

- 01 Apprentice training at the wheel at Tortus Copenhagen
- 02 Pots waiting to be decorated at Tortus Copenhagen
- 03 Cloudy glazing and simple shapes are typical of the Danish vernacular
- 04 Eric Landon at Tortus Copenhagen



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## POTTED HISTORY —Copenhagen

### Preface

Denmark's ceramics used to take pride of place on the global mantelpiece but the industry was in danger of crumbling. Happily, a new generation has gone back to the potter's wheel to revive the aesthetics and artistry of old.

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Potter Eric Landon is kneading a ball of soft white clay in his 18th-century studio, located just off Kompagnistraede in a quaint part of Copenhagen's old town. This has been the home of his brand, Tortus Copenhagen, since 2012. As he throws the stoneware clay onto his rotating wheel, around him dozens of simple pastel-coloured vessels rest on shelves, a kiln in the corner warms the room and a rabbit called Herman runs past his feet. It's an idyllic space and certainly at odds with the garden-shed image many have of studio potters.

"The status of this lifestyle as a potter has risen recently and I'm trying to do that too," says Landon, who moved to Denmark from the US in 1999. As the wheel between his legs starts to turn, he says, "I want to show the world that you can sit and relax and drink a coffee in a beautiful studio and then make a pot. Coming into my workshop has an appeal for people yearning to get their hands dirty."

And come they do. Besides the hugely successful workshop courses that he regularly holds – with potters from South Korea to Australia travelling to be taught by him – business is booming for Landon. When MONOCLE visits he's putting the finishing touches to another space he's acquired just across the courtyard that will host larger workshops and the first Tortus Copenhagen shop. It's prime real estate on one of the prettiest streets in Copenhagen, just around the corner from Royal Copenhagen's flagship.

Although Danish ceramics were as world renowned as Danish furniture in the 1950s and 1960s, it's subsequently been a quiet few decades for the industry. Many of the brands that still operate have shifted their production abroad; the ones that didn't simply went out of business. More to the point, the Danish vernacular went out of fashion. But the Danish pottery industry is kiln-hot once again and,



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## The cylinder

If there's one thing that symbolises Danish pottery – and perhaps Danish design in general – it's the cylinder. Described as a “national fetish” by New York-based ceramics dealer Garth Clark, it's not difficult to understand why: the cylinder is a form that is reduced down to the bare essentials of function – no bells and no whistles. It's essentially the most minimalist thing you can make and that's why it was so ubiquitous in the 1950s and 1960s, usually sitting on a teak dresser next to a Hans J Wegner armchair.



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in the skilful hands of people such as Landon, it's easy to see why.

Across town lies the workshop of Studio Arhoj, a brand set up by Anders Arhoj in 2013. It moved into the vast and bright space here at the end of 2015; this time last year just two people worked for Arhoj but now there's a team of eight. The studio's pieces – a range of tea cups, pencil pots and his recognisable two-eyed “ghost” figurines – are stocked in 200 shops worldwide and there's a three-month waiting list for products. The potters produced 7,000 ghosts alone in the lead-up to Christmas and the workshop still hums with activity. “I never planned to be a boss with people working for me, it just sort of happened,” says Arhoj.

In 2005 Arhoj packed in his job as a graphic designer and moved to Tokyo to study Japanese. There he absorbed colourful *kawaii* culture and when he moved back to Copenhagen, he established his studio. Japanese cuteness is apparent in his vibrant pieces. “In Japan it's normal to put faces on everything,” he says to explain how the idea for the ghosts came about, and it's easy to see their appeal. Danish designer Mette Hay was one of the first to stock Studio Arhoj pieces in her influential shop, Hay House, in central Copenhagen. It snowballed from there. The secret to their success? Studio Arhoj pieces are firmly design-led rather than technically impressive and Arhoj is proud of that. “We're a design studio, not a pottery barn,” he says. “We're bringing design to the craft.”

Tortus Copenhagen and Studio Arhoj operate at very different ends of the market but share an aesthetic that defines



05

much of the new generation of Danish ceramics. It's one that has a footing in Danish history: lots of flowing “rabbit fur” glaze, *wabi-sabi* imperfections and seriously streamlined forms (see panel, above). It's an incredibly particular style. “When I came here I was moved by how everything is scraped down, much like a poem. The best poems use the fewest words to have the greatest impact,” says Landon. Although Arhoj's rainbow-coloured pieces are far more conspicuous, he agrees: “We focus on the shape: clean but never boring.”

The pottery industry dates back centuries in Denmark (Royal Copenhagen has been around since 1775) but the last significant boom was in the post-war period, when ceramics matched the look and popularity of Danish furniture.



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- 01 Bisque ware awaiting glazing at Studio Arhoj
- 02 Studio Arhoj's brightly coloured pots
- 03 The studio's classic 'ghosts' being turned on the wheel
- 04 Anders Arhoj with his 'ghosts'
- 05 The studio's characteristically colourful pots
- 06 Glazing time at Studio Arhoj
- 07 Mette Duedahl's cosy work space
- 08 Pots waiting to be fired in the kiln at Duedahl's workshop
- 09 Stoneware vessels by Duedahl
- 10 Duedahl in her studio
- 11 Stogo plate from the 1970s that has inspired Duedahl's work

Brands such as Saxbo, Bing & Grondal and Palshus excelled at using clay very simply but slightly playfully, just like design masters such as Hans J Wegner and Arne Jacobsen did with wood. "If you look at Danish furniture there was that use of natural materials such as wood but [the designers] did things like bending or making precise shapes out of it," says Landon. And just as the world's thirst for Danish modern furniture has boomed in recent years, so too has the interest in its mid-century ceramics – and, inevitably, any potters working in a similar vein today.

In her small workshop in the residential neighbourhood of Frederiksberg, nestled cosily below ground level, potter Mette Duedahl is showing MONOCLE a rustic muddy plate that was part of a

crockery collection given to her parents when they married in the 1970s. The small-scale Danish manufacturer Stogo produced it and the influence of this simple piece on Duedahl's own work is clear: functional and no frills. "I want something that has the same qualities but with a modern expression," she says.

Duedahl produces black, cream and oat-coloured tableware (plus a hugely successful coffee pot for global brand Muuto), with more than a whiff of this 1970s folksiness about them, inspired by brands such as Stogo and Scandinavian simplicity. "Design' is not a huge influence on me," she says, reflecting on her more rational approach to making things. "It's about having a need and fulfilling that need the best way possible. I don't want to make something just to be unique, I want to make something well."

Duedahl took to pottery after working for 10 years as a photographer. She learnt the craft of clay at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art's Center for Glass and Ceramics in Nexø, on the island of Bornholm out in the Baltic Sea, and graduated in 2011. Bornholm has long been the heart of the Danish pottery industry, being one of the few places in the country where stoneware clay is found naturally (red earthenware clay, which is slightly more rudimentary, is common elsewhere).

Duedahl, her husband (a glassblower who also studied at Bornholm) and young children are planning a permanent relocation to the island to be closer to the heart of pottery and the Danish countryside that inspires her pots. "It has crazy nature that you just don't find



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anywhere else in Denmark. It's another life," she says.

It's a promising time for Bornholm. Soholm was the first factory to open on the picturesque island in 1835 and was one of the most important protagonists in Danish mid-century ceramics. The factory closed, like so many in the 1990s, but the pieces are now hugely collectible. In January, a new factory opened hoping to jump-start the country's manufacturing base. Funded by a mixture of private investors, Den Danske Keramikfabrik aims to bring manufacturing back to Bornholm and keep traditions alive by producing pieces for Danish artists, architects and ceramicists at decent prices.

This is vital not only to Bornholm but the Danish industry at large: with so many mid-scale factories closed nationwide, plenty of potters in Denmark are crippled (perhaps even bored) by having to churn out their crowd-pleasing pieces themselves instead of experimenting with new work. "Smaller studios are struggling to cope with demand," says Landon. Duedahl agrees: "I'm stuck in



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## Fired up

The fine-art gallery Copenhagen Ceramics opened in 2012. The brainchild of Denmark's leading ceramic artists, Bente Skjøttgaard, Steen Ipsen and Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl, it was originally intended to run for just 12 months, yet the gallery stayed open for three years and hosted 27 exhibitions. It tapped into the heritage of imaginative sculpture that dates back to the 19th century in Denmark and that is alive and well in the forms that the three directors have created during their lengthy careers: highly technical, ornamental and collectible. "We felt that there were so many fantastic ceramicists here but nowhere to show their work," says Skjøttgaard. "That's why we opened the gallery: we needed a meeting place." Her work can be seen in the V&A in London and the Designmuseum Danmark in Copenhagen.

"In our circles it's always been difficult to overcome that barrier between the crafts system and the fine-art world," says Bodilsen Kaldahl. "But it's been going on for quite a while here. It's being talked about as the new photography."

A retrospective of Copenhagen Ceramics will be exhibited at the Salone del Mobile in Milan this month, featuring works by all three of the artists and many more. [copenhagenceramics.com](http://copenhagenceramics.com)

my own production. A lot of shops want my things but it's difficult to keep up." Though it's early days, Den Danske Keramikfabrik could be their lifeline.

Larger-scale manufacturing is also seeing a resurgence in Denmark after largely collapsing by the early 1980s. Back in the heart of Copenhagen, Ditte Fischer has run her porcelain tableware brand for nearly 20 years. She has a staff of six, including one employee who used to work for Royal Copenhagen before it shifted production to Thailand some years ago. Fischer's pieces are characteristically Nordic, grey, minimalist and adamantly "Made in Denmark". She feels the tide is turning at this level of the industry too. "People are on the lookout for products that have a story and that are made by a person they can connect with and in a country they can connect with," says Fischer from her boutique on Laederstraede. "I've been saying for 20 years that we can make things in Denmark. And now the younger ones are doing it. We can do it, we can make things right here next door."

It's fitting that this "next door" is Tortus Copenhagen, whose workshop and new shop is a one-minute walk up the road. And that just around the corner is Stilleben, a ceramics concept store that has become something of a lynchpin for – and major champion of – contemporary Danish pottery since opening in 2002. It's a charming little community.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Danish ceramics became more known for its fine-art practice (see panel, left) and the straightforward, rustic tableware it had been famous for since the Second World War plummeted in quality, popularity and production. But by returning to some of the principles of mid-century design – simple forms, pale colours and beautiful glazes – the industry is finding its feet again.

It's not simply a matter of nostalgically copying the past but rather being subtly guided by its tastes, like the fluted shapes of Tortus Copenhagen vessels, the lustrous glazes at Studio Arhoj or the charming naivety of Mette Duedahl's cups. These ceramicists are looking back but at the same time they are reasserting Denmark as the capital of pottery production. "The younger generation is finding its identity and thinking that maybe what we were doing years ago wasn't so bad," says Landon, throwing a vessel at his wheel, his hands white with stoneware clay. "It's a total rebirth." — (M)

- 01 Potter at Ditte Fischer's workshop
- 02 Cutting-room floor
- 03 Porcelain moulds
- 04 Fischer outside her Copenhagen shop
- 05 Inside Fischer's flagship shop
- 06 The potter's bestselling porcelain
- 07 Her Japanese-inspired porcelain teapot
- 08 Cumulus glaze tests at Bente Skjøttgaard's studio
- 09 Skjøttgaard's studio
- 10 Skjøttgaard, co-founder of Copenhagen Ceramics



10