

THE CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS MOVEMENT IN HAWAII

Shige Yamada

Under the patronage of Hawaiian royalty, the arts of ancient Hawaii flourished, reaching great heights. Skilled artisans produced ritual, domestic, and ornamental objects unsurpassed in Polynesia—until the early part of the 19th century when the various *kapu*, societal prohibitions, were abandoned. Without the *kapu* system, which ruled every aspect of island life, the traditional culture collapsed. Hastening the demise of this fragile society was the arrival of large numbers of missionaries, merchants and laborers from Europe, America and Asia who settled throughout the island chain, irrevocably altering what remained of the indigenous culture. Finally, in 1893, with the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by a group of dissident Americans, a tragic yet colorful period in the history of Hawaii was brought to an end. Half a century later, with the coming of World War II, the turbulent forces of change generated by global conflict engulfed America and swiftly transformed these languid islands into a major Pacific crossroads. The great sweep of the pendulum towards modernization drew everything in its wake, including art. New York City, which became the cultural

capital of the world with the fall of Paris in 1940, acquired much national prominence in art. The growing potency of modern art, manifested in part by an increasing acceptance within art circles of the New York School, was felt even in Hawaii by the tiny art community which then included a few painters, printmakers and sculptors.

The Beginning of the Contemporary Ceramics Movement

The years from 1947 to 1950, with the sudden emergence of significant ceramic art in the Islands, were particularly eventful ones in Hawaii's art history. During that period a small group of art majors pursuing ceramics at the University of Hawaii were accomplishing remarkable achievements in clay to the astonishment of the conservative art establishment in Honolulu. With their teacher, Claude Horan—the primary catalyst in those pivotal years of the ceramics movement—these students made such an impact on island art that public attention was drawn to this hitherto obscure craft. Their experimental work with ceramic materials and bold departures from traditional modes of working with clay aroused the art community from its quiescence and brought about,

somewhat abruptly, controversy and spirited dialogue. This marked the beginning of the contemporary ceramics movement in Hawaii. Later, Peter Voulkos was to lead a similar movement in California which played an important role in the contemporary crafts movement which swept the country.

When Claude Horan came to teach ceramics at the University of Hawaii in 1947, he started with severely-limited facilities. Ceramics was a new course offering at the University and an empty World War II military barrack served as a classroom. A bouyant and enthusiastic young potter trained in the tradition of pottery-making in California and Ohio, he transformed the "shack" into a functional ceramics studio complete with potters' wheels and kilns. Within two years he attracted a group of students with superior talent. Among them were Toshiko Takaezu, Alice Kagawa Parrot, Anna Kang Burgess, Wade McVay, Harue Oyama McVay and Isami Enomoto. Igniting the creative drive of his students by encouraging them to experiment with both form and materials, they soon burst out of the rigid cocoon of the tradition-bound craft. Exceeding everyone's expectations and excited by the development of modern art in New York, the students were driven to

innovate. They boldly sliced open conventionally-thrown pottery forms and recombined them to produce unique forms which expressed a fresh vision. The potential of wood and metal, in combination with clay, was explored. These explorations resulted in well-integrated multimedia sculpture and pottery uncommon at the time. Local resources—including wood, cane, and volcanic ash—were tested in the tiny studio laboratory for their value as glaze materials. In this atmosphere, where an anemic craft was undergoing rejuvenation, it seemed that anything was possible.

One day, when Horan threw a completely-closed form on the potter's wheel, the implications suggested by such an accomplishment were not lost on the students for whom another door flew open. What was once a simple pot, a container, had been subtly transformed into sculpture by merely closing a tiny aperture at the top. Before them sat a non-utilitarian form which was inherently an object for visual contemplation—sculpture. This fundamental concept had barely been digested by the students before they too were throwing closed forms. It must be remembered that at the time, pottery-making was a clearly circumscribed activity not to be confused with the "loftier" aims of art. Sculpture, for example, was art; pottery-making was definitely not! being accorded, instead, the status of a craft. Such a difference, delineated by the often provincial mentality of art cognoscenti, was essentially an academic one deeply-rooted in historical prejudice. Fortunately, this did not deter the students from using clay and ceramic materials beyond conventional limits. Throughout the country, the eternal verities in art were being questioned seriously by younger artists seeking new directions. In the work of such

leading exponents of modern art as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, they found something that turned them on. In 1948, ceramics major Wade McVay exhibited "Prolatus," a closed ceramic form, at an art show at the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

PHOTO BY THE ARTIST



PROLATUS Wade McVay

This glazed, egg-shaped sculpture was greeted with outcries by a number of enraged visitors to the exhibition. In a letter-to-the-editor appearing in a Honolulu daily, an observer snickered that he had "a chicken in (his) backyard (which could) produce the same thing by the dozen—and without any hands." A respected painter on the University faculty coolly remarked that the "closed wheel-thrown form was inappropriate to the craft of pottery-making and could not actually be considered legitimate sculpture." An art reviewer, more sympathetic to innovation, welcomed the unexpected intrusion of the egg-shaped sculpture in an otherwise staid art exhibit and compared it to the works of Brancusi—probably to the chagrin of local practitioners of "fine art." And so a lively public debate con-

tinued for a while over what would be considered commonplace ceramic sculpture today. Thus, in 1948, with no known precursor in the country, "Prolatus" became an important milestone in the developing ceramic art of Hawaii.

In the intervening years, we have seen the emergence of many other ceramists whose creative energies and phenomenal productivity have impressed an unusually receptive public. The names of island ceramists Shugen Inouye, Henry Takemoto, Sally Fletcher Murchison and Charles Higa have become as familiar as those of prominent local painters and sculptors. The ceramic bandwagon has filled to overflowing, spilling ceramists onto all the major Islands who are producing pottery and ceramic sculpture in staggering quantities to feed what appears to be the public's insatiable appetite for ceramic art. In the heat of present-day competition, with numerous ceramists striving to carve a small niche for themselves, it is timely to ask, "Where have all the old-timers gone?"

By the late Fifties, Toshiko Takaezu, Anna Kang Burgess and Alice Kagawa Parrot had acquired national reputations in the crafts field, having moved to the Mainland after leaving the University. Toshiko, now a resident of New Jersey, is one of the country's leading ceramists, while Alice and Anna are nationally-recognized weavers who have made New Mexico their home. Isami Enomoto, who directed his interest to commercial and architectural ceramics and who collaborated with internationally-known muralist Jean Charlot on several major ceramic projects, is the owner of the state's leading ceramic firm, Ceramics Hawaii. Wade McVay, creator of the controversial "Prolatus," entered the field of business management in Honolulu shortly after he earned a master of arts degree in ceramics

from Ohio State University. In 1952, Horan (now retired) was joined on the University faculty by one of his most outstanding former students, Harue Oyama McVay. More than any other local ceramist, her imagery in clay reflects the creative mind of an artist attuned to her time and Hawaiian environment. In 1978, the Honolulu Academy of Arts invited this prominent artist-teacher to exhibit recent works in the museum's 28th annual exhibition, "Art Hawaii"—finally giving Harue public acknowledgement. Her contributions in the field of ceramics span more than two decades and form a major cornerstone in the state's ceramic tradition. Hawaii's contemporary ceramics movement is clearly traced through her.

A Potter of Hawaii

Harue, daughter of Japanese immigrants, grew up in the Pawa'a section of central Honolulu of the Thirties and Forties. An atypical individual, her youthful experiences were fairly typical of the *nisei*, second generation Japanese, growing up at the time. She describes, with nostalgia, the era of her childhood, a transitional period in which many of Hawaii's most well-known artists grew up.

"I was raised in a part of Honolulu where there were few homes. Now the area is filled with high-rises. There were many Chinese in my neighborhood who raised truck crops. There were also extensive clumps of wild shrubbery and pastures where cattle freely grazed. When I was a child attending Lunalilo Elementary School, I had to take a path near the grazing cattle. I was so deathly afraid of them that whenever I had to pass near any cow, I would take off my shoes and run for my life. At school, my classmates were largely children of Japanese immigrants. Now, when I drive past the school, I am fascinated by the sight of all the different colored hair of

the kids there—blond, black and every color in between. Such a contrast from my childhood days when the classroom was a sea of black hair. Eventually, my parents transferred me to Maryknoll School because they felt that I was not receiving enough homework from my public school teachers. Maryknoll, a parochial school, had a reputation for giving out lots of homework. My parents were determined to see me receive a good education and decided that I needed to study as much at home as I did in school. When I entered my teens, I had to attend a Japanese school after my regular English school hours to learn not only Japanese, but such feminine skills as flower arranging, hand-sewing, and how to walk properly in tabi, Japanese slippers. I resented this type of rigid, disciplined activity even though I knew that it served a useful purpose in my education. When I attended Roosevelt High School, I took two years of art from a very nice teacher. The instruction was not the sort one might encounter in an art program today, but I enjoyed the experience which whetted my appetite for art. I had the good fortune of having parents who were always supportive, especially in my education. Having an uncle in Japan who was presumably a fine musician, a biwa player, probably had something to do with their willingness to accept my eventual decision to pursue ceramics in college—even encouraging me to study art more broadly in order to become a better artist. Throughout my high school years, and even when I entered the University of Hawaii, I was always being steered into taking science and math courses by well-meaning teachers and administrators because I did well in those subjects. The truth is I always hated those courses and felt I had no choice but to endure them. In spite of this form of professional guidance, I still managed to fit in a few art courses in my first two years of college—which I found more satisfying than the required courses. Then, in 1948, during my junior year I heard about Horan and the terrific ceramics program so I enrolled and was hooked from the start. A whole new world opened up for me. Nothing I ever studied could compare with ceramics. It was like

Christmas day whenever we had a kiln opening. Unfortunately, I also experienced something very unpleasant that year. I was stunned when my friends from high school who were in college seeking degrees in education or sociology, the "in" disciplines then, became quite cool and later avoided me altogether when I informed them that I was going to major in art. I was puzzled by their behavior towards me and could only surmise that they regarded art as a frivolous activity for empty-heads. Being rejected by my former friends did not change my mind because by then I knew what I wanted—a career in art."

After graduating from the University of Hawaii, Harue continued her training in ceramics at Ohio State University where she received her master of arts degree. Returning to the Islands in 1952, she joined Horan as an art instructor at the University. She has, since then, earned the respect of students who see her as a warm, generous and dedicated professor of art. Fellow ceramists regard her as a master potter whose works are eloquent reminders of Sung pottery, which she has long admired. Her thrown forms—bowls, compotes, vases—are of classic proportions. They are subtle, relaxed, and glazed with rare skill and restraint so that form and clay retain their integrity and are not overwhelmed by distracting color or meaningless surface decoration. In contrast, her ceramic sculptures are freer, bolder forms full of whimsy. If a lump of clay could be planted in the ground as one might a seed, then the resulting growth from the soil might resemble Harue's ceramic sculpture—organic shapes which have a kinship to the luxuriant plant life of Hawaii. Unswayed by fads, novelties and sensationalism which

proliferate in art, Harue continues to work in a highly-personal style with calm assurance in a media she has become to know very intimately. Her unpretentious work in ceramics carries a breath of life seldom witnessed in contemporary art. Paradoxically, her deep affinity for clay developed into a source of frustration for her some years ago, and prevented her from crossing an important threshold as an artist. Only recently did she resolve her dilemma.

"I have this great desire to work with lights. They're sculptural forms suspended in space emitting a glow quite difficult to describe, but I can imagine them distinctly. I wish I could fabricate what I've already conceived in my mind, but where am I going to find the right materials to fabricate it? No, I haven't given up clay. I love working with clay and I probably always will, but that's been part of the problem. I've worked with clay for such a long time it's probably coming out of my ears. Occasionally, I'd have these red-hot ideas for sculpture where clay just wasn't the right material to use, but for years I just adjusted my ideas and pruned them to fit the working properties of clay simply because I was habituated to clay and didn't want to work with any other material. Sure, I've done some work with metal-casting, resin, wood and glassblowing in order to grow as an artist and to break out of my mold, my one-media habit. These explorations clarified some thoughts for me in that it made me acutely aware that the materials I work with should only be a means to an end, and that my ideas are more important. This sounds quite obvious, I know, but I've been wrestling with this problem for a long time. Reaching a decision to change, and then internalizing it has been quite traumatic for me. Now that I've finally made a clean breast of it, I've acquired a sense of freedom. For me, it's a fresh beginning which I feel will lead to my best work."



Harue McVay at work on sculpture commissioned by the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, 1980

Observations

The ceramics students at the University of Hawaii thirty years ago belonged to the fine growing tip of the contemporary ceramics movement in America which, within less than twenty years, peaked and leveled-off into a broad, lusterless plateau. Directions in style and technique set in motion more than a decade ago continue to be perpetuated and perfected by numerous second and third generation ceramists who have firmly established a new American ceramic tradition. Despite the tremendous ongoing activity in the medium throughout the country, the impetus to innovate lacks the vigor of earlier times. Although evidence

of creative fatigue in the field is discernible, there are ceramic artists with a strong desire for continued growth as creative individuals who are responding to the fresh challenge posed by new technology, materials, processes and ideas. In this trend, there is reason to believe that ceramic art may be launched into promising new directions—bringing about, again, a regeneration of the art.

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