

# Kaatskill Life<sup>®</sup>

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*By Design*

Catskill  
*ART*isans at work



“No weakling ever became a potter,” says Cecily Fortescue as she carries a heavy mass of clay out to her worktable in a gazebo overlooking a magnificent valley east of Callicoon. “I would happily make nothing but bowls,” she adds, applying her full strength to kneading a lump of clay, which may be porcelain, buff stoneware, or a red grog clay that gives her pieces their characteristic exterior color. This kneading process achieves a uniform consistency in the clay and eliminates air bubbles. Then she rolls the clay into a slab – a step she compares to making pizzas – which her sensitive fingers palpate into an even circle that is exactly one-quarter-inch thick. “I do everything by eye,” she says.



# Feats of Clay

*text and photography by the  
Catskill Mountain Crafts  
Collective, Inc.*





To turn this disk into a basic bowl, Fortescue cuts darts in the clay like a seamstress cuts fabric to shape the material over a rounded body. She molds it over a sturdy inflatable balloon fitted with a stopper to let out air to compensate for shrinkage as the clay dries. A coating of clay slurry glues the seams, which she polishes to invisibility.

Fortescue may texture the completed bowl with a piece of netting, a flexible straw, a broken bamboo trivet, a rough piece of wood, or some other found object. "I love to texture things," she exclaims.

Engrossed in the hand-building process, Fortescue often loses track of time, sometimes listening to classical music while she works. An amateur violist, she hosts a classical music program on WJFF Radio Catskill. "I'm the self-styled Queen of Dead Air," she says with a smile.

After firing the pot at about 1,800 degrees F. she applies layers of glaze (superimposed to increase the color's depth) and refires it at 2,100 degrees. When the artist first set up her Callicoon studio, the chemical composition of the well water caused her accustomed glazes to "crawl," leaving bare spaces. Now she takes water for mixing them from New York City, where she and her husband maintain a home. She frequently leaves the exterior of a bowl unglazed because she enjoys the contrast between the two very different surfaces.

Fortescue began making pots in 1973. As a child she remembers choosing a pot at the Cornwall studio of one of her grandparents' friends, the internationally renowned English potter Bernard Leach. However, an extensive academic career preceded her own decision



to become a potter. She holds a doctorate from Oxford University, taught medieval French literature at London University, and was a freelance translator in Rome for 10 years. Visiting the U.S., she met and married a film editor. "Arnie knew I was a wanderer," she says. "To keep me in New York he found me a pottery studio on 18th Street."

She taught at the 92nd Street YMCA and at the Children's Aid Society on Sullivan Street and sold her dinnerware at Macy's and Henri Bendel. She earned her first solo show by winning first prize in a show at the Pen and Brush Gallery. Now she exhibits regularly in numerous galleries, including the Nutshell Gallery in Lake Huntington, the Elaine Benson Gallery in Bridgehampton, and the Catskill Art Society in Hurleyville. Visitors can also see her work during the Society's annual summer studio tour.

The monumental scale of Fortescue's current work magnifies the technical problems of creating her pots because the stresses within the material are greater. "They fall in the gray area between sculpture and functional pieces," she says. Nevertheless, she wants them to be not only impressive but useful. "The best work," she adds, "has what I call gesture. Changes of direction. Asymmetry." 🐼

*Editor's note:* A two-person show of the work of potter Cecily Fortescue and watercolorist Ann Higgins will be held from January 9 through February 3 at Orange Community College in Middletown, New York. There will be a reception from 1 to 4 p.m. on January 12. For information about her work or the annual summer studio tour, call (845) 887-5740.

