

From the Ismay archive. by Alex McErlain



Eileen Nisbet 1929-1990

Earthenware dish, semi matt yellow glaze, 45cmd x 9cmh. c1970.
Photograph Phil Sayer.

Eileen Nisbet was a particularly innovative potter, hand building sensitive work in earthenware and porcelain. She lived and worked in London and taught at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design. Nisbet is now known mostly for her adventurous work in porcelain which she made from 1975 onwards, however, I find her early work just as strong and distinctive, the epitome of a thoughtful maker.

This large dish is decorated with what I regard as a modernist take on a traditional meander pattern, usually found on slip combed country wares. A slip comb cuts several lines at once but here Nisbet has engraved five individual lines to form the meandering design. In the photograph the lines progress from the bottom right hand corner to the top left. As the pattern develops through six looping turns, the lines crisscross over each other in a manner that traditional patterns rarely do. This produces a complex linear effect made especially vibrant because of the inlay technique. You certainly don't read this pattern in the same way as traditional slip combing, there is intrigue in following the individually scratched lines and a more pronounced focus on the negative space. The deeply engraved lines were filled with black slip, scraped back when leather hard. The potter has deliberately left traces of black slip to discolour the background to the pattern. Nisbet also pays homage to a traditional galena based honey glaze but in this instance the glaze is softly matted and very inviting to the touch.

The dish has a skinny feel about it, made by press moulding, pinched thin at the rim, with the addition of a coil to form a foot ring and fired on a three pronged stilt. The underside of the dish is more matted and there is a prominent lime spot chip. I was surprised to see the chip on the reverse, many potters would have abandoned such a flawed piece without glazing it, however, it must not have been such a big issue for the potter as she has rubbed stain into it before glazing.

In the Ismay archive there is a statement (archive item 5861) written by Eileen Nisbet in September 1979. The statement was written in connection with an exhibition of her later work in porcelain, however one paragraph resonates with this earlier work and reveals some of her thinking. *'The bowls originated through 'flat' drawings (as against 3 dimensional drawings) made when I was designing stained glass. The silhouette had to convey the object immediately and include all the important details from a single viewpoint. These ceramic bowls (which to me) are like drawings, flat, but showing shape, rims, inside, handle at a glance.'* Ismay's paper archive contains many exhibition lists, which provide a fascinating glimpse into the pottery world of the period.

Nisbet made a series of these earthenware dishes from the late sixties to the mid-seventies. There is a similar piece illustrated in Michael Casson's book 'Pottery in Britain Today' (picture 49) and she features in Casson's BBC series 'The Craft of the Potter' episode 3, where she incises lines in a pressed dish. There is a good website about Nisbet which includes many images of her work together with a group of beautiful line drawings some of which reveal the way she developed her ideas for linear decoration.

<http://www.eileennisbet.co.uk/index.html>



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