

KETTLE'S YARD

LUCIE
RIE



THE ADVENTURE OF POTTERY

TEACHER NOTES

Introduction

Lucie Rie (1902–1995) was a ceramicist with immense technical knowledge and an inventive, experimental approach. She created thousands of original pieces which transformed how ceramics were made and viewed in the UK and beyond.

Rie is among the most celebrated potters of the twentieth century and she carved out her career as an independent female potter in a male-dominated industry.

She innovated techniques with different clays and glazes, sometimes combining ingredients to create glazes that bubbled or melted when fired, sometimes using a sharp needle to create fine lines in the pot's surfaces and sometimes throwing with multiple balls of contrasting clay, creating flowing spirals of colour that reflected the spinning motion of the wheel.

Rie was born in Vienna to a wealthy and educated Jewish family and was brought up surrounded by new ideas and creativity. In 1938, she was forced to flee Austria to escape the Nazi persecution of Jewish people. Having moved to London on the brink of war, in order to make a living, Rie turned to making ceramic buttons for the fashion industry.

She slowly established herself in Britain through the 1950s and 1960s, becoming renowned for her distinctive tableware and one-off pieces. Rie lived to the age of 93.



Images - left: Lucie Rie throwing on the wheel, early 1950's. Right: Lucie Rie in 1988. Photograph: Tony Evans/Timelapse Library Ltd/Getty Images

Cover image: Lucie Rie, *Bowl*, 1977, thrown porcelain with Manganese glaze and sgraffito decoration. Middlesbrough Collection. Purchased with assistance from the V&A Purchase Grant Fund

'If one should ask me whether I believe to be a modern potter or a potter of tradition I would answer: I don't know and I don't care. Art alive is always modern, no matter how old or young. Art-theories have no meaning for me, beauty has. This is all my philosophy. I do not attempt to be original or different. Something which to describe I am not clever enough moves me to do what I do.'

- From an undated manuscript, c. 1951 in the Lucie Rie Archive at the Sainsbury Centre

Using these notes

These notes have been drafted to support visits, exploration and discussion of ceramicist Lucie Rie, coinciding with the exhibition of her work at Kettle's Yard in *Lucie Rie: The Adventure of Pottery* from 4 March 2023 – 25 June 2023.

This kit is organised showing the development of Rie's practice over time and includes a short description of her materials and processes. Each section has exploration and discussion questions and activities for primary and secondary to engage with.

In addition to exploring *The Adventure of Pottery* these notes can be helpful when exploring Lucie Rie's work within the wider context of the Kettle's Yard House and Collection; with 4 of her bowls on permanent display within the House. [Visit Kettle's Yard collection online](#) to discover more about these specific collection works.

Vienna - early work

Lucie Rie (née Gomperz) was born in 1902 in Vienna. At the age of twenty, she enrolled at the city's Kunstgewerbeschule, the school of arts and crafts closely associated with the radical Wiener Werkstätte. It was here that she first encountered pottery. With encouragement from her tutors, the ceramicist Michael Powolny and the renowned architect and designer Josef Hoffmann, Rie spent her student years learning to throw and experimenting with glaze recipes.

Following graduation, Rie established her own studio in Vienna, initially experimenting with elaborate vessel forms and bright colours before focusing on simple outlines and distinctive rough surfaces. During these years, she developed her **unorthodox method of raw glazing, firing each pot just once**. At first a practical solution – her only access to a kiln involved carrying pots on a precarious tram ride across the city – the technique would come to be a defining characteristic of her work. Meanwhile, Rie's reputation was steadily increasing in Austria and beyond. She won top prizes for her work at international exhibitions, culminating in the 1937 Paris International Exposition.

However, Rie's early success was brought to an abrupt halt in March 1938, with the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany and the persecution of Jews that immediately followed. In October, Rie fled to London, carrying some of her pots in her hand luggage, wrapped in clothing for protection.



Bowl, 1930–38, earthenware with blue and brown pitted glaze, 27.6 cm diameter ; Plant pot, 1930–38, earthenware, turquoise and black mottled glaze with unglazed interior, 15.8 cm tall

Explore & Discuss

KS1

- Look at the pictures of Lucie Rie's early works over the page.
 - Describe, using a list, the colours, texture and shapes you see.
 - Are they all the same or different?
 - How would they feel if you could touch them?

KS2

- Look at the *Tea Service* from 1936. Imagine that Lucie Rie has carried this set, wrapped up carefully in clothing as she escaped Nazi Germany persecution and travelled across the ocean to the UK. Picture in your mind's eye that she has landed safely with the *Tea Service* wrapped up and settled in England. Using your imagination, write a short story about the journey of the *Tea Service* and its life in England. Who uses it? Where does it live now? What stories could it tell if it could speak?

KS3 & KS4

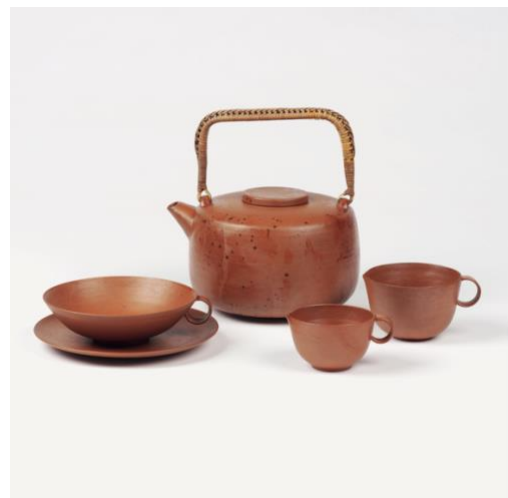
- Explore the work and ideas of the [Wiener Werkstätte](#), with particular focus on [Josef Hoffman](#). What similarities or influences – perhaps with colour, shape, form - do you notice between Rie's early work and that of the Viennese movement aesthetic?
- Look deeply at the glazes outside and inside Lucie Rie's early forms – what affect does it create to have different colours within and outside the forms?

Make

- Personality Pinch Pots – [Create pinch pots](#) that tell other something about you. You might express yourself through the shape of the form, through carving, or adding painted pattern and detail.



Pot, c. 1926, earthenware with blue, orange, brown and white splashes, 10.5 cm diameter



Tea service, c. 1936, earthenware, unglazed and burnished, teapot diameter 16.2 cm

London, The War and Buttons

Arriving in London, Rie soon settled at 18 Albion Mews, near Hyde Park. At the time, the main trend in ceramics came from Bernard Leach and his contemporaries, inspired by Japanese tradition and rural medieval craft. In contrast, Rie's pots were much more modern, controlled and refined.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, Rie was branded an 'enemy alien', and was unable to secure a Board of Trade license to make pots. To make ends meet, she began to produce buttons for the fashion industry. Initially making glass buttons for the company Bimini, Rie soon began to develop her own press moulded ceramic designs which could be produced and glazed in quantity. Albion Mews became a successful button workshop, with the help of a group of assistants, many of them fellow Jewish émigrés – including Hans Coper (1920-81) who arrives in 1946 and collaborated with her in the studio until 1958. While primarily, for Rie, a financial necessity, the button-making years would have an enduring impact on her work, providing an opportunity for collaboration and experiment. Matching glazes to couturiers' fabric swatches required an encyclopaedic knowledge of glaze chemistry, skills she then utilised in making her pots.



Lucie Rie in her studio, c. 1970s, with button moulds stacked on shelves behind

Explore & Discuss

KS1 & KS2

- It can feel hard when we don't feel like we 'fit in' or feel different – how can we find our place and feel comfortable and confident to be who we are and express ourselves?

KS3 & KS4

- Explore the work of [Bernard Leach from the 1930s](#). Can you notice the differences between the forms of Leach and Rie? Compare and contrast.

Make

- Lucie Rie made tens of thousands of unique ceramic buttons, some elaborately detailed and shaped, others circular in form. Inspired by her button forms, create your own set of buttons that tell a story of who you are and what you like – this could include symbolism, colours, letters etc. Sketch out your ideas and annotate the designs. Then using clay, create the forms. As an extension, experiment with different glaze combinations.



Buttons, 1940s, earthenware

Rie's ceramic technique

Most ceramic works are made in clay and then fired in the kiln. This first firing is called biscuit firing. After the biscuit firing, glaze is added and then the piece is fired again. Early in her career, however, when still in Vienna, Rie decided to add the glaze without first biscuit firing the clay piece. She was so pleased with the result that this method, known as **raw glazing**, became her preferred technique.

Ceramic glazes are made up of different raw materials, often including silica and metal oxides such as sodium, potassium and calcium. Rie made all her own glazes. She kept notebooks filled with recipes she had perfected over time, as well as pot designs and records of customer orders.

Rie fired her ceramic ware in a high temperature electric kiln. This was also unusual, as most of the potters working at the same time were using flame-burning kilns. There was little precedent for using electric kilns and Rie would have had to experiment to find the effects that she wanted.

Explore & Discuss

- Look closely at Rie's coffee and teapots and tableware made in the 1950s & 1960s: you'll notice that the handles are often made with bamboo, or that the coffee pots and milk jugs Rie made have straight, angled handles. Discuss and explore - why do you think she did this?

The design of the coffee pots meant that she could apply the **glaze** to the form with a brush, while rotating it around on her wheel or in hand, and then fire it. At the time, this was in great contrast to the usual potter's glazing methods of dipping pre-fired (biscuit-fired) ware into tubs of glaze or quickly pouring lots of glaze over pre-fired forms to create an even coat.



Tea service, 1950s, stoneware with bamboo handles



Coffee pot and milk jug, c. 1960, stoneware with sgraffito through manganese glaze, largest 20 cm tall



Reconstruction of part of Lucie Rie's Albion Mews studio in Gallery 143.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Image of Lucie Rie in her studio. courtesy of The Craft Potters Association of Great Britain and the Ceramic Review archive

Post-war 1950s & the sgraffito technique

The post-war years saw Rie slowly returning to making one-off pieces, alongside tableware. In 1948, Rie shifted from using earthenware to **stoneware and porcelain**. **Stoneware was more durable, making it a practical material for ceramics designed to be in daily use, as well as enabling Rie to make pots with thinner walls.**

Around the same time, Rie and Coper visited the Neolithic stone circle at Avebury in Wiltshire. Here they saw Bronze Age vessels on display in the nearby museum. These had been decorated using the **sgraffito** technique, with incised patterns etched into the surface using bird bones, which had been preserved inside the vessels. Rie was captivated by the technique and soon began to include it in her own work, **using a steel needle to scratch through glaze or slip and reveal the pale clay body beneath**. In other instances, the etched groove was filled with pigment to create an inlaid line, allowing positive and negative versions of the same design.



Bowl, c. 1955, stoneware with inlaid manganese lines, 16.4 cm diameter; Beaker vase, 1956, porcelain with inlaid design, 15 cm tall; Vase, c. 1950, porcelain with sgraffito design through manganese, 18.9 cm tall

Explore & Discuss

KS1 & KS2

- Look closely at the surface of the 1950s bowls and vessels made by Lucie Rie. What lines do you see on the surface? Using pencil and paper, make marks like those you see (crosshatch, straight lines, thin, thick lines etc).
- What do these different types of lines and marks remind you of?

KS3 & KS4

- Look up close at the sgraffito technique on Lucie Rie's vessels from the 1950s. Do you see the indents in the clay? Sketch your observations of her work, with a focus on line.
- Explore the sgraffito technique over time through research into different uses and techniques, for example from early Bronze Age vessels through to contemporary ceramics.

Make

- Roll out a flat shape of clay. Make a range of marks in the surface including using thin etching tools and more solid/thicker clay tools. Describe the difference between the textures and patterns created. If you have access to a kiln, glaze and part-fire these, then mark again.
- Inspired by the positive and negative space present in Lucie Rie's ceramic forms create your own positive and negative designs. Using a black piece of paper or card, draw a lined pattern using white chalk or pastel. Recreate the same lined design on white paper with black pencil or pastel. What is the difference between the two? Explore as a class.
 - The Whitney Museum of American Art has a helpful resource on [explaining positive and negative space here](#)



Bowl, c. 1962, stoneware with sgraffito exterior and inlaid interior, 23.8 cm diameter

New directions in the 1960s and 1970s

As the 1950s drew to a close, Rie started to **develop new glazes and forms**, rediscovering the rough textures and earthy colours that had characterised her early Viennese work. Speckled, pitted and pinholed glazes began to emerge and Rie found ways to create glazes that flowed and bubbled dramatically in the kiln, giving pots a rugged, volcanic appearance.

Another innovation of the 1960s was Rie's spiral vessels. These involved combining clays in contrasting colours, which when thrown produced a marbled swirl of colour, generated by the upward spinning motion of clay on the wheel. She started to make more fluid, organic forms. Bowls were gently squeezed after throwing to create an undulating rim, while bottle and vase forms acquired bulbous bodies, narrow necks and flaring lips.



Bottle, 1974–75, porcelain thrown in sections with brown and green spiral, 25.5 cm tall



Bowl, 1971, porcelain with uranium yellow glaze, 16.5 cm diameter

Explore & Discuss

KS1 & KS2

- These works by Lucie Rie suggest movement. Inspired by this twist and move your body into different forms you see or feel when exploring her work.

KS3 & KS4

- Look closely at the different surface effects and textures in Lucie Rie's work from the 1960s and 1970s. Describe the different lines, textures, colours and movements you notice.
- Some of her work during the 1960s and 1970s plays with our perception of balance – for example, narrow bases or thick wide openings. Imagine you were to pick up and place down one of these objects, do you think they would be hard to balance? Challenge yourself – try and recreate a similar form using clay!

Final years

Throughout the 1970s – 1980's Rie continued to experiment and re-work shapes, glazes and decorative surfaces. Notable among these was the increasing use of **golden manganese oxide**, which resembled molten bronze. Often applied just to the rim, or otherwise covering the whole vessel, it gave her pots the appearance of precious antiquities.

At the same time, new colours were appearing – including vibrant blues, greens, yellows and pinks. Sgraffito continued to feature, often combined with bands of colour, or in densely crosshatched lines filled with manganese to create a mesh-like 'knitted' design.



Bowl, 1990, porcelain with pink glaze, inlaid lines, turquoise bands and manganese drip, 19.5 cm diameter

Make

- Create a still life: draw the outline of one of Lucie Rie's fluted vases or bottles. Cut it out and alongside other sourced images of fruit and flours and arrange the objects into a collaged still life.
- Collect a range of neutral-coloured objects and make an arrangement with them on a white tabletop or piece of paper. Turn down the lights and use a torch to explore – what shadows do you see? Sketch or photograph some of these.

Rie's work in the Kettle's Yard House

There are five works by Lucie Rie in the [Kettle's Yard Collection](#), three of which are displayed in the House where Jim Ede, the founder of Kettle's Yard, had intended.

There are some interesting parallels between Lucie Rie's practice, her studio, and Kettle's Yard.

- Jim Ede described Kettle's Yard as 'continuing way of life' – meaning the house and all the objects, stones, artworks, light and space within it were as a whole work of art. This [Gesamtkunstwerk](#) ('total work of art') approach could be considered as similar to Rie, whose life, when established in London was deeply tied to her life at Albion Mews, encompassing her studio and home in one location.
- Rie was famously brief when it came to discussing the ideas or artistic process behind her work, telling an interviewer, 'I like to make pots – but I do not like to talk about them.' However, in her archive are close up photographs of textured rocks, and collections of pebbles, germs and stones; similar to those one might find within Kettle's Yard. Seen through this lens, one might notice suggestions or hints of landscape and nature within her forms, textures and colours.

Explore & Discuss

- Explore Lucie Rie's Conical Bowl in depth through our online resource, [A Handful of Objects here](#).
- Choose a work by Lucie Rie and draw the outline of it. Inside the drawn form, write down words that come to mind when you think about Lucie Rie and her work – it could be a feeling, an observation, a question or a colour, shape or texture you like... Share your 'shape poem' drawing and words in pairs or as a class.

KS3 & KS4

- Visit Kettle's Yard and find the works by Lucie Rie in the House. Sketch them in their setting, noting where they are positioned and noting what the details around them are. What do you notice? What stands out to you? Why do you think Jim Ede put the bowl there?
- If you were to curate the Lucie Rie works in the Kettle's Yard House, where would you put them and why?

A – Z GLOSSARY OF POTTERY TERMS

Body	The material or mixture of materials from which a ceramic form or vessel is made. This usually consists of clay combined with additional ingredients such as silica or feldspar. Common categories are earthenware, stoneware and porcelain.
Burnishing	Polishing the surface of unfired clay by rubbing with a smooth stone or the back of a spoon. This is typically done when the pot is almost dry - known as the 'leather hard' stage.
Earthenware	A clay body that is softer and more porous than stoneware or porcelain. It is fired at a lower temperature.
Firing	Placing pottery in a kiln and cooking to a high temperature, usually for many hours. Typically, unglazed pottery is fired first at a lower temperature (known as 'bisque' or 'biscuit' firing), before a glaze is applied and fired again at a higher temperature. Lucie Rie developed an unorthodox method of applying glazes
Glaze	A coating applied to the surface of pottery to decorate it and make it waterproof. Glazes often contain metal oxides (see below), as well as silica, which turns glassy ('vitrifies' in the heat of the kiln.
Inlay	A technique similar to sgraffito (see below), where lines are etched into the clay and brushed with a glaze or pigment. The surface is then sponged clean, leaving behind a sharp line. The technique can be used alongside sgraffito to create positive and negative versions of the same design.
Jasperware	A type of pottery developed by Josiah Wedgwood in the 1770s, and which continues to be a popular range produced by Wedgwood Jasperware most commonly uses contrasting blue and white coloured clays to create decorative designs. In 1963, Lucie Rie was approached by Wedgwood to collaborate on a range of blue and white Jasperware. However, the designs never went beyond prototype stage. Some of these prototypes are on display in the exhibition.
Kiln	The furnace in which pots are fired. These can run on fuel such as wood or oil, but Lucie Rie used an electric kiln.
Manganese	A metallic 'oxide' (see below) which can be mixed into clay or glazes to achieve particular colours and textures. Lucie Rie used manganese extensively. It formed the basis for her matte dark brown and metallic bronze glazes. It can also create a speckled effect.

Oxide	Powdered metallic compounds or elements used as glaze ingredients or mixed into clays. Oxides can be used to achieve particular colours or textures. They can also cause chemical reactions during firing to encourage melting or bubbling of the glaze. Lucie Rie regularly used manganese oxide in her pots, which she used to achieve a matte dark brown, as well as her metallic gold and bronze glazes.
Porcelain	A durable, light and translucent clay body, made from a mixture of Kaolin clay and minerals such as feldspar and quartz.
Sgraffito	A decorative technique, meaning 'scratched' in Italian. A sharp needle tool is used to scratch through a layer of glaze or slip, to reveal the colour of the layer below. Lucie Rie used sgraffito extensively throughout her career.
Slip	A fluid mixture made from watered-down clay, sometimes mixed with pigment, used for joining and decorating ceramics. Slips can also be used instead of (or alongside) glazes to decorate the surface of a pot.
Stoneware	A clay that is hard, durable and non-porous. It is fired at a higher temperature than earthenware.
Studio pottery	Unique, handmade pottery, usually made by a single person or a small group. In Britain, studio pottery emerged from the Arts & Crafts movement of the late 19th century, which promoted handmade objects and traditional techniques.
Throwing	Forming pottery on the potter's wheel. A ball of prepared clay is thrown onto the wheel, centred, and shaped using the spinning motion of the wheel.
Turning	The process of using a sharp tool to trim, smooth and refine the form of a vessel. This is typically done when the pot is almost dry - known as the 'leather hard' stage.
Ware	Ceramic objects or products, usually vessels or other functional items. These can be categorised by usage, for instance 'tableware', 'kitchenware' or 'decorative ware'. 'Ware' can also refer to a certain material or making tradition, such as 'stoneware' or 'Delftware'.
Wheel	A machine used for making thrown ceramics. Lucie Rie used a European 'kick wheel', where the spinning motion is generated using the feet, but most modern wheels are electric.

School visits to Kettle's Yard

Visiting Kettle's Yard is free and you can choose from a variety of different activities and types of visits to suit your needs. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings are set aside for schools, academies, colleges and universities. Self-led visits during regular opening hours can also be booked in advance.

Contact us at schoolbookings@kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk to tailor or book your next visit.

Types of Visit

Self-led visit during regular opening hours:

FREE

Introductory tour and drawing activities:

FREE to all UK-based state schools*

Look / Make / Talk:

£75 per class for an interactive visit including drawing, discussion and practical activities*

Arts Award Discover in a morning:

£5/child including moderation

Artist-led workshop:

from £180 per class for a full morning including introductory tour, drawing activities and artist-led workshop*

**Please note, if your school charges a fee, (e.g. private schools or language schools), we charge £75 for an introductory tour with drawing activities, £125 for Look / Make / Talk sessions and £230 for an artist-led workshop*

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