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# CO-LECTURE: INNOVATIONS IN CALIFORNIA CLAY

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## Introduction

Many think ceramic history in the San Francisco Bay Area began in 1959 with Peter Voulkos's appointment to the University of California–Berkeley; or with Funk artist, Robert Arneson, whose work at University of California–Davis redefined fine art mores. Their transformative contributions stand, though the history requires further inquiry. California proffered a unique environment through geography, cultural influx, and societal flair, creating opportunity for experimentation that achieved broad expression in the ceramic arts.

Today, artistic clay use in California is extensive. Its modern history began with the 19th century discovery of large clay deposits in the Central Valley, near Sacramento. This find coincided with the growth of cities like San Francisco and Oakland, creating an expanding market for clay pipe and architectural adornments. Settlers from the Pacific Rim, Mexico, and other states carried varied clay practice into California. Simultaneously, a nature-inspired style was emerging on the West Coast. Sociopolitical changes caused by World War II brought practitioners whose European backgrounds infused a broader sensibility into the region's ceramic practice. Also, many artists were introduced to ceramics through the United States G. I. Bill.<sup>1</sup> With the unleashing of artistic experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s, clay's creative possibilities seemed limitless. Since then, California's artistic amalgam, especially that of Northern California, has been a point of departure for ceramics that are vessel-based, architectural, sculptural, conceptual, and contextual installation. This pluralistic scope makes clay one of the most versatile and expressive materials for three-dimensional art. California's multicultural society and inventive sensibility prompted a dynamic era of artistic innovation while celebrating a varied vessel tradition.

## Artistic Clay Origins of California

A combination of influences fostered the environment in which ceramics prospered during the 20th century. Northern California sits on extensive clay deposits. Many are located at the juncture of the Sierra Nevada Mountains with the Central Valley that was once an immense inland sea. Clay reserves were discovered by Midwestern entrepreneurs visiting the region in the 1870s.<sup>2</sup> As they traveled back roads, often crudely cut through hillsides, they discovered an abundance of clay, and manufacturers like Gladding, McBean in Lincoln, California, were established. This abundant cache initiated the drive for industrial clay use, leading to the adornment and sheathing

of urban buildings—first with architectural terra cotta and then with Art Deco tile.

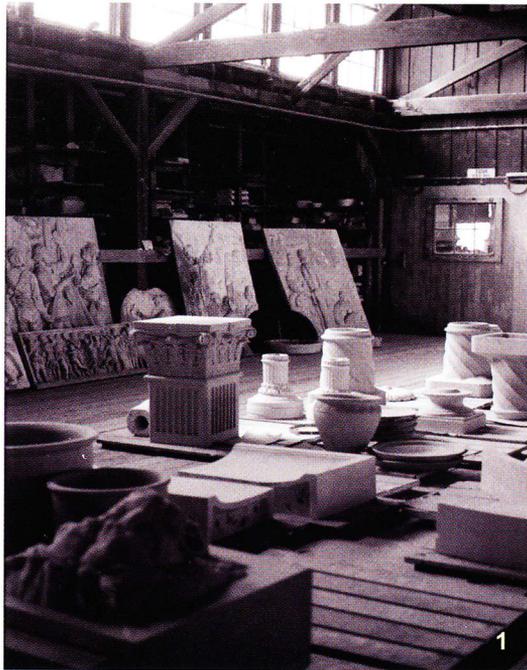
California's diverse history served as the foundation for its unfolding cultural pluralism. Mexico claimed territory through large land grants given to retired military officers in the mid 19th century. Current cities and regions are namesakes of Spanish explorers. Missionaries arriving from Mexico brought the culture of adobe and Spanish tile with them. Overland travelers migrated west in pursuit of wealth and opportunity, including those wanting to establish European-style potteries. Workers from China mined and built railroads, indicative of California's direct connection to Pacific Rim cultures and the extensive ceramic presence they represent. The late 19th century perception of California as a "Valhalla" was heightened through the imagery of artists, like Albert Bierstadt's breathtaking, though somewhat embellished, scenes of Lake Tahoe and Yosemite, including *Among the Sierra Nevada, CA*, 1868. Such imagery fueled California's sublime mythology that continued into the 20th century.

California's identity as a realm of grand nature underscored much of its cultural image, and also illustrates its departure from East Coast artistic practice. Artisans participated in the late 19th century–early 20th century Arts and Crafts Movement, yet California's distance from eastern cities fostered a freedom of interpretation linked more with nature than with social benefit. For example, Roblin Pottery of San Francisco (1898–1906), produced simple forms with solid glazing adorned with regional lizard-like fauna. Its contemporary, Stockton Art Pottery (1896–1900), retained a Victorian aesthetic similar to potteries in the Midwest.

A cultural turning point was the devastating 1906 earthquake and ensuing fire that destroyed much of burgeoning San Francisco. Shattered artistic communities dispersed, moving to nearby areas of Berkeley and Oakland—where the California College of Arts and Crafts began—or further away to places like Carmel. This tragedy fostered opportunity to rebuild a world-class city in the West.<sup>3</sup> Civic leaders rallied to compete as the site for the 1915 World's Fair that they successfully won.

## Widening the Lens

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) of 1915 beautifully asserted the identity of Northern California and the Bay Area as a Mediterranean arcadia, as is illustrated by the still-standing rotunda designed by noted California architect, Bernard Maybeck (1862–1957). The PPIE served as a cultural



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**California Clay:** **1** Contemporary (1997) image of historic Gladding, McBean in Lincoln, CA. This company devised architectural terra cotta and tiles for many cities in California and the USA. Its main factory was located near extensive clay reserves near Sacramento. **2** Viola Frey in her studio, Oakland, CA, 2001. Photo: Nancy M. Servis **3** Antonio Prieto and Shoji Hamada with Hamada's family at Mills College, Oakland, CA, ca.1952. Prieto attracted many artists to the Bay Area through ceramics. He and his wife, Eunice, amassed an extensive collection, donated to the college. Robert Arneson was one of his students. Photo: Private collection. **4** Stephen DeStaebler: *Seated Figure with Right Striped Arm* 78x14x29" Pigmented stoneware, surface oxides, ca.1984. Sculpture located in front of DeStaebler's studio, Berkeley, CA. Photo: Nancy M. Servis **5** Clayton Bailey in his studio, Port Costa, CA, ca.2002. Photo: Nancy M. Servis. **6** Richard Shaw demonstrating his decal and screen printing techniques, Davis, CA, ca.2008.

draw for the Harlem Renaissance artist, Sargent Johnson (1888–1967), whose work included sculpture, enamel painting, pottery, and murals, contextualizing him within California’s latent Arts and Crafts Movement while also positioning him as one of the region’s budding modernists. As early 20th century potteries developed, like the medicinally driven Arequipa Pottery (1911–1918) in Marin County and art potteries like California Faience, Berkeley (1915–1959), urban areas constructed buildings adorned with architectural terra cotta and later, Art Deco tile. Oakland’s Cathedral Building (1914), is sheathed in Gothic Revival embellishments and is reminiscent of New York’s Flat Iron Building. Nearby is the Paramount Theater (1930) with its soaring exterior figurative large tile façade.

**Bay Area as Cultural Ferment**

In a recent interview, Jim Melchert recalled a comment by the painter, R.B. Kitaj, who was once a visiting professor at UC–Berkeley. He equated the region to a migratory stopover for artists, poets, and other creative progenitors, infusing it with acute artistic ferment.<sup>4</sup> Antonio Prieto, for example, came to California in 1916 as a young boy from Spain, sailing around Chile’s Cape Horn. The industrious Bauhaus-trained potter, Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985) arrived first to New York from Europe to escape the Nazi invasion of Holland. Within three years of her arrival in California, Wildenhain established Pond Farm (c. 1943–1985), an artists’ colony and pottery located 80 miles north of San Francisco.<sup>5</sup> Edith Heath (1911–2005) was another ceramics innovator who founded Heath Ceramics in 1948 after her solo pottery show at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor Museum. Heath developed wartime clay and glazing practices that were economic—like single kiln firing at lower temperatures to save energy. Her resourcefulness led to an enduring line of utilitarian ware and tile that still thrives today. Later, artists were drawn to Northern California by the active presence of Peter Voulkos as was true for Jim Melchert.<sup>6</sup> Clayton Bailey (b. 1939) moved from Wisconsin to get involved with the irreverent coterie of funk artists.

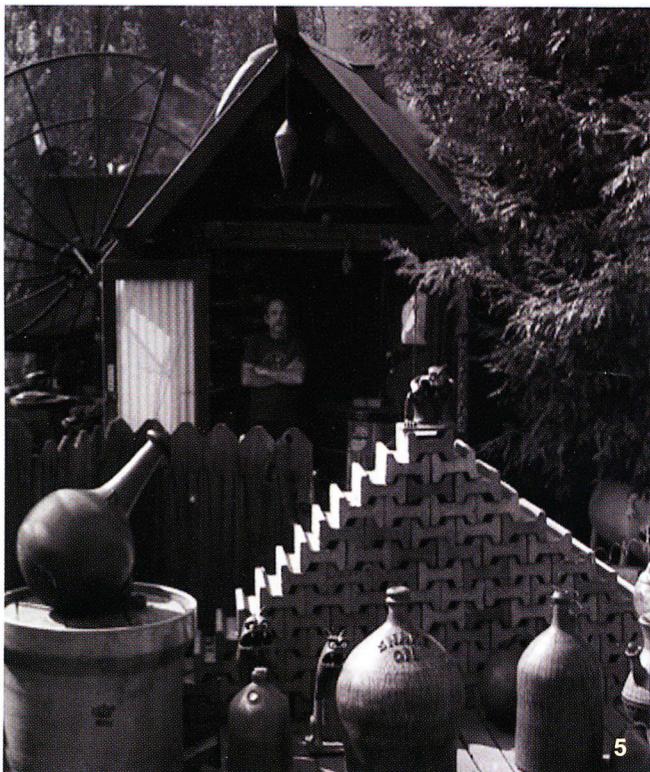
While migration is an influential driver of California’s cultural history, many of those with noteworthy contributions

to ceramics were born in the state. Native Northern Californians include F. Carlton Ball (1911–1992) who founded the San Francisco Potter’s Guild, Robert Arneson (1930–1992), Annette Corcoran (b. 1930), Viola Frey (1930–2004), and Ron Nagle (b. 1939) to name a few.

Efforts to elevate California ceramics occurred during the 1950s with Prieto’s attendance at the International Conference of Potters and Weavers at Dartington Hall, England in 1952. This meeting coincided with the well-known tour by Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada to the United States that included a visit to Oakland’s Mills College. The First Annual Conference of American Craftsmen in 1957 occurred at the Julia Morgan-designed conference site, Asilomar near Monterey. Makers from multiple disciplines gathered with some ceramicists in positions of leadership.<sup>7</sup> Designer/Craftsman exhibits took hold at venues like the Richmond Art Center, north of Berkeley. In 1946, Rayer and Leslie Toki opened a pottery in San Pablo called Leslie’s of California, which quickly evolved into the best regional source for clay, glaze, and molds. A goal of Leslie’s was to support artists in their unique endeavors that often led to innovation of technique. For over 60 years artisans like James Lovera (1920–2015), Beatrice Wood (1893–1998), Robert Arneson, Peter Voulkos, Stephen De Staebler (1933–2011), Viola Frey, Clayton Bailey, Sandy Simon, Kimpei Nakamura, Jun Kaneko (b. 1942 Japan) and MC Richards (1916–1999) were all patrons.<sup>8</sup>

**Role of Academia**

The notoriety of colleges and universities in the 1960s squarely rests on the fermentation that occurred the decade before. Independent makers like Heath and Wildenhain, along with the fundamental strides achieved by the Ceramics Guild at Mills College, set the stage for non-conformist artists like Montana-born Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson to advance new ideas. The California College of Arts and Crafts was where many of these formative artists studied. Viola Frey taught there for over three decades while devising unparalleled towering figurative sculpture. At San Jose State University, Herbert Sanders (1908–1988) established the ceramics department in the 1930s, fostering ceramic excellence through his technique-



Finneran's ring-like and mounding installations, assembled using thousands of hand-rolled curved clay rods, reference Bay Area grasslands.

These select artists represent a small cross-section of those actively working in the creative ceramics realm. As the cyclical discussion of craft versus art periodically reappears, its impact has waned here. Northern California's innovative use of such a versatile material as clay leads to pioneering artistic practice today.

1 Peter Voulkos discovered ceramics at Bozeman State College, Montana where he was studying on the G.I. Bill.

2 Gary Kurtz, *Architectural Terra Cotta of Gladding, McBean* (Sausalito, CA: Windgate Press, 1989), 89.

3 Large terra cotta clay deposits in Niles, owned by Mission Clay, provided the clay for making bricks that helped rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake that leveled the city, as noted by Bryan Vansell, General Manager of Mission Clay.

4 Nancy M. Servis interview with the Jim Melchert on April 8th, 2013, Oakland CA.

5 In 2014, Pond Farm was named to the National Register of Historic Places.

6 Nancy M. Servis, "Jim Melchert—Works of Resonance," *Ceramics: Art & Perception* #100 (2015): 88–93.

7 In attendance were F. Carlton Ball, Edith Heath, Betty Feves (1918–1985), Vivika Heino (1910–1995), Antonio Prieto, Daniel Rhodes (1911–1989), Peter Voulkos (1924–2002), Marguerite Wildenhain, and Eleana Netherby.

8 The business soon moved to San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley where it remained until its transfer sale in 2015. For a further discussion of the impact of Leslie Ceramics in the Bay Area, see *More Than Clay: The Toki Collection of Ceramics*, 1994 by Nancy M. Servis.

9 John Toki notes that it was also during this time that Peter Voulkos was spraying some of his work with black Krylon enamel spray paint and the advent of epoxy glue made joining ceramics a boon for sculptors.

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**John Toki**, MFA, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA, is an internationally renowned ceramicist, known for monumental scaled totemic sculptures. He is an educator and co-author of three highly regarded books, including *Hands in Clay*, 5th edition and *Make it in Clay*, 2nd edition.

based books, especially regarding crystalline glazes.

Much is known about the impact these artists made on students, the regional artistic community, and beyond. Their synergistic activity inspired artists like Marilyn Levine (1935–2005), Stephen De Staebler, Richard Shaw (b. 1941), Beverly Mayeri (b. 1944), James Melchert (b. 1930), Ron Nagle (b. 1939), Tom Rippon (1954–2010), and Kazuye Suyematsu (b. 1938). Notably, some artists ignored material divisions during the 1970s when the Bay Area's Conceptual Art movement prospered. Innovative exhibitions like Melchert's *Lower Case* a show at the San Francisco Art Institute intermingled conceptual ideas with clay. Judy Chicago's feminist installation piece, *The Dinner Party*, premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, and John Roloff burned large sculptural kilns as outdoor events.<sup>9</sup>

## Coexistence: Innovations and Traditions

This brief discussion illustrates the diverse societal, geological, and cultural conditions through which the trajectory of clay use in Northern California prospered. Practitioners from around the world as well as residents engaged in a unique evolution of artistic thought and practice, resulting in concurrent efforts of artistic pluralism. Elegant vessel interpretations using nature continue with the work of Annette Corcoran. Sandy Simon amplifies her commitment to pottery through her functional-ware and gallery, while Ehren Tool employs the vessel as anti-war commentary within the gift economy. The mysterious figurative evocations by Arthur Gonzalez blend symbolism with dream-like imagery, while Calvin Ma renders steampunk depictions of relational creatures. Annabeth Rosen defies traditions completely to engage in disciplined yet brut practices resulting in groundbreaking sculptural work; Jos Sances ascribes to the tradition of social activism through his large-scale, hand-painted and silk-screened ceramic tile murals; Ron Nagle continues to excel sculpturally as his once vessel-referenced small sculptures have attained pure abstraction. Finally, Bean