I thought I would focus almost exclusively on the beauty of her pottery itself. Her pots, though, really speak for themselves. The strength and stability of the pots, the seemingly effortless blend of form and glaze are evident.

In the small sampling of photographs that accompany this article, we can't capture the breadth of her work. Because she never copied herself, her pottery continued to grow and change over the course of her career. She worked for almost 50 years as a professional potter and teacher and in each decade her work changed, became stronger, rougher, and ultimately more complete. Notwithstanding the beauty of her work, however, I find myself going back to the

importance of the integrated life that Vally led, because as Alex Giampietro said, it is the whole of Vally that makes her so important. It's her gardens, her cooking, her philosophy of life, her generosity of spirit that influenced so many.

The ability to teach people to see more fully and to appreciate beauty takes time. Capturing this subtle process without an example is not easily done. So I have used my experience, only as one example, by including excerpts of a memorial I wrote shortly after her death.

But first a few notes to put her life and work in context. She first met Bernard Leach in 1950 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. They remained friends for years and I think his influence can be seen in her work. But her style is distinctive, incorporating the simplicity of the Mexican peasant pottery that she loved and bringing the graceful curves of nature to her pots.

At the time of our first meeting, Vally was 77 years old and vibrant in her life. She was barely five feet tall, with Einstein-like white hair, her eyes deep brown wells, her flair for style showing in her red lipstick. She was Viennese and from Vienna at the turn of the century when it flourished as never before or since. Gustav Klimt, Kokoscka, Arthur Koestler, Honeggar, Egon Schiele, Sigmund Freud, and Gustav Mahler and many more were all part of her milieu. I think she forever carried that flourish with her; an ability to make things grow—vegetables, flowers, people and herself. Her accent always reminded me of that heritage.

We sat and talked across her slab of crafted walnut that served as table and conversation center. A sensuous



"Tea Set" by Vally Possony.

BRUCE BUGBEE PHOTO



BRUCE BUGBEE PHOTO

"Platter" by Vally Possony.

warmth and sensibility flooded the room, making my finger tips tingle. Six floor-to-ceiling windows faced each other across a 30-foot expanse, three on each side of the room. Leaves of what seemed to be hundreds of shapes and colors and textures filled the light of the windows with their green lace. I felt a whoosh of relief, a step into another world, a cry of recognition, and a knowledge that my life would change as a result of this small, white-haired woman shrewdly eyeing me with total concentration. This was my introduction to Vally Possony.

"So, you're Bobby," and her mouth rolled the word as if struggling with an overly sweet, sticky rice cake, pronouncing it like Bo-be instead of Ba-be. "That's a nickname?" . . . "Ah, for Ro-bear-ta," the Rs rolling, the accent on the second syllable. I liked the way she said it. "This is a good name, Ro-bear-ta," and it confirmed my resolution so that within a year I had finally changed from life-long "Bobby" to "Robertta." I was always Ro-bear-ta to Vally.

I was there to be interviewed to see if I would "fit" in one of her pottery classes. "You know I need to make a balance with my classes." Well I didn't know then but in her presence it seemed like the most natural and important of concerns. I came with the best of recommendations—Ila Gillaspie. Still, "Why do you want to study pottery? . . . Have you never studied pottery before? . . ." followed. I later learned that it was a definite plus that I had not studied pottery before since she did not approve of most modern methods of making pots.

By the end of that first meeting, somewhat to my surprise, I had joined the Wednesday night class. So many

memories of those evening classes linger. Vally holding court, sitting in her chair at the end of the studio, directing. "Ahhhhh . . ." it was the sound of someone going down a roller coaster and wanting it to stop, equally sure that it would not. Someone was making a shape she didn't like. At "snack time" Vally would bring forth some delectable treat with students contributing a creation of their own.

I will always remember Vally, head tilted quizzically to the side, eyes closed, holding a pot to examine it and learn it from her fingertips first. When she made pots, she did it first from feel, not sight. Her pots, following the circular pull of the wheel, embedding her finger marks, seem to pass to the holder that tactile awareness and her gift of touch.

Vally's studio itself embodied so much of her aesthetic—kickwheels with wood surround and benches honed to a soft satin, simple wooden

"Pottery should be good to look at, good to the touch, good to eat off and drink from. It should move with you in your life..."

—Vally Possony

shelves and counters, only natural sponges (and much attention paid to "the sponge situation"). For me, as for many of her students, her studio is a smell—a smell of clay and earth and quiet; a calm—a calm of being in touch with and in tune with the melodies of movement and time; a quiet that also speaks of hidden laughter and times spent in concentration and camaraderie. It's a place of soothing comfort where the clay and the cold metal of the wheel and the silky soft grain in the wood wash over my soul and take me home.

After several years, in 1984, our mutual friend, Ila, died suddenly from asthma. It was a terrible blow to Vally and I began to visit her more often outside of class to soothe our loss. Food was almost always a centerpiece of these visits. One time she made a cabbage broth soup with one piece of Mortadella laid across the top, served in one of her soup bowls. It was magnificent. Another time brown and wild rice, wheat berries, and spicy sausage with onions and peppers were stir-fried with an unusual blend of seasonings. "I cook each vegetable separately, to keep the flavors distinct." I started to notice the pleasure of knowing how food is

prepared and where it came from.

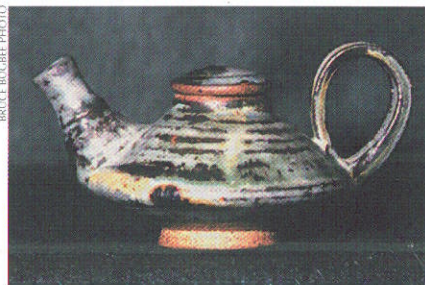
While eating, Vally would show me things: a particularly beautiful green pepper full of shadings and curves, or some fresh mache lettuce from her garden ("It's the best. They don't have it here."), or a spoon, expertly carved from a gnarled piece of wood brought to her by a student "with taste." Another time she had four different types of pears so that I could taste the difference and know for myself which to buy.

Because she enjoyed all living things so much, I went on the lookout for unusual, interesting, or beautiful things. I started to notice rocks and wildflowers and insects. I went to farmers' markets where the produce would be more interesting, less antiseptic. I started to notice trees and plants and liked to bring her the things I found most interesting, like the macadamia nut still in its shell from

Hawaii. All the while, of course, my own vision of the world was changing.

She'd talk about the proliferation of strip shopping centers and gas stations and fast food with horror. "Terrible! Terrible!" It offended and chilled her to her very core. She drove through them as fast as she could to get back to her sanctuary where the world still made sense. For a woman so vitally connected to life, I believe she came to feel cut off from an outside world

that she no longer could understand. Her students saved her, in a way, because we kept a vital link to the world. But at least in part it was her separateness that drew us there, a place out-of-sync with a world gone awry.



BRUCE BUGBEE PHOTO

"Ewer" by Vally Possony.

Then, in 1994, we had a terrible winter in Washington. It was bitter cold and ice covered everything. I went to class after a particularly harsh storm and was startled as I looked at her. Her heating had failed and she seemed to have aged years overnight. She died a few weeks later.

When I first started to study with Vally some 15 years ago, I was a senior

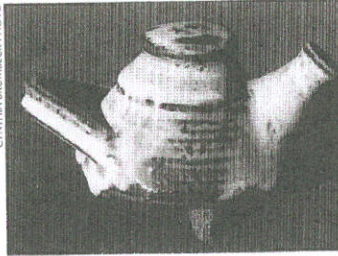
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bank regulator working 10 to 15 frantic hours a day. Now, I am a full-time artist, gardener, and aspiring cook. I haven't always given Vally so much of the credit for the transformation in my life, but now, reflecting back, her life—so rich in dignity, curiosity, and beauty—has been a powerful yardstick against which to measure the completeness of my own life. With her life as a model, she sparked my own readiness for change and the courage in me to recognize the need to move on. She awakened in me the inner knowledge that I too must find my own space.

CYNTHIA BRUMBECK PHOTO



"Teapot" by Vally Possony.

She gave me the passion for and a model of freedom—freedom to follow my own child-like pulls and tugs, my own destiny. And she gave me a vision of beauty and art that will always influence me.

For those of us who have a passion for the ancient art of clay, I think it's important to remember that the way we live will show in our work. Vally's pots will always embody the integrity, simplicity, and playfulness of her life.

To answer my original question, I think after Vally's successful 1978 show at the Phillips Collection, she no longer felt a need to push for recognition. After all, the only other potters to have a show at the Phillips were Leach and Hamada. At that point, she had enough students and collectors to support her simple lifestyle and continue her work. Now, though, it's time for her pots to take their rightful place amongst other master works. ■