

The Paradoxes of the Everson's Ceramic Nationals

“We ought to be put on the art map,” demanded the third director of the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts and founder of the Ceramic Nationals exhibitions, Anna Wetherill Olmsted. But was she asserting the value of her institution or clay as a medium? One can imagine hearing this battle cry coming from the mouth of Rose Slivka thirty years later in the offices of *Craft Horizons* (where she served as editor from 1959-79), as status has been a constant source of anxiety in the studio craft movement.¹ From 1932 to 1972, ceramic biennials held in the Everson Museum of Art (originally the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts) staked out a problematic ambition: The museum would organize a representative survey of ceramic art democratically from all corners of the United States, select the best and then tour the finalists in order to demonstrate excellence to the nation. But was this a vehicle planned to spur vernacular and regional production or to seed national fads and aesthetic consistency?

The bedeviling issue of the status of clay in the fine arts was never latent or suppressed. Olmsted publicly advocated that the exhibition series feature sculpture, yet privately bemoaned the inclusion of hobbyists and the practice of awarding prizes to “best designed piece or pieces of pottery suitable for mass production.”² She sought corporate funding yet nimbly avoided being controlled or beholden to the local patron of the exhibition, Onondaga Pottery (maker of Syracuse China), a firm that was interested mainly in large-scale manufacturing. On the one hand, the small institution tried to represent excellence on a shoestring, sometimes with an annual exhibition budget of a mere four hundred dollars, yet it also leveraged the idea of a national aesthetic with great success. Olmsted's bold ambitions to make Syracuse's museum both a regional center and a national arbiter of taste were always in tension.

Depending upon one's perspective and affiliation to clay as a medium, one can see the Ceramic Nationals, as the program came to be called, as a narrow-minded or risky undertaking. The Everson's Nationals came to represent and define a slice of American art when the exhibitions toured seven cities and in a few years traveled to multiple

international venues. In 1937, for instance, the Ceramic National went from Syracuse to the Whitney Museum, as well as on a European tour of Finland, Sweden, Copenhagen and England. In most years, the exhibitions traveled to six or eight other venues over a two-year period. The National was a sprawling catch-all which contained over five hundred works, including teacups, figurines, and architectural ornament. In hindsight, it might seem impossible that a small, regional exhibition program could extend such a reach, but, if contextualized in the milieu of the WPA and the 1930s when cultural institutions endeavored to expand audiences first and foremost, the idiosyncrasies of the Ceramic Nationals seem less peculiar, all save the monastic devotion to clay working. Even that is difficult to categorize; a little known fact is that the program's devotion to ceramics was inclusive of enamels too. Medium-specific craft shows are now the rule, with museums catering to practitioners and collectors as special-interest groups. While the Everson is deemed noteworthy mainly in reference to the history of American ceramics, the Ceramic National and its international aspirations is an eccentric history, a tonic to the usual story of American art and design that dominates the conferences of academia with MoMA-centric blinders.

Syracuse's Ceramic Nationals tread precariously between obscurity and notoriety as a program to document and dispute aesthetic revolutions. In the words of Richard Bach, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's curator and liaison to the field of industrial design in the 1920s and 1930s, the Everson's shows became "an experiment station where criteria of quality may be established."³ However, it is both rare and near impossible for an institution to pronounce artistic judgment with a sure hand and also to identify the unknown and emergent artists of value with its other five digits. With the post-war institutionalization of the crafts in academic degrees, the prestige that came with medals came to be more meaningful and more competitive. The Nationals included ornamental concrete, a development that surely fueled ceramicists' anxiety about the ontology and taxonomy of artistic status. The usual structure of a Ceramic National was to hold regional juried shows for a year in advance and then winnow the show from the actual artifacts in Syracuse. Hundreds of artworks were shipped each season for a firsthand inspection. The Everson's permanent collection of ceramics, now on display as a study

center in the basement for two decades, is the result of buying the medal-winners' work. The uneven range of the collection defies order or easy categorization; wonderful surprises and surprising gaps abound.

The program came to a dramatic halt in 1972, when practitioner-jurors Peter Voulkos, Robert Turner and Jeff Schlanger were asked to look at slides and argued that they could not distinguish quality by sorting through four thousand images. Voulkos, Turner and Schlanger decided that the show no longer served the medium's interests. Their decision, whether it was fueled by a counter-cultural rebellion or plain and simple frustration, provided an excuse for the director at the time, Jim Harithas (who had no passion for clay as an institutional mission), to cancel the Ceramic Nationals during his brief tenure. The jurors' decision can be seen as anti-authoritarian and a sign of the era's social unrest and loss of faith in standards of criteria, but it was in many ways an elitist act too. A door of opportunity was closed, especially to ceramicists focused on function and design. The jurors had themselves emerged from earlier Nationals: Turner had exhibited bowls in the 1940s, while Voulkos had shown elegant vases with figurative ornament in the 1950s. Yet in 1972, they argued that the show might hinder the public from recognizing ceramics as art because the work was weak.⁴ "Art" had become the reigning paradigm, not the notion of democratic representation, or the celebration of the medium.

Corporate sponsorship for the Nationals had been vigorous in the 1940s and 1950s, but diminished thereafter in direct proportion to the clay-workers' desire to be granted the prestigious title of artist. Ceramic companies such as Homer Laughlin and Syracuse's local businesses, such as Carrier, an air conditioner manufacturer, funded later shows but the larger cast of patrons in earlier years is worth recalling. In 1941, Thomas J. Watson of IBM was directly involved in sponsoring the 10th Ceramic National and for a decade awarded the largest cash prize. High-end department stores, such as Gump's in San Francisco and Marshall Field's in Chicago, were venues for the touring show or sponsored cash prizes. In 1958, Neiman Marcus sponsored the participation of French ceramists and in several years the retailer brought the show to the top-floor galleries of its Dallas shop. Whereas Ceramic Nationals in the 1930s "circuited" the Metropolitan

Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, by 1969, despite the growing insistence by clay-workers that they were “artists,” the venues tended to be outside of major metropolitan cities. In 1969, the twenty-fifth National circuit traveled far but to fewer major cities: Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois; Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Neiman-Marcus, Dallas, Texas; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, Pennsylvania; Ohio Northern University, Ada, Ohio; Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, Wilmington, Delaware; Craft Center, Worcester, Massachusetts; Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire. The degree of marginalization coincided with the composition of regional juries and national juries increasingly being composed of ceramic artists. Medium-specificity was a self-fulfilling ghettoization. There were fewer appearances by craft luminaries in other media, such as Dorothy Liebes, whose presence as a co-exhibitor of an ancillary textiles display in 1940 and as a juror in 1958 surely had enriched and expanded the critical criteria of the Ceramic Nationals.

When the 21st Ceramic National came to the Portland Art Museum, Oregon, in the summer of 1961, the field itself was experiencing a paradigm shift that can be read in the catalogues. William Hull, Everson Museum of Art director, deemed the 21st National (and ceramics in general) “reassuring” as it was an art form “disciplined by considerations of craftsmanship.”⁵ Henry Varnum Poor, a renowned painter of plates and murals, had similarly seen the result of his work jurying the 20th Ceramic National as a triumph of collective expression: “the rare and beautiful things in ceramics have been the expression of a whole people, of a time and a place more than of individuals, and to find that this holds true today... is to me the most exciting thing about this first international show.”⁶ After 1961, the Nationals favored a criteria based on the notion of avant-garde estheticians such as Rose Slivka. Liberation from convention and collective style was what Slivka saw as “The New Ceramic Presence.”⁷ She valued work that was “personal” three times more than shapes that were traditional or evocative of long-standing cultural conventions. Slivka argued for ceramics that was “motivated by a personal aesthetic and a personal philosophy,” and expressive of “rugged individualism.” Her mantra, “individuality, the aloneness of each man’s search,” reads like an amalgam of Abstract-

Expressionism and existentialist aphorisms.⁸ The improvement of mass production, then, was considered a joke. In 1962, new director Max Sullivan applauded ceramic art in Slivka's terms. Sullivan welcomed a re-orientation toward "personal," "direct expression" and "experimentation," and went so far as to describe the "distortion of form or destruction... taking precedence over the making of fine utilitarian objects" in a favorable light.⁹

Ascertaining the impact of the 21st Ceramic National on Portland, or vice-versa, is not an easy task. The 7th or 8th annual had already traveled to the Portland Art Museum in 1938, and numerous other Nationals had visited west coast venues, from the University of Oregon Art Gallery to the San Diego Art Museum. One would have to argue that overall the rebellious art of the 1960s was a syndicated sensibility. In the studio pottery movement of the 1960s, regionalism was not visually legible any more so than today. One sees a similar phenomenon in the Oregon Ceramic Studio's annuals and biennials, and also those established at Scripps College, CA. The revolutionary heat in 1960s ceramics, largely considered a West Coast, Voulkos-ic eruption, turned from a skeptical to a doctrinaire liberation theology within only a few years. Needless to say, patrons such as IBM were less interested in exhibiting one of Voulkos' pummeled plates that had ceased to be recognizably useful. The Ceramic National and most of these other biennial group shows began to serve a more limited audience of academic practitioners. In evaluating their jurying of the 24th Ceramic National, Paul Soldner and Ken Ferguson noted that "technical proficiency" was no longer a criterion in ceramics, as if such an explanation were not visible in the illustrations. Cookie jars, which had been Arthur Baggs' winning entry in 1938, no longer competed in the fray. Companies ceased to enter the contest or win prizes, as Glidden had in 1947. Individual self-expression was what was valued and on display.

In reconsidering the Ceramic Nationals as a vehicle to promote the medium, it is difficult to determine the aftereffect of its long run. They were certainly well attended. Were they representative of the diversity of American aesthetics? If in the 1930s, Olmsted had articulated an "art complex" and desire for greater prestige, in the 1960s this same

sentiment, inflected with a more severely individualistic vision, spread through the social networks of ceramics as a virulent dogma. These days, it seems the Everson struggles to value medium specificity. Syracuse China, the local manufacturer and supporter, closed in 2009, so ceramics are no longer a local point of pride or a boon to the civic coffer. The Nationals did serve the growth of academic programs, which is why it seems most confusing that ceramic academicians helped terminate the shows. Looking around at museum exhibitions today, aesthetic pluralism seems less palpable and visible in the art collections than the proliferation of an over-theorized Postmodern and multi-cultural era would suggest. In comparison, 1930s Ceramic Nationals included Pueblo potter Maria Martinez and African-American clay workers William Artis and Sargent Johnson. Recent revivals of the National in the 1990s have mainly been stocked by middle-class academics.¹⁰ Ceramics might be victimized as a “lesser art” but its practitioners are as affluent as those in other art worlds. Perhaps in fifty years, once circuits such as annual SOFA fairs recede into history and we realize the degree to which 1960s artistic liberation was dependent upon cheap foreign fuel and natural resources, perspective will be gained to evaluate these complex attempts to corral ceramics into the high temple of art. Only then will we be able to write the story of regional variety and national identity in twentieth-century American clay.

Ezra Shales, Associate Professor of Art History at the School of Art and Design at Alfred University, New York, 2011.

¹ Letter from Olmsted to Carlton Atherton (ceramic instructor at Syracuse), 16 February 1933, Everson Museum of Art Ceramic Archive, Syracuse, as cited in Cheryl Buckley, “Subject of History? Anna Wetherill Olmsted and the Ceramic National Exhibitions in 1930s USA,” *Art History* 28: 4 (2005): 514.

² *Contemporary American Ceramics Selected from the 12th Ceramic National* (Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 1948), 9. “My one desire is to reach the INDIVIDUALIST potters, working as Mrs Robineau worked, not to commercialize the thing by getting factory pieces. Nothing then would stop Onondaga Pottery from sending some of their inartistic

worst.” See Buckley, “Subject of History? Anna Wetherill Olmsted and the Ceramic National Exhibitions in 1930s USA,” 513-514

³ Anna Olmsted, “Decorative Arts,” *Official Catalog, 1939*, 32, as cited in Cheryl Buckley, “Subject of History? Anna Wetherill Olmsted and the Ceramic National Exhibitions in 1930s USA,” 521.

⁴ Marsha Miro, *Robert Turner: Shaping Silence—A Life in Clay* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2003), 99.

⁵ William Hull, *21st Ceramic National* (Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 1961), 5.

⁶ Henry Varnum Poor, Foreward to *20th Ceramic National* (Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 1958), np.

⁷ Rose Slivka, “The New Ceramic Presence,” in *Ceramics Monthly*, 21: 4 (1961): 35, reprinted in Garth Clark, ed., *Ceramic Art: Comment and Review, 1882-1977* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 131-142.

⁸ Slivka, “The New Ceramic Presence,” in Garth Clark, ed., *Ceramic Art*, 142.

⁹ Max Sullivan, *22nd Ceramic National* (Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 1962), 7.

¹⁰ Barbara Perry, “Modernism and American Ceramics,” in *Craft in the Machine Age, 1920-1945*, ed. Kardon (New York: Abrams, 1986), 104-5. For a trenchant interpretation of recent Ceramic Nationals see Edward Lebow, “American Ceramics Now: The 27th *Ceramic National*,” *American Craft* 47: 4 (1987): 26-33, 69-70.