

## CRITIC'S PICK

## The Met Museum Sees More Clay in Its Future

An abstract painter found his place as a great collector of American ceramics. His latest gift ushers the Metropolitan Museum of Art into the 21st century.

By Roberta Smith

June 13, 2021

Ceramics has come a remarkably long, raucous way since the early 1950s. That's when Peter Voulkos, inspired by Abstract Expressionist painting, upended the medium with an increased scale, ambition and an improvisatory energy that mixed wheel-thrown with hand built forms. Since then, some ceramists — Ken Price to Betty Woodman to Kathy Butterly — have simply assumed their work was part of the mainstream. They and others have appeared regularly in big exhibitions like the Whitney Biennial and they've been taken on by major galleries.

But the mainstream art world is always narrower than it thinks; plenty of ceramists continue to work beyond its borders. Lucky for them, they've had a discerning champion whose devotion can be measured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a robust, riveting exhibition titled "Shapes From Out of Nowhere: Ceramics From the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection." It celebrates this eminent collector's third game-changing gift of clay vessels and objects to the Met — this one honoring the museum's 150th anniversary. A visit can be humbling, but to be humbled is to be enlightened: I knew less than half of the 49 artists in the show.



Some the pieces in "Shapes From Out of Nowhere" exhibition. At top, works by Peter Callas, Margaret Israel and just below, Peter Voulkos, overlook a case holding George Ohr's earthenware creations, glazed and unglazed.

Eric Helgas for The New York Times



Axel Salto's "Royal Copenhagen Vase," from 1945. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VISDA; Eric Helgas for The New York Times

The show's nearly 80 objects — from the gift's total of 127 — come at you from all sides, what with the unexpected contributions from new makers, unusual examples by known ones and, generally, the aggressive, often bulbous, rough-surfaced works that Ellison seems drawn to. More than a few of the objects verge on grotesque and maybe ugly and will push at the limits of your taste, which is always healthy. All told, the show expands the art historical narrative while also distinctly representing the impassioned vision of one person.

Ellison was born in West Texas in 1932, then moved to New York around 1962 and, with no previous training, committed himself to becoming an Abstract Expressionist painter, sticking with it for 25 years. At the same time, he also began buying — purely on instinct — whatever ceramic objects appealed to him as he visited thrift shops during walks around the city. He bought more and more, learning as he went, and realized that many of his acquisitions were of 19th-century American art pottery, after which he began to be more selective, opting for quality over quantity, he said.



At the left, Arnie Zimmerman's "Vapor 1" (1992); Zimmerman's "Bladder, Tongue and Tangle" (1994); Babs Haenen's "Spring Dunes" (1988). At right, center: Aneta Regel's "Gut Feeling" (2017); top, John Gill's "Tall Vase" (1995); front, Amara Geffen's "Potemata" (1991). Eric Helgas for The New York Times

In 2009 Ellison promised some 300 pieces to the Met, much of which went on view that year in the newly refurbished American Wing. All were formally given in 2018. Ellison also branched out into European ceramics from around 1900, mostly French and English, giving the Met more than 100 examples. Then it was on to the 20th-century. Sometime in the 1980s Ellison recognized his growing collection, not painting, as his calling. His is the classic story of the driven, autodidactic collector who becomes an expert and a scholar in his own right. He has contributed a long essay to the book that accompanies the exhibition, which he also published himself. In addition, he photographed all the works reproduced in it.

Coming from abstract painting, Ellison was attracted to artists who favored abstract form over function. His preference was confirmed in an epiphanic moment in 1974, when he first encountered the radically abstract work of the American Arts and Crafts (for lack of a better word) potter George Ohr (1857-1918), which came to light after being neglected for 50 years. Ohr performed his own upending, taking up improvisation in the 1890s, long before Voulkos. He threw dazzlingly thin-walled vessels on the wheel and then twisted and pinched them into sinuous, sometimes beautifully rumpled, often asymmetrical forms; his metallic glazes were also innovative. Ohr's witty, elegant pots — really sculptures — became a touchstone for Ellison; six of them form the heart of this show and are the only works here that he is keeping. But he gave already: 20 spectacular Ohrs are all on view in the American Wing.

The work here concentrates on the postwar period. The earliest pieces in the gift are from 1945 and by Axel Salto, an influential Danish ceramist, well-known in the design world. His fabulously bumpy, folded “Vase” — one of the show’s openers — resembles a priest’s chasuble with a mind of its own. Further into the show, another great Salto vase seems draped in vines, attesting to his love of nature. Another influential nature-lover is Ruth Duckworth (1919-2009), whose “Untitled (Mama Pot)” evokes a gourd with hints of the female body.

The post-Voulkos generation, who largely turned to hand building, is well-represented here: Price and John Mason — who were his students; Rudy Autio, Robert Arneson and others.

The new Voulkos works (three of five are in the exhibition), substantially bolster his presence in the collection, most significantly with a sculpture from 1958 whose piled-together forms and volumes reflect the lessons of Abstract Expressionism. It is fittingly titled “Untitled (Chicken Pot)” — and the pot seems to be losing. The Met is getting one of the best Arneson pieces I’ve ever seen: his tribute to a Minoan octopus vase from around 1960, which depicts the elusive creature in storm-tossed bas-relief and avoids the artist’s usual corniness. It’s an unfortunate mystery there’s no mature work by Price, but the early one, from 1957, is beguilingly prescient.

More recent arrivals, like Butterly and Elisa D’Arrigo, favor thin-walled, manipulated pieces that take their tips from Ohr. Aneta Regel, who was born in 1976 and is the youngest artist in the collection, favors emphatically rough-surfaced organic forms and blazing colors. In this presentation — expertly selected and installed by Adrienne Spinozzi, an American Wing curator — more than half of the artists are entering the Met’s collection for the first time. An example is the formidable John Gill, whose hand-building technique results in geometric planes that almost seem chopped from wood.

In some cases, Ellison chose examples of an artist’s career from different periods, as in the case of three impressive pieces by Peter Callas — a former Voulkos assistant — from 1994, 2002 and 2016, each crusty and delicate in its own way. Arnie Zimmerman is represented by a kind of nautical monster from 1994 titled “Bladder, Tongue and Tangle.” I’ll take his “Light Green Tangle,” from 2013, which holds its own beside Salto’s vine-covered vase in one of the show’s best vitrines. Also here are Margaret Israel’s “Vessel,” a shallow basin thrillingly supported by little more than unspooling, ribbonlike tendrils of clay, and Howard Kottler’s “Chalice” (1965), thick-lipped, with a footed base that twists, something like a heavy robe winding around its royal wearer.

Some pieces tumble and churn, like Cristina Carver’s “Rottolocus,” Gary Erickson’s “Sobornado” or Anne Marie Laureys’s “Cloud Unicus” — which all live up to their distinctive titles. Three works by the Japanese artist Kyoko Tonegawa internalize these pressures, resulting in smooth, if leathery, misshapen spheres with open, searching maws. They might be bodily organs, animal-hide water bags or blind worms.

Another group treats the vessel like an irregular canvas, applying flashy glazes in brush strokes, daubs or pours of color, among them the Americans Lynda Benglis and Susanne Stephenson; Alison Britton and Gareth Mason, who are both British and Babs Haenen of the Netherlands. Some pieces look to be on the verge of collapse, like Ewen Henderson’s mound of a vessel, which might be made of patches of burlap. In contrast Raymon Elozua’s three pieces (from 1987, 1991 and 2001) seem to explode, their colorful shards of ceramic held aloft by constructions of wire or rods, with the most recent piece apparently designed on a computer.

And finally, a few pieces stand tall, silent and symmetrical, like witnesses or icons, most notably Kate Blacklock’s “Cross Your Heart” and Syd Carpenter’s “Deep Roots” and “Familiar Figure.” Similarly restrained, but only a few inches high, is Mary Rogers’s pale cylindrical “Folded Form.” Its thin porcelain walls suggest Ohr, but are turned in on themselves, like a flower bud set to open.

By now Ellison’s gifts to the Met number over 600 clay objects, divided largely among three groups. Each has in essence opened new collecting territory for this great institution. Unlike the first two gifts, this latest act of generosity leads the museum into the living future.

### **Shapes From Out of Nowhere: Ceramics From the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection**

Through Aug. 29 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.