

# Martine Polisset

Biot, France by Lucie Brisson



PHOTO: EDITH ANDREOTTA



PHOTO: ALAIN CERRUTI



PHOTO: EDITH ANDREOTTA

## Just the Facts

### Clay

paperclay and French black stoneware

### Primary forming method

coiling, shaping with a knife, polishing with a spoon, sanding down

### Primary firing temperature

2012°F (1100°C) for bisque, then to 1778°F (970°C)

### Favorite surface treatment

scratching

### Favorite tools

a spoon with the handle cut off and a blunt knife

## Studio

Since 1989 Martine Polisset has been sculpting clay in the heart of the scenic village of Biot (9000 inhabitants, between Cannes and Nice on the French Riviera). Two hundred years ago her studio was a bakery with an oven at the back that she describes as looking, “like a massive igloo!” Polisset took the oven out after buying the place in the 1980s to reveal the rock behind it and the vaulted ceiling. The 400-square-foot space is naturally cool during the southern French summers and in the winters is warmed by a wood stove. “I love my studio,” she says, “but it is too small, and too dark, with only one window! Sometimes I think I should give it a fresh coat of white to brighten it.” There is a large table in the middle. She moves around it to work. Her equipment is a spray gun for glazing, an electric kiln, and a radio. “It’s too dusty for CDs.”

For a while, Polisset tried to have a studio isolated in nature: “I liked the idea so much! . . . But I couldn’t deal with having to rely daily on the car.” Now she enjoys having her workspace close to her home. Although it is not a showroom, passers-by wander in, attracted by what they glimpse through the door.

## Work

Polisset works on one piece at a time, taking it from start to finish, which can take a week or a month, depending on the shape’s complexity. “Having several pieces in progress is too compli-

cated,” she explains. “Coiling is a slow, organic process, during which I often have to wait, because the consistency of the clay has to be just right. When I have to stop, there are always other things to do. I go dig clay beside a sheepfold I have in the mountains, a beautiful red clay that I use as a slip. Or else I work in my terraced garden, growing tomatoes and potatoes next to a 1000-year-old olive tree.”

She always works alone, about three hours a day. At first a piece goes fast. The clay is soft and the shape is easily altered. The harder the clay gets, the longer the process takes. “I scrape the inside curves with a spoon I’ve cut the handle off of. At the end [of the building process], I use sandpaper. That stage reminds me of drawing, which I love.”

Like many makers, she says she learns from mistakes. “Sometimes I become totally lost in a piece, and the so-called mistake becomes more interesting than what I was trying to achieve in the first place.”

## Seeds of Inspiration

“Most of the time my starting point for a piece is something I gathered during a walk,” Polisset says, “a seed or some other

shape.” This object, or part of it, becomes a model of sorts. If it’s very small, she takes pictures and enlarges them to look at while she handbuilds. Recently she has been working less from life, and inventing more. She seeks inspiration in books (on plants, sciences, medicine), and online, mostly on archeological sites. “Neolithic stone axes, for example, are simple, beautiful, efficient shapes.” She needs to be calm and focused to start a piece. Occasionally she will sketch ideas out in advance.

In the journal that presents her work to galleries, Polisset quotes the English poet William Blake (1757–1827) “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ and Eternity in an hour.” This quote is illustrative of both the way she works and her finished pieces.

## Location

When she was young, Polisset and her parents vacationed in Biot. “I started picking up seeds and stuff on the ground here,” she explains. Eventually, in 1971, she simply stayed. “I grew up in Paris. Now I go there on holidays. I love the city, going to the cinema . . . but it’s nicer



ABOVE: PHOTOS: EDITH ANDREOTTA. OPPOSITE: PHOTOS: J.J. L'HÉRITIER.

this way around! I feel very lucky.” Her house (located in the light orange building in the image at the top of the page) is a tower, part of the village’s old battlements. She can see the Mediterranean from its windows. The studio is just a few minutes walk from her home.

### Body

Polisset is thankful that her back doesn’t bother her, but lately she has developed osteoarthritis in her knees from the repetitive motions in the studio. Swimming helps. The sea is right down the hill, a couple of miles away, and she swims regularly from May onward. She did ballet until she was 17 and still loves dancing: “It frees me up and centers me at the same time.”

### Marketing

Being a member of Ateliers d’Art de France (a professional body of over 6000 French artists across several media) helps with marketing Polisset’s work. They organize shows of members’ work in France and abroad. In the 1990s Polisset made a decent living from her pieces. “Right now it is harder,” she says, “but I feel very grateful that I don’t have to do anything else.”

“I am terrible at marketing!” she readily admits. Luckily her brother is a graphic designer and looks after all the promotion.

Sales are mostly to private collectors who have followed her work for years. Sometimes customers come to the studio to look at pieces in progress. She also sells through galleries in France and Belgium, and at the local arts and ceramics museum (Biot was a pottery center from the 16th to the 18th century). Recently her work is selling more and more at large art shows or salons. These are also big social events, and Polisset enjoys having the opportunity to meet other artists. From time to time she takes on commissions and she has also collaborated with a glass artist on projects in the past.

When describing the art market for her work, she says that she regrets that Paris is, “a little stale and narrow-minded about art.” She adds, “In the US, people are more enthusiastic.”

### Lessons

Polisset muses, “It is important to trust your intuition, to be curious about things around you, to enjoy the quiet, to be humble and work with your heart. . . . If something isn’t working, don’t push it. Go for a walk instead. . . . My whole mind and body need to be into what I am making. If I try too hard, nothing happens.”

[www.martinepolisset.com](http://www.martinepolisset.com)

[www.ateliersdart.com/atelier-martine-polisset,2565.htm](http://www.ateliersdart.com/atelier-martine-polisset,2565.htm)

