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EARTH AND FIRE: CERAMICS FROM THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

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EARTH AND FIRE:

Debbie Masuoka, YELLOW RABBIT HEAD, 1989, ceramic, 53 1/4 x 40 1/2 x 15 in.

CERAMICS FROM THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

SIXTH ANNUAL SHELDON STATEWIDE TOURING EXHIBITION

Robert Arneson
1930-
BRICK MULTIPLE
1976, ceramic
4 1/4 x 8 9/16 x
2 5/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1991.H-2966 and
H-2967

These rectangular clay shapes, stamped with the name ARNESON, are the 42nd and 43rd in a series of 50 made by the artist in 1976. *Brick Multiple*, suggesting an abstract type of portraiture, implies a relationship with an earlier work by Arneson entitled *Fragments of Western Civilization* in which a brick ruin is scattered over a large space. Many of these bricks bear the imprint ARNESON, while others are marked BRICK and VIRGO, the artist's birth sign. Arneson suggests that even the most recent and substantial construction will in time decay, but nonetheless, in the wreckage the most enduring signs will be the brick and the artist's mark.

David Gilhooly
1943-
FROG BANANA-
SPLIT SUNDAE
1983, ceramic
7 x 8 1/2 x
3 3/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1984.H-2725

This light-hearted ceramic concoction in a commercial glass dish is part of a series in which the artist developed a personal frog world mythology. Gilhooly said, "The frogs celebrate all I saw as fun in our world." The clever creature in this work seems to have decorated himself with food and is posing for our amusement. The artist was a student of Robert Arneson, whose work is also included in this exhibition, and he was one of the primary figures in the California Funk Art Movement. The intention of the Funk artists was to challenge our perception of the world by putting familiar objects in an unfamiliar context, thus challenging traditional definitions of art.

Rick Dillingham
1952-
POLKA DOT POT
1974, earthenware
11 in. d. x 11 1/2 in.
UNL-Charles Merrill
Trust
1975.U-1287

The shape of this earthenware pot, brightly patterned with two shades of orange polka dots, is indicative of the artist's study of Native American techniques and traditions. Dillingham collected Pueblo pottery as a young man, an interest which led him to study Anthropology in New Mexico. He is the author of several books and articles on the subject of Native American ceramics. This globular earthenware vessel tapers to a slightly raised mouth. The clay body is painted matte white and colored with evenly spaced orange dots and accented with green on a portion of the pot. How do the decorative colored spots enhance the shape of this vessel? How might we compare Dillingham's pot with Helen Naha's "Hopi Jar?"

Grueby Pottery
Company
VASE
c. 1899-1903
ceramic
12 3/4 x 10 x
6 3/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1985.H-2739

Grueby pottery was completely handmade and in production for only a decade, but during that time it became a popular alternative to the more traditional high-gloss glazed pieces of Rookwood and others. An outstanding example of the high quality and uniqueness of American art pottery, this Grueby vase, attributed to designer George W. Kendrick, displays the famous cucumber or watermelon rind shade of dark green and the matte finish that made Grueby earthenware distinctive. Grueby directed the art pottery movement away from painted ware toward vessels emphasizing form and ornamental glazes.

Margaret Furlong
1946-
LANDSCAPE SLAB
n.d., ceramic
4 x 12 1/2 x
17 1/2 in.
NAA-Gift from the
Men's Luncheon
Series
1976.N-546

Nebraska-born artist Margaret Furlong created this abstract clay painting to reflect her dual interest in ceramics and watercolors. Use of the word "landscape" in the title enhances our understanding of the subtle earth tones and horizontal bands of color, suggesting land and sky. Close scrutiny reveals the artist's manipulation of the clay slab surface with impressed lines of varying width and direction. Furlong's landscapes are not literal reflections of nature but do reflect her appreciation of the land. In an historic sense, the artist's work provides a link with the past and representations of animals drawn by human hands in a cave in Lascaux, France, dated to the Ice Age, 37,000 to 12,000 years ago.

Tony Hepburn
1942-
PLATEAU #9
1980, ceramic and slate
22 x 20 1/4 x 2 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1991.H-2978

Hepburn's circles within a square slab, emphasized by a slate triangle, suggest an aboriginal compass, or perhaps a plan made by early humans for marking an area of land. The artist has acknowledged an affinity for pre-historic sites, such as Stonehenge. In *Plateau #9* we see minimal forms as well as evidence of the Abstract Expressionist concept that the making of art is as important as the object itself. In 1981, Hepburn was one of the first artists invited to hold a workshop at the Omaha Brickworks (a working brickyard that allowed artists to take advantage of their facilities), which led to the eventual development of the Bemis Foundation in Omaha.

EARTH AND FIRE: CERAMICS FROM THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

EARTH AND FIRE: CERAMICS FROM THE SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY, the sixth annual Sheldon Statewide exhibition, is a diverse selection of ceramics made in America during the past 100 years. From delicate Victorian vases to commercial ware of the early twentieth century and contemporary sculptural works, this comprehensive assembly truly offers something for everyone.

Though EARTH AND FIRE addresses the American contribution to the ceramics tradition, clay vessels and figures have been formed by nearly every culture since the beginning of civilization. These objects, made of the very earth itself, were not only utilitarian, but also often ritualistic, or created for purely aesthetic reasons. The earliest American ceramic objects - pots and jars from the ancient Southwest - date from about 850 AD through the late Pueblo eras. With the coming of the Europeans, more and more types of ceramic vessels were introduced to this country.

Included in EARTH AND FIRE are works by eccentric artist George Ohr whose work of the early twentieth century was unknown to the art world until the recent past. The art potteries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are represented by examples from the Rookwood and Grueby studios. The art pottery movement laid the groundwork for the establishment of an American ceramic tradition. The ensuing decades, up to mid-century, saw the emergence of characteristics that can be identified as peculiar to ceramics produced by Americans. During the last forty years these qualities have been more fully defined, most particularly in the works of those artists who were involved in and who have benefitted from the "revolution" in ceramics that took place after the second world war. Notable among these are sculptural ceramic works by masters such as Peter Voulkos, Tom Rippon, Peter Shire and Richard Shaw. EARTH AND FIRE also includes works by Nebraska ceramicists Gail Kendall and Margaret Furlong. Today American ceramics, once a stepchild of other cultures, is strong enough to influence many of those cultures on which it once depended.

As the art museum of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery staff is committed to making the exceptional permanent collection available to all Nebraskans. The Sheldon Statewide exhibition program realizes that goal by circulating art of the highest quality to communities throughout the state. Each Sheldon Statewide exhibition addresses an art historical genre or theme, and together the six exhibitions constitute a mini-art history course and a unique focus on the Sheldon Gallery's renowned collection. As the exhibition series continues, the relationships between diverse artworks are increasingly apparent.

While many staff members contribute to the year-long preparation of each exhibition, we are especially appreciative of the efforts of the Community Programs Coordinator, Nancy Dawson. Ms. Dawson has authored the notes which accompany these photographs, and she has trained innumerable volunteer docents to conduct local tours in each host community. We also thank Curatorial Secretary, Karen Williams, for her thoughtful design of this brochure.

The Sheldon Statewide program succeeds in large part due to the continuing support of the Nebraska Art Association, a non-profit corporation dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Of particular importance is Chancellor Graham Spanier's support of the Community Programs Coordinator position. We also appreciate receiving generous grants from the Virgie Schepman Outreach Grants Program and from the Nebraska Department of Education in support of docent training.

Equally invaluable are the many local sponsors who support the exhibition in their respective communities. Their appreciation of both the immediate and long-range goals of the Sheldon Statewide program is especially meaningful. Their generosity has enabled tens of thousands of fellow citizens of the state to encounter works of art of the highest quality.

Perhaps the most important component of this collaborative venture is the dauntless effort of the many volunteer docents in each venue. Their willingness to receive often complex information and disseminate it to the school children and adults of Nebraska is the vital link that binds together the Sheldon staff, the supporters, and viewers of each statewide exhibition.

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Commercial vase,
decorated by
Lydia Weckbach
1872-1930
VASE WITH IRIS
1914, ceramic
5 1/2 in. d. x 12 in.
UNL-Extended loan
from the UNL Anthropology Department
1985.L-12-85

Peter Voulkos
1924-
PLATE
1973, stoneware
18 1/2 in. d. x
3 3/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1984.H-2726

Lincoln artist and china painting teacher Lydia Weckbach decorated this slip-cast porcelain vase in 1914. Long stems of hand-painted purple iris extending from the base enhance the distinctively shaped handles of the vase. The shape of the vase and the applied decoration blend gracefully in the Art Nouveau tradition that features curvilinear shapes based on plant forms. China painting, once associated with Victorian ladies painting flowers on teacups, became popular in America in the latter part of the 19th century. Predominately women, these aspiring American artists were advised to decorate an object to "bring out the beauty of the form."

Peter Voulkos was successful in developing a new language for American ceramics in the late 1950s. Initially a painter, Voulkos discovered an interest in ceramics, which led to early recognition for his innovative work. Declaring that "there are too many rules and too little freedom," Voulkos created with a vigor that negated the vessel's function, demonstrated by cutting holes in the wall of a large bowl. Voulkos made surface rips, filling some with wads of porcelain, as seen in the plate in this exhibition. The plates were sprayed with a thin, clear low-fire commercial glaze - a deliberate rejection of centuries of glaze research . By the late 1960s, the plate, thrown and altered, emerged as the artist's primary form.

Gail Kendall
1944-
VESSEL
1987, ceramic
18 x 23 1/2 x 11 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1989.H-2886

Gertrud Natzler
1908-1971
Otto Natzler
1908-
YELLOW BOWL
n.d., ceramic
4 in. d. x 3 5/8 in.
NAA-Gift of Emma
Baegl
1977.N-545

Brilliantly colored and dramatically shaped, this vessel was hand built upside down from thinly rolled slabs of clay. The artist, a faculty member of the UNL Department of Art and Art History, constructs functional, utilitarian objects from low-fire clay bodies, multi-fired with opaque and transparent glazes, overglazes and lusters. Kendall says she loves things that sparkle (snow, water, sequins) and we see evidence of that in the areas of high-gloss glaze and small, jewel-like shapes of *Vessel*, that provide contrast with the incised matte surface. Kendall's interest in sculptural vessels includes soup tureens, candelabra and serving pieces influenced by European ceramics of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Gertrud and Otto Natzler emigrated from Vienna in 1938, driven by political tensions which erupted into World War II. Gertrud's exceptional ability at the potter's wheel and Otto's glaze technology opened doors to the ceramic community in southern California where they settled. Together they created elegant vessels in traditional, classic style, incredibly thin and sumptuously glazed. Gertrud Natzler said, "In pottery, form is content." *Yellow Bowl* displays the purity of form and glorious coloration inherent to the Natzler aesthetic. Of interest are four slight indentations evenly spaced in the slender walls of the bowl and the intriguing interior ridges.

Debbie Masuoka
1957-
YELLOW RABBIT
HEAD
1989, ceramic
53 1/4 x 40 1/2 x
15 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1990.H-2940

George Ohr
1857-1918
BROWN DISH
n.d., earthenware
4 1/2 in. d. x 2 3/8 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1975.H-2359

This large, enigmatic creature, whose eye seems to follow us as we move about, has been described as having both iconic and sacred qualities, reminiscent of large ancient sculpted heads found in Central America and Mexico. Surface indentations show the mark of the artist's hand as she manipulated the clay to create a textural pattern and the suggestion of "fur." Masuoka constructs these rabbit heads from long coils of clay, 1 1/2 to 2 inches thick, pinched to about 3/4 inch thickness, or thinner, but still thick enough to show the imprint of thumb marks. As a student at Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1986, Masuoka began the series of rabbit heads which are still evolving.

Unquestionably the most innovative potter of his time, George Ohr, the self-styled "Mad Potter of Biloxi," was not understood or appreciated by his contemporaries. Of his first memorable experience with a kick wheel, Ohr said, "When I found the wheel, I felt it all over like a wild duck in water." He became a genius at the wheel, developing pieces of incredible thinness, and always taking full advantage of the characteristics of the clay. Ohr's pieces were regarded as grotesque in his day, but are seen now as "masterpieces of delicacy and restraint," while his richly textured and idiosyncratic glazes are considered some of the most beautiful ever created.

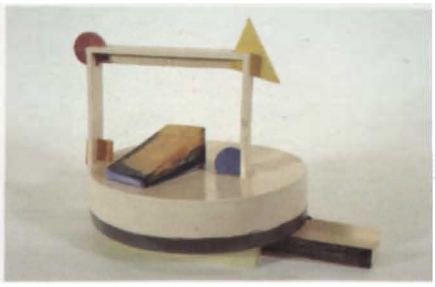
Helen Naha
20th C., life dates
unknown
HOPI JAR
n.d., clay
7 3/4 in. d. x 4 in.
University Collection
1991.U-4390

Pablo Picasso
1881-1973
CERAMIC PLATE
n.d., Madoura ceramic
10 1/8 in. d. x 7/8 in.
UNL-Gift of Harold
Diamond
1961.U-355

Noted Pueblo potter, Feather Woman (Helen Naha), specializes in whiteware. Firing the white clay is difficult since the pots require an extra hot fire. Designs on the Naha family pots are derived from ancient black-on-white designs, discovered on a pot found when Helen's husband was plowing a field near their home. After the pots are formed, layer after layer of white slip is applied until it is "eggshell thick" and only the last layer is polished. Naha admonished her daughter, Sylvia (this generation's Feather Woman), "Never leave anything out, in your finish or your process. Sand and polish as far as your fingers will reach." The intricately decorative design of Naha's jar is organized in a neat well-ordered pattern and painstakingly polished.

Picasso's ceramics, begun in 1946, were inspired by an exhibition of local potters' work discovered while the artist was vacationing on the southeast coast of France. For a time the artist dedicated his heart and soul to the production of ceramic pieces, but what was a major love eventually became a minor interest. Intending his plates for decoration rather than domestic use, Picasso worked on them quickly, not stopping until he had made several hundred pieces. This Picasso plate typifies the slightly elongated square shape with rounded corners, which he made famous. The glossy white shapes applied to a black matte surface suggest figures dancing on the back of a crocodile, loosely confined within the border design.

Robert Rauschenberg
1925-
R.F.D.
1972, ceramic
18 1/8 x 23 x
5 1/4 in.
UNL-Gift of Carl and
Jane Rohman
1992.U-4427



Peter Shire
1947-
TEAPOT
1977, ceramic
7 3/4 x 10 1/4 x
7 1/2 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1978.H-2250

One of the paragons of postwar American art, Robert Rauschenberg had no exposure to art until he was seventeen. Since the early 1950s his work has included a wide range of media, reflecting the aesthetic complexities of the last half of the 20th century. Saying he "wanted to work in the gap between art and life," he dissolved boundaries between art and nonart. A noted art historian has stated that he has "a love for the world's throwaways and his concept of art-making is an unending salvaging process in which the refuse of life is continually absorbed into the refuge of art." Rauschenberg has made large collages and constructions out of corrugated boxes, relying on subtle differences in the material as well as printing, shipping labels, binding tapes, line and shadow to create interest.

This fanciful sculptural object, not intended to be utilitarian, is a playful combination of geometric shapes and bright colors with an architectural use of clay. *Teapot* shows characteristics of Minimalism in which the artist reduces the work to bare-bones essentials. Shire has taken a familiar ceramic form and disregarded its traditional function, giving it a completely contemporary expression. Shire is a sculptor and furniture maker whose ceramic work is stylistically akin to his furniture.

Rookwood Studio
UNTITLED
n.d., ceramic
7 1/4 in. d. x 15 in.
UNL-Extented loan
from the UNL Anthropology Dept.
1985.L-15-85

Ron Taylor
1943-
GUMBALL
MACHINE
1972, ceramic
12 3/4 in. d. x
24 3/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall
Collection
1973.H-1766

The Rookwood Pottery, established in Cincinnati in 1880, was one of the most important and productive in the art pottery movement. Founded by wealthy socialite and avid china painter, Maria Longworth Nichols, Rookwood attracted attention in the press, primarily because of the novelty of a woman entrepreneur. At Rookwood, men and women shared equal creative freedom in the decoration of the wares, and the importance its women artists enjoyed is part of what has made it legendary. The vase in this exhibition, though it is undated, was made sometime after 1904 when a new matte glaze called "Vellum" was developed. This allowed production of subjects in detail, such as the beautiful sunset scene depicted in shades of blue and coral by decorator Fred Rothenbusch.

One of a series of six ceramic "gumball machines" made in 1972, the object in this exhibition is unique with its brightly-colored orange base. The artist, a graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute, is a ceramicist, tile muralist and teacher as well as owner and manager of a commercial pottery business. *Gumball Machine* is exaggerated in size, its top filled with glass "gumballs," the brightly-colored base accented with shiny metallic glaze. Taylor has employed the Pop Art style of the 1960s that derived its imagery from popular, mass-produced culture, focusing on familiar objects of daily life.

Richard Shaw
1941-
MRS. PARTCH
n.d., ceramic
37 3/4 x 9 3/4 x
15 3/4 in.
NAA Collection
1984.N-665

Unknown
TREE OF LIFE
CANDLESTICK
n.d., ceramic
17 x 13 x 4 in.
UNL-Gift of the
Mexican Government
1975.U-4426

Mrs. Partch, a great favorite with Sheldon Gallery visitors, appears to stride forward to greet us as we note with amusement her tin can head, "handle" hands, and ball of twine torso, supported by stick and racquet handle legs. She is, in fact, constructed of meticulously crafted porcelain casts which have been subjected to multiple firings and complex glazing processes to create the illusion of whimsically composed junk. The artist, Richard Shaw, was a leader in the Super Object movement that outdistanced Funk in the early 1970s. In the trompe l'oeil tradition, Shaw has created the humorous and appealing figure of *Mrs. Partch*, bringing to mind the proliferation of used and abandoned objects in our throwaway consumer society.

Representative of ceramics from the region of Metepec, a major pottery center southeast of Mexico City, this candleholder depicts a Mexican craftsman's version of the Biblical pair who gave life to humanity. The figures of Adam and Eve flanking the serpent are surrounded by bird, flower and leaf forms attached by heavy wire to the central tree form. An angel hovers over the figures, and a representation of the Creator is in a primary position at the top of the *Tree of Life*. A high-gloss black finish covers this figurative piece that exemplifies the extraordinary works from the hands of these creative Mexican potters.

EARTH AND FIRE:
CERAMICS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

Sheldon Statewide Program Schedule

York • **October, 1992: The First National Bank**
Local Sponsor: The First National Bank of York

McCook • **November, 1992: High Plains Museum**
Local Sponsors: Cattlemen's Consulting Service, First National Bank, McCook National Bank, AmFirst Bank, Red Willow Animal Clinic, Howard Kool Motors, Inc., Cornbelt Chemical Company

Norfolk • **December, 1992: Norfolk Arts Center**
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Nebraska City • **January, 1993: Morton James Public Library**
Local Sponsor: Kropp Foundation

Grand Island • **February, 1993: Grand Island Public Library**
Local Sponsor: Arts in Education Committee

Beatrice • **March, 1993: Gage County Historical Museum**
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Local Sponsor: Columbus Art Gallery Exhibition Committee

North Platte • **May, 1993: The Mall**
Local Sponsors: First National Bank of North Platte, North Platte National Bank, North Platte Telegraph, United Nebraska Bank

Cozad • **June, 1993: The Robert Henri Museum**
Local Sponsor: Cozad Arts Council

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
THE NEBRASKA ART ASSOCIATION

Nebraska Arts Council

The Nebraska Arts Council, a state agency, has supported all the year's programs of this organization through its matching grants program funded by the Nebraska Legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. A portion of the museum's general operating funds for this fiscal year has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency that offers general operating support to the nation's museums.