

# Northwest Modern

Revisiting the Annual Ceramic Exhibitions of 1950-64

## A moment captured.

It is a rare opportunity when one is able to envision what “the past” was like. A good historian knows that we are always looking back through a lens of today, imagining the past while subconsciously making assumptions on what we believe to be true, or “knowing what we now know.” Revisiting the *Annual Exhibitions of Northwest Ceramics*, a juried series that took place at the Oregon Ceramic Studio in Portland, between 1950-64, has been an experiment in looking back. The Studio (or OCS, now Museum of Contemporary Craft) organized these exhibitions in order to both stimulate the artists working in that medium and legitimize clay as an art form. Today, the artwork and archives that remain act as clear evidence of how the OCS played a part in the transition of how ceramics were perceived, capturing one of the most exciting periods of art history in the Western United States.<sup>1</sup>

In 1950, the volunteers of the Oregon Ceramic Studio launched the *First Annual Exhibition of Northwest Ceramics*, using a model set forth by the annual *Ceramic National Exhibitions* at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts (now Everson Museum of Art), New York. “Calls for Entries” were sent out to artists in selected Northwestern states, asking for work made within the last year to be entered into the competition.<sup>2</sup> Actual work was shipped to Portland, where a panel of guest-jurors reviewed the pieces and made their selections for the exhibition, awarding a range of donated monetary prizes to the best work. On display in the Museum’s former location in southwest Portland for one month, each exhibition gained much press and attention, attracting crowds and, with them, patrons, as the majority of the work in each *Annual* was sold to local Portlanders.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, almost 60 award-winning works spanning the 14 years were later donated to the Museum of Contemporary Craft or purchased directly out of the exhibitions by the Portland Art Museum; almost all of these works are now on view together for the very first time, visually demonstrating a documented shift in ceramic artwork from functional, classically-shaped vessels to abstract, expressionist sculpture.

Perhaps one of the most telling things about how the *Annuals* demonstrate this shift in ceramic work through the years, is the subtle change in the structure of the “Call for Entries.” For each exhibition, the Studio asked that artists submit their work to the jury in specific category, either “Pottery” or “Sculpture.”<sup>4</sup> This differentiation, and the fact that these labels were even used, highlights the segregation that the Studio would

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<sup>1</sup> The Archives of Museum of Contemporary Craft contain records in several forms: exhibition archives, artist files, a set of handmade scrapbooks, an image library made up of slides and photographs, and a collection of over 1,000 objects.

<sup>2</sup> British Columbia was later included.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the work shown over the 11 exhibitions still resides in many private collections in the region.

<sup>4</sup> In the earlier exhibitions, “Enamel” was also a category.

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eventually hope to dispel, and the very issue that the American Craft Movement would take on itself: the age-old art vs. craft debate.

In the first *Annuals* of the early 1950s, it is clear that the Studio stressed the importance of the simple, decorative function of the entries; emphasizing their use in private homes, the volunteers even installed some of the clay vessels in the exhibition holding dried flowers so that visitors could envision what the pots would look like when purchased and on display in their living rooms.<sup>5</sup> The connection between contemporary craft and modern architecture was encouraged, and the OCS aimed to show the public that their artists were interested in designing objects for domestic use, but in an updated, non-folksy way. The subdued, grayed glaze hues in pieces like Frances Senska's *Cream and sugar set* and Lee Tillotson's *Gunmetal bowl*, both from 1950, and the brown salt glazes, golds, mustards and copper-blues from works in the *Third* through *Fifth Annuals* especially show the leading colors in the region as predictably earthy but pleasantly complementary to use in one's modern home.

**“The entries indicate a truly Northwest type of ceramics is developing, and that craftsmen in the area are doing a serious job of utilizing materials at hand.”<sup>6</sup>**

The work entered and exhibited at the time also represented an interest in artists in working from the life and landscape around them. Swirl motifs, organic curves and leaves were incorporated onto traditional vessel forms, and artists used wax relief and sgraffito techniques to add designs to the surface.<sup>7</sup> Several of the award-winners each year were visual interpretations of Northwestern wildlife or livestock, as seen in Peter and Henry Meloy's *Decorated bowl* (1950), Eugene Bunker's *Branch bottle* (1953), Peter Voulkos' *Babe the Blue Ox* (1954), all decorated with line drawings in clay of steed in motion or grazing. In many cases, the work remained functional (even if the function was purely decorative), with the artists working the smooth surfaces in clean, simple ways.

There were, of course, the stand-out pieces in the earlier shows, which represented a more sculptural and conceptual treatment of clay: Voulkos' primitive *Carved Pot* (1951) inspired one juror to remark, “you could build a room around it;” Tom Hardy's haunting *Ram* (1950, not on view but in the collection of the Portland Art Museum) left audiences wanting more from the 29-year-old Oregon rancher; and Betty Feves' modernist *Three Figures No. 4* (1955) was photographed and featured in three separate periodicals that month, as it was the third time almost in a row she had won the highest-paying award in an annual.

Year by year, works in the “Sculpture” category started to outnumber those in “Pottery,” and the awards given were eventually listed in the exhibition catalogs as “unspecified.”

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<sup>5</sup> Whether it was *The Oregonian* or the OCS that stressed the importance of placing these objects in homes as decoration is unclear.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Jones, *The Oregonian*, June 4, 1950.

<sup>7</sup> Sgraffito is a technique used in ceramics where the maker etches into the clay slip before firing the piece.

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Finally, in 1954's *Fifth Annual Exhibition of Northwest Ceramics*, for the first time the awards were not tagged by category at all (in the Museum's archives for that exhibition, however, it is noted that there was more "Sculpture" exhibited in this *Annual* than any other before, so they were still being *entered* by category).

Then, in 1958, just as local Portlanders were realizing that the exhibition series was a regular place to see and purchase top quality work each year, the Studio decided to take a year off, shifting the series to a biennial "so that the Studio could give time and encouragement for artists to work in other clay forms."<sup>8</sup> The Studio was ready to break from the mold, and they held the eighth exhibition not as a regional juried show but as a national invitational, in order to take a greater survey of trends within the field, illustrate the diversity of what could be achieved with clay, and to prove just how powerful of a medium it could be. Along with going as far as titling the exhibition *Ceramic Sculpture*, in the forward in the catalog, Board Chairman Walter Gordon alluded to the special effort put in that year to emphasize the "Sculpture" over "Pottery" element, (not-so-subtly) arguing that the artists would make "more meaningful and spirited work" when commissioned to do large-scale sculptures that could be incorporated into public buildings—as opposed making the domestically-scaled, functional objects that had been the norm up to that point.

**"Featuring ceramic sculptures alone is a departure for the studio's annual exhibit. At previous showings sculptures have been in the minority, indicating that this creative use of clays merited further exploration. It is to encourage this exploration that the studio now offers an exhibition devoted entirely to ceramic sculptures."**<sup>9</sup>

This change to a more curated, intentional exhibition marked the beginning of a larger transition within the OCS. Looking back it is clear that, in the 75-year history of the Museum of Contemporary Craft, the middle of the twentieth century was a period of great growth, excitement, collaboration and discovery. It is perhaps fitting that the history of ceramic art on the West Coast was going through a similar transition. After World War II, the United States' higher education system had seen an increase in creative activity and the birthing of many new programs. Because of this, more experimentation and sharing of ideas was happening in the field of ceramics, particularly. As fine art programs were blooming into the 1950s and a general interest in handmade objects was rising, other museums across the country began hosting regional juried exhibitions of ceramic work that saw record attendances.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hodge, as quoted in Van Cleve, Jan, "Golden Service: Portland's Contemporary Crafts Gallery Marks Its 50<sup>th</sup> Year," *American Craft*, October/November 1987, 38-41

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Catherine, "Works of 20 Nationally Known Artists Appear in Display at Ceramics Studio," *The Oregonian*, Sunday, April 20, 1958, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, Susan, "Ceramics in the west: the explosion of the 1950s" in Lauria, Jo, ed. *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*, Los Angeles: Rizzoli International Publications, 2000.

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In the beginning of the 1960s, as the New York-based American Craft Council was expanding by putting representatives in six regions (including the Northwest),<sup>11</sup> and Rose Slivka's "The New Ceramic Presence" (*Craft Horizons*, 1961) was confronting readers with a declaration of what clay was becoming and lighting ceramists across the nation on fire, the Oregon Ceramic Studio was at a crossroads. Since its founding in 1937, the OCS had been part firing studio and supply shop, part center for learning about clay, and part retail gallery. Early in 1960, Lydia Herrick Hodge, founder and unofficial director of the Studio, passed away at the age of 74. In March, under the suggestion and advice of Activities Committee member Sue Cooley and artist-in-residence/clay technician Ken Shores, the OCS discontinued its sales of ceramic supplies and firing of individuals' work in the Studio's kiln room. Not only was that component becoming more expensive than it was worth, but around that time other local institutions such as schools were building kilns and acting as other community resources for craft supplies anyway. The volunteers managed to mount a vigorous *Ninth Biennial* that year, but the Studio had already begun a process of a physical expansion and reprioritizing. Ken Shores stepped in as a part-time paid director, with longtime volunteer Barbara Weber as secretary and bookkeeper.<sup>12</sup>

Almost as if to mirror the organization's tumultuous shifts during this period of instability, the ceramic work in the last few biennials of the early 1960s showed an interesting change as well. The images of objects on the catalog covers for both the *Ninth* and *Tenth Biennials*, for example, show off the brighter colors, deeper textures, radical forms and exaggerations in scale of the seemingly diverse yet completely resolved sculptures. Looking through the dozens of archival slides of small groupings and arrangements of objects from the *First Annual* (1950), contrasted with those from the *Eleventh Biennial* (1964), one sees the dramatic change from the simple elegance in the earlier compositions, to the monumental experimentation and controlled disorder of the objects in the final exhibition. By the last *Biennial*, the pieces were as varied as slab-built, wheel-thrown, minimally glazed, brightly (or multi-) colored, mixed media, figurative and abstract, but the resounding difference from the first exhibitions of the series is remarkable.

**"Amazingly, there seems to be a real connection between all craftsman working in the Northwest – it's an active feeling of development and interest, coupled with a professional attitude of high standards."**<sup>13</sup>

It is also the configurations of artwork in the installation images that are dynamic too, with pieces working well *together* for the first time. As critic Catherine Jones noted, "the show has a greater variety of forms than previous, quality is high and there is a finished look about the entries that shows the potters to be in full control of their media."<sup>14</sup> For as different as the energetic painterly strokes of glaze in Rudy Autio's oversized *Stoneware*

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<sup>11</sup> ACC newsletter, 1961. For interesting thoughts on how "potters" identify themselves see essay/lecture by Paul Soldner (1<sup>st</sup> page, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph).

<sup>12</sup> Board Meeting minutes and Ken Shores' report, March 23, 1960

<sup>13</sup> in *Jurors Select Winners In NW Ceramic Show* article

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Jones, *Sunday Oregonian*, May 15, 1960

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*Coiled Vase* (a.k.a. *Enormous Jar*, 1960) to the shape of Jean Griffith's nonsensical *Raku Bottle* (1962) to the violent drips of Robert Sperry's *Tray* (1962) are, they appear to be carefully curated into the exhibitions and consciously installed. No longer are the objects placed together as if to mimic a domestic, liveable setting, on low cabinets or rows of shelving, but the pieces have been positioned on pedestals or hung independently on walls, and have been given enough space for one to walk around.

Looking at the collected objects on view together in *Northwest Modern: Revisiting the Annual Exhibitions of Northwest Ceramics of 1950-64*, or a visual slideshow of the installation images (also on view), the gradual shift from domestic, functional, classically-shaped vessels, to abstract expressionistic sculpture with painterly surface treatments, exaggerations of form and a sense of rebellion is unmistakable. The synthesis of sculpture and painting, ceramic-work was becoming a legitimized, hybrid medium for both function and creative expression, with the Oregon Ceramic Studio leading the charge to prove the Northwest region was both a revolutionary and a leader in field where tradition is typically honored above all else.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, it was becoming clear that OCS had much to be proud of, but that it had an even larger goal: to widen its scope to include other craft media. In order to take itself more seriously as a educational center that focused on craft as a broader subject, the Oregon Ceramic Studio finally changed its name to Contemporary Crafts Gallery by the end of 1964. But would it be able to simultaneously support its local artists, gain national attention for its exhibitions and educate its public at the same time? Clearly the story does not end here.

The Studio had certainly accomplished what it set out to do with the *Annals*: support ceramists and aid in the change of how clay was treated in visual arts. Truly, “no other group of artists in the United States comes close to matching the influence of West Coast ceramists on the character of American ceramic art today.”<sup>16</sup> The record of these eleven exhibitions is a pivotal one in the cultural history of the region; without the primary sources preserved in the Archives of Museum of Contemporary Craft, and the objects in the care of regional public and private collections, this unusual opportunity to look back into this time period would be lost.

Kat Perez, Curator, *Northwest Modern* and Exhibition Coordinator, Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2011. Special thanks to those who have helped in the various stages of this exhibition: Ann Eichelberg, Nicole Nathan, Ezra Shales, Leia Wambach and Namita Wiggers.

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<sup>15</sup> A breakthrough in sculptural ceramics would finally come in 1966 with *Artforum* editor John Coplans' exhibition *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics*, held at the University of California, Irvine, which featured Peter Volkuos and John Mason among others.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, Garth, “Otis and Berkeley: crucibles of the American clay revolution” in Lauria, Jo ed. *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*, Los Angeles: Rizzoli International Publications, 2000. p124.