

Only Collect

Northern Lights

The works of Swedish ceramist Berndt Friberg

are sensuous and controlled BY AKIKO BUSCH



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANITA CALERO

ALMOST SINCE the modern movement was established, in the twenties, we have been interpreting it, translating it, and otherwise finding ways to put a spin on it. For many years, one of the lightest spins was engineered by the Scandinavian moderns. If modernism elsewhere reflected an ethos of rationalism, equating design with technology, the Swedish mod-

erns were more likely to consider the emotional and psychological components of design. Comfort and a sense of warmth and pleasure were all essential to the Swedish moderns. Most of all, however, it may be their conviction that objects help to confirm our humanity that makes revisiting their work so rewarding today.

Consider Swedish studio potter Berndt Friberg, born in 1899. In 1934 Friberg joined the Gustavsberg Studio, a renowned ceramics factory outside Stockholm, as a thrower for Wilhelm Kåge. The art director of the factory, Kåge was a distinguished presence in Swedish design, advocating that ordinary household objects represent a congruence of art and industry. From 1944 until his death in 1981, Friberg worked at Gustavsberg both as a designer for industrial ceramic production and as a studio potter. The body of work he produced reflected both the rigorous discipline of production work and the idea that the rituals of daily life be animated by the beauty of the ordinary.

Friberg's early pieces reflected classical traditions of Chinese ceramic art. As he matured as an artist, however, he manipulated the forms more, elongating, exaggerating, and otherwise stretching them into the realm of modern expression. The generous bulb of a bottle suddenly and gracefully narrows to an astonishingly delicate spout; such intersections of composure and astonishment inform much of his later work. And while a formal elegance seems to mark many of his pieces, there is also an implicit humanity in the way

they ask to be held, touched, used.

Indeed, even the most exaggerated of these pieces reflect a sense of serenity and balance, a symmetry of spirit that seems to radiate from within the vessel. Mark McDonald, owner of the Gansevoort Gallery in New York, who has collected Friberg's work for fifteen years, suggests that this aura

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of composure may be due to the absolute resolution in the relationship between foot, body, and rim; in even the smallest bottle, there is a clear beginning, an established middle, a concise end.


A sense of phenomenal control distinguishes Friberg's glazes as much as it does his elegant forms. The vibrant coloration and luster of his high-fire glazes have held their appeal in the Swedish market. American collectors, however, have found greater allure in the more subtle calibrations of color in Friberg's matte glazes. In these, it is the quiet layering of earth tones, subdued landscapes of hue within landscapes, that is the evidence of Friberg's virtuosity.

Friberg has been often overlooked in the history of contemporary ceramic art, perhaps because he was a masterful technician of form and glaze at a time when innovation and personal expression tended to elicit greater public enthusiasm.

But Friberg was a more disciplined artist, and nowhere is this more evident than in his miniatures, a sequence of delicate bowls, bottles, vessels, and vases, most of them between one and three inches high. The art of miniaturization lies in the control and precision required for the human hand to shape material on such a reduced scale. But these tiny pieces can also read as meditations on form, a repetition of small parts from which a larger sense of composure seems miraculously to emerge. Larry Weinberg, another New York gallery owner and collector of Friberg, observes that miniaturization held out a special appeal in the late forties and fifties not simply to the ceramic arts but to science and industry. The scale of

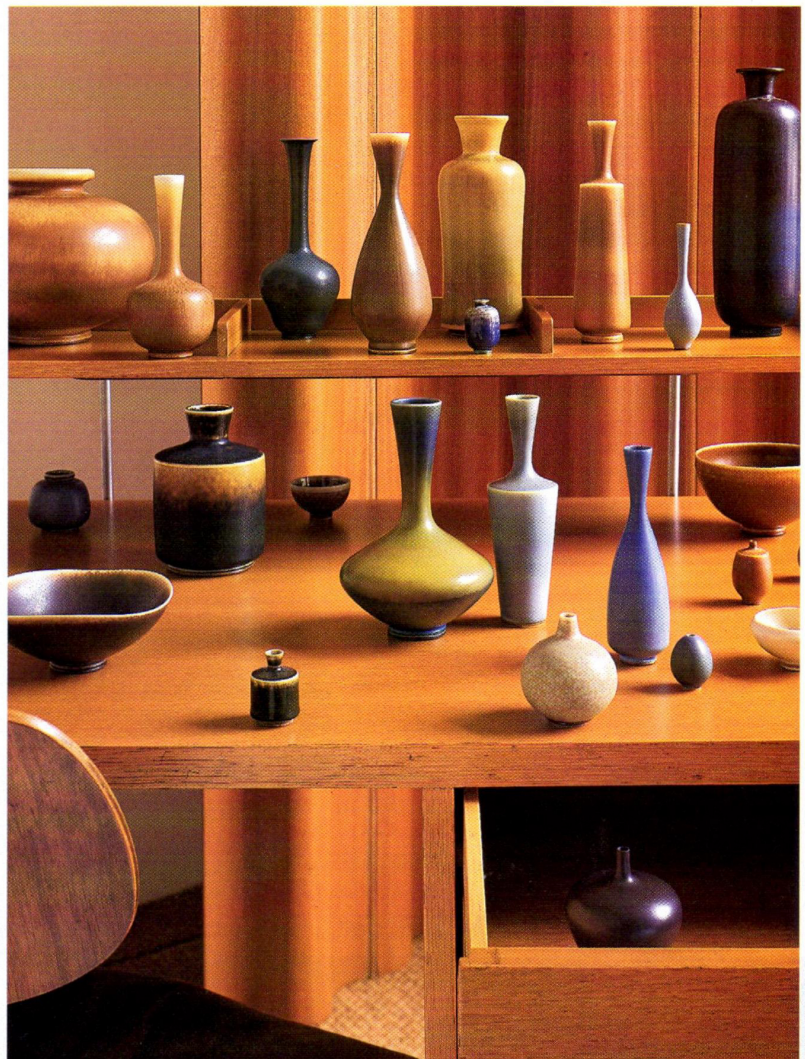
these pieces, he suggests, "is not unrelated to transistor technology," and one can easily read these pieces as little stone-ware batteries that generate something larger than themselves.

During Friberg's lifetime, these miniatures and small pieces could be purchased for less than \$100. The affordability of his work was consistent with the Swedish design ethos that disregarded the conventional schism between art and craft. Be it a pot or a painting, affordability was a part of larger aesthetic considerations. Today, the price of Friberg's work remains relatively low. His miniatures sell for anywhere from \$400 to \$800. Midsized vessels start at \$500 and can go as high as \$1,500 to \$1,800. It's not surprising that Friberg's forms, at once sensuous and controlled, drew the attention of artist and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, who began to amass his own collection in the early '80s. Mapplethorpe found Friberg's sensual forms compati-

ble with the latent eroticism of his own still-life photographs. He also documented his collection in photographs that made manifest the cumulative beauty of Friberg's work. The whole of a Friberg collection seems effortlessly to exceed the sum of its parts, and it is the accumulation that is the reward. A sequence of Friberg vessels is the visual evidence that objects can conduct their own conversations, and in doing so manage to clarify, inform, and expand on one another. Most of all, these are *things* that know how to keep their own company. Which in the end, could be what makes a good collection. 

"Only Collect" is a regular column about antiques and collectibles. Akiko Busch is a contributing editor to the magazine.

STILL LIVES A random arrangement of Friberg vessels has its own visual rhythm, previous page. Grace in both modern and traditional forms, below.



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