

**Meaning and Memory:  
The Roots of Postmodern  
Ceramics, 1960–1980**

By Garth Clark

*'Too much of a good thing is often wonderful!'*

Mae West

*'Too much is never enough!'*

Morris Lapidus, architect of the 1950s

Miami Beach hotels, Eden Roc and Fountainbleu

## Introduction

Postmodernism and ceramics is a marriage made in artworld heaven. This particular nirvana, shielded from modernism's disapproving scowl, is brightly patterned, unconcerned about reverence for authorship or originality, ready to quote styles from the medium's long past at the drop of a slip brush, and prepared to mine every semiotic meaning inherent in clay, glaze, pottery, and utility. This has liberated ceramics, allowing it to express its historical literacy, its humor, and its relationship to both everyday life and the decorative arts. In the process, ceramics has come alive as never before, it is more diverse, literate, adventurous, and ambitious than at any other time. There is even the room and the encouragement for those who have chosen to remain in the modernist camp. This may sound a touch over exuberant, but the enthusiasm should be read against the background of ceramics' previous relationship to modernism in which much of the ceramic tradition was kept firmly closeted to avoid censure.

To describe the union of ceramics and modernism as a 'relationship' is probably pushing the meaning of the word to its limit. It was unconsummated, antagonistic, and demoralizing. Several factors made ceramics unwelcome at this minimal steel and glass table. Ceramics derived from low art rather than high art, it participated in pagan activities such as decoration and ornamentation and its two primary form types, vessels and figures, were both considered ill suited to the modernist canon. Figuration was thrown out with all realism and representational art, and replaced by abstraction. The vessel posed a different kind of problem. It was too complex, loaded with too much meaning, was too domestic, evoked too many associations both in the past and present. It was simply too messy for modernism to deal with as an art form. It could, however, be redeemed through industry—creating tableware simple in shape, glazed white, and with no decoration or any other outward sign of individuality.

This produced some strange policies. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for instance, could accession, say, a teapot into their collection if it was machine made, but not if it was hand made, even if the latter reflected better design principles.

On the surface, the reasoning behind this was really quite logical. Industry could better serve the proletariat than crafts. At heart, modernism was a socialist movement and the enemy was the bourgeoisie and their decadent taste. Even though the Arts and Crafts Movement was one of the foundations of modernist philosophy, it was felt that handcrafted objects would be relatively costly to make compared to industrial production, and so would sell to an affluent audience and further encourage bourgeois taste. To an extent this was true. Even the socialist William Morris admitted that his Arts and Crafts Movement had ended up making 'bibelots for the filthy rich.'

However, the argument does not hold water, to use a vessel metaphor. Firstly, it was the *progressive-minded* bourgeoisie who were the primary supporters of the new modernists. These doctors, lawyers, architects, psychiatrists, and other professionals were the boosters who bought modernism's expensive leather and metal furniture, after it was rejected by the working class. The same class still buys this furniture today. Secondly, this attitude about craft materials was not applied to fine art. If industry was the perfect delivery system in modernist utopia then surely all sculpture and paintings should be reproduced industrially as well, in posters and replicas. But modern fine art did not want to change the exclusive, elitist market that had been so carefully nurtured over the centuries, it just wanted to take over the power and run the show. So the aesthetics of art changed, but the high-art mechanisms of control and canonization remained the same.

Either way this meant that aside from producing some superb ceramic designs for industry, ceramics and modernism never really had the chance to dance together, a loss to both parties. Exclusion from the modernist community had an impact on ceramics between the two world wars. Mostly, this was negative. It pushed ceramics into the arms of the anti-modernists, such as Bernard Leach, who argued a regressive non-art position that has hobbled ceramics for decades and which, remarkably, still holds some sway today. It also encouraged a decorative movement, derived from the French

Art Deco potters, of charming, but ultimately shallow, decorated pottery, figures, and figurines that had a veneer of modernist styling. Very little high art was made in the ceramics movement between 1920 and 1950. Cynically, one could argue that this only proved modernism correct, but the embargo kept ceramics from growing and taking part in one of the great art movements of all time, isolating it from modernism's intelligence, and, by forcing it to the right, gave a victory to the least avant-garde elements in the crafts.

These potters were every bit as narrow, intolerant, puritanical, and despotic as the modernists. For ceramists, excluded from modernism, they provided an authoritarian regime to rebel against. Until quite recently they retained a strong voice in the ceramics world. Some have even tried to make the point that such artists as Leach are actually modernists in traditional clothing. Paul Greenhalgh's provocative essay on this subject 'Maelstrom of Modernism' in *Crafts* (May/June 1992) makes particularly interesting reading, but is ultimately unconvincing. They shared elements with modernism such as a very narrow path of approved history (almost all decorative pottery, except for early slipware which was viewed as primitive, proletarian, and therefore 'pure,' was excluded) and they adopted the same reverence for objective functionalism as the modernist architects. For many ceramists, removed as they were from the fine arts mainstream, these traditionalists replaced modernism as the enemy and much of the ceramic rebellion that led to postmodernism was in reaction to Leach rather than to modernism itself. Interestingly, the end result was much the same.

After World War II (1939-45) the paradigm started to change. At that point a generation of young ceramists began to take matters into their own hands and, marginalized or not, made powerful art, more or less within a modernist framework. Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, and Ruth Duckworth in Britain (all three émigrés) worked in a contemporary style that was loosely modernist, influenced by the lineages of Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Henry Moore. In the USA, Peter Voulkos and John Mason led the modernist charge in Los Angeles

with the so-called Abstract Expressionist Ceramics Movement from the mid-1950s, followed soon thereafter by Robert Turner, Karen Karnes, and David Weinrib at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, Ruth Duckworth at the University of Chicago, Richard DeVore at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, and many others. Although they came late to the modernist movement, at heart they shared the movement's values—truth to materials, purity of concept, originality, authorship, a commitment to abstraction, a rejection of decoration, and a number of other principles that make them members of this camp.

Postmodernist ceramics has its roots in the USA during the 1960s and in Britain during the 1970s. It is at this point that the long simmering rebellion against modernism's puritanism began to boil over. Ceramics, held back for years, was a player in the postmodernist movement from the start, unusual for a medium that has tended to move with glacial caution, trusting evolution rather than revolution. However, before we look at this in detail it is necessary to explain a little more what postmodernism means in the larger sense of the term. This is no easy task. As Eric Fernie wrote in *Art History and its Methods* (1995), postmodernism is 'intentionally difficult to define.'<sup>1</sup> In an article in the *New York Times*, entitled 'Modern and Postmodern, the Bickering Twins,' writer Edward Rothstein takes this a step further and remarks that, 'Postmodernism is almost impossible to pin down; like a blob of mercury, it slips away under pressure, only to pop up again in its original form.'<sup>2</sup>

Postmodernism is a big tent. In the visual arts, both applied and fine, it has produced a host of styles, theories, and approaches to art. This includes post-minimalism, maximalism, appropriation, post-industrialism and, as much as its adherents deny this paternity, deconstructivism as well. It popularized the conceptual tool of semiotics. It brought about a return to pattern and decoration, allegory, narrative, figuration, and a new type of historicism. It has spawned scores of mini movements, experimental design firms, and workshops such as S.I.T.E.S. and the Memphis group. It both facilitated and exploited the contemporary crafts revival.

While there are references to postmodernism before World War II—in the writings of the literary critic Federico de Onis in 1928 and historian Arnold Toynbee in 1938—they are unrelated to its current definition. Joseph Hudnot uses the term in *Architecture and the Spirit of Man* (1949), but it is not until 1977 that the first major book on the subject arrived, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, written by Charles Jencks, an American architect living in London. Later he succinctly defined the movement as, 'fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of its immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence.'<sup>3</sup> However, the stage was set for Jencks in 1966 by another American architect, Robert Venturi, whose book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* provided the movement with its battle cry, 'Less is a Bore'—an upending of Mies van der Rohe's modernist diktat, 'Less is More.' Venturi urged for ambiguity and a 'messy vitality' to replace the purity and order of modernism. Aldo Rossi in 1966's *L'architettura della città* was also influential, particularly on the subject of memory, but only after its translation into other languages in the 1980s. On the subject of postmodernism in its broader philosophical context, Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* (1979) was the most influential text.

The fact that postmodernism's most influential writing came mainly from architecture was a good fit with ceramics as both disciplines have their roots in the applied arts. Jencks' book is notable for its fierce critique of modernism's failures, in particular that its buildings had no memory and no communication skills. The lack of memory is easily explained: By this Jencks meant that modernism's paranoia about revivalism, which led to the banishment of almost all historical references, cut architecture off from its past and vacated its memory. Therefore its buildings had no connection to the continuum of time. One of the great benefits of postmodernism was that it reconnected artists and designers with their past.

Hans Ibelings explores this in a slender, but compelling, book, *Supermodernism* (1998), writing

that, 'Parallel with the discovery of memory as a medium for channeling meaning in architecture, was the discovery of architecture's own memory. One aspect of postmodernism is its (re)discovery of history as a value-free source of inspiration and as an inexhaustible repertoire of forms, types, styles, and so on, that everyone is free to re-cycle at their own discretion. Simply put, the modernists regarded the past—with the exception of the particular line in history from which they claimed descent—as just so much dead weight. For postmodernists the past was the natural starting-point for the creation of something new. What is more, they discovered an infectious delight in the past, for it turned out that there was so much more to discover than the Palladio-Ledoux-Schinkel line of descent. One of the lasting salutary effects of postmodernism is that a good deal of previously neglected architectural history is now the subject of research.' What is fascinating about this statement is that with a few adjustments (replace 'architecture' with 'pottery' and the 'Palladio-Ledoux-Schinkel line of descent' with the 'Sung, Japanese teaware-and-medieval-slip line of descent') it applies exactly to ceramics as well.

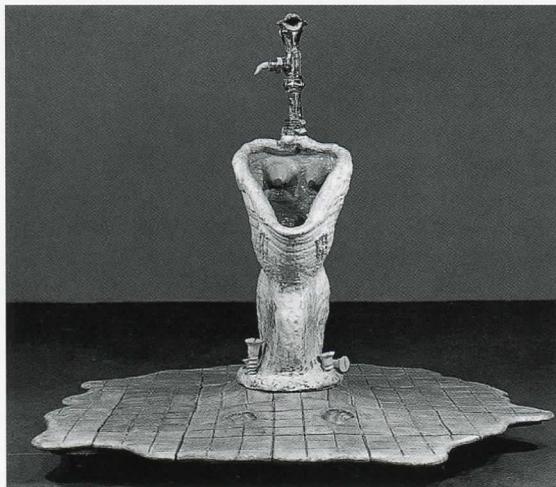
Claiming that modern buildings had no communication skills may seem a less obvious criticism. This refers to the growing interest in semiotics or semiology in the late 1960s. Semiotics is a branch of structuralism that examines the meaning of signs rather than words. These signs comprise a language system—iconic, indexical, and symbolic—that enables a building or an object to become what semiologists term, 'a bearer of meaning.' Ornament, the primary means of presenting signs in architecture, had been banished and this inhibited modernism's ability to communicate. Semiotics now plays much less of a role and much fun has been made of this concept of architecture 'speaking,' notably Tom Wolfe in his acidly pointed critique, *From Bauhaus to our House* (1993). But in fact ornament does allow a building to signal information: for the function of a building to be made more clear, for its relationship to the buildings that surround it to be 'discussed,' for traffic to be directed, and for buildings to be made texturally warmer, friendlier, and more accessible.

Postmodernism's arguments were not restricted to aesthetics. At the heart of the postmodernist rebellion lay a deeper issue that is dealt with in the separate, but related, field of postmodernist philosophy. By 1960 there was a growing sense of ennui about the modern dream. In the light of the Cold War, urban unrest, ecological concerns, and the Vietnam War critics began to question the modernist ideal of progress. As art writer Robert Atkins comments, 'The ecological revolt that dawned during the 1960s signaled a loss of modern faith in technological progress that was replaced by postmodernist ambivalence about the effects of that progress on the environment.' Atkins points out that postmodernism reflects a fundamental change in the techno-economic structure of the major developed countries, 'Just as modern culture was driven by the need to come to terms with the industrial age, so postmodernism has been fueled by the desire for accommodation with the electronic age.'<sup>5</sup>

This is a significant point. Postmodernism is mainly the product of a generation reared on electronic entertainment, with television being the most influential. Music Television (MTV), founded in 1981, has influenced the optical sense of the postmodern generation. Its staple, the music video, developed an audience that could accept visual information at breakneck speed. This is a group that is visually literate without necessarily being informed. Through these videos they have been exposed to the work of Old Master painters and classic photographers which has been referenced in otherwise low-art videos to sell the music. So when they see R.E.M.'s video 'Losing My Religion' done stylistically in the look of the famous Czech photographer Jan Saudek or watch Madonna play with Horst P. Horst's classic photograph in the music video 'Vogue,' they are being taught about appropriation. In this case the audience is different from that of the educated art world where it is assumed that the audience knows in advance from whence the artist is 'outsourcing his images.' In the case of MTV, the process is reversed. Later they may encounter the original source and make the connection. As they begin to realize how the game

is played they look more carefully for these connections. An audience has emerged whose sophistication in processing layered, rapid-fire imagery, and content is second to none in the history of man. Appropriation looms large in other electronic fields—such as ‘sampling’ in hip hop and rap music, another distinctly postmodern phenomena of taking short chords of classic popular music and making entire choruses.

More radically, digital imagery allowed makers of music, film, music videos, and television advertising to employ memory in ways not imaginable a generation ago. One of the groundbreaking images in this regard was the Hoover advertisement showing a famous Fred Astaire film clip where a broom he dances with has been seamlessly replaced by a modern vacuum cleaner. Personal computers have created a remarkable democracy of access, whereby almost every kind of artistic creation by man can be photographed, transcribed into 0s and 1s, downloaded, altered, e-mailed anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds, and incorporated into the work of the contemporary artist. This, in turn, can be made available on the Internet where millions can take these images and re-appropriate them in their own work. With this flood of data and information, modernism could not hold to its narrow aesthetic view of life.



**Robert Arneson**

*Herinal*, 1965

Ceramic

h 5 ft, w 6 ft

h 1.5 m, w 1.8 m

Courtesy the Estate of Robert Arneson, Licensed by Vaga, New York, NY and George Adams Gallery, New York, NY

Ceramics first began to tweak modern reticence in the 1960s with the arrival of Robert Arneson, the maverick father of the ceramic Funk Movement and one of the major ceramic artists of the twentieth century. Bridling at both the wall-to-wall dominance of the Abstract Expressionists in American art at that time and the deathly conservatism of the ceramics movement (with the notable exception of Peter Voulkos and company whom Arneson admired), he took a stand in 1961. While demonstrating throwing techniques at the California State Fair he threw a bottle shape, sturdy but inelegant, more or less in the shape of a soda bottle, impressed the legend ‘No Deposit,’ and then sealed it with a hand-made bottle cap. At this moment the postmodern battle in ceramics had been enjoined.

Although this object now seems tame—certainly when compared to the scatological work that followed in which Arneson encrusted toilets and urinals with ceramic vaginas, penises, breasts, and feces—even this small gesture managed to enrage both modernists and anti-modernists alike. *No Return* (1961)—now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—was exhibited later at the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco where it provoked considerable criticism. A reviewer for *Crafts Horizons*, Alan Meisel, wrote peevishly, ‘if the purpose of including this in the exhibition was to irritate the reviewers, it did.’<sup>6</sup>

Funk can most easily be described as an inversion of Pop art. It has the same elements as Pop, but turned inside out to reveal a visceral interior. Both movements used ‘commercial’ craft. Both were related to consumerism. Pop took its techniques from advertising art and Funk from the hobbyist shop. Both used banal everyday images. But Pop was clean and Funk was dirty. Where Pop was cool, neat, and detached, Funk was hot, messy, and confrontational. Both used humor. Pop was sly, subtle, and ironic, while Funk was sophomoric, offensive, and obvious. This is best explored by comparing the work of Robert Arneson and Claes Oldenburg.

Oldenburg’s toilets are made of white canvas, pristine and even elegant in their droll, deflated presence. Arneson’s toilets, made at about the same



time, are flowing with a lava of store-bought glazes, puddles of unmentionable liquids and solids, and containers of all known varieties of human sexual organs. One provokes wry amusement, the other a much darker humor. Needless to say, when this work first appeared in the early 1960s, Arneson and Oldenburg were equally offensive to both the art world and the lay public, albeit for different reasons.

After an outpouring throughout the 1960s of excrement, genitalia, and disturbing and offensive subjects of every description—telephones with breasts, hands reaching out of electric toasters, penis handles on boxes—Funk could not get any dirtier without moving beyond the pale. The Super-Object, a term that I coined in the late 1970s, was the next step.<sup>7</sup> Arneson's younger students took the commercial glazes, the popular culture images, and the low-fire techniques from Funk, cleaned up the act, and refined the end product. The Super-Object arrived more or less simultaneously during the late 1960s in the Bay Area of Northern California (San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, and their environs) and in Seattle. In California its leading exponent was Arneson's student, Richard Shaw. Howard Kottler led the charge in Seattle with a group of artists which included Patti Warashina, Fred Bauer, and later Mark Burns and Michael Lucero.

The Super-Object is high craft. Its technical finesse reminds one of Boehm birds or Lladro figurines—over priced, over crafted porcelain atrocities from the kitsch industry—an association that these artists happily acknowledged and parodied. Clay's ability to mimic materials such as wood, cloth, leather, or metal was an important part of the vocabulary. The Funk artists had used this mimetic technique, but so crudely that it provoked humor rather than illusion. In the hands of the Super-Object makers, the imitation of other media was so convincing that one often had to touch the object to convince oneself that it was indeed fired clay.

In particular, Marilyn Levine was a master of this technique, creating leather objects in high-fired stoneware that defied the eye, right down to the details of chrome-plated studs and steel zippers, all ceramic. Harold Rosenberg observed that Levine's

work 'was essentially a conceptual art, that brings to the eye nothing not present in nature but instructs the spectators that things may not be what they seem.'<sup>8</sup> This was in tune with a growing super-realist movement amongst painters at the time. Ceramics considered this work to be heretical, a bucket of slip thrown in the face of both the crafts and modernism, assaulting the one principle that both these movements shared and revered, truth to materials. As the art critic Kim Levin observed, 'Old time illusionistic art has collided with the future becoming as literal as minimal forms...form has redissolved into content—Pygmalion is back in business.'<sup>9</sup>

Richard Shaw's work was not solely dependent upon illusion, but invested in a kind of visual poetry derived both from the surrealist object and earlier realist paintings of curious still-life assemblages by American painters such as John F. Peto. Shaw used discards from consumer society—broken pencils, tins that had held canned food, which he then cast and painted to build composite figures or assemblages. Howard Kottler, on the other hand, was more of an appropriationist, long before the title existed and achieved its legitimacy through artists such as Sherrie Levine and Mike Bidlo. Kottler's breakthrough body of work was a series of witty plates in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were factory-made, white-glazed porcelain to which he applied colored ceramic decals that were either store bought or custom made for him by other artists. There are thousands of these plates and no record as to how many were produced. He mischievously parodied the multiples market, giving the sense that they were part of a carefully monitored edition by sometimes using a decal on the foot that read, '2 of 10,' the only edition number he ever used.



Above, left  
**Claes Oldenburg**  
*Soft Toilet*, 1965  
Paper (Gemini G.E.L.)

Above, right  
**Patti Warashina**  
*Kiln Car*, c. 1979  
Porcelain, wood, plastic  
| 36 in., 91.4 cm

The subjects were unashamedly populist: the American flag, pink roses, and portraits of the Pope. Mainstream art images were also used—Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy*, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*, and Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. He boxed some plates in sets and lavished more craft on the 'packaging' than the 'product,' another neatly presented irony. These sets dealt with specific themes, such as four plates in wood-grained leather envelopes resting in a pine box and dedicated to Wood's painting *American Gothic*. Kottler, a homosexual, plays havoc with the all-American family virtues that this painting represents, mixing and matching genders with transgressive glee. In another set, with the plates sexily enclosed in reddish pink leather, Kottler took Gertrude Stein's famous line, 'Rose, is a rose is a rose,' as his starting-point—the images were made up from decals of pink roses and then titled with a wicked sense of camp. These plates are a perfect early expression of the appropriationist impulse in postmodernism. They replicate high art in a decidedly low-art format and are cool, industrial, populist, witty, and subversive.

It was 1977 when Kottler's work really struck home in the ceramics community. A sculpture he made in that year, *The Old Bag Next Door is Nuts*, was reproduced in *Ceramics Monthly*, the primary professional journal for ceramic artists in the USA. Subscribers noted that the work, which was literally comprised of a molded house and a paper bag full of nuts, was made directly from two commercial molds that were available from Duncan Ceramic Products. Letters of outrage flowed into the magazine. The response of Ms. Poris, a ceramist from Farmington Hills, Michigan, was typical. She noted the page numbers on which the molds were illustrated in the Duncan catalog and then fumed that her sense of 'justice, honesty, integrity and aesthetic feeling [has] been affronted. The piece is cynical and dishonest, stretching originality beyond my level of acceptance.'<sup>10</sup>

Kottler's stance challenged both the ceramist's belief in the sanctity of the hand and the modernist notion of originality. There was an additional irony in that those most offended by Kottler were adherents of the Bernard Leach/Warren

MacKenzie school whose hands were busy at work mimicking wares originally made by Chinese and Korean potters seven hundred years ago. That they, of all potters, should pillory Kottler for his 'lack of originality' was absurd and part of the theater that his work was meant to provoke.

In a later statement regarding the outrage over his work, this super-mannerist stated unapologetically, 'I am lazy, I use images already available—casting is simpler and faster than molding—I purchase molded pieces already cast, use prepared glazes, in fact, I seldom touch clay. I use other people's molds, other people's ideas and other people make my ceramic decals. I just assembled the parts.'<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Ms. Poris he had acknowledged that even the title was not his, but was suggested by his students Michael Lucero and Alice Sundstrom: 'In fact the only element that is mine was the concept for the sculpture and hopefully, Ms. Poris, you will permit me this one small glory.'<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, Los Angeles was the other center of postmodern invention. The West Coast was isolated from the establishment on the East Coast and felt freer to reject the orthodoxies of the day. Los Angeles contributed two important artists to the emerging postmodern aesthetic in the 1960s, Michael Frimkess and Ken Price. Both artists were 'graduates' of Peter Voulkos's so-called Abstract Expressionist Ceramics Movement. Neither actually fitted this description, although both Frimkess and Price did do work during the 1950s that superficially fitted the style of the action painters.

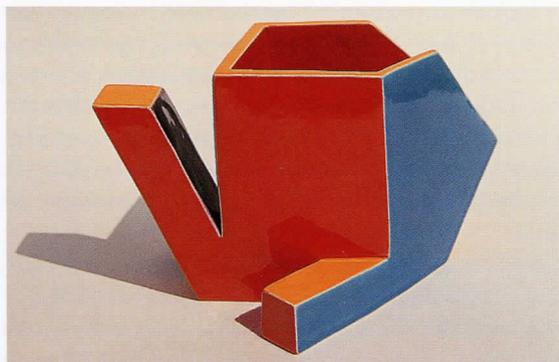
In the mid-1960s Frimkess began to work in a Pop format. He drew comic-book imagery onto classic ceramic forms such as Chinese ginger jars, Greek amphoras, and Zuni Native American bowls, terming these cultural forms his 'melting pots.' The work was funny and smart; black- and red-figure cyclists peddled across the surfaces of Volute Krater amphora, Uncle Sam chased naked women of various nationalities around the voluptuous volumes of ginger jars, jazz bands played riffs on Kang H'si vases. These works began to seduce the ceramic community, softening their feelings about some of the new styles that were then percolating. They were still hand made (in fact, painfully so as Frimkess



threw them dry because he believed that this was how the ancients had made their pots, but it caused his fingers to split and bleed) and they could get the joke between the street and the museum, pitting comic-book imagery against iconic stature of forms devised by potters two thousand years ago.

Ken Price came from a school which is variously termed 'Fetish-Finish' and 'The L.A. Look.' Fetish-Finish was a high-process approach to art often using advancing materials such as resins and plastics. The end result had a somewhat industrial feel and was finely crafted and included the minimalism of Robert Irwin, Edward Ruscha's billboard-like paintings, the linoleum-like splatter paintings of Ron Davis, Craig Kauffman's serene Plexiglas wall reliefs, and Billy Al Bengston's meticulous air-brushed paintings. Price's work in the 1950s was not particularly memorable, but in the early 1960s he found his voice with his remarkable cups and ceramic 'eggs.' Unglazed, the egg forms could have passed as Arp-like modern sculpture, but it was Price's vivid, primary palette that transformed them into sexy postmodernist works. Furthermore, he irreverently substituted automotive lacquer for glaze, imbedding a slyly abstract reference to popular culture and consumerism.

Between 1972 and 1974, Price created a series of 'Architectural Cups.' These neo-cubist, neo-constructivist objects are three- to five-inch (8–13 cm) high postmodernist trophies and amongst the most sought-after of all American ceramics. Their bright commercial colors, their playfulness, and insouciance does not detract from their presence as serious, intelligent works of art. Exhibited



extensively in the 1970s both in New York and London, these brilliant objects had considerable influence. The British artist, Richard Slee, another important postmodernist, was just one of the artists for whom they were a revelation.

In the 1960s, Ron Nagle, the enfant terrible in Voukos's Berkeley circle (he was only twenty years old), found himself growing more sympathetic to the Los Angeles art scene than to what was happening in the San Francisco Bay Area. Between 1960 and 1965 he frequently visited Irving Blum's Ferus Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles where many of the 'L.A. Look' artists exhibited, including Ken Price. He found Price's 'little Grandma wares' a revelation. He was expecting some heavy macho Abstract Expressionist clay, but instead 'here is this guy making boxes with cups and lace and stuff and it blew my mind.'<sup>13</sup> But the gallery also showed a number of East Coast artists (Andy Warhol had his first gallery exhibition there) and European artists as well, including Giorgio Morandi. The combination of Price's cups and Morandi's exhibition of austere still-life paintings proved to be an epiphany. 'If Morandi could spend his life painting half a dozen objects on a tabletop then I could devote mine to the cup,' he decided.<sup>14</sup> Nagle was deeply invested in popular culture. In addition to his ceramics, he was a musician and a composer of pop music, writing songs for Barbra Streisand, amongst others, and producing the sound effects for the movie *The Exorcist*. He therefore had the inside track on pop as a hands-on practitioner and was not an academic slumming in the streets of the everyman.

Nagle was able to pack an immense amount of information into his small forms. His cups were an amalgam of mixed resources, a love of Japanese Momoyama tea wares, a fascination with 1950s and 1960s automobile design, and with the 'splash and drip' decoration on early plastic and linoleum kitchen surfaces. Sometimes his cups drew their texture and sometimes their form from the 1930s San Francisco 'deco-stucco' houses in which he had grown up. He began to work with decals and china paint, both considered hobbyist materials and occasionally did away with the bottom of his cups so that they were just hollow, tube-like cylinders.

Above, left  
**Michael Frimkess**  
*Covered Jar*, 1968  
 Stoneware, glazed over  
 with over-glaze painting  
 h 23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in., 60.3 cm

Above, right  
**Ken Price**  
*Untitled Cup*, 1973  
 Porcelain, glaze, paint  
 h 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in., 9.5 cm



The handle became a vestigial sculptural element, sometimes organic and, at other times, precisely geometric. He worked through one series after another and it is difficult to select any one work to represent his polychromatic genius, but his *Untitled Cup (Guggenheim)* of 1975 was certainly one of his most amusing and succinct early American postmodernist works. This cocky piece rises to its full height of  $3\frac{1}{8}$  inches (8 cm) and takes on and satirizes the giant presence of Frank Lloyd Wright and his most controversial piece of architecture—the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

In the 1970s the focus shifted to a group of students from the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. Its beginnings were not auspicious. Had one visited the school while Ralph Bacerra, Adrian Saxe, Peter Shire, and Elsa Rady were all students, one would have found them making work that, while accomplished and stylish, was quasi-Asian and tilted towards the conservative look of the anti-modernists. But they soon began to take a turn to the left, while retaining their impressive technical facility. Bacerra, who became the head of the department, developed exceptional skills at pattern and decoration. His works, an unlikely amalgam of the decoration on Japanese Imari, the princely Nabeshima wares, the optical art of M.C. Escher, and the flat stylized paintings and prints of Andy Warhol, were gloriously hedonistic, a complementary mix of decorative excess and disciplined craft.

Shire began to work with bright primary colors and create playful forms out of neo-constructivist geometry that led him to join Ettore Sottsass' influential Memphis group. Rady created cut-wing bowls, as crisp and sharp as a Coco Chanel suit, which were the apex of an Art Deco spirit that had invaded postmodern ceramics. Lastly, there is Saxe, with his informed, multi-layered response to court porcelains as instruments of power and privilege. This large, manic, red-haired iconoclast has had an extraordinary influence internationally. Erudite, impassioned, and controversial, he decisively reshaped the rules of engagement for the ceramic arts in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He took on the eighteenth-century porcelain factory wares of Meissen, Sèvres, Nymphenburg, and Chelsea, an aspect of ceramics that everyone—from modernist to anti-modernist and all in between—had dismissed as irredeemable. His erudition at explaining why this body of work fascinated him and his ability to validate its aesthetic integrity won converts and brought this once despised ceramic inheritance into the fold.

Saxe was crossing a line in taste that the ceramics community had drawn between the 'cottage aesthetic,' which was honest, direct, and 'pure,' and what Kottler, a decade earlier, had identified as the 'palace aesthetic,' which was (at least from the viewpoint of the cottage) effete, decadent, derivative, hyperbolic, excessively decorated, and, given its overtones of aristocratic privilege, politically incorrect. Most ceramic art by the modernists was raw, organic, and rustic in its feel and look (i.e., cottage). So, too, was the work of the anti-modernists. In this they were united against postmodernism. The use of gold and silver, not in an ironic context to imitate metal as with the Funk and Super-Object artists, but to express the beauty of the most opulent and sensuous of these surfaces, was the third rail in ceramic art politics. No one up to this point had dared touch or defend it.

Kottler had played with this, but used humor and a commercial treatment to take out the sting. The use of gold by Saxe was semiotic as well as

aesthetic. His glazes were as exquisite as any of the 'approved' glazes such as tenmoku or celadon. He meant viewers to be seduced by the overt allure of the surfaces at the same time as the symbolism of wealth and dynastic privilege made them feel uneasy about their apostasy. As Peter Schjeldahl, now the art critic for the *New Yorker* has written, this guilty pleasure makes Saxe's pots 'glamorous and untrustworthy, like a pedigreed dog that has been known to bite.'<sup>15</sup> He created some pots with surfaces that comprised as many as five different gold glazes, each one more refined and magnificent than the other, and then rudely contrasted this with plastic toys which became finials or hung from brocaded swags. He also put street language on his pots, the intrusion of a lower class into the palace context which many found disturbing.

Saxe is not an appropriationist, however. His work does not look like Meissen or Sèvres, or any other court porcelain, but he uses their lush palette, has appropriated some of their glazes, directly molded handles and ornaments from original models at Sèvres, and ended up making his objects even more outré than the originals. His approach to history, as Schjeldahl notes, is not imitative but 'enraptured and cannibalistic.'<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that when two Australian art historians, Justin Clemens and Mark Pennings, decided to create a symposium in 1996 for Craft Victoria entitled 'Cultural Theory and Craft Practice,' which explored the place of crafts in postmodernism, they chose Saxe to be their poster boy.

The work of Saxe, Richard Notkin, who deals with political subject matter, Anne Kraus, who explores dreams and narrative, and Cindy Kolodziejki, who creates bizarre 'historical' vessels loaded with perverse sexual imagery, all belong to a kind of vessel that Schjeldahl has dubbed 'the smart pot.' In a catalog essay about the work of Saxe he defines this kind of vessel as: 'an academic object positing an imaginary academy, the brains of an imaginary all-embracing civilization. The smart pot is so removed from innocence, so thoroughly implicated in every received notion of nature and culture, so promiscuous in its means and ends that it is almost

innocent all over again... The smart pot x-rays the hoary art/craft distinction to reveal its confusion of values: values of prestige fouling up values of use.'<sup>17</sup>

In the late 1970s a group of New York-based artists, many of them originally from California, gathered for a series of meetings at the studio of the painter, Robert Zakanitch. They discussed the inherited resistance to decoration, its importance in feminist art, and its significance in non-Western art. From these meetings a movement, Pattern and Decoration (P and D), was born with the agenda of building credibility for artists who worked in this genre, including Robert Kushner, Ned Smyth, and Miriam Schapiro. The movement's voice was the gifted art historian Amy Goldin who argued that 'while decoration can be intellectually empty, it does not have to be stupid.'<sup>18</sup>

The ceramic involvement was limited, but significant, namely the ceramist Betty Woodman and the tile muralist, Joyce Kozloff. The breakthrough came in a series of exhibitions beginning with curator John Perreault's 'Pattern and Decoration' in 1977 at P.S. 1 in New York and 'Decorative Impulses' at the ICA in Philadelphia in 1979. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York lent credence to the movement when it chose five P and D artists for its survey 'Nineteen Artists: Emergent Americans' in 1981. What P and D managed, through the fledgling Holly Solomon Gallery in New York (which took on the cause) and the breakthrough museum exhibitions, was to empower indirectly those in ceramics who had long worked with pattern and decoration. Suddenly decoration had a new respectability after years of being considered the ultimate fine-art pejorative.

P and D contributed some good writing to the painfully small list of published material on postmodernism and ceramics, in particular the paper 'Ceramic Decorations and the Concept of Ceramics as Decorative Art' by George Woodman, himself a P and D painter and the husband of Betty, which was presented at the 1st International Ceramic Symposium in Syracuse, New York, in 1979. This oft-quoted manifesto explained in the most lucid and convincing terms a role for

decoration that was neither passive nor secondary. 'Among sensitive young potters,' he wrote prophetically, 'there appears to be a dawning awareness that the decorative stance is one of the strongest and most appropriately taken in ceramics. Attempts to avoid, disguise or transform the "minor" arts into "real" art are the result of a misconception of the nature of decoration in part brought about by the critical assumptions underlying an increasingly attenuated and artificial framework of cultural values.'<sup>19</sup>

Betty Woodman, in turn, also became one of clay's most controversial and effective ambassadors for P and D ceramics, giving new life to an ancient, persistent style. An indefatigable exhibitor, her shows influenced artists throughout the USA and Europe. Her pots at this point were 'playing a kind of sneaky game with function. They are to be used and used with a sense of decorative ebullience and not some mean notion of the function of eating and life at table.'<sup>20</sup> George Woodman was correct about the groundswell of interest in decoration and in the 1980s this came to life with a vengeance from Ralph Bacerra's over-the-edge palace wares to Phillip Maberry's room-sized installation for the 1983 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the city's most controversial showcase for groundbreaking art.

Lastly there is the matter of the ceramic figure. This, too, was once verboten. To be fair to the modernists, there were few strong artists working

with the clay figure in the years between the two world wars. The saccharine quality of most ceramic figuration during this period quite understandably made the teeth of the modernists ache. It still has that effect today on anyone with a dislike of doe-eyed sentimentality. There were exceptions such as Lucio Fontana who was working actively in figurative ceramics from 1925 onwards and 'visitors' from other media who briefly took on ceramics—Elie Nadelman, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Nevelson, and others. Arneson's arrival on the scene, and the more neo-classical Stephen De Staebler, began to encourage figuration in the 1960s. Margaret Israel, Patti Warashina, Michael Lucero, Peter VandenBerge, and Jack Earl are amongst a host of artists who worked figuratively in ceramics during the 1960s and 1970s. Some continued into the 1980s and are represented in this book by their later work.

The one artist who deserves special mention in the rise of the postmodern figure is Viola Frey. She had been dealing with the figure since the 1960s. Another Bay Area artist, she was influenced by Arneson, but was not a Funk artist and most of her early work identified as being of this style ends up being more Pop in character. In the early 1970s she began to play with eerie animal sculptures that at first seemed comical in their appearance, but carried a disconcerting and edgy 'human' quality achieved at times by placing a rendering of her own readily identifiable mouth in place of the animal's. Then she moved to the human figure. Some were modeled by hand as original works, while others were what Claude Levi-Strauss terms 'bricolage,' mixed assemblies of 'cultural detritus'—both hand-modeled pieces and works molded directly from dime-store figurines. Frey obsessively collected these figurines, attending the huge outdoor Alameda Flea Market in San Francisco over weekends and acquiring new pieces for her ever-growing hoard.

In Frey's mind the flea market was her 'church' and sight of these cheap, sentimental and simply made chotchka's, laid out on the endless tables of the market, graced by the sunlight, had for her an almost religious quality. Even when she was creating her huge ten-foot (3-meter) high figures, Frey still had the ideal of the figurine in her mind



**Phillip Maberry**  
*Paradise Fountain*, 1983  
Ceramic and multimedia  
Installation at the 1983  
Biennial, Whitney  
Museum of American  
Art, New York

as a populist standard for the clay figure. She was also attracted to other outcasts from the artworld's canon of good taste—as can be seen in her body of work between 1975 and 1977 where she took on the patchwork look of the scorned paint-by-numbers hobbyist kits, then at the height of their popularity, and transferred this appearance to her work both on canvases and sculpturally, with molded and assembled vignettes. The result was aesthetically beautiful and deeply dissident. By the late 1970s her palette and means of working and thinking were distinctly postmodern. A compulsive reader, she had absorbed the thinking of many of the theorists who were influential in that movement and brought an understated literacy and intellectual rigor to the ceramic figure. Together with her partner, Charles Fiske, she also transferred those ideas to two generations of students at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Britain emerged as the second power in postmodernist ceramics. Its main focus was the Royal College of Art, London, although there were some precursors to this school's hegemony on postmodern ceramics. Delan Cookson was the earliest British Pop artist in ceramics and his work from the late 1960s and early 1970s is amongst the most undervalued in British ceramics. His curious sculptures of nuts, bolts, and other industrial objects in a heavily grogged stoneware, without either glaze or color other than the clay itself, have plain, but convincing, sculptural strength.

The Royal College of Art's dominant role in what was then vaguely termed 'the new ceramics' was the result of the vision of the Marquis of Queensberry, head of the ceramics department. When David Queensberry took over the ceramics department, it was a hard-core nursery, providing young designers for Britain's large (but shrinking) ceramic industry. Artistic pretension was not tolerated, handcraft was verboten and the joke was that anyone found throwing a pot on the wheel would be taken into the courtyard at Kensington Gore and shot. Soon after taking over the department, Queensberry realized that focusing only on design was no longer viable. The demand for designers was declining precipitously, while the influence of studio ceramics

was on the rise. He then began to change the department to cater to the studio ceramist, but retained the industrial connection. He was not a blind convert. His feelings about the new ceramics were decidedly ambivalent, fearing that it would replace solid design with secondary art, what he so eloquently called 'the failed Henry Moore Syndrome.' However, he encouraged young artists to explore not just traditional craft, but also technology and to find a place for industrial techniques in the creative process. Intuitive and rule breaking in his choice of students, he was remarkably successful and his graduates from the early 1970s would come to dominate British ceramics through that decade and into the next.

The industrial connection that the department offered was seized upon by some of the students. Paul Astbury worked with complex molds, airbrushing of surfaces, and a variety of other industrial techniques that would not be found in Bernard Leach's bible, *A Potter's Book*. Jacqueline Poncelet began to work experimentally with bone china, an industrial material used by the tableware industry. Carol McNicoll, encouraged by her champion Zandra Rhodes, made wonderfully inventive molded and assembled works, plays on the Mad Hatter's tea party, and whimsical cups on soft, plushy cushions that oozed human toes (p. 20). Glenys Barton used the extensive decal-making facilities at the school to create precise grid landscapes for her pristine cast porcelain figures. Ingeborg Strobl (p. 20), a graphic artist from Austria, used all of the above to make a body of postmodernist ceramics with a touch of genius, focusing largely on the theme of how man has converted the animal kingdom into a catalog of consumer products.

Anthony Bennett took on the world of caricature, working in the style of a three-dimensional cartoonist, using molds for his figures, even though they were unique pieces, in order to get a particular sharpness of line and to escape the craft look of hand modeling. Astbury took on technology and sci-fi as his subject matter, making remarkable robot figures and other post-industrial objects, covered in decals of electronic circuitry and yet, through finely



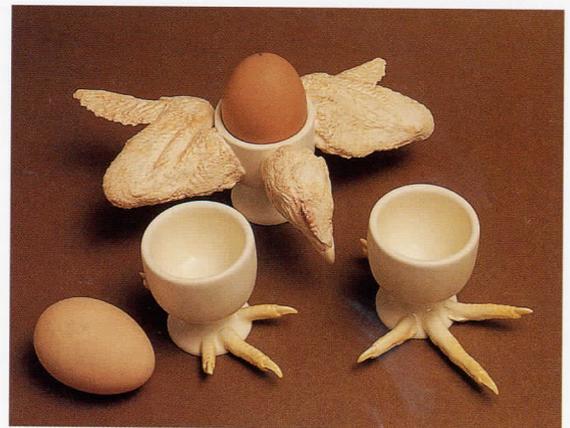
detailed elements of surface erosion, revealing the fragility of man-made creations. Others were more traditional, at least in terms of technique. Alison Britton first made rather quaint work, but after graduation found a place halfway between Pattern and Decoration and Jackson Pollock's action painting, giving a kinetic surface energy to her asymmetrical slab-built pots. Elizabeth Fritsch transferred from the Royal Academy of Music, London, where she was studying to be a harpist. She was one of the department's most successful artists and her approach to the vessel, flattening its forms and treating them pictorially rather than as fully three-dimensional objects, has left a lasting impact and is one of the most intelligent examples of structural use of decoration in postmodernism.

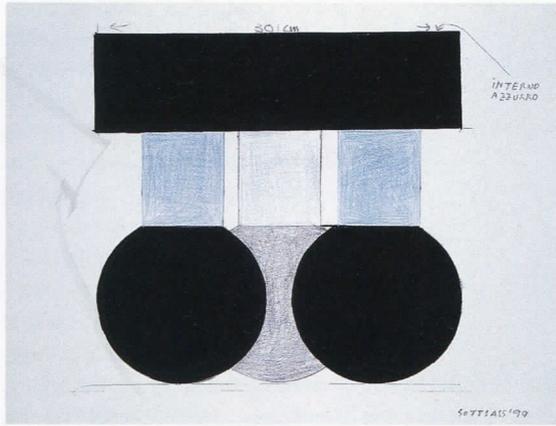
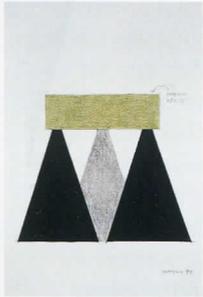
There were many other artists who graduated from the Royal College of Art during the halcyon days of the 1970s—Martin Smith, Nicholas Homoky, and Magdalene Odundo. There were two elements which made this work have such an impact. The first is that it was consciously postmodern, even if the term was not used much at the time. Some of the artists, with their short-cropped bright green and yellow hair, saw their work as more punk than anything else at a time when punk had not yet hardened into its more nihilistic, tongue-pierced, gothic, drug-focused identity. But this is not a realistic connection and suggests that the work had much more of a counter-culture edge than it actually

possessed. Punk was harder and less committed to any kind of craft virtuosity. For Punk artists, being able to join two pieces of cloth together with safety pins was considered high manual skill. Certainly none of the Punk fanzines, *Ripped and Torn*, *Vomit*, and *Sniffin Glue*, ever published this work. Overall, with their modest scale, superb craft and refined finish, most of the Royal College ceramics were still very much directed to an upper-middle-class market.

A student myself in the ceramics department during the mid-1970s, I was privy to the aesthetic process, the debates and issues that energized these artists. They had a clear-eyed sense of where ceramics had come from and where they stood in their triangular relationship with ceramics, craft, and fine art. They knew they were changing the rules in a way that placed them in conflict with both modernism and the more traditional elements in British ceramics, who were still a powerful and vociferous voice and loudly proclaimed their disapproval. Peter Fuller, a lively pro-Leach Marxist art critic, was particularly damning in his view of this work, feeling that ceramics was making a mistake by increasingly ignoring the 'rich subtending soil of the decorative arts and crafts' and instead appealing 'to the debased fine arts, quite literally to validate themselves'<sup>21</sup>, and that ceramics should stay in the kitchen, where it belonged.

What the Royal College students achieved may well have passed under the visual arts radar undetected were it not for the British Crafts Council.





Victor Magrie, its sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued director, and once a potter himself, was enthralled by the Royal College work and within a year of graduation some of these artists were being included in the Council's group exhibitions and were receiving one-person shows with catalogs. This caused great resentment amongst the older established artists who had not been accorded this attention, but Magrie rightly wanted to stimulate a growth of ideas in the crafts and this group seemed best equipped to shoulder the burden both of early stardom and to carry his progressive, urbanized message of innovation, a break from the dominant and romantic image of the besmoked rustic potter making porridge bowls in bucolic countryside workshops.

Not all of the postmodern action (or 'PoMo' as some of the British artists refer to it) was coming from the Royal College, although, as the only MA course for ceramic art in Britain at the time, it did dominate. Two other artists outside the College need to be mentioned, Richard Slee and Andrew Lord, who graduated from the Central St. Martins School of Art and Design, London, in 1970 and 1971 respectively. Slee has remained one of Britain's most innovative postmodernists and his work has continued to grow and change ever since he left school, reflecting a restless interest in popular culture, an approach that has proven difficult for the crafts community to understand. Lord, on the other hand, 'crossed over' into the fine arts world

immediately after leaving school and has remained in this world, the only British ceramist to make this transition. Rather than winning him respect as a trailblazer, it has made him a controversial and much-criticized figure, even in the postmodernist establishment. Lord's work is decidedly postmodern, but takes this position from a stance of reverence for modernist masters. Early work blends a love of Delft pottery with an analytical study of structure, light, and shade in modernist still-life paintings. The modest still-life groupings of three to five vessels began to expand to massings of over fifty pots in a single piece, creating work of unquestioned strength, while remaining fully within the vessel tradition, walking a tightrope through modernist bigotry.

European ceramists did not begin to become players in the postmodern ceramic movement until the 1980s and so a discussion of their work rests with Mark Del Vecchio, the author of this book. However, there is one artist who needs to be singled out and that is the Italian artist, designer, and architect Ettore Sottsass. Sottsass' love of ceramics goes back more than fifty years and throughout that time he has been actively producing ceramic work, industrial designs, limited edition works, and unique pieces. However, it is only recently with the publication of a book on his pottery by Bruno Bischofberger that the ceramic community has begun to realize the extent and depth of his commitment to the medium.

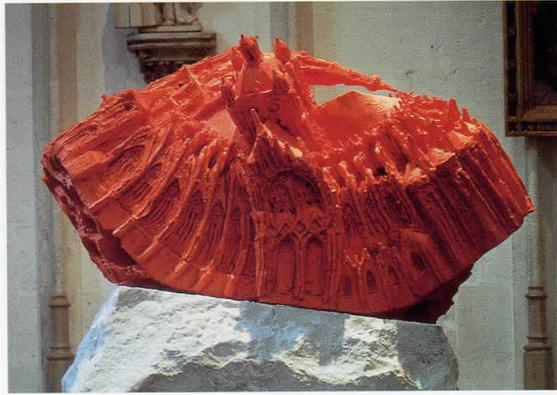
Finally, there is one more aspect of postmodernism and ceramics that needs to be discussed, even though this has tended to happen after 1980, the chronological boundary of this essay, and that is the breakdown of specialization. Del Vecchio has chosen to dedicate his book to those whom, in turn, have dedicated their careers to ceramics. This is appropriate, all the more so because ceramists as we know them today may well be an endangered species. Art schools are beginning to move away from material-based specialties. The more avant-garde institutions such as Goldsmiths College in London are even encouraging their graduates to abandon the traditional fine arts designations of painter and sculptor for a more free-floating multi-media concept of the

Top left  
Ettore Sottsass  
*Cherries*, 1972  
Ceramic  
h 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in., 27.3 cm

Top right  
Ettore Sottsass  
*Tarzan*, 1999  
Drawing

Above, left  
Ettore Sottsass  
*Jane*, 1999  
Drawing

*Tarzan* and *Jane* are designs for official vases of the Ceramic Millennium: Leadership Congress for the Ceramic Arts, Amsterdam, 1999



artist. This, too, is one of the consequences of postmodernism. Critics feel that this will lead to dilettantism, while supporters feel that it will turn craft into the servant of ideas rather than vice versa.

This open-minded spirit regarding materials has encouraged a number of leading postmodernists to bring ceramics into their orbit. In the 1930s many fine artists turned to making or designing ceramics. The imperative in this case was economics. Fine art was not selling and they felt that a sideline of decorative arts could help support their careers. In the 1950s there was a burst of interest amongst European painters in ceramics, fueled partly by the example of Pablo Picasso and his enormous output of work from the pottery town of Vallauris. Joan Miró, Jean Cocteau, Georges Braque, Antoni Tàpies, and several others created ceramic art. For some, the works were minor explorations, while for others, such as Miró, they were part of a serious ongoing sculptural oeuvre.

The adoption of ceramics by painters and non-specialist sculptors in the postmodern era has been different in many ways. Today, the material is not approached in a decorative arts context. Arman, Miquel Barceló, Tony Cragg, Thomas Shutte, Siah Armajani, Antony Gormley, Keith Haring, Jeff Koons, and many others have used the material to create major works that are as important in their oeuvre as any other medium. While some use the material on its own, others such as Anthony Caro have made it part of a multi-media partnership, as in his gigantic, heroic, narrative installations

*The Trojan War* (1993–94) and *The Last Judgment* (1995–99), in which metal, wood, and clay are married in equal parts.

This was borne out recently with the sale of a porcelain sculpture by Jeff Koons entitled, *Pink Panther* (1988), at auction in New York for \$1.8 million, the highest price ever paid for a twentieth-century ceramic artwork. Furthermore, these artists, what the ceramists refer to as 'visitors,' are not just 'day-trippers' to the ceramics workshop, but are actually remaining with ceramics and intensifying their involvement. This is viewed with a slightly jaundiced eye by the ceramics community. Having been excluded for years from the fine arts market, they are happy to be allowed in, but are not thrilled with having to compete in the ceramic realm with name artists who have high-market profiles and a competitive edge. But the impact of this development in the long run will be beneficial. As the use of ceramics as a fine-art medium increases it will further breach the clay ceiling that has kept prices so low in this medium. Ceramists are not used to the tough competitive market in which the fine artists have had to operate for decades and they will have to become more professional to survive, a pressure that is long overdue. Specialization in this medium will not disappear overnight. Some aspects of the medium, such as the makers of functional wares, will probably weather the change and continue to create as before, but it is unlikely the ceramics community as we know it today—largely conservative, clubby,





educationally based, and often obsessive about process—will survive in the boundary-less world of postmodernism.

Whether postmodernism is now at its end after a run of nearly forty years is a good twenty-first century question. After all, most movements last on average only seven to ten years. Certainly, there is enough criticism. For some, postmodernism is symptomatic of all the evils of globalization, consumerist at heart, and with its revivalist license, creating inter-cultural creolization. Chris Baldick, writing in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990), certainly manages to encapsulate most of the concerns about postmodernism's significance. Calling postmodernism 'a cultural condition prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s' he views this phenomena as a 'culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning and originality are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.' He notes that the 'posties'—a derogatory term for the movement's supporters, see a certain salvation and egalitarianism in the fact that the movement has flattened the hierarchy of high and low art, but Baldick feels that this has come at great cost and that many now regard the movement 'as a symptom of irresponsible academic euphoria about the glitter of consumerist capitalism and its moral vacuity.'<sup>22</sup>

Of course Baldick is correct, but he is also incorrect. Postmodernism has produced the most heinous explosion of trite and often misinformed historical quotations, it has encouraged all the 'isms,' from feminism to conceptualism, to play havoc with aesthetics in the name of postmodern content-based art, most of which has a lack of profundity and has subjected us to tedious artworld lectures on morality, political correctness, and even the meaning of life. It has resulted in an often incompetent and manipulative assimilation of the crafts. It has blighted the skylines of many a city with its pink, blue, and gray miasma of crudely proportioned buildings, seemingly made from giant children's toys. Postmodernism at its worst is admittedly much more of a visual catastrophe than modernism which,

at its lowest ebb, resulted in a boring, featureless sterility which can more easily be ignored; although it should be noted that some feel that modernism's post-1950s blight has been enormously corrosive. Prince Charles, Britain's reactionary royal architectural critic, went on record as saying that modernism had done greater damage to London than the bombing during World War II.

Postmodernism, being easy to mimic, is, at its worst, horrifyingly ugly and gruesomely vulgar, particularly in architectural scale. But the opposite is true as well. Postmodernism has been a tonic. Color has flooded back into our lives. Memory has been restored, often with remarkable insight and freshness. Society's love of decoration—seemingly an innate sensibility of the human being—has been revived. Architecture is free to be individualistic again. The concept of beauty is making a cautious re-entry. But finally what makes postmodernism great is that one really cannot generalize about it because it has no singularity or hard boundaries and as a result it can never become the formidable, intolerant, and restrictive academy that grew out of modernism. Its practitioners are too diverse, its theory too broad, its freedoms too boundless to be able to install a regime and police the arts. As Eric Fernie states, it 'represents the principle of no principles'<sup>23</sup> and so it defies centralized theory and dogma. It is a bit like the Internet, limitless in its boundaries and finally impossible to control or regulate fully. It will die its own death at some point, but not just yet. It may well only be halfway through its raucous life. At this moment we are still enjoying many of its fruits. The ceramic ones are documented here, but the movement has also resulted in the current revival of design innovation, the most significant advance in this once becalmed field since 1960.

Then there are those who believe that postmodern is not an independent activity at all, but simply a sub-culture of modernism itself. As Edward Rothstein remarks, 'Is it possible then that the culture is still immersed in Modernism? Po-Pomo may turn out to be just another variety of Mo.'<sup>24</sup> Certainly modernism is resilient and is re-emerging in a traditionally progressive mood in movements

Jeff Koons  
*Pink Panther*, 1988  
Porcelain  
h 54 in., 137.2 cm

such as super-realism, neo-modernism or what Charles Jencks terms 'New Moderns'.<sup>25</sup> This movement is based partly on the concept that modernists were not able to realize fully their aesthetic ideals because the technology of building had not yet matched their ambitions and so the physical realization of their designs was imperfect. Now that there is a wide range of new materials and systems to create seamless, transcendent, and transparent structure, modernism can return in a more ambitious and perfect form.

For ceramics, postmodernism is certainly still laden with unexplored opportunities. It has changed the entire paradigm that once oppressed the medium. As Justin Clemens states in his paper 'Postmodernity, or The Shattering of the Vessels' which he delivered in 1999 at the 'Ceramic Millennium: Leadership Congress for the Ceramic Arts' in Amsterdam, postmodernity has exposed the fact that art was always more dependent on craft than the other way around—'craft was a fundamental *condition* of art—and not simply its aesthetically degraded shadow.' Clemens believes that 'postmodernity has caused a dislocation of both art and craft in which art is de-capitalized and dispersed through new arts such as "video art" and "sound art" while the old arts of painting and sculpture have lost their traditional centrality and legitimacy. Craft based art on the other hand is in ascendancy gaining increasing clarity and relevance within the arts.'<sup>26</sup>

This is an historic opportunity and one which has only been partially seized. 'There is now a chance,' says Clemens, 'for ceramic art (and new practices and poetics) that are not simply submitted to the regimes of technologies for reproduction, nor identified in their essence with the logics of the hand, nor opposed nor subordinated to the dictates of other arts. Ceramics is in a singular situation, at once perhaps the most archaic and genuinely global of all the arts, it...finds itself at the cutting edge of aesthetico-technical innovation.'<sup>27</sup> This moment may indeed be not the apex of a movement, but the thin edge of a new and bold ceramic wedge.

Nowhere is this issue clearer than in Del Vecchio's last chapter, post-industrialism. This is the emerging of a new order in ceramic art. The environmental

term 'ecotone' describes an area where two adjacent ecosystems overlap, say, a wetland and a forest. In a sense this is true of these works where the line between old-fashioned craft and industrial technology meet. It is producing new visions and new processes that draw from the strengths of both. This has been of growing fascination to younger craftspeople, but is now moving out of the margins and is on its way to becoming an aesthetic mainstream for ceramic art.

This book takes a particular view of the postmodern era and the ceramic art it has produced, mainly specialist makers, mainly highly crafted, mainly artists under sixty years of age. It has been assembled by an author who has had remarkable intimacy with this artwork. He and I co-founded the first ceramics gallery to devote itself to a new generation of postmodern artists. This has given Del Vecchio a hands-on contact with the product of two decades of creativity. All too often these surveys are the result of armchair research by authors who know work only through slides. This book is unique because Del Vecchio has personally handled just about every object reproduced in this book, he knows its heft, its scale, and its texture. There are exceptions, but they are few. Most of the pieces have also been part of almost four hundred exhibition installations in galleries, museums, and public spaces which Del Vecchio has designed, lit, and supervised. His reputation amongst artists for the sensitivity of his displays is without peer mainly because he feels that the work of the installer should be invisible and the art itself should dominate. This experience shows in the book in many ways, in the excellent choice of representative images and in the structure of the book itself, which flows with the same structure and logic as an authoritative exhibition—Del Vecchio is sensitive to what objects do and say in proximity to each other and is always striving to reveal as much about the artist as possible. Given this pragmatism and lack of academicism, *Postmodern Ceramics* is likely to be the practical reference point to this movement for decades to come.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Eric Fernie (ed.), *Art History and its Methods* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 351
- <sup>2</sup> Edward Rothstein, 'Modern and Postmodern, the Bickering Twins,' *New York Times* (Saturday October 22, 2000)
- <sup>3</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977), p. 48
- <sup>4</sup> Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 1998), p. 21
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Atkins, *Artspeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present* (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1997), p. 152
- <sup>6</sup> Alan Meisel, 'Robert Arneson,' *Crafts Horizons* (September, 1964), p. 64
- <sup>7</sup> See Garth Clark, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979) and for a revised view of the Super-Object by the same author, *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987)
- <sup>8</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'Reality Again,' in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), p. 120
- <sup>9</sup> Kim Levin, 'The Ersatz Object,' *Arts Magazine* 49 (February 1974), p. 12
- <sup>10</sup> The piece was illustrated in the September 1977 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*. Two letters from Ruth Poris were published in *Ceramics Monthly*, the first in November 1977, p. 7, and the second in March 1978, p. 7
- <sup>11</sup> Howard Kottler, quoted by Elaine Levin in the exhibition catalog *Illusionistic Realism Defined in Ceramic Sculpture* (Laguna Beach, CA: Laguna Beach Museum of Art, 1977), unpaginated
- <sup>12</sup> Letter from Howard Kottler to Ruth Poris, dated March 3, 1978
- <sup>13</sup> Ron Nagle quoted in Barbaralee Diamonstein, *Handmade in America: Conversations with Fourteen Craftmasters* (New York: Abrams, 1983), p. 169
- <sup>14</sup> Ron Nagle in interview with author, May 1999
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Smart Pot: Adrian Saxe and the Post-Everything Ceramics,' in Jeff Perrone and Peter Schjeldahl, *Adrian Saxe* (Kansas City: University of Missouri, 1986), p. 11
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in George Woodman, 'Ceramic Decorations and the Concept of Ceramics as Decorative Art,' in Garth Clark (ed.), *Transactions of the Ceramics Symposium 1979* (Los Angeles: Institute for Ceramic History, 1980), p. 106
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 110

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Fuller, 'Review: Textiles North,' *Crafts*, March/April 1982, pp. 49-50

<sup>22</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 212

<sup>23</sup> Eric Fernie, op. cit., p. 351

<sup>24</sup> Edward Rothstein, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> See Charles Jencks, *The New Moderns: From Late to Neo-Modernism* (New York: Rizzoli, and London: Academy Editions, 1990)

<sup>26</sup> Justin Clemens, 'Postmodernity or the Shattering of the Vessels,' in Dawn Bennett, Garth Clark, Mark Del Vecchio (eds), *Ceramic Millennium: Transactions of the 8th International Ceramics Symposium* (New York: Ceramic Arts Foundation, 2000), p. 83

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.