

# Carol Long

## No Straight Lines, Ever

by Kim Hurley Andrews

The first time I drive out to see Carol Long and her ceramics, the world is mostly unfamiliar with Covid. I go past St. John, Kansas, where the landscape is typically Midwest flat. As I approach the farm where Long has lived with family for decades, I notice something unexpected: a slight rise and fall on the horizon; a curved, undulating line.

Out front, a big dog lies in the yard greeting visitors. Next to a double gravel driveway is a farmhouse, which inside features a fireplace faced with Long's handmade tiles. Her colorful tile designs cover floors, walls, and countertops. To the south is a former wash house she used as a gallery until recently, when her stepmother moved in. It's been transformed at least twice. The two-room structure with interior barn-wood siding housed her studio before she made it into a gallery.

### Imagination and Natural Elements

I arrive during her Christmas open house, which has been extremely popular for years with area residents and longtime collectors. One guest chooses a tree ornament as a gift. Long's recent pieces are displayed in the gallery's main room; some are rather large. Many of her vases from this era bear slightly muted colors and touches she generally incorporates into each work: slip-trailed lines, little beads of clay resembling berries, her distinctive birds, and flowers and animals of all kinds. Had she not become an artist, she says, "I would have been a gardener or a horticulturist. I love green, growing things, and placing them in my work."

Especially noticeable in Long's work is the repetition of natural elements, such as leaves, vines, and berries, which seem to grow in arcs or bent lines. "Many plants, growing things, have a similar progression," she explains. Rather than intentionally setting out to create a specific slip-trailed design, she begins by envisioning how colors fit into a design. "Sometimes I just start slip trailing shapes, even though I'm not sure, because maybe something great will happen."



1

She imagines one shape on the handle, down to a rounded bottom, and up another side to the other handle. That's her frame. Everything in between is subject matter, with the design in glazes and slip trailing. A bird might emerge behind the leaves on top, or as a surprise. Her guiding principle? "No straight lines, ever."

Like many artisans, experience helped Long perfect her method. Over time, she learned which flowers work well in a piece, conducive to her technique. "If you ask for a zinnia, it may end up looking like a big ball," she explains, "but a poppy is something altogether different." She prefers to use animals and insects that surround her: deer, hares, peacocks, koi, frogs, butterflies, dragonflies, and cicadas. Some are exotic but able to survive in Kansas.

### A Connection to History

She likes to think in terms of historical ceramics, things like canopic jars that Egyptians crafted long ago. "I took that idea and made things around me, like a cat canopic, butterflies, and dragonflies. Or a mermaid canopic." A mermaid? "One average-sized mermaid is as available to me in Kansas as anyone else," she jests.

On a trip to the Denver Art Museum in 2015, Long saw a "fabulous ceramic pre-Columbian woman, just standing there." She came home and constructed some of her own from thrown parts, adding a Kansas theme that incorporated poppies and sandhill plums, and what she calls "fabulous headpieces." The original versions were black and white clay; hers became multicolored. "They would stand up by themselves if you didn't breathe on them," she remembers. A man from a nearby town built custom stands to help keep them upright.

Long's affinity for historic ceramics, and the lines and movement of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Arts and Crafts styles and architecture, show up in virtually every piece. She sees the handles themselves as expressions of Art Nouveau. "I can take the lines from slip trailing on a piece and send them out into negative space."

### An Urge to Create

The second, smaller room in Long's gallery contained works from her early career: large cocoon-like pieces or conch shells, and a triptych of large tiles. Her *Chrysalis* series is very large. Now they look like sea creatures to her, but were based on the idea of a chrysalis. She also has created tiles with butterflies, daughters, and flowers—the closest she has come to two-dimensional work. These rely on texture, a method of "cutting and pressing in, and slip trailing to raise up." Here, one can see her palette becoming more complex, the designs more innovative.

Long spent the first ten years of her life in Michigan, but, in her mind, she's a native of Stafford County, Kansas. First, she lived on her dad's farm south of St. John, then her husband Jerry's family farm, north of town. She and Jerry are both fifth-generation Kansas farmers.

One could say that her art literally grew out of the ground her dad farmed. Long remembers sitting in the



1 *Running Hare Bottle*, 13½ in. (34.3 cm) in length, handbuilt, altered, textured, and slip-trailed Laguna B-Mix Cone 5 clay, stain, glaze, fired in oxidation to cone 5, 2024. 2 Carol Long with greenware in her studio, 2024. 3 *Forest Green Lidded Jar*, 7 in. (17.8 cm) in width, wheel-thrown, altered, and slip-trailed B-Mix Cone 5 clay, stain, glaze, fired in oxidation to cone 5, 2018.



driveway of her childhood home, at age 10 or 11, playing in mud that was mostly sand. There, next to a puddle, she filled one of her dad's cattle syringes with mud and squished it out, making designs on the ground. "What a good time that was!" she recalls. This led her to ask for Pumper Number 9, a fire engine-shaped Play-Doh extruder, one Christmas. Unfortunately, she never got it because her mother decided she was too old for it. Now she owns a large hydraulic extruder, what she calls overcompensation for never receiving the gift.

The urge to create went unquenched. St. John High School offered a small art class that was rich in talent. She recalls how their instructor, Sheldon Ganstrom, took the class to a Gordon Zahradnik raku workshop at Sterling College. "We moved straight into clay and did a raku firing in the school courtyard. Our instructor was excited, and so were we. There was a mystery about what would come out of the raku firings. I still feed on that same feeling when I open a kiln, but I expect more," she says. Because of what Long gained there, she strongly supports high school art programs.

Much of her time in college was spent in a ceramic lab. "I don't remember anything outside of that," she confesses. There, she learned how to pull handles—which she couldn't stand to do at the time. Now they are included in almost all her pieces: some functional, most nonfunctional. "The handles go off into space and give such a flow to the piece," she explains. "I'm very concerned with shape, how the handles go, and how slip trailing will bring it all together."



4

4 *Caterpillar Vase*, 11 in. (27.9 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, altered, textured, and slip-trailed B-Mix Cone 5 clay, stain, glaze, fired in oxidation to cone 5, 2024. 5 *Deer in Sandhill Plums*, 12½ in. (31.8 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, altered, and slip-trailed B-Mix Cone 5 clay, stain, glaze, fired in oxidation to cone 5, 2016.

Long's well-honed technique of slip trailing shows up in each piece. Truly, it's amazing to see: her steady hand gracefully draws lines freehandedly, repeating something she's perfected, over and over. Widely known in the area where she was raised, Long gained greater prominence through online sales during the pandemic. However, private collectors began seeking out her work some time before.

I find my way back to Long's farmstead in between Covid outbreaks. On this trip, we meet in a large metal building that still houses her studio. Surrounded by favorite art books and stacks of molds and crates, she comes here faithfully each day, ever disciplined to create.

At one point, she takes me back to the kiln room. There, among a spray booth, kilns, and pieces in process, she points out some angle-iron tables, custom made by her dad. He passed away in 2022. No doubt, he'll continue to be a part of his daughter's artistic process, just as he was in the beginning, providing the equipment and materials she needed to explore and create something beautiful out of mud and sand.

*For more information on Carol Long's work and practice, visit [carollongpottery.com](http://carollongpottery.com).*

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5

## An Organic Vase by Carol Long

To make my forms, I use Laguna B-Mix Cone 5 clay for construction and slip, and a Laguna Precision Trailing Bottle 7 for slip trailing. After the initial steps of throwing and altering, I alter all straight lines of the vessel's silhouette and move on to pulling and attaching handles while the clay is still moist. This allows the handles to bend with ease—sometimes even into quite tight curves—without cracking.

I pull the handles so they are rectangular not round in cross section (1, 2). The broad sides keep the handles from being too fragile and will be secured to the body. The narrower edges serve as a canvas for slip trailing and glaze decoration. I thoroughly slip and score the contact points. The clay shouldn't be wet—just very soft and pliable, allowing for a secure bond.

As I work, I'm considering how these handles will be visually connected through slip trailing and glazes. A handle reaches outward, extending the top rim into space (3).

The opposite side will have a handle in the other direction (4). Another handle emerges from a lower curve on the form. It extends upward, leaving a sliver of negative space between itself and the vessel's side. I would like it to appear as a ribbon flowing along the side of the body.

I attach five handles to complete this form. To avoid the handles remembering their former shape and detaching, slip and score where they actually touch the body. Curlicues stick out into space and will unroll if not secured to themselves (5).

Tip: To maintain the spaces between handles and the body, insert pieces of sponge while drying (6).

After the handles firm up, I move on to slip trailing their edges and back into the main body of the piece. I fill shapes created by the slip trailing with glazes, which will appear to be ribbons flowing in and out of the design.



1 Once all straight lines of the vessel's silhouette have been altered, attach pulled handles while the clay is still moist, allowing them to bend without cracking. 2 Pull the handles so they are rectangular. The broad sides will keep the handles from being too fragile and the narrower edges serve as a canvas for slip trailing and glaze decoration. 3 Attach so that a handle reaches outward, extending the top rim into space. As I work, I consider how these handles will be visually connected through slip trailing and glazes. 4 Add another handle so it emerges from a lower curve on the form, extending upward, creating interesting negative spaces. 5 To avoid the handles remembering their former shape and detaching, slip and score where they actually touch the body. This curlicue sticks out into space and will unroll if not secured to itself. 6 On a different piece, I have inserted pieces of sponge between the handles to maintain spacing while drying.