GENERATIONS: Ken Shores by Namita Gupta Wiggers

This essay was first published in the museum brochure accompanying the 2008 exhibition of the same title held at the Museum of Contemporary Craft from April 10 through July 23. The exhibition offered an opportunity to examine Shores’s work in a historical context that simultaneously links his work with that of his teachers, mentors, contemporaries and students, as well as his collections. SP is pleased to offer an adaptation of the original essay, with permission, as a remembrance of the influential life and work of Ken Shores (1928–2014).

To understand the legacy of Ken Shores requires recognition of how his work connects with the history of twentieth-century studio ceramics. Grouped together in the exhibition “Generations: Ken Shores,” the vessels created by Shores, Victoria Avakian Ross, and Glen Lukens are clearly linked. Ross, head of ceramics at the University of Oregon (UO) from 1920–64, taught Shores according to the style of Lukens, her teacher. Lukens, known for his simple molded vessels coated in thick, vividly colored glazes, is recognized as a pioneer of West Coast ceramics.

Shores started at UO in 1945, left the school in 1946, and returned in 1953 to continue his studies. At this time, artists were shifting their focus away from production of mold-based forms; there was a newfound fascination with the potter’s wheel. In 1952, Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach, and Soetsu Yanagi had introduced the Mingei Movement through a series of lectures and workshops held across the country from Los Angeles to Black Mountain College, in Asheville, North Carolina. One of the most famous workshops took place at the Archie Bray Foundation, in Helena, Montana. As participants in that workshop, Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio learned new approaches to using the potter’s wheel and thereafter began to incorporate a loose, expressionistic energy into their work that led to a significant shift in ceramics.

Around the same time, Bauhaus-trained Marguerite Wildenhain was teaching summer workshops at her Pond Farm studio in Guerneville, California. Although both Voulkos and Wildenhain visited UO at Avakian Ross’s invitation, it was Wildenhain’s approach that Shores chose to learn. Set side by side, the differences between the classical form and carved surface of a Wildenhain piece and the calligraphic and painterly surface treatment of a Hamada plate and a Voulkos wax-resist vase are clearly visible. Shores spent the summers of 1955 and 1956 at Pond Farm and later described the experience as “one of the greatest influences in my life. Not so much [through her] style of pottery, because it took several years to break away from what she taught us concerning a good pot. But learning how to make pots was so important because she demanded so much.” From Wildenhain, Shores learned how work in a disciplined way as an artist.

Adapted from an essay by Namita Gupta Wiggers, former director and chief curator, Museum of Contemporary Craft in partnership with Pacific Northwest College of Art, and curator of “Generations: Ken Shores.” Wiggers served as the director and chief curator, MoCC from 2004-14. An independent curator, writer, and educator, she is the director and cofounder of Critical Craft Forum (www.criticalcraftforum.com). She teaches at Oregon College of Art and Craft, Pacific Northwest College of Art, and Portland State University. Wiggers serves on the board of directors of the American Craft Council and The Center for Craft, Creativity, and Design and is the exhibition review editor for Journal of Modern Craft.
Being a potter, however, was not Shores’s goal; he wanted to create sculpture, and he wanted to use clay. His search for a sculptural approach that best employed the materiality of clay while engaging with history led him to the work of Spanish architect Antonio Gaudí. In Gaudí’s work, Shores found a model for biomorphic form, sculptural hand-built structures, and an unapologetic engagement with surface decoration. The building blocks of Shores’s later artwork can be seen, in many ways, in the works of his MFA thesis project, awarded with honors in 1957 by UO. Shores merged the influences of Ross’s glazing techniques, Wildenhain’s wheel-throwing skills, and Gaudí’s organic modernism into a range of sculptural vessels. Shores’s visual vocabulary embraces the hand-sculpted form that counters the rectilinear lines of industrial modernism.

Skipping his graduation ceremony, Shores instead chose to attend the first annual conference sponsored by the American Craftsmen’s Council (now the American Craft Council) in Asilomar, California. Over the course of three days, attendees from forty-eight states, Mexico, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, and Afghanistan discussed the socioeconomic outlook that craftspeople faced, the relationship between design and technique, and professional practices. This was the moment in which a community coalesced, with the conference and its proceedings serving as the foundation of a new American craft movement. For Shores, it was an opportunity to meet artists and personalities.
whom he knew about through his reading or word of mouth, and it led to lifelong friendships with artist Toshiko Takaezu, Paul Smith (former director of the American Craft Museum, New York), and Rose Slivka (then editor-in-chief of Craft Horizons) and Lois Moran (editor of American Craft from 1980 to 2006). It also connected him to a growing national community of artists working with similar ideas and led to exhibition opportunities in which he presented his work to an international audience.

Following the conference, Shores became the artist-in-residence at the Oregon Ceramic Studio (OCS) in Portland (now the Museum of Contemporary Craft). Shores spent the next ten years balancing his work with mounting responsibilities at OCS. During that period, many artists who are now recognized as leaders of their generation exhibited their work at OCS, one of the few venues then that showed contemporary craft. Through conversations with artists such as Betty Feves, Ken Ferguson, Erik Gronborg, Howard Kottler, Henry Takemoto and Robert Sperry, Shores continued to clarify ways to express his ideas. Exhibitions of his work, including Haniwa-inspired portraits, “people pots” inspired by pre-Columbian pottery, classical Italian portraiture, and painted slab sculptures, convey the energy surrounding ceramics during the sixties.

When OCS founder Lydia Herrick Hodge died in 1960, Shores served as acting director until named the first paid director in 1964. Under his directorship from 1964 to 1968, the newly renamed Contemporary Crafts Gallery (CCG) expanded its exhibition and gallery spaces and continued to further develop national connections. At this time, Shores also began service on the board of the American Craftsmen’s Council as a Northwest Craftsman Trustee from 1966 to 1970.

As CCG flourished, Shores faced the difficult decision of whether to devote himself to directing the organization or to making his art. Doing both was increasingly difficult.

In 1967, in transition from his director’s role at CCG, Shores began teaching part-time at Lewis & Clark College. From 1968 to 1995, he built and established the art department at Lewis & Clark, using Wildenhain’s methods as the foundation for the ceramics program. His legacy continues through the work of his many students, including Ted Sawyer, Gary Smith, Skeffington Thomas, and Steve Schrepfeman.

Teaching freed Shores from the constraints of living primarily on what he earned from the sales of his ceramics, and with this new, steady income, his artwork flourished. Following a World Crafts Council trip to Peru in 1968, he began creating his internationally acclaimed “Feather Fetishes,” a series he continued to develop for the next fifteen years. These luxurious and exquisitely crafted objects evoke imagined functions and rituals, as they remain out of reach, enclosed in vitrines atop mirrored bases. Former Portland Art Museum curator Rachael Griffin noted the work runs on an independent course: “There is no funk here, no
austere hard-edge, non-sensuous conceptualism." What is here is a series layered with complexity and meaning, objects that speak of an imagined social life that connects simultaneously with the historical tradition of the vessel and a critique of contemporary fetishization of the art object. As Shores continued to teach, he began to travel extensively, visiting and collecting work from Europe, South America, Morocco, Thailand, and in particular, India. To address the deep interconnectedness between Shores's artwork and his collection, the “Feather Fetishes” constituted the largest area of the “Generations: Ken Shores” exhibition and were juxtaposed against photomurals of his collection as it was displayed in his home.

“Generations: Ken Shores” was the first museum exhibition to focus on this central figure in the history of ceramics in the Pacific Northwest. Placing his work in context with that of his teachers and contemporaries, the exhibition revealed Shores’s role in the historic shifts that moved clay from a strictly functional to a conceptual medium. The exhibition also highlighted the theoretical underpinnings of his undeniably exotic “Feather Fetishes.” A world traveler and a collector of “egoless” art for decades, Shores drew his inspiration from the unsigned religious and spiritual art from Europe, India, and East Asia that covered the walls and spaces of his home; it was work from outside both the Western canon of art and contemporary art’s conversation with itself. Much like Lukens, Shores believed that “the new in art is incredibly old, and the old is still vastly new.” Having lived in a culture where virtuosity and self-proclamation prevail, Shores, a student of Vedanta since 1958, focused instead on unity. Because Shores was quick to divert a conversation away from himself, “Generations: Ken Shores” was a special opportunity to place his work at the center of an ongoing dialog about craft and its history in the West Coast region and beyond.

**FOOTNOTES:**
2 Interview between Ken Shores and Namita Gupta Wiggers, March 2007. Shores left school after his first year, spending the next few years working in the display departments of department stores in Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. He attended classes at the Art Center in Los Angeles, as well as one more semester at UO before enlisting in the US Army in 1951. After serving his tour of duty from 1951-52 during the Korean War, Shores returned to complete his undergraduate and graduate degrees at UO on the GI Bill.
6 Conference proceedings of the “First Annual Conference of American Craftsmen, sponsored by the American Craftsmen's Council,” Asilomar, CA, June 1957, p. 5
7 In 1980, Shores was elected a Lifetime Trustee Emeritus to the National Board of the American Craft Council.
10 Interview between Ken Shores and Namita Gupta Wiggers, June 2007.
12 Vedanta is a spiritual philosophy based on the Upanishads, and the idea that all religions strive towards universal truth.