

# Yova's "Voice"

## The glowing beauty of Yova Raevska's ceramic artistry

*Article by Teodora Nikolova; photos by Elena Spassova*

One hundred years after the universal spark ignited at her birth in Troyan, Bulgaria, the ceramic works of Yova Raevska lit a joyful new fire in people across multiple generations, backgrounds and professions. A multitalented and diverse group came together in Sofia, Bulgaria, from different parts of the world to raise the curtain on the beauty of Yova's fragile-yet-enduring world, and the result is a unique and exhilarating exhibition.

Often, we perceive things that recur with a mysterious connection throughout our lives, and we struggle to explain them through the divine or attribute them to forces of nature. In Yova's case, the mysterious power that touched her was literally in the earth, because Yova Raevska had the gift of hearing "the voice of clay."

Raevska's prodigious ability to create her impressive, pure, poetic pieces – dancing gracefully through Balkan history, tradition and modernity, infused with artisanal warmth and artistic sensitivity – continues to transcend time despite her passing in 2000.

Her gift is mirrored today in the brilliant blue eyes of her granddaughter. Amy Gorin Chapman beams the same bright inner spark, inspiring others attracted by its glow. Surely, Amy inherited this ability from Yova, and it drove her to turn a serendipitous find from a summer project into a priceless

exhibition, a documentary (in production) and a book about her extraordinary grandmother.

Amy has lived most of her life an ocean away from Bulgaria. Her Bulgarian parents emigrated separately, then met and married in America, where they brought Amy into the world. After years spent in America at university, in professional life, getting married, and starting a family (husband Jeff and two children), in 2016 Amy found herself living as a European in the Netherlands, happy to be closer. Closer to what? Closer to the Bulgarian earth from which her grandmother, with whom she always felt a strong connection, created her ceramic art.

Clearly, the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter is mysteriously strong, because shortly before the 100th anniversary of Yova's birth, Amy made an amazing discovery in the attic of her grandmother's old house in Dragalevtsi, Bulgaria. That summer, Amy came to Sofia with a friend to prepare the house for sale. There, hidden in dark corners, layered in dust and delicate spider webs, sat the beautiful ceramic works packed away years before.

*"I knew the house was filled with paintings by my dad, my grandfather's many miniatures and some studies and works painted by my great-grandfather. And I was aware of Yova's beautiful ceramic creations but did not expect to find them in such quantity – nor did I anticipate their scale and power. Once again brought to the light of day, it seemed as though they took in a deep breath, exhaled, then spoke clearly to me across the years, saying 'Hello, and thank you for coming.'"*

**Amy's passion and energy spread to her family, her friends, ceramics history specialists, restorers, artists, designers, and photographers.**

Twenty years after Yova's last large exhibition, a community of devotees created an event that showcases Yova's body of work, which is still magnetically and modernly revealing: **“The Voice of Clay.”** In the exhibition, you might notice the influence of late-secession ornamentation or rediscover Byzantine mosaics in the wonderful tondo of The Last Supper. You might follow the burnished lines of the engravings or the intriguing plastic shapes and unusual silhouettes of the Negra series. You might admire the simplicity and purity of her Troyan vessels or the bold interpretations she used to test the “rules” of Tarnovo's graffiti technique. Or you might recognize the urban scene in "Dog Walker" or feel the strength of the "Bolyari" vases, mesmerized by the depth of their green and blue hues. Whatever path you take, you will surely experience the enchantment of Yova.

A walking encyclopedia of archaic ceramics and ancient techniques, Yova expressed this knowledge through her own artistic personality – laconic, pure, poetic, and richly emotional. During a period in Bulgarian history that sought to break the natural ties of things to impose new institutional and ideological order, Raevska was able to rise above ideology with the subtle-yet-strong earthly power of the modern artist.

The thoughtfully curated ceramic works presented in “The Voice of Clay” – along with a full-color companion catalog that includes research and text offered by art critic Violeta Vasilchina – wonderfully illuminate the legacy left by Yova Raevska, presenting clear evidence that, 100 years later, her spark still burns bright. On display at the National Ethnographic Museum until 27 January, 2019.