

Suzy Birstein

A Return to the Muses of Greece

Article by Suzanne Fournier

THE ENGLISH POET AND LITERARY CRITIC MATTHEW ARNOLD observed a century ago that virtually all of the major cornerstones of our culture, from law to medicine, science and religion, to the arts and architecture, derived ultimately from the ancient Greeks. For Suzy Birstein, a Vancouver-based ceramic artist whose brilliantly-hued and richly-layered sculpture blends a myriad of cultural references, a return to Greece in her recent work as both a creator and facilitator of art, represents a full-circle return to the spiritual inspiration for her chosen calling as an artist.

It was in Greece as a 20 year old student that Birstein's artistic muses first tapped her on the shoulder. Luxuriating in the magnificent Greek islands of Corfu and Crete, absorbed in the ancient art and architecture on offer, Birstein felt in touch with freedom, creativity and passion for new experience. It was while gazing at frescoes at the Palace of Knossos, after receiving mail from home, that Suzy was faced with key life decisions. She returned to Canada to marriage and eventually motherhood, combining work in her home-based studio while raising two active, athletic sons. Knowing she was no longer destined to be a perpetual world traveller, Birstein wondered, "What would provide me with the dual spirit of knowingness and the unknown, openness and unpredictability, intensity and freedom?" She turned instinctively to art. Drawn especially to the sensuousness and infinite possibilities of working with clay, Birstein became a prolific ceramic artist and an inspirational teacher of children and adults. Now she answers her own question by saying the decisions she made in Knossos have come to describe the life she has led "as an artist, teacher, wife and mother since those idyllic days in Greece".

Although her days of sun- and art-soaked freedom on the islands of Crete and Corfu have never been far from Birstein's creative mind over the last three decades, it is in the last two years that Greece has returned full-force to her, as the inspiration for a new body of nine life sized clay sculptures, atop ready-made Greek columns, first showcased at the Seymour Art Gallery in Deep Cove, British Columbia, Canada in the spring of 2008; and also as the location for a ceramics workshop Birstein led on the Greek island of Skopelos in September, 2009. She will follow up on the successful 2009 two-week hands-on clay workshop called *Mia Muse*, with another class at Skopelos in September, 2010 entitled *Mytho Muse*. The Skopelos classes that Birstein will continue to offer in



Moon lights up the night... (Side 1).



Above: *Who are you really and what were you before?* (Side 2).
Below: *Moon lights up the night...* (Detail, Side 2).



years to come came about through one of the serendipitous coincidences that seem to recur in her life. Drawn by her passion for musicals and Hollywood movies, Birstein saw the film version of the musical *Mamma Mia* and fell in love with its setting in Skopelos, which she recalled from her days in Crete was said to be especially stunning in summer and fall. Birstein turned to information she'd been sent earlier by the Skopelos Art Foundation (set up by American artist Gloria Carr as a way to combine her love of art and Greece) and promptly wrote to Carr about her work as an artist – especially the recent solo show of Greek-inspired column-based figures – and her love of all things Greek.

The foundation and its board responded enthusiastically to Birstein's proposal for a ceramics workshop that would allow up to a dozen budding artists to work in clay while exploring the glorious island of Skopelos. At the Skopelos facility, which has both electric and woodfired kilns, Birstein demonstrates ceramic handbuilding techniques which combine textures, slabs, coils and pinching to create figurative sculptures. Working small, students are able to create figures in the form of decorative and functional mugs, masks, spirit bottles and heads. Birstein is able to demonstrate her signature multi-surface combinations which allow the new creations to have fired and cold surfaces, side by side as desired. Along with the intense focus on ceramics, students are offered time to discuss and explore their own concepts of the 'muse', enhanced as Birstein says, by "the evocative ambiance of Skopelos". Artists working with Birstein can develop their creative vision through exposure to local music and food and still find time to explore the island's pristine beaches and trails. For Birstein, who has instilled a passion for ceramic sculpture in students aged five to 75, the Skopelos workshops in 2009 and in subsequent years enable her to embrace the source of her own muses while guiding others to theirs.

After moving to Vancouver with her husband, chef Hartley Rosenberg, Birstein graduated from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1980 with an Honours diploma in ceramics. She has gone on to create a wide and diverse body of handbuilt pottery over the last 30 years, ranging from functional tableware to a series called *Portrait Masks* and large double-sided *Duet* busts replete with multicultural motifs. The *Spirit Bottles* group of vessels draw on visual and spiritual themes from cultures as diverse as Mexico, India, Southeast Asia and Africa. Working from her bright home-based studio where she shows and sells her ceramic work (as well as monotypes, oil paintings and even ceramic jewellery) Birstein conducts classes for ceramics students of all ages. She also has taught at Vancouver's celebrated Arts Umbrella facility for children for 20 years and is a frequent artist-in-residence in schools. Welcome in her home studio are influences as diverse as Picasso, Modigliani, Frida Kahlo and Beatrice Wood to Busby Berkeley and Carmen Miranda. The cultural icons that recur in her sculpture include the busy many-handed Indian gods, Venetian-style masks and now, the 'classic' Greek-influenced Birstein columns and busts, all created to the ever-present outpouring of music ranging from tango, opera, blues and jazz, from Frank Sinatra and Cole Porter to

Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen.

Birstein communicates through the faces and figures that dominate her art, driven by a stream-of-consciousness drawing and painting technique that draws on widely-disparate cultural themes. A sculpture might merge an African primitive mask, a Greek caryatid, Mexican folk art images, a parrot or a Pierrot, along with animalistic horns and antlers. "Within a single statue, there can be a Chinese warrior, an Egyptian god and a cancan dancer," notes Birstein. When she says, "I long to merge the power of Nefertiti with the spirit of Carmen Miranda," Birstein is speaking literally and descriptively. Her ceramic sculptures blend "archetypal icons that embrace the power of ancient and contemporary world cultures" with the popular culture of music, film and dance that she has embraced since childhood. In her work, all of those influences and themes somehow combine harmoniously, brought together by the brilliance and subtlety of the way she wields colour on earthenware slabs and coils with fired and cold surfaces, combining multiple glazes, underglazes, pencils, black line, lustres, acrylics and patinas on bisqued surfaces and the rich textures she achieves with stamped, figured and embossed wet surfaces. The audacious melding of world cultures and icons is admiration, not appropriation; as Birstein notes, "My work celebrates the interconnectedness of many cultures and eras." Her work reflects her deep appreciation for the diverse influences in Canadian society, as does her studio and her home. To Birstein, who invariably wears a brightly jeweled *bindi* on her forehead in the midst of her cascading, multicolored Greco/African style braids, all of the artistic reflections of her life are about honouring the diverse fabric and social harmony in the Canadian culture in which she lives and works.

In 2008, Birstein's colourful imagery caught the eye of the people at Distinctive Assets, who discovered Birstein's work while searching the Internet for Mexican-inspired pottery. After discussion, Birstein was chosen along with a handful of other Canadians and as the only artist to contribute to the 2008 Oscars' gift bags. For the 80th year of the Academy Awards, Birstein created 80 *Motion Pitchers*; elegant elongated slim pitchers with figures in stylized, glamorous poses, echoing the stars who receive the famous gold statuette. The experience garnered Birstein intense media exposure in Vancouver, the US and Asia but also strained the resources of her home kiln, which was pressed into production of dozens of the lovely ceramic vessels, housed in cylindrical designer packaging and proffered to nominees for Best Actor and Director or sold through her studio and gallery.

It is in her latest body of work that virtually all of Birstein's artistic influences and inspirations came together. In a typical synchronicity, she was on her way to a tap dance class when she saw Greek columns in a shop window and instantly saw how they could be combined with her own sculpture to form life-size figures. "A voice inside cried, 'Columns. Nine Greek columns for the nine Greek muses,'" says Birstein. The series had actually already begun with a muse that called on the personas of King Tut and Ganesha, the first in a new direction Birstein had begun toward large clay sculptures, which barely fit inside her home-studio kiln. The torso and head of the Ganesha figure survived



Above: *Notorious from Dance of the Crinolin'd Muses (Detail, Side 2).*

Below: *Moon lights up the night... (Detail, Side 1).*





Above: *Who are you really and what were you before?*
 Below: *African Queen from Dance of the Crinolin'd Muses (Detail, Side 2).*



but the base, upon loading, broke into thousands of pieces. Spotting an elephant column that day in the shop window, Birstein could visualize her Ganesha perched atop it. She envisioned eight more sculptures that would incorporate Greek columns as foundations. "Each ceramic character would be inspired by its found column," Birstein decided, "and I would glaze, paint, patina the ceramic and surface the column so the figure read as one." As for the melding of cultures in her 'muse' creations, Birstein saw the muses as "open-handed, ready to receive and offer, to come alive and be impassioned in the most positive sense". She notes: "This would be my dream for our world."

Seeing the columns on her way to a tap dance class, another idea sprang into her mind. She had commissioned former Broadway dancer Jim Hibbard to choreograph a solo for her to tap dance amidst her sculptures and the Greek column-based sculptures would create the perfect setting for her. The dance itself was inspired by a scene from the musical *There's No Business Like Show Business*, in which Donald O'Connor dances around a courtyard decorated with stone fountain figures that come to life after he kisses Marilyn Monroe.

Hibbard and Birstein began months of rehearsal that would culminate in Birstein's own performance art film of her dancing amid her column-based sculptures. On opening night at the Seymour Art Gallery, with Birstein's nine columns regally positioned among a throng of guests at the gallery, her performance art film *Tap to the Muse* was screened. There above the crowd was Birstein tap dancing and interacting with her imposing sculptures. Brilliantly-painted and laden with her signature multicultural icons, some festooned with bright crinolines, the animalistic and human figures came to life alongside their creator, creating a dazzling scene without jeopardizing the fragile sculptures.

The individual works in the column-based series integrate into a harmonious whole, yet each is laden with layers of intricate details and imagery. All can be read as front-and-back duos, much like Birstein's earlier *Duet* series but the sides of the ceramic sculptures and the columns also are painted and freighted with imagery. Handbuilt with slabs of clay, the sculptures glow with Birstein's melting-pot of brilliant colours and metallic tones. The clay is disguised under richly-coloured glazes, underglazes, gold and mother of pearl lustres, rust and turquoise/aged copper patinas, while the 'Greek' columns, painted in complementary and contrasting hues, have become African drums, vessels or 'legs'. Motifs from the nine columns, whether roses, classical Greek women draped in togas, African drums or crouching elephants, are echoed in the colours and themes of the ceramic sculpture above.

To examine some of the nine sculptures in detail: *African Queen*, perched atop a painted column with two turquoise crinolines that seem to put the figure in whirling motion, reveals on both sides a mask-style face crowned with bronzed horns evocative of the *chivara* or African antelope. On one side, the dominant face is a primitive African-style mask, with rich scarlet lips, blue cheeks and a purple head-dress on either side of the horns. Between the curving tusk-like horns is a pagoda-shaped hat that might also function

as a lid. The torso below that imposing head is bedecked with a dramatic feminine face, evocative perhaps of a Frida Kahlo image but more deliberately intended to refer to the masks worn in the traditional African *Gelede* masquerade performance of the Yoruba, which pays tribute to the power of women as mothers, elders and ancestors. In the *Gelede* ceremony, men placate and please women in a bid to secure female power for good rather than harm. Below this *Gelede*-style mask, are triangular ridged, coloured slabs of clay attached to form a collar. The bright blue traditional knee-length crinoline that graced the figure on the first side is placed below the triangular neck piece of the *Gelede* mask, becoming an exotic ruff. The top face on the reverse side has a shining feminine golden face with Asian or African features, despite her deep blue eyes. The torso on the golden side has Madonna-style pointed breasts and arms draped in textured, painted clay with the same bronzed patina that, on the body, is reminiscent of rusty iron armour. These female creatures read as romantic but fierce warriors, challenging in their femininity, yet assertive. The golden-hued maiden also has lustrous golden hands with shiny red fingernails. One of her decorative hands is perched confidently on the figure's hip, yet the other opens in a receptive, passive stance that seems more Buddhist than fierce woman warrior.

Notorious is the second tutu-bedecked sculpture in this *Dance of the Crinolin'd Muses* and returns to the exotic Egyptian and tribal African influences. One face is that of an alluring but androgynous Asian-looking warrior cat, with ruby lips, whiskers and sharp ears. It is an echo of the Egyptian Bast goddess that traditionally sported the head of a lion or sand-cat. Bast the cat goddess carried huge bas-jars, or bast, to add the feminine 't' ending. Filled with expensive perfumes, Bast jars were valued in the searing heat of Egypt, offering the welcome relief of perfume and the accoutrements of hygiene. The cat was revered in Egypt as an object of worship. Birstein's Bast is perched atop a curved cylindrical vessel. The punch of the ruby red tutu on the slim creature makes the catwoman a powerful figure but also a playful one about to whirl away in dance.

The first of Birstein's sculptures in the *Muse* series is titled "Who are you really and what were you before?", a quote from the film *Casablanca*. Fittingly, this sculpture is based on Ganesha, the Indian elephant-shaped god who confers good luck on new ventures and can be the remover of all obstacles. Birstein's tall ceramic Ganesha is a noble figure, carefully posed on his column with quizzical down-cast eyes and a lustrous white trunk. His hands are held in a receptive pose at his waist and his torso is the hue of aged copper, turquoise and metallic. Ganesha may be a boy-god but Birstein has graced him with breasts which peek with metallic-glazed nipples from blue clay slabs that might resemble a military uniform. His hands come together at his waist in a receptive pose. Colours of turquoise and blue, echoed by Ganesha's pointed slab-like elephant ears, predominate. The sculpture appears to be a unified whole, with the column formed by a circle of crouching elephants, which read as legs for the tall, dignified, somewhat androgynous boy-elephant. On Ganesha's other side, another



Above: *African Queen* from *Dance of the Crinolin'd Muses* (Side 2).

Below: *Who are you really and what were you before?* (Detail, Side 1).





*Installation shot: Suzy Birstein with Moon lights up the night... and You can tell at a glance.
Photo by Cindy Goodman.*

boy-god, this time the young King Tut of Egyptian historical fame, takes a bolder stance. Wide slabs of clay on either side of his head, formed by the back of Ganesha's elephant ears, become the blue-and-yellow striped regal headwear of his day. King Tut, too, has one hand open in a receptive pose, open before the rusty armour plates on his chest.

Perhaps the most "classically" Greek of the Muse series is "Moon lights up the night...", a sculpture built atop, and inspired by, the four women in the Minoan Crete style that form the column base, dressed in classical draped togas, bedecked by roses that evoke the lushness of the Mediterranean. Again, the hues of the column carry through to the sculpture atop, which has not only front-and-back images but also a startling gold African Cote d'Ivoire style Goro mask on the shoulder of a white-faced Caryatid-style figure. She has glamorous Cleopatra-style eyes painted over the white-glazed clay face, with ruby lips and rosy-purple cheeks. White columns on her torso, just below her gleaming gold breasts, reference the Parthenon and on her head is a purple vessel. All the Greek goddesses on this side of the piece are balanced by the more masculine gold-painted face on the reverse, with the mustache, torso and curious face that either evokes a golden Greek-influenced Buddha with closed-eyes and a bundle of braids on either side of her face; or is she a drowned figure from lost Atlantis?

This dizzying synthesis of eras, cultures and mythologies is all entirely intended and indeed, celebrated by Birstein. Her visual eye finds echoing references in images from all eras and all cultures. She works with the metaphors that have moved artists for centuries, researching their meanings deeply but also instinctively embracing the figure, the colour, the line and the presentation of its surface image that attracts her eye and makes her yearn to recreate the juxtaposed icons and images from a host of cultures and eras.

It is her openness to diverse cultural imagery, that allows Birstein to accept the influences of Picasso, Modigliani, Beatrice Woods, Frida Kahlo or even Busby Berkeley or Carmen Miranda. Through her willingness to incorporate the meaningful icons of other cultures, such as masks and ceremonial figures, her ceramic sculpture achieves a deeper social and spiritual meaning. She explains "Nothing and nobody is original, except in how we perceive everything around us -- really I want to be part of everything, of all cultures, and to have them be a part of me."

Birstein intends her ceramic sculpture to combine disparate influences in a harmonious way, and firmly believes the world would be a better place if we all admired and wanted to experience other cultures. Her drive is to create startlingly beautiful sculpture, with all the mythological and iconic influences that she has gleaned in her own experience and from her ongoing passionate self-directed study of world art history. Yet the process of creation for her is not one with a pre-determined goal. "I don't start out thinking what to create; as I work I'm constantly discovering what is coming out of the clay, with my hands, it's like being in an altered state," notes Birstein. "I feel a strong connection through the creative process to the art of other times and places; I feel connected to all those other artists from times past." Ceramic sculpture, as her chosen medium, assists that process: "Clay is primal, it's of the earth, it's fire and it's hollow like air, and wind." For Suzy Birstein, the return to her spiritual origins as an artist in the idyllic Greek islands, will continue to inspire new work while allowing her to share the gift of complex and varied techniques with other artists, in the land that likely first gave birth to the sculptural arts.



The Artist's Signature.

Suzanne Fournier is a Vancouver-based journalist and author who is also a student of ceramics. Suzy Birstein's work is represented by Jonathon Bancroft-Snell Gallery in London, Canada. (www.suzybirstein.com) Photos of sculpture by Kenji Ngai.