

# Honoring the Past Embracing the Future

AMOCA'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION by Kathleen Whitney

The exhibition, "Honoring the Past, Embracing the Future," which was on view last year at the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) ([www.amoca.org](http://www.amoca.org)), located in Pomona, California, provided a panoramic overview of the history of ceramics. It featured over a century's worth of functional, sculptural, and commercial ceramics viewed through the lens of 323 objects drawn

from the museum's extensive holdings. The objects exhibited represent an extraordinary community of donors, artists, and supporters. AMOCA is a unique institution and the exhibition mirrored its founding principles, its special place in the ceramic world, and its extraordinary contribution to the cultural life of Southern California.





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1 Installation view, grid-wall display in the “Steeped in History” section of the exhibition. 2 Japanese blue-and-white platter, 30 in. (76 cm) in diameter, 19th century. 3 Patti Warashina’s, *Woman with Birds*, 7 ft. 10 in. (2.3 m) in height, low-fire clay, underglaze, glaze, 1991. 4 Paul Soldner’s *Untitled 227*. 5 Robert Sperry’s *Untitled*, approximately 27 in. (68 cm) in diameter.

ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ART.

AMOCA was founded in 2004 by David Armstrong, a Pomona-based businessman with an MFA in ceramics from the Claremont Graduate School where he studied with Paul Soldner. The museum’s stated mission is to “champion the art, history, creation, and technology of ceramics through exhibitions, collections, outreach, and studio programming.” Beth Ann Gerstein, the museum’s director, notes that AMOCA is the only institution in the US that is entirely devoted to the total breadth of ceramic

practice. It has a resource collection, the Helen and Roger Porter Resource Library, a fully equipped ceramic studio, gallery spaces devoted to work produced by contemporary artists, and a fervent commitment to educational outreach.

AMOCA’s collection contains over 7000 items representing international examples of industrial design, historical objects, contemporary sculpture, and functional objects. These holdings, donated by over 40 artists and collectors, consist of historically significant objects



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from four continents whose chronology spans the 19th through the 21st centuries. Robert and Colette Wilson donated one of the largest collections, 3400 examples of late 19th- and early 20th-century Villeroy and Boch/Mettlach ceramics. Another 400 works came from the American Ceramic Society in Westerville, Ohio. This collection is named for Spencer Davis, founder and former publisher and owner of *Ceramics Monthly*. David Armstrong's contemporary ceramics form the heart of the collection, including a spectacular three-lobed vessel by Bennett Bean. Frieda Bradsher, a California artist and collector, bequeathed more than 215 works of mostly contemporary American pottery to the museum. One of the most recent acquisitions was from Californian potter Bill Burke; his bequest includes works by British potters, Chinese artifacts, and works by his Californian peers. Local collector Jodi Siegler contributed a number of works that are featured in the anniversary exhibition.

In order to do justice to the scope of the AMOCA collection, curator Jo Lauria developed five thematic categories that cut across time and space and allowed her to celebrate cultures, individuals, and anonymous makers. The objects were inventively installed without regard to chronology or geography in groups that focused on universality of subject matter or form. Lauria worked with the

architect Erin Kasimow on an installation that married presentation to conceptual organization. Lauria's diverse selections embodied an array of contrasts, the abstract and the figurative, the intimate gesture and the big statement, the global and the local, historic and contemporary, traditional and avant-garde, industrial and handmade. Lauria cut straight to the heart of what is most essential when looking at objects: content, aesthetics, and context.

"Global and Cross Cultural," the section that introduces the exhibition, is one of the most richly complex of Lauria's selections. The first object was an enormous 19th-century Chinese blue-and-white platter that features scenes from daily life. The pieces that followed made a geographic leap to investigate the types of ollas developed by indigenous people (American Indian and Peruvian potters) and the Mexican villagers of Mata Ortiz. Most importantly, the viewer was introduced to the extraordinarily cross-cultural nature of contemporary ceramics. The global influence of *Mingei*, Japanese folk art, was demonstrated in objects produced by Shoji Hamada (Japan), Bernard Leach (UK), Warren MacKenzie (US), and Jeff Oestreich (US).

This section segued to "The Old Guard, the Vanguard & Masters of Their Medium," a selection of pieces that created a dialog between the work of 20th- and 21st-century potters. The section was both

concise and encyclopedic. It dramatized the enormous scope of studio ceramics that have been produced over the past 75 years beginning with artists like Otto and Vivika Heino, Otto and Gertrud Natzler, Lucie Rie, and Hans Coper. Among these vessel-oriented works were those by artists involved in the mid-20th-century American Clay Revolution (California Clay movement), sculptors Paul Soldner, John Mason, Jim Leedy, and Peter Voulkos. These artists, the vanguard of their time, have become the old guard, giving way to artists such as Jennifer McCurdy and Cheryl Ann Thomas who have extended the definitions of material use and blurred the boundaries between art and craft.

Teapots, cups, pitchers, and ewers were presented in the “Steeped in History” area and displayed in ways that emphasize an astonishing variety of decoration, tactility and function. This section featured a display of Yixing and Yixing-influenced teapots. It also included the most spectacular portion of the exhibition, what Lauria refers to as the “wall of wow.” This immense, open-gridded unit displayed nearly one hundred small objects and vessels that included a Picasso vase, an Akio Takamori cup, a Villeroy and Boch vessel, a Rose Cabat *Feelie*, and a Susan Peterson bottle. It was an encyclopedic display of over 100 years of experimentation with functional and sculptural forms.

The last section, “Soulful and Embodied,” was a diverse grouping of figurative works that included Rudy Autio, Patti Warashina, and two enormous 19th-century Mettlach platters, each bearing a glaze-painted portrait. There was also a small tray full of Judy Moonelis heads. A related section, “Menagerie” featured many objects that employ animal imagery—not the least of which was a large, colorful Viola Frey platter featuring an upside-down horse.

The category of ceramics represents an unwieldy field of objects. The triumph of this exhibition was that it liberated this field from art-historical conventions that often distort the content, history, and meaning of ceramic objects. Lauria and AMOCA produced an exhibition that displayed the richness of ceramic history. The objects in it were freed up to fully demonstrate a range of aesthetic values while also showing how various makers worked to create new aesthetics and identities. The visual conversation at play between these objects documented the strategies that gave these sculptures and vessels form. Ultimately, the exhibition revealed the non-linear trajectory studio ceramics have taken to arrive at our wildly diverse, historically inflected present.

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**6** Mettlach double portrait platters, 34 in. (86 cm) in diameter, ca. 1895. **7** Jennifer McCurdy’s vessel, wheel-thrown and carved porcelain. **8** Jeff Oestreich’s untitled vase. **9** Teapot wall, detail view of installation. **10** Viola Frey’s large platter, 26 in. (66 cm) in diameter, earthenware, 1998. **11** Bennett Bean’s triple vessel on base, 34 in. (86 cm) in length, earthenware. **12** Judy Moonelis’ *Head Tray*, 24 in. (61 cm) in length, 1995.



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