



Les Flammes

L'Âge de la céramique
15 octobre 2021 – 6 février 2022

MM MUSÉE
D'ART MODERNE
DE PARIS



Ron Nagle, *Captive Morgan*, 2012. Faïence, émail, polyuréthane catalysé et résine époxy, H. 13,3 cm × L. 14,6 × l. 14,6 cm.
Collection particulière © Ron Nagle, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



#ExpoLesFlammes

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The Flames The Age of Ceramics

15 October 2021 - 6 February 2022



Gathering over 350 pieces dating from the Neolithic to the present day, the exhibition *The Flames: The Age of Ceramics* is an immersive exploration of the medium, a fresh, fruitful dialogue between objects from different periods and contexts that brings to light influences as well as coincidences.

An inexhaustible source of inspiration and expression for craftsmen, artists and designers, ceramics – from the Greek *keramos*, meaning "clay" – is one of humanity's earliest cultural manifestations, used since prehistoric times to make idols, constructions and food containers.

The exhibition presents ceramics by modern and contemporary artists and ceramicists, among them Jean Carriès, Georg Ohr, Paul Gauguin, Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach, Marcel Duchamp, Meret Oppenheim, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Raoul Dufy, Lucio Fontana, Beatrice Wood, Ken Price, Ron Nagle, Cindy Sherman, Judy Chicago, Miquel Barceló, Jean Girel, Simone Leigh, Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel, Theaster Gates, Rebecca Warren, Mai Thu Perret, Clare Twomey, Takuro Kuwata, Natsuko Uchino, Sandra Berrebi (fragrance: Laurent-David Garnier); historical works by Bernard Palissy, Marie Talbot, Dave the Potter and reknown ceramic manufactories; anonymous pieces such as prehistoric Venus figures, ancient Greek vases, and vernacular pottery; and non-European items including Nok pottery, Mochica jars, Tang figures, Iranian reticuled piece and Japanese raku wares.

The exhibition's transhistorical approach focuses on ceramics as inherently related to art and, more broadly, to humankind. Long underestimated among the arts, the medium can be both functional and sculptural, and as such compels us to rethink existing categories and traditional hierarchies. In its mingling of art, craft and design, *The Flames* explores not only ceramics' relationship to the decorative, the culinary and the performative, but also its scope of application in the fields of medicine, aeronautics and ecology.

PRESS RELEASE

Museum Director
Fabrice Hergott

Curator
Anne Dressen assisted by
Margot Nguyen

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Ron Nagle, *Captive Morgan*, 2012
© Ron Nagle, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Three themes structure this exhibition: **techniques** (clays and firing, shapes, decoration); **uses** (functional, sculptural, ritual); and **messages** (trompe-l'oeil, anti-classical, political). Also considered are pieces that deviate from the rules, reinvent codes and challenge procedures, even if the recipes infused with alchemy have hardly changed throughout history.

Like the Phoenix constantly reborn from its ashes, ceramics exerts an increasing yet cyclical fascination linked to the technical unpredictability of the firing and the kiln that can never be completely mastered. Since the late 19th century, the tactility and roughness that have always driven craftsmen have exercised a powerful pull on artists too, together with numerous amateurs and collectors.

Fire, the inspiration for the exhibition's title, is a technical resource sparking not only precise properties and functions, but also specific counter-aesthetics and an imaginative richness sometimes verging on the radically utopian. In many respects ceramics is an art of resistance. The recognition of a "Ceramic Age" – one, strangely enough, never previously acknowledged – seems today more obvious than ever.

The Flames can be seen as the third chapter in a series of exhibitions, coming in the wake of *Decorum* (on tapestry) and *Medusa* (on jewellery) at the Musée d'Art Moderne in 2013 and 2017 and their rethinking of the definitions of art. It is built around loans from numerous renowned institutions and collections, both public (Sèvres Manufacture and National Museum, Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseille, the Louvre, the Arizona State University Museum, etc.) and private; as well as collaboration with French and international academics and theoreticians, including the three guest specialists Frédéric Bodet, Thomas Golsenne and Stéphanie Le Follic-Hadida.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue gathering texts by specialists and artists; an international symposium on the theme *Ceramics and Politics*, jointly organised by the Society of Friends of the Sèvres National Museum and the Paris Museum of Decorative Arts, at the National Institute of Art History (INHA) in Paris in January 2022; a participative collecting project; a program of workshops and demonstrations; and a pedagogical mobile and miniaturized version of the show for people unable to attend.

Worth noting: as a gesture of respect for the Earth – the primary material for this exhibition – the furniture specially designed by the Cros/Patras agency in collaboration with Natsuko Uchino is more than 50% recycled and recyclable.

In addition, the exhibition will find an echo in a selection of ceramic works belonging to the museum and on display within the permanent collection.

Visitor information

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris 11
Avenue du Président Wilson
75116 Paris
Tel. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Open Tuesday – Sunday
10 am – 6 pm

Open late: Thursday until 10 pm

Admission

Full rate: 11€
Concessions: 9€

Cultural activities

Information and bookings
Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

Press officer

Maud Ohana
maud.ohana@paris.fr

List of artists

*Deceased artists

**Women artists

***Deceased women artists

Caroline Achaintre, *Mikhail M. Adamovich, Marc Alberghina, Victor Anicet, **Polly Apfelbaum, *Josep Llorens i Artigas, *Robert Arneson, Kader Attia, **Sylvie Auvray, **Laetitia Badaut-Haussmann, Miquel Barceló, Philippe Barde, **Anne Barrès, Frédéric Bauchet, *Pierre Bayle, *Vanessa Bell and *Duncan Grant, **Lynda Benglis, *Paul-Ami Bonifas, **Sandra Berrebi (fragrance: Laurent-David Garnier *Paul Beyer, *Norbert Bézard, Florian Bézu, **Katinka Bock, Philippe Bonnier, Emmanuel Boos, *Louis-Marcel Botinelly, *André Borderie, **Alison Britton, *Jerry Brown, Roger Brown, Seyni Awa Camara, *Guidette Carbonell, *Jean Carriès, *Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Marc-Camille Chaimowicz, *Pol Chambost, Claude Champy, *Ernest Chaplet, ***Martine Damas, **Judy Chicago, *Giorgio de Chirico, Morgan Courtois, **Liz Craft, Johan Creten, Roberto Cuoghi, *Salvador Dali, *Pierre-Adrien Dalpayrat, ***Anne Dangar, *Honoré Daumier, **Claire Debril, *Théodore Deck, *Emile Decoeur, ***Francine Del Pierre, *Auguste Delaherche, Richard Dewar, Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel, *Erik Dietman, *David Drake (Dave the Potter), *Taxile Doat, *Marcel Duchamp, *Raoul Dufy, **Nathalie du Pasquier, Florent Dubois, *Marcel Dupont, **Mimosa Echard, Didier Faustino, *Paul Gauguin, **Nicole Giroud, *Walter Gropius, Matias Faldbakken, **Simone Fattal, *Hassan Fathy, Harun Farocki, Sharif Farrag, ***Gisèle Favre-Pinsard (Collectif les 4 Potiers), *Robert Filliou, *Wayne Fischer, *Peter Fischli and *David Weiss, *Claire Fontaine, *Lucio Fontana, ***Fance Franck, *William Friend de *Morgan and *William Morris, ***Viola Frey, **Laureline Galliot, **Hélène Garache, **Vidya Gastaldon, Theaster Gates, *David Gilhooly, Jean Girel, General Idea, **Nicki Green, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze, **Dorothy Iannone, *Shoji Hamada, *Keith Haring, Yasuo Hayashi, Roger Herman, *Michel and ***Andrée Hirlet, *Georges Hoentschel, Christian Holstad, *Raymond Isidore, Cameron Jamie, *Georges Jeanclos, *Elisabeth Joulia, *Georges Jouve, *Johann Joachim Kändler, *Wilhelm Kåge, *Kawai Kanjiro, ***Karen Karnes, Jacques Kaufmann, Yagi Kazuo, *Raku Kichizaemon XI Keinyū, *Per Kirkeby, Aaron King, ***Anne Kjaersgaard, Joseph Kosuth, *Kiki Kogelnik, **Joyce Kozloff, Daniel Kruger, ***Beate Kuhn, Takuro Kuwata, Torbjørn Kvasbø, Cameron Jamie, *Jean-Jacques Lagrenée le Jeune, **Olga et **Martha Nieuwenhuys and *Asger Jorn, *Fernand Léger, *Stig Lindberg, **Lucile Littot, Patrick Loughran, *Tyra ***Carolina Lundgren, Ianis Lallemand, Lamarche Ovize, **Liz Larner, **Louise Lawler, Oyekan Lawson, *Bernard Leach, **Simone Leigh, *Emile Lenoble, ***Jacqueline and *Jean Lerat, ***Margrit Linck, *Pierre Loti, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy, ***Jeanne Malivel, ***Jeanne Mammen, *Enzo Mari, *Walter de Maria, Ichino Masahiko, Tony Marsh, Lou Masduraud, *Henri Matisse, Nick Mauss, ***Maria Poveka Martinez, *Félix Massoul, *Jean Mayodon, **Kristin McKirdy, **Caroll McNicoll, **Kimiyo Mishima, *Fausto Melotti, Ana Mendieta, *André Metthey, ***Marisa Merz, Richard Milette, *Joan Miro, *Kenji Mizoguchi, **Claudine Monchaussé, Daniel de Montmollin, *Giorgio Morandi, **Ursula Morley Price, *Bruno Munari, **Setsuko Nagasawa, Ron Nagle, **Ruby Neri, **Kate Newby, *Isamu Noguchi, Richard Notkin, Navid Nuur, **Cécile Noguès, **Magdalena Odundo, *George Ohr, **Yoko Ono, Luigi Ontani, ***Meret Oppenheim, Hamed Oudderzane and Mohammed Oudderzane, *Bernard Palissy, Présence Panchounette, **Brigitte Pénicaud, **Mai-Thu Perret, Grayson Perry, Susan Peterson, Françoise Pétrovitch, Gio Ponti, Pablo Picasso, Ken Price, Anton Prinner, Françoise Quardon, Michael Rakowitz, ***Suzanne Ramié, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, ***Lucie Rie, *Auguste Rodin, **Carissa Rodriguez, Clément Rodzielski, *Georges Rouault, Hervé Rousseau, Sterling Ruby, Ed Ruscha, **Elsa Sahal, ***Niki de Saint-Phalle, **Bettina Samson, *Alexandre Sandier, *Maurice Louis Savin, Adrian Saxe, ***Valentine Schlegel, *Sebastien, **Arlène Shechet, Thomas Schütte, *Georges Serré, **Cindy Sherman, Peter Shire, José Sierra, Alev Ebüzziya Siesbye, **Bente Skjøttgaard, Richard Slee, **Carolein Smit, *Ettore Sottsass, *Séraphin Soudbinine, **Magdalena Suarez, Per B. Sundberg, ***Alina Szapocznikow, ***Vera Székely, ***Marie Talbot, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Ehren Tool, Elmar Trenkwalder, **Rosemarie Trockel, **Clare Twomey, **Natsuko Uchino, *Claude Varlan, ***Marie Vassilieff, **Csaba Vayarozen, **Anne Verdier, *José Vermeersch, Jean-Luc Verna, Alain Vernis, **Betony Vernon, Camille Viot, *Maurice de Vlaminck, Peter Voulkos, *Édouard Vuillard, Edmund de Waal, **Rebecca Warren, Nick Weddell, *Vally Wieselthier, ***Marguerite Wildenhain, Jesse Wine, Michel Wohlfahrt, ***Beatrice Wood, ***Betty Woodman, Trevor Yeung...

Exhibition itinerary



Jean-Jacques Lagrenée le Jeune, Louis-Simon Boizot et la Manufacture de Sèvres, pour la laiterie de Rambouillet
Jatte téton dit "bol sein" et son trépied, 1787-1788
Porcelaine tendre (bol) et dure (trépied)
H. 16 cm x L. 13,4 cm x l. 12,2 cm
Sèvres - Manufacture et Musée nationaux
© RMN-Grand Palais / Sèvres-manufacture et muséonations / Martine Beck-Coppola



Lucio Fontana
Concept spatial, vers 1955
Terre cuite
D. 50 cm
Collection Larock-Granoff, Paris
© ADAGP, Paris 2021



Jean Girel
Bol, 2018
Grès émaillé (tenmoku)
H. 6,7 cm x D. 12,5 cm
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris
Don T. K. Ngiem, 2019

I. Techniques

The question of the mastery of firing and of materials, crucial for the ceramics process, often divides artists and craftspersons. Commonly addressed in museums dedicated to ceramics, it is rarely considered in museums of modern art. This exhibition chose to deal with techniques by presenting works and objects from a variety of contexts, rather than fragments or pedagogical artefacts.

According to the idea that "to see is to understand" (Paul Éluard), the eye of the visitor is invited to familiarize itself with the textures and the finishes of the different materials. As the visit progresses, more obvious links become apparent between the choices of the types of clay and their firing methods, resulting in effects (such as vitrification and waterproofing) corresponding to specific uses.

The objects of this first section are initially arranged according to clays and firing techniques (unfired clay, terracotta, earthenware, stoneware, porcelain). They are then classified according to the way their shapes have been fashioned (modelling, clay coiling, wheel-throwing, moulding, soaking), and finally according to types of decorations, applied in the material or on its surface (via scraping or impressions, glazing, or transfers).

Even if the ceramics process is eminently technical, it nevertheless remains largely uncontrollable: a dimension that some artists choose to exploit, taking advantage of accidents.

1. Clays and firings

The generic term *ceramics* designates all objects made of clay that have undergone an irreversible physicochemical transformation.

Pottery was a major technological invention that involved the taming of fire; although it is objectively as important as the use of flints or the invention of hunting weapons, it remains largely absent from classical prehistorical interpretations.

Over time, along with the mastery of temperatures and the diversification of ceramic techniques, several effects have been created. According to the type of clay and the firing temperature (from unfired clay, simply dried in ambient temperature, to porcelain fired at up to 1400° C), the results vary significantly.



Anonyme
(site de Fort Harrouard, Sorel-Mousson, France)
Statuette féminine, néolithique moyen
Terre cuite modelée
H. 13,8 cm x L. 7,8 cm x l. 1,5 cm
Musée d'Archéologie Nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye
© RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris) / Michel Urtado

2. Kilns, firings and tools

There are several types of kilns: wood-fired, gas, coal, electric, and *raku*. Firing is carried out in an *oxidising* atmosphere (in which there is an excess of oxygen) or in a *reduction* atmosphere (causing the flame to seek the missing oxygen in the very material of the clay and the glaze, thus changing their appearance).

Whatever the kiln, each firing follows a *curve*: heating, *quartz inversion* or irreversible *melting point*, which varies depending on the clay, cooling. A ceramic piece may require one or several firings (at decreasing temperatures) depending on the clay and the complexity of its decoration. All ceramics undergo *shrinkage* during the drying and firing processes, depending on the clay (from 5 % up to 20 % of the initial volume).

3. Shapes

There are different ways of fashioning a clay shape: modelling, casing, clay coiling, 3D printing, wheelthrowing, moulding, soaking, by hand or assisted by machines, tools or more or less sophisticated props. Water is one of the essential elements for fashioning. Depending on their plasticity, clays lend themselves better to some types of fashioning than to others.

Slip is a mixture of clay diluted with water. Essential to moulding techniques, it is also commonly used to join together different unfired clay elements. Some painters such as Giorgio de Chirico used clay (or wax) figurines alongside their paintings. Sculptors like Rodin employed clay as an intermediary stage, while other artists such as Fontana, or Warren, used it as an end in itself, taking advantage of the spontaneous and expressionist nature of the gesture.



Simone Fattal
Dionysos, 1999
Grès émaillé
H. 80 cm x L. 31 cm x l. 10 cm
Courtesy de l'artiste et de la Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris
Photo : © Aurélien Mole

4. Decorations and effects

Decorations refer to surface effects that make pieces more impermeable, more solid, or ornament them. The decoration may consist of texture effects in the clay itself, or on its surface, through the simple colouring of the fired clay, or a mixture of two clay bodies called *neriage*.

Other decorations are associated with firing:

- *smoking* blackens the piece on chosen areas (as is the case with *raku* firing); the flames can also lick the naked clay in wood firing ;
- decoration with *resists*, with wax, glaze, or a stencil ;
- glazes may retract during the firing; for instance, *tenmoku* glazes evoke a hare's fur, an oil stain, tortoiseshell, or the vault of heaven (*yohen*) ;
- *lustre*, first used in Persia and Mesopotamia in the 9th century, is an iridescent metal layer on the surface of a glaze, due to an extreme state of reduction in the metals.

In factories, *decoration* refers specifically to the paint—applied freehand, with the cloisonné method, with a *pouncing pattern* (a sort of stencil)—or reliefs on the ground.



Anonyme (Jingdezhen, Chine)
Pot à pinceaux (Pitong), dynastie Qing (1644-1911),
fin 18e ou 19e siècle
Porcelaine, émaux soufflés
H. 12 cm x D. 10 cm
Musée national des Arts asiatiques - Guimet, Paris
Ancienne collection Emile Guimet, œuvre exposée au
pavillon chinois de l'Exposition Universelle de 1900 ©
RMN-Grand Palais (MNAAG, Paris) / Michel Urtado

II. Uses

The second section of the exhibition deals with the cultural history of ceramics, whose uses vary according to epochs and contexts. Indeed, ceramics can be utilitarian, artistic or ritual, or even all three at the same time.

In the West, ceramics is often characterized by its usefulness, in opposition to artworks, supposedly non-functional. However, the works on display in this section show that the artistic value of a piece is not necessarily connected to its uselessness. In Japan, the dividing line between function and craft is not so clear-cut. The rustic aesthetic, accessible to all, is highly valued. According to the philosopher Sōetsu Yanagi, “apart from use there is no beauty of craft”.

Even before the advent of design, several modern artists—especially in Europe—were also seduced by functionalism and devoted themselves to creating useful forms. Thus, from the late 19th century on, ceramics appeared to be the medium that made it possible to introduce art into life. Today, it is an integral part of the language of contemporary art.

Far from being merely material, ceramic objects also convey cultural, or even ritual, choices. Testifying to a relationship with the invisible, they operate between transcendence and resilience.

This section explores the various areas of application of ceramics – culinary, architectural and medical, decorative and sculptural, as well as religious.

It also gives rise to dialogues that testify to concrete influences (with non-Western art or folk art, for example) and brings to light more unintentional but nevertheless striking formal coincidences.

1.Functional

If it is sometimes difficult for ceramics to be recognised in the West as an artform in its own right, it is because it is above all seen as functional. Its applications are numerous, and its uses varied. The properties of ceramics, which differ according to clays and firings, result in specific uses: a flowerpot is in terracotta because it must remain porous, while a vase is covered with glaze so as to be leakproof.

While its links with the domestic and culinary fields and the table arts are most evident, ceramics is also traditionally associated with architecture but also, historically, with writing, and, today, with health and aeronautics.

Use implies a risk of cracks and breakage, but also the possibility of mending



Marcel Duchamp et Ulf Linde
Fountain, 1963 (réplique de l'oeuvre de 1917)
Porcelaine, briques
H. 31,5 cm x L. 51 cm x l. 62,5 cm
© Collection Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Suède Donation des Amis du Moderna Museet, 1965
© Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2021



André Metthey et Henri Matisse
Vase, vers 1907
Faïence stannifère peinte
H. 24 cm x D. 20 cm
Musée d'Art moderne de Paris
Paris Musées, musée d'Art moderne, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image ville de Paris
© Succession Matisse 2021

2. Non-Functional, dysfunctional and sculptural

In the West, it is generally considered that an object that is utilitarian, or that requires too much technical skill, cannot be artistic. Ceramics has often been in the service of the table arts and decorative arts. Thus, from the 18th century, *centrepieces* placed in the middle of tables, bibelots in display cabinets, enormous ornamental vases (sometimes without an opening), or plates designed to hang on the wall started to appear.

While all of the works presented in this section refer allusively to a function, none is utilitarian. More or less openly *dysfunctional*, these pieces therefore tend to be sculptural.

Gauguin invented the expression *ceramic sculpture*. Today, ceramics has become a medium of choice for many artists and craftspersons, who ignore the disparagements and prejudices associated with this practice.



Ettore Sottsass et Anthologie Quartett
(Essen, Allemagne)
Théière Lapislazuli, 1987
Céramique modelée et émaillée en bleue
H. 20 cm x L. 20,1 cm x 18,5 cm
Centre national des arts plastiques, en dépôt au
Musée national Adrien Dubouché, Limoges
© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist, RMN-Grand
Palais / Georges Meguerditchian
© ADAGP, Paris 2021

3. Rituals

Ceramics objects are not only material objects. They also convey cultural choices and can express a link with the world of the invisible. Thus, in a large number of cultures there is a divinity of the Earth: for example, Earth Clay (or Mother Clay) in indigenous American tales, or the Hebraic myth of the Golem, the elaboration of a form out of clay to evoke the original act of creation.

For a long time, ceramics served religious, life or death rites; it continues to play a symbolic role in some religious, pagan, or even new-age rites of passage. This quasi-transcendental dimension can be associated with the metamorphic quality of ceramics that resists the ordeal of fire, becoming a symbol of possible rebirth and eternity.



Anonyme (Ocumicho, Mexique),
Arbre de vie, 2004.
Terre cuite, sculptée, peinte et modelée H. 101 cm / L. 74
cm / l.15,8 cm.
Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée,
Marseille
© RMN-Grand Palais (MuCEM) / image MuCEM.

III. Messages

The final section of this exhibition explores the question of (explicit) messages or (implicit) suggestions conveyed by ceramics. Beyond iconography, forms and textures are also meaningful.

The effects of imitation and trompe l'oeil enabled by ceramic techniques are dealt with in his section. It also presents anti-classical works that challenge the rules of traditional figurative sculpture with sloppy or baroque forms. Contemporary ceramics is often based on intentional accidents. Its sensual dimension—brought about by the handling of the materials, or perceivable in its very shape—contributes to its appeal.

Ceramics can have a reputation of being too decorative, considered to be apolitical or even conservative. Yet it is often the vehicle of avant-garde, alternative, and civically engaged positions. Its materiality and the socioeconomic and cultural realities of its production explain to a large extent this contradiction. Ceramics can thus express power as well as counter-power relations. It can induce a reaction, becoming an ally of environmental causes as much as of social, racial, feminist or queer revolutions. Beyond being the mere container, the ceramic object may turn out to be the content, an active and engaged agent.

Far from being a dead or inert subject, this art of making, which originates from the earth itself, readily goes beyond the object to touch on politics and the living.

1. Trompe l'œil: a confounding power

As a medium passing through epochs and borders, ceramics is also striking for its ability to simulate other materials, the mastery of glazes and firings having enabled it to compete with the most precious materials—bronze, jade, marble.

Thanks to ceramics, it is also possible to imitate different styles and periods. For centuries, Korean and Chinese porcelain particularly fascinated other cultures: the Japanese kidnapped Korean potters to discover their recipes; in the Near East and then in Europe, before the discovery of kaolin, earthenware and soft-paste porcelain were invented by trying to copy Chinese porcelain. While travelling the world in the early 20th century, the potters Bernard Leach and Shōji Hamada disclosed the foundations of the Japanese *mingei* aesthetics, whose influence is still felt in contemporary ceramics.



Simone Leigh
Village Series, 2020
Grès émaillé
H. 63 cm x D. 35,6 cm
Collection De Iorio, Trente, Italie
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, Gstaad, Suisse,
Londres, Royaume-Uni, Hong Kong, Chine, New York,
Los Angeles, États-Unis
© Simone Leigh Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth
Photo : Thomas Baratt

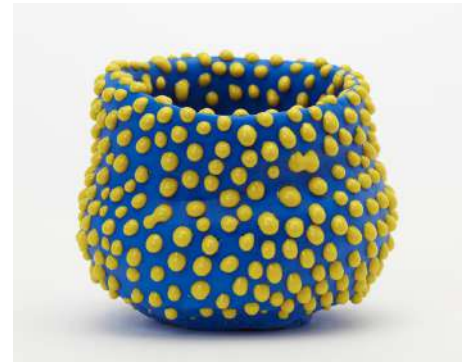


David Gillhooly
Dogwood, 1987
Faïence blanche émaillée
H.33,02 cm x L. 12,7 cm x l. 12,7 cm
© Collection of the Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe,
Etats-Unis; Gift of Stéphane Janssen
Photography by Craig Smith

2. Misshapen aesthetics

If ceramics has interested artists so much—see for example the collections of Auguste Rodin, Johan Creten or Takashi Murakami—it is less for the apparent simplicity in fashioning it than for the richness of the symptomatic forms and decorations emanating from its physical properties. Its propensity for expressionism and the misshapen appears as a counterpoint to the ideals of a triumphant and figurative classical sculpture.

In fact, firing accidents, almost inevitable at each stage, have given rise to effects that were eventually desired: fissures or *crazing*, droplets, crackles, or *flaking*... for the last ten years, “sloppy” ceramics has thus described a whole section of contemporary ceramics, also called *bad ceramics*, which gladly plays with an amateur or provocative aesthetics



Takuro Kuwata
Bowl, 2014
Porcelaine, émail
H. 13 cm x L. 13,5 cm x l. 14,5 cm
Courtesy de l'artiste et de Pierre Marie
Giraud, Bruxelles, Belgique
Photo : © Tadayuri Minamoto

3. Politics

If “saying is doing”, to borrow the philosopher John Austin’s famous phrase, it can also be inversely argued that “doing is saying”. Choosing ceramics can be a sign of political engagement, in terms of controlled and ecologically responsible production. As a medium for the dissemination of alternative beliefs, this practice has often been chosen by minority groups to affirm their identity and accompany social, racial, sexual, and ecological revolutions. Often associated with handmade crafts, it is nevertheless often mass-produced, and may serve reactionary and propagandistic purposes.

Moreover, we can no longer minimise the role played by new media within the contemporary ceramic community, used as mediums of communication and exchange often showing commitment and solidarity.



Marie Talbot
Fontaine de propreté, vers 1840
Pâte grésée, tournée et modelée, visage
estampé matricé, émail à la cendre
H. 66,4 × L. 21,5 × l. 26 cm
Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la
Méditerranée, Marseille
© RMN-Grand Palais (MUCEM) / Image RMN-GP
© Photographe : Christophe Fouin

Catalog

A WORK OF MANY HANDS

GLENN ADAMSON

Ceramics were the first assembly-line product. In Jingdezhen, China's storied center for the production of pottery and porcelain, a single vessel could pass through the hands of twenty or more people before being finished. Workers there specialized in processing the clay, throwing, trimming, decorating, glazing, loading the kiln, firing. Each of these tasks had its own skill set. And while we today might focus on the more "artistic" aspects of a pot, undoubtedly the most important job was that of the kiln-masters, for several weeks of work could be ruined if a firing failed. Even today, manufactories are lucky to achieve a 70% success rate, disposing of the rest as wasters or factory seconds. It is for good reason that traditional potters often make "kiln gods" – little figurines that watch over the firing from within.

This distribution of authorship – across the work of human hands, and perhaps even divine ones – is a basic fact of ceramics. And it flies in the face of certain expectations that are brought to the discipline. Perhaps because pots are implicitly anthropomorphic, or perhaps because clay preserves so well the literal imprint of its maker's touch, we tend to romanticize the relationship between maker and object. It is easy to mistake the moment when the form rises on the wheel, or when the brush touches the surface, as freighted with all the individualism that art and craft have to offer. In fact, intention flows through ceramics in complex currents, swirling around and through the objects in ways that may or may not leave an evident trace.

It is against this background that we should understand the artist-artisan collaborations that are such a vital part of modern ceramics. Again, this is hardly unique to the medium. In tapestry, glass, metal sculpture, and many other genres too, division of labor is commonplace. It is fair to say, however, that when a painter or sculptor works with a potter, they are relinquishing more than the usual degree of agency over the results – and this is precisely why artists of the caliber of Gauguin, Picasso and Miró gravitated to clay. It offered them an unpredictable situation, in which their own instincts, those of their technicians, and the will of the material all combined.

Occasionally, such collaborations have occurred on more or less even footing, as was the case when Gauguin first started working in ceramics with the help of the great Ernest Chaplet (though Gauguin soon learned enough to work on his own). More often, however, potters are brought to fame by their association with fine artists. This was the case with André Méthey, whose work with the leading Fauvists was presented at the Salon d'automne of 1907. Josep Llorens Artigas and Suzanne Ramié were similarly elevated to prominence by their work with Miró and Picasso, respectively.

If Picasso daubs a face on a pot handmade by someone else, is it really "his" work, in the same sense that *Demoiselles d'Avignon* is? Or should we understand that gesture as being on a continuum? Perhaps pots by painters should be seen as the inverse of depictions of ceramics by painters – the tabletop still lifes of Pierre Bonnard, for example, in which teapot and cup assume an animated individuality that is the equal of any hand-wrought vessel? In this case, the authorship of the objects (that particular teapot, that cup) is completely unknown. Yet they sang to Bonnard, and he passed the music on to us.

Somewhere on this same spectrum, we have the widely circulated concept of the "unknown craftsman," an idea coined by Sôetsu Yanagi, the theorist of the Japanese *mingei* movement, and popularized by his British ally, Bernard Leach. (As it happens, the phrase circulated in English primarily through Leach's very loose translation of Yanagi's writings, another blurring of authorship.) For Yanagi, the most inspirational ceramics were vernacular examples, fashioned by country potters to serve the needs of their community, with no pretensions toward art. He believed that it was precisely the natural, unforced quality of these objects that made them so worthwhile. For those who followed this line of thinking, even to mark a pot with signature or seal could seem misguided. One should instead aspire to the condition of anonymity.

It's a little ironic that ceramics, which for archaeologists are often the most reliable evidence of a past culture, are so elusive in our own. Most pots worth looking at bear a complex relationship to the conscious aims of the people who made them. From a standard art historical perspective, that might seem like a problem, though one can just easily argue that it lends this medium further relevance, in our complicatedly interdependent era. In any case, ceramics themselves stand apart serenely from such concerns. We humans, uncertain and striving, give them life; then they go their own way.

CENTERING AND THE PROBLEME OF RE-CENTERING

JENNI SORKIN

With unknown consciousness, I possessed in my grip
A magnificent mantelpiece, though its heart being chipped."
—Bob Dylan, *Ballad in Plain D* (1964)

In the folk singer Bob Dylan's love ballad, he never mentions the ceramic object itself, but its presence is palpable: a bittersweet metaphor for the imperfection of love, solidifying the notion of harm: the wounding that happens when we are a vessel for our own and others' emotional turmoil.

When M.C. Richards was writing *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* in the early 1960s, ceramics was simultaneously mainstream and fringe: mainstream, in that handmade coffee mugs were a dependable staple of folk music's coffeehouse culture that arose in New York City's Greenwich Village, where modest storefronts such as Bitter End, Café Wha?, Gaslight Poetry Café, and Gerde's Folk City became legendary sites of origin, where Joan Baez, the trio Peter, Paul, and Mary, Simon & Garfunkel, and yes, a young Bob Dylan, launched their careers. Yet ceramics, also a part of the folk revival, was also impossibly fringe, a distant afterthought, in that the people who produced such wares didn't actually live in New York, where urban fire protection laws made it difficult to build or fire a kiln, unless it had attained a special longevity, such as the Greenwich House Pottery, established as a settlement house aimed at providing services to immigrants in 1902. By the early 1960s, it was a local pottery workshop with an exhibition space, and a staff of well-regarded male artists, similar to the folk revival scene, in that men were lauded, while women performed the behind-the-scenes labor.

The early 1960s were still a holdover of the late 1950s: beatniks were the proto-hippies, and Richards herself could be described as a beatnik, leaving a teaching position at Black Mountain College for life on an artist-centered commune in Rockland County, New York, about an hour north of New York City, known as "The Land," where other avant-gardists, such as John Cage, Stan Vanderbeek, and her partner at the time, David Tudor, also lived. As I have written extensively, Black Mountain College (1933-1957) did not have ceramics for most of its brief history, owing to the hostility that Josef Albers felt for clay's pliability, which he condemned as the most "easily abused" material by beginning art students. Cage was never faculty at Black Mountain for more than two brief summer sessions, but Richards was an integral part of its renowned experimental pedagogy from 1945 to 1951. She left Black Mountain as it became an untenable situation: full of entwined personal and professional entanglements, as the entire faculty lived on campus together, as the college was failing financially.

Resettled on "The Land," a community she co-founded with architect Paul Williams, Richards produced ceramics, farmed, and wrote essays, poetry, and letters alongside a much more talented ceramist, Karen Karnes, who was less restless and more committed to the medium as a medium, and not as a metaphor. Karnes made flame-proof casseroles and sculptural vessels simultaneously, as many studio potters did to stay afloat, creating both functional and non-functional ceramics. Richards, on the other hand, was a latecomer to the medium, with a vested interest in mining ceramics toward experiential learning. Prior to taking up ceramics, Richards had been an English professor with a deep investment in directing, staging, and taking part in experimental theater productions, including the first designated "Happening," in modern art, *Theater Piece # 1*, by John Cage, in 1952. By this time, ceramics itself was already a performative medium. As I have written elsewhere, "To understand ceramics as a performative gesture made in real time and space is to witness an object-event." Through abstraction and an assertion of scale, the ceramic sculptor Peter Voukos reconfigured post-war ceramics. He was often photographed making oversized pots or sculptures shirtless, cigarette dangling from his mouth, forearms plunged in brown muck, reveling in the clay's viscosity. The photographic evidence of such performances offers him up as a Jackson Pollock of late modernist ceramics, with comparably greater longevity.

Ultimately, ceramics re-centered itself, owing to the hard and often unconscious work performed on behalf of the medium by Voukos, Richards, and many others, who, during the second half of the twentieth century, sought a place for its participation among the greater avant-garde strains of artistic production.

In the 21st, century, it is now-mainstreamed art form whose specific disciplinary history remains fringe, understudied, and largely forgotten in the wake of its intensive appropriation by other fields. That is, the contemporary playing field is not just the domain of studio-based ceramists. Rather, it is crowded and interdisciplinary, with designers, architects, and sculptors also seizing upon old and new technologies. Theirs is an unbridled enthusiasm for clay's plasticity, but with little appetite for its historical authenticity and context.

[...]

DISMANTLING THE PATRIARCHY ONE BRICKS AT A TIME: VOULKOS AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF CERAMICS AT UC BERKELEY

NICKI GREEN

I am the Brick. Well, in this case, I am the Soft Brick. You see, I am the Trans Woman who accepted the invitation to the Berkeley Ceramics Program with the understanding that I would access a recently updated facility. I entered this space knowing that changes were underway—and shifting layouts are a regular part of my world view, as temporary, non-static, but also shifting as liminality—liminal as identity. Let me be frank, I'm talking about Bricks here. Bricks like kiln bricks, but in my world, Bricks are also the trans women who don't pass, "a face like a brick" or "square brick shoulders." Often a slightly younger generation than mine, I am just outside these communities of heavily politicized trans folks, gender fluid, and disinterested in passing. Brick like "she got a brick to the back of the head" and "put a brick through that window!" I'm not quite one of those older, passing-obsessed transsexuals either. I kind of pass, and I'm the recipient of the legacies of the Queen's Vernacular and Gene Compton's Cafeteria Riot, and of tumblr. I am the Soft Brick.

Is passing a liminal state?

It was in the autumn of 2016, amidst the resonant September Berkeley heat, that the old Voulkos kiln was disassembled and brought out to the dumpster. I intercepted the pallet, ushering the elements into my studio, incredulous to how anyone could discard such history-laden materials. But all objects carry with them their histories, no? At what point does the sentimentalist become hoarder? Where do these two identities fissure? Where do they cohere? It was this dusty pallet of insulation, the instigators of his legacy sitting quietly, chalky and tired next to me, radiating the pain and pride of getting to be his tool that would inspire this ongoing nagging, and viscous series of reciprocal questions.

You, Bricks, have mostly sat untouched for 15 years, save for the sparse appreciation for your histories, you sit stacked as archival walls of that kiln, parched and exhausted, the char lines and drips of glaze only minimal reminders of the years spent gripping each other swelling and contracting, insulating these walk-in sized gas chambers bringing those enormous objects to life. You were created to absorb all the heat and violence necessary to cultivate those artworks into permanence. You were just doing your job, but were you complicit in his legacy? Voulkos rallied around him all the men he could find. You, Brick, witnessed the late nights, the smoking, drinking, and the studio talk. As the most porous material in the space, you witness and absorb the breadth of relationships in the studio. As the tool, that is your role and what you were created to do. Do you resent the way you stand idly, Brick?

Is porousness an active or static state of being?

All this talk of function and production reminds me of my undergrad, I was making ceramic dildos in my cluttered, curtained off studio that I called "The Pit" because I would pile collected materials on any surface I could find—crafty, or maybe just scarcity-issues, the studio has always been my refuge. My next-door studio mate was this high femme cis girl who kind of looked trans and would reference that false-legibility in casual conversation. "The hottest transvestite in school" she would inaccurately avow, confessing her fabrication later. She seemed to love the attention and exoticism that came with it, which drove me crazy because she got to pass as trans without the actual violence or agoraphobia that often comes with the persecuted body. She wasn't really a Brick, though she was playing Brick, and perhaps didn't know what a Brick was.

[...]

Related Activities



George E. Ohr
Sans titre, 1900
Grès, cuisson bois
H. 8,9 x L. 12,1 x D. 12,1 cm
The Museum of Everything, Londres, Royaume-Uni
© Courtesy of The Museum of Everything, Londres, Royaume-Uni

THE VISITORS' DISPLAY CASE

A participative and evolving project during The Flames exhibition, this space for collecting objects within the exhibition is the first experiment of its kind at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. Ceramics brought in by visitors, following a call for contributions on the museum website, will be presented for the duration of the exhibition.

For more information on how to drop off your object, visit: mam.paris.fr/collecteflammes

PEDAGOGICAL SUITCASE

In parallel with the exhibition, a miniature, mobile "suitcase" version will bring the exhibition and its subject matter outside of the museum walls and be available for workshops. The aim is to rethink educational approaches to broaden access to the exhibition and engage with audiences who are not always able to visit. It also permits exploration of educational and artistic resources beyond the duration of the exhibition. A project supported by the Fondation d'entreprise Hermès.

Produced in collaboration with Natsuko Uchino, Clovis Maillet and Antonia Carrara.

THE STUDIO

Conceived by MAGMA (Masters in Art with Geo-materials) of the École Supérieure of Art and Design TALM-Le Mans. Integrated within in the exhibition itself, this functional space is dedicated to practical and sensorial experiences and will be activated by the visitor services department of the MAM with workshops and demonstrations of the many uses and transformations of clay. The programme for this space is available in this brochure and on the museum website.

PODCASTS

Continue to explore ceramics with a series of podcasts by a range of guests who take a new look at this practice and its relationship with art and humankind. These podcasts are available for free on the museum's mobile app (iOS and Android), on the Paris Musées SoundCloud account.



Visitor information

MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

Postal address

11, Avenue du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris Tel. 01 53 67 40 00
www.mam.paris.fr

Public transport

- Metro: Alma-Marceau ou léna (line 9)
- Bus: 32 / 42 / 63 / 72 / 80 / 92
- Velib's bike stations : 4 rue de Longchamp ; 4 avenue Marceau ; place de la reine Astrid ; 45 avenue Marceau ou 3 avenue Bosquet
- Bike: Bicycle parking spaces are available in front of the museum entrance.
- RER C: Pont de l'Alma (line C)

Opening hours

- Tuesday-Sunday, 10am-6pm (last entry 5:15pm)
- Closed Monday and some public holidays

Admission

Full rate: 11 €
Reduced rate: 9 €
Free for under 18

Combined ticket for two exhibitions, *Anni et Josef Albers, L'art et la vie* and *The Flames*

Regular rate: 16 €
Reduced rate: 14 €

The exhibition is accessible to people with motor disabilities and reduce mobility.

No-queue tickets : www.mam.paris.fr

Wearing a mask is mandatory from the age of 11, hydro-alcoholic gel is provided, temperature is checked and the visitor will have to follow a direction of visit.

Reservation of a time-stamped ticket to access the exhibitions is mandatory www.billetterie-parismusees.paris.fr

In accordance with regulations, proof of vaccination must be presented at the museum entrance.

Press Officer

Maud Ohana
maud.ohana@paris.fr

Paris Musées

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