

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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# PORTRAIT: STEPHEN PEARCE

## A Potter's Tradition in County Cork

By Nicholas Fox Weber

Second-generation Irish potter Stephen Pearce lives and works in Shanagarry—a townland overlooking Ballycotton Bay in County Cork just 100 yards from his childhood home. **BELOW:** The pottery was designed by Pearce.

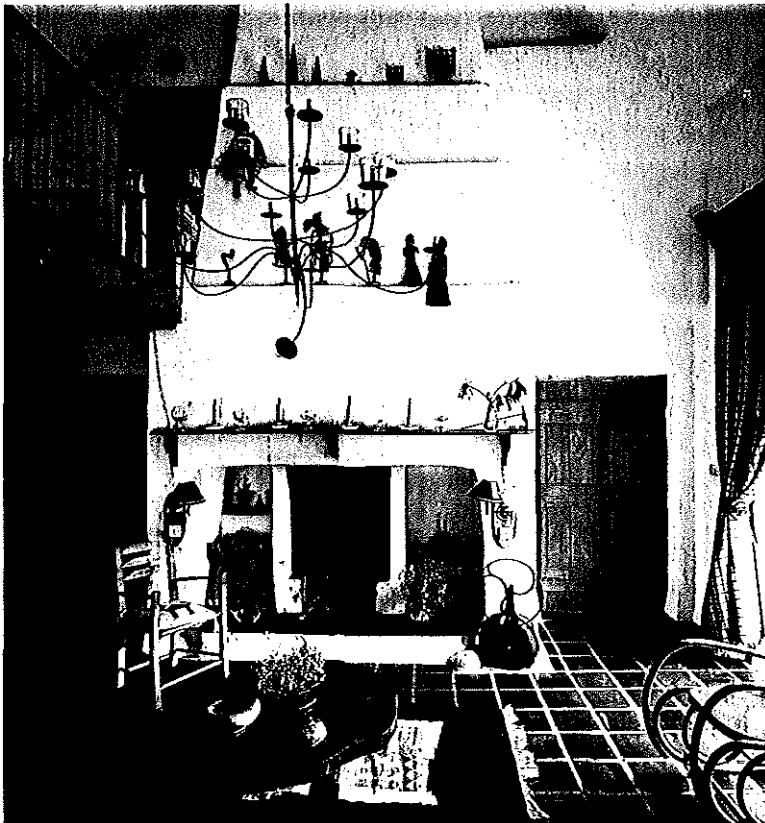
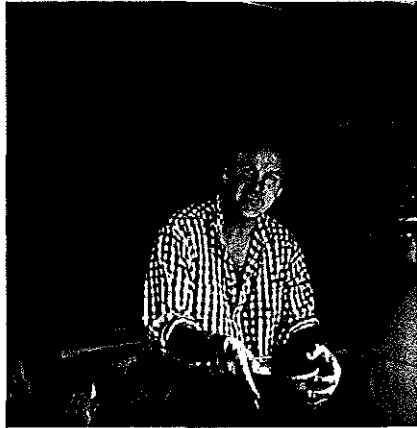
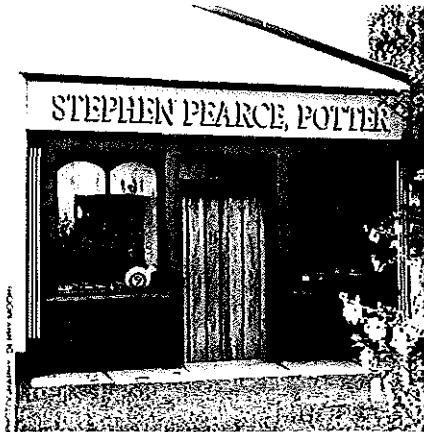
Pottery is “what I do best and enjoy most,” says Pearce (below). “I must be very stupid to allow myself to be distracted by running various businesses when I get such pleasure and fulfillment from quietly making pots.”

WHAT MATTERS MOST in the pottery of Stephen Pearce is the earth from which it is made, and its function as useful vessels for food. Notions of style, or deliberate historical references, play no part. Nor does the maker's personality. Pearce is more concerned with universal truths: the essential nature of ceramics, the need for sustenance. Nothing should intrude. “If I can observe the object making itself with none of me in it, it's a victory. When you take a raw material like clay, there's a point at which it does itself. It's easy to impose that wonderful human intellect. It's harder to let it go alone.”

Pearce acquired both his reverence for material and his humility at an early age. In 1954, when he was eleven years old, his parents moved to Shanagarry, a townland overlooking a rolling landscape and Ballycotton Bay in County Cork, Ireland. They moved because his father, a potter, found the new house and courtyard suitable for establishing a pottery.

In nearby Youghal, Philip Pearce was able to obtain one of the finest raw earthenware clays in the world. He could also link himself to centuries of the predecessors of his craft. The village had been a potter's source for hundreds of years. After mastering an impeccable technique, Philip developed straightforward, distinctive forms of black-and-white pottery, which he named for his new haven. “Shanagarry” is still made in a

**LEFT:** The living room of his residence “has the proportions of a traditional Irish farmhouse, with a fireplace that would have been used for cooking,” says Pearce. A bellows stands next to the hearth. Irish artist Patrick Scott designed the chandelier; the glassware is by Stephen's brother, Simon Pearce. Draperies are from horse-blanket material.



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workshop a stone's throw from where Stephen today produces his dishes in larger headquarters.

Stephen's parents emphasized the attitude that their son today cites as his underlying personal philosophy. "We are all actually part of the same experience," he says, speaking about "getting in line with the cosmic chain." It's a view that Lucy Pearce, Stephen's mother, did her best to inculcate.

"My mother was from a Welsh coal-mining background—very humble, and with no money. She was an early suffragette, and then one of the first female university professors in England, where she taught biology. Even before my father started the pottery, she decided to take complete pleasure in life with children. After me, there was my sister, who has Down's syndrome. Then came my brother, Simon, who today is a glassblower in Vermont. Lucy," says Stephen, jauntily referring to his mother by her first name, "enjoyed taking a supportive role. She cooked amazing meals, using local peas, carrots and leeks to make vegetable quiches before anyone else knew what a quiche was. She also worked closely with Myrtle Allen, who with her husband owns Ballymaloe House and is one of the best-known cooks in Ireland.

"My mother always invited clients of the pottery to come for lunch. She also did a lot for the people of the region, where there was extreme poverty back then. When my father raised honeybees, Lucy would give the local farmer honey for his child's bronchitis. She'd always say what was on her mind. At Irish Youth Hostel meetings, the men would talk for hours, and then she'd put down her knitting and make their decisions."

RIGHT: An Irish dresser in the showroom—which contains several styles of ceramics—displays blue-and-white flowered pottery that Pearce calls "my Chino-Celtic range because its origins lie equally in the traditions of Ireland and China." Asserts the potter, "We're all one when it gets down to brass tacks."

## Pearce acquired his reverence for material and his humility at an early age.

BELOW: Poppies fill a jug done in terra-cotta and white, colors that until recently predominated in Pearce's earthenware. In the background, a gold painting by Scott "keeps a watchful eye on everything I do," says Pearce.



His mother's candor, as well as her generosity, are the hallmarks of Stephen Pearce's own character and of his plates, bowls and mugs. He considers the goal of his pottery "its simplicity and its honesty." He explains, "I've taken forward a very simple tradition. We've made useful things as simply as possible." Dishes for serving and eating should function for today's clients just as they did for his coal-mining ancestors: to present, and perhaps to accentuate—but in no way overpower—good, unpretentious food.

Lucy Pearce had definite standards. "Anything we did, we learned properly," Stephen continues. "Whatever we wanted to do our mother encouraged us to tackle. Then she'd make us feel we had done it ourselves." She was a friend of the educators A. S. Neill (of Summerhill fame) and Maria Montessori. "She believed that Western society places too much value on intellectual ability and philosophical theories. She wanted us to focus on the practical things right



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in front of our eyes, like how to fix a bicycle, or the need to prepare and serve food. When it was a new playhouse we wanted, Lucy didn't order a prefabricated one. Instead, she gave me some used wooden packing cases for the basic material, bought me my own hammer and saw, showed me how to pull out and straighten nails, then left me home alone for the day."

Lucy Pearce valued freedom—to a shocking degree. She and Philip dined at a large and beautiful polished hunting table, but when they were sitting at it with dinner guests and Stephen and Simon came inside with buckets of sand to make sand castles in the middle of the table, she didn't stop them. Lucy felt that one should never interrupt a child's creativity. Patrick Scott, a friend of the senior Pearces and today one of the best-known painters in Ireland, considered visits to their house a nightmare. On one occasion the boys filled his new car with coal, and their parents said nothing. Once during a family visit to London, a representative of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was called into Harrods because Stephen and Simon had no shoes on. Lucy Pearce explained that it was good for the development of their feet.

Stephen went to a Quaker boarding school, and in 1962, at nineteen, he returned to Shanagarry to work with his father in the pottery. After that, he spent two years at Winchcombe in Gloucestershire as an apprentice. "Then," Pearce says, "I returned home for a year and invented the idea of an Irish design scholarship. Not only did I provide the Irish Export Board with this concept, but I gave them the reasons that I should be the first person to receive it and told them the amount of money I needed." The board agreed, and Stephen went off on the Trans-Siberian Express to Japan. There he worked with an old man named Kanashige Toyo making Bizen-yaki, an unusual form of porcelain that has no glaze,

gaining its color from different temperatures in the kiln.

In the meantime, Simon Pearce had gone to New Zealand. The two brothers met for the long return home, hitchhiking via the Middle East. Next, Stephen managed a rock band for a couple of years, and then he and Simon tried to work together in their father's pottery. Shanagarry was an easy place to live, but each of the Pearce brothers soon found that he needed his independence. In 1973 and 1974, with money from his father, Stephen built his own house and pottery. Since then he has been married and divorced; he has opened and sold shops in Dublin, Cork, Naas (County Kildare) and Galway; and he has expanded the places in which he lives and works.

The house he has designed at that gentle glade, Ballycotton Bay—one hundred yards from where his parents moved when he was eleven—was built in a straightforward Irish cottage style that makes it fit right into the landscape. The colors are muted and natural: the red-brown fired floor tiles, the light pine furni-

### **Youghal had been a potter's source for hundreds of years.**

ture and beams, the soft white plasterwork, his white-and-terra-cotta plates and pots. Stephen is partial to forms and patterns that transcend cultures. His draperies, fashioned in County Kerry from traditional horseblanket material generally used under saddles, have the same blue-and-white windowpane checks as the shirts he buys at Birth of the Blues in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

"When I started to make pots at age eighteen, I thought my work was totally original," he says. "Then in a ceramics museum in Tokyo I saw

designs from two thousand years ago and realized how similar they were. When I recently developed my blue-and-white earthenware, after many years of just working in white and terra-cotta, I had no idea that this new coloring was really a French tradition. But there's that idea again: We are all part of the same experience."

Cultural mix is essential to Stephen Pearce's everyday life. He lives with a half-Vietnamese, half-Irish art historian, Kim-Mai Mooney, and for both it is a marvelous alliance. In Kim-Mai's view, "Stephen is full of a very positive energy. It swirls me along. He believes in the people around him. With his enthusiasm and focus, it is as if someone has given you an injection. He gives his all."

The people who work in the pottery all feel the same way. Bridget O'Riordan is a former construction company worker who seven years ago came in looking for any sort of work. After helping with the kilns, she advanced to throwing and glazing. She finds that while Stephen has rigorous standards about the quality of the finish on every object, he never denigrates anyone and has encouraged her to develop skills she never knew she had as a decorator of pottery. She has recently added sponge-ware patterns to the pottery's output. The working environment is like the objects it produces. Honesty is paramount. It is the quality that at first made Stephen's household objects difficult for the general public to accept, and today gives them their large audience. "Your pots show your character," says Paddy Tattan, who has been there for thirteen years. "If it's a bit crooked, that doesn't matter; it's natural. Irregularity is okay. We're not machines; we're human beings."

Through gentle evolution, Stephen Pearce's pieces have acquired inexact, individuated looks. After the raw clay comes in from Youghal, it gets put through a wash mill. Pearce designed and made a contraption in which two giant rakelike forms mix

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the rough clay with water. Next, the washed clay goes through a sieve and into a slip arc, where it is stirred so that sand doesn't settle into the bottom. The slip arc, also Pearce's design, looks like an old-fashioned hand-held food chopper except that it is about ten feet in diameter. Then the clay gets pumped under high pressure in a filter press. After that, it is shaped into flat square cakes and put into a pug mill before being stored in dark bunkers. Then, when it is pliable enough to be thrown, it goes to one of the eleven wheels where Pearce or another of the potters is at work. Next comes the finishing, with periodic drying stages. The bottoms get trimmed, the handles put on. After the first firing, the objects have the pink tone of biscuit; the second firing adds a glaze. The finished objects emerge either with a blend of the rough terra-cotta tone of the biscuit firing and a white glaze, or with the newer white-and-blue design.

The cups, plates, bowls and vases convince you that in the realm of personal taste there is no right or wrong. The square dishes with flat sides slop-

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ing outward might hold potatoes, or bouillabaisse, or pocket change and safety pins. The flat, round vessel with sloping sides might be for pasta, or salad, or floating nasturtium blossoms. Take your choice for coffee or tea; it might be one of those moments when you crave a generous Provençal-scale bowl, but it might also be your demitasse mood, or an occasion for a sturdy mug. You may not go so far as to feel that you can build a sand castle on a polished hunting table, but Stephen Pearce's pottery will both liberate and uplift you. □

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