

All in a Day's Work



Photos courtesy of Susan Hill

Susan Hill – Potter

Susan Hill works at Hillgrove Pottery in NSW, Australia. She loves everything about her job and finds it rewarding to make pots that other people like and can use every day for a cup of tea or to bake a pie or casserole.

www.hillgrovepottery.com.au



Where do you work?

My studio is actually a large, red shed, at the bottom of our garden. We own alpaca and while I am working I can see them in the field beside me.

The studio.



Have you always been interested in what you do?

Yes. When I was about 7, my Mum put me in a school holiday art programme for two weeks where the main focus was pottery. Ever since then I have always loved it. Mum still has a couple of the pieces that I made then!

What training did you do for your job?

I trained as an apprentice potter at Sturt Pottery in NSW, Australia. Every day for the first year I made the same shape! All day I sat at the pottery wheel making the same shape over and over... It was very challenging at first, but my teacher was kind and very encouraging and I got better and better every week.

The reason for doing that same (very difficult) shape was to learn all the ways to manipulate the clay while it is spinning on the wheel. For the next two years, while I made pots, my teacher taught me about making glazes (outer layer), how to fire the kiln and how to look at my pots with a critical eye - and squash up the ones that I thought weren't good enough. A lot were squashed! That sounds tough, but it means that I don't worry now if I have to squash one. I just keep the best ones for firing. All that practice making pots all day taught me to be able to make them faster too. I can make 40 mugs in one hour.

What is a day in your life like?

I get up early and check that the alpaca are all okay. Then I start preparing the clay into balls for throwing on the wheel. I spend the morning throwing pots on the wheel and then in the afternoons, when they have dried off a bit, I decorate them and put handles on them. Then I think about what I need to make tomorrow and draw the pots in my sketch book.



Applying a glaze.

When I am firing the kiln I get up at 4am. The kiln takes 12 hours to fire and I have to stay beside it the whole time to make sure the temperature is rising properly. By 4pm the kiln is 1285°C and I switch it off. It takes another 24 hours before the kiln is cool enough to open and see how the pots turned out. Sometimes I can hardly wait!

What is your main aim?

To keep making pots and try different shapes and styles all the time. I also like to test different glazes in every firing. Glazing is very important as it finishes off the pot. A good glaze can't save a bad pot, but a bad glaze will ruin a good pot. So my aim is to make good pots and finish them with very good glazes.

What is the best thing about your job?

Opening the kiln and seeing how a new style of pot turned out. My kiln is very big - over 150 pots will fit in each firing and it's fun to see how they turn out. A lot depends on firing properly, so when they all turn out okay it makes me very happy. But the best thing is being able to do what I really love doing all day - making pottery.

What advice would you give someone who wants to become a potter?

Do a short course in pottery to see if you like doing it. Do Art when you get to High School and then do pottery courses for adults. Some Universities offer a Degree in Ceramics - or if there is a pottery near you, see if the potter takes apprentices - that would be the best of all. It takes a lot of practice to learn how to make pots on the wheel, but meanwhile you can make loads of things by hand: little animals, pinch pots, tiles, pendants, Christmas tree ornaments and little boats - anything you like! The important thing is to just keeping making.

What is the best piece of advice you ever had?

Don't give up! All my family and friends love getting my 'mistakes' as presents. If I have a bad day, when nothing seems to go right making pots, I just switch to some other task like recycling the clay. Then when I go back to the pot after a time, things seem to come back to rights.



Lidded jar.



The kiln.



Goblets.