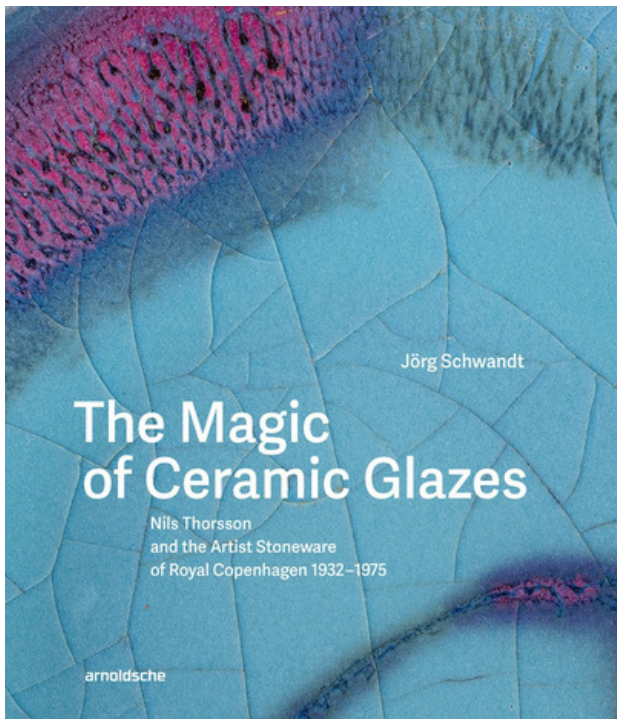
Reviews



The Magic of Ceramic Glazes: Nils Thorsson and the Artist Stoneware of Royal Copenhagen 1932–1975

Jörg Schwandt
Arnoldsche, 2025, hb £40.60

Published in August 2025 to accompany the exhibition *Die Magie der Glasur: Kunstkeramik aus Dänemark, 1910–1980* at the Bröhan Museum, Berlin's state museum for Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Functionalism, this 200-page volume is a feast for the eyes. As such, it has already achieved its first aim.

Author, collector, and ceramics expert Jörg Schwandt states in the preface that, 'the book is an invitation. Its aim is to awaken an interest in classic glazes, [...] it wishes to open everyone's eyes to the capability of certain glazes'. Rather than approaching Royal Copen hagen's celebrated stoneware production through the familiar lenses of design history, biography, or ceramic technology, Schwandt focuses on the visual and tactile qualities of high-fired glazed surfaces themselves. The result is a book that is at once scholarly, connoisseurial, and deeply personal. The publication draws on the author's more than 50 years of experience collecting and studying Danish artist stoneware, offering readers an unusually informed perspective on one of the most accomplished ceramic workshops of the 20th century.

The book centres on the work of Nils Thorsson (1898–1975), artistic director of Royal Copenhagen's stoneware studio and one of the most influential figures in modern Danish ceramics. Drawing on a rich selection of objects produced between the 1930s and the 1970s,

Schwandt explores the workshop's engagement with high-fired stoneware and its adaptation of East Asian, particularly Chinese, ceramic traditions. Rather than presenting these works primarily as design objects, he examines them as vehicles for the display of glaze effects, highlighting the extraordinary depth, luminosity, and material complexity.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its methodological originality. The book is structured in a way that draws the reader in and satisfies that curiosity with- out becoming overwhelming. Concise essays provide introductions to manu- facturing processes, sources of inspira-tion, and the development of the Royal Copenhagen stoneware department under Nils Thorsson. Individual terms are highlighted in bold or in italics to guide the reader through the essays, and Schwandt deliberately avoids the technical language and chemical formulas that often dominate ceramic literature. The catalogue part is organised by glaze types, moving from celadon and temmoku to iron brown, and concluding with Nils Thorsson's 'Jungle' series of the 1930s.

The individual entries are richly illustrated, and it is here that the publication truly comes into its own. Mesmerising close-up photographs reveal subtleties often invisible in conventional reproductions. The book enables something the exhibition itself cannot: sustained, intimate close looking from multiple angles, encouraging comparisons between objects that approach the experience of handling them in person. The discussion of glaze as something that transcends simple surface decoration and becomes inseparable from the ceramic body is especially persuasive.

This publication is a joy for those who are already interested in 20th-century ceramics and glazes and an exciting entry point for those to whom the world of ceramic glazes always felt too opaque to enter. At times, however, the emphasis on aesthetic appreciation comes at the expense of broader contextual discussion. Readers seeking extensive discussion of Royal Copenhagen's institutional history, production practices, or commercial strategies may find the treatment comparatively limited. Yet this narrowing of focus is also the book's greatest strength. Schwandt's concern is not to write a comprehensive history of the manufactory, but to teach readers how to look at glazes, and in this he succeeds admirably. Richly illustrated and thoughtfully structured, *The Magic of Ceramic Glazes* demonstrates that the surface of a ceramic object can be as compelling a subject of study as its form, maker, or historical context.

Rebecca Klarner