

A Survey of Contemporary Ceramics in California

Lee Middleman

California has a rich history of ceramic making. The indigenous Native Americans have produced low-fired ceramics for centuries, followed by the Spanish colonizers and their American successors. The San Francisco Bay Area became the center for the pottery industry in California during the nineteenth century when a strong Asian influence was incorporated. Today's contemporary ceramics in California developed from these traditions under tremendous influences from both Asia and Europe during the twentieth century.

This survey focuses on the current California "studio artists" working in functional and sculptural ceramics. These artists work singly or in small group studios. Factory and high production pottery will not be discussed.

This is my perspective of the current state of contemporary ceramics. I will begin with discussions of the economic and financial situations of ceramic artists and then focus on their individual styles and development.

Economics Of Ceramic Arts

California ceramics survive even in the current economic downturn. Many colleges and universities in California have strong ceramics departments that cater to a wide range of students. From young people desiring a career in art to retired workers seeking a new way to express themselves, students attend classes for beginner to advanced in pottery and sculpture. Community centers and private studios also offer instruction. Many of these facilities provide opportunities to fire in electric and gas and sometimes even wood-firing kilns. Students learn pit-firing, American Raku, salt, and high-firing.

Ceramic shows and exhibitions continue to draw strong attention. Many cities now sponsor street fairs and festivals where independent artists sell their work. These events help new or part-time artists to gain exposure and learn the art of displaying and selling. However, these fairs are not the preferred venues for a more established artist. With the number of galleries offering ceramics declining, more and more ceramic artists are looking for ways to introduce collectors to their work.

Ceramic artists often supplement their income by teaching privately in their studios or at local schools. Others have turned to graphic design and website design for additional income. Artists' spouses or partners often provide the needed supplemental income.

Many artists share studio space or live in less expensive communities. Lifestyle is sacrificed for dedication to their art.

In addition to participating in festival shows and gallery exhibitions, ceramic artists often hold "open studios" where the public is invited to visit the working studio and view pieces on display. Americans enjoy meeting the artist in his creative environment and learning about the process. This intimate setting can result in significant sales. A variety of retail shops, not galleries, now carry ceramic art for sale. These include gift, picture-framing, and museum shops. Internet sales have become an important avenue for some ceramists. They utilize both individual websites and commercial websites.

A large population of hobbyists and part-time ceramic artists help to support local clay and glaze

manufactures and retail ceramic stores. For example, in the San Francisco area there are four companies that produce commercial and custom clay bodies. These very high quality clay bodies offer a wide range of texture, color, and firing temperatures. These retail ceramic stores also hold training classes and workshops.

Ceramic Styles – Studio Artists

Reviewing the work of current ceramic artists in California, three styles are evident. I have defined them as: functional ceramics, decorative functional ceramics, and sculptural ceramics. I will evaluate each of these styles and illustrate them with examples.

Functional Ceramics:

Functional ware adds uniqueness and style to the dinner table and home. Taking inspiration from many world traditions and earlier California traditions, these artists create work that is unique. It is often a combination of styles and new directions. The freedom of the independent potter comes through and stands strong against the high production work of factories. Functional ceramics are typically produced in both gas and electric kilns fired from cone five to ten. Some wood-fired and salt-fired ware is also produced. California potteries became very active in the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1930s, functional potteries developed a solid-color revolution in which remarkable functional shapes were finished in bold colors, providing an alternative to traditional white dinnerware. In Sausalito, California, Edith Heath (1911 - 2005) developed a distinctive line of dish-ware that particularly influenced this current style.

Functional Ceramics



Edith Heath



Jan Schachter

Martha Kcan



Bob Pool



Janicc Rowell



Brent Jcjhnsn

Decorative Functional Ceramics:

I use this term when the function of a piece is much less important than the artist's statement, design, or features in the piece. This is my definition; it is best explained by the contemporary examples I have included later in this paper. In many cases, the work may not be truly functional. Examples include teapots that do not pour well, vases with very narrow openings, extremely large or small designs and decorations that interfere with use. An early artist to direct his work in this style is Harrison McIntosh (1914-) who has worked as a studio potter in Claremont, California, since the 1950s. His elegant, highly refined sgraffito and mishima bowls, vases, plates and bottles are collected as more than functional pieces. Marguerite Wildenhain (1896-1985) developed her unique style of decorative functional pottery after coming to California from France. A classic textural style and sgraffito are evident in her forms. She trained many recognized ceramic artists at Pond Farm in Guerneville, north of San Francisco. James Lovera (1920 -) took masterfully thrown bottles and bowls and made them distinctive art by using unusual textured glazes and brilliant colors.

Decorative Functional Ceramics



Harrison McIntosh



Erin McGuinness



Michael Adcock



Lee Middleman



Andrea Fabrega

Sculptural Ceramics:

Although influenced by many techniques in Europe and Asia, contemporary California sculptural ceramics explore new directions. California ceramists have had the freedom to experiment with materials, ideas and themes. Sold as art, these ceramics can command significantly higher prices than functional ceramics. Galleries in New York, Boston and other the East Coast cities are particularly excellent venues for this work.

This style of work developed rapidly after World War II, when young soldiers returning home took advantage of the “GI Bill” and enrolled in ceramic art courses at colleges in California. With a new sense of freedom, they explored art with non-traditional approaches. Although there are many early contributors to this style, only a few can be covered here. At the University of California Davis, Robert Arneson (1930–1992) led the development of the funk ceramics movement. He and his students approached ceramics with humor and new subjects. Peter Voulkos (1924–2002), who is known for his abstract expressionist ceramic sculptures, founded the ceramic arts department at the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Originally producing dinnerware, Voulkos turned to creating freely formed, energetic sculptures. He is credited with crossing “the traditional divide between ceramic crafts and fine art.” After serving as a medic in World War II, Paul Soldner (1921–) studied under Voulkos and later taught at Scripps College. As he developed his sculptural style, he designed novel ceramic equipment and is known as the father of American Raku firing.

Sculptural Ceramics



Robert Arneson



Paul Soldner



Peter Voulkos



Cheryl Tall



Anne Goldman



Fred yokel



Janc Grimm

Bardara Prodaniuk

Examples of California Contemporary Ceramic Styles

These images reflect current work in these three styles. Many of the artists whose work is shown here are members of the Association of Ceramic and Glass Artists of California. Likely the largest ceramic artists association in the United States, the association has over 500 (85% working in clay) members, about half of which are full-time, juried artists. It is believed to be the oldest, continuous ceramic artists association in the United States.

The first example(s) in each style are from the pioneer artists mentioned above. Their names are in bold.