

OUR HISTORY

An Essay from the Jane Hartsook 25th Anniversary Exhibition Catalogue By Victoria Thorson

Greenwich House Pottery, founded in 1909, has been involved in developments in American art and ceramics throughout the 20th century. In the first half of the century, the Pottery was located in what is now the main building of Greenwich House, Inc. at 27 Barrow Street in New York City. The arts programs and the social services of Greenwich House were vital to this settlement house's mission to support the whole human being. Classes in ceramics, music, and local theater productions encouraged individual artistic expression and helped to create a sense of community for many area residents. But the Pottery's classes also provided training in a marketable skill--the potter's craft.

Greenwich House Pottery, like Pewabic in Michigan, Rookwood in Ohio, and numerous other art potteries across the country, was an essential part of the Arts and Crafts movement supplying unique, hand-made work as a viable alternative to the encroaching mechanization of industry. Trained ceramists emerging from the Pottery's classes formed the Greenwich House Potters and Sculptors. This group produced art pottery pieces with a distinctive blue-turquoise glaze that were hand-built or wheel-thrown following

prototype forms or that were unique, one-of-a-kind creations. Pieces won national prizes, such as the Chicago Art Institute Prize of 1924, and were collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Newark Museum in New Jersey. Commissioned works included the terra cotta pots used by the Garden Club of America and white enamel-glazed garden urns for J.P. Morgan in 1929. These orders came through the contacts of Maude Robinson, the Pottery's director from 1911 to 1941, or through the uptown store at 755 Madison Avenue established by the Pottery.

Contributions in 1929 from patrons Marshall Field, Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and numerous others helped to lay the Pottery's foundation for the second half of the century. These funds were used to purchase a new electric kiln--"the largest of its kind"-- and were added to the building fund for 16 Jones Street, the cornerstone of which was laid in 1928, as a school for apprentice training of community boys in woodworking and stone carving.

Due to its leadership, reputation, and broader purpose as a school and ceramic arts center, Greenwich House Pottery was among the small number of art potteries that survived the Depression and World War II. Greenwich House, Inc.'s other craft areas were not so fortunate, and in 1948, Jane

Hartsook, the Pottery's director from 1945 to 1982, expanded the pottery program by taking over the 16 Jones Street building.

With a knowledgeable and generous Virginian manner and an MFA in ceramics from Alfred University, Jane Hartsook led the Pottery through an exciting period of expansion and change, from the post-war period when she observed "quite a contest of people coming through the pottery" who needed access to a clay studio, to the Pottery of today, an internationally recognized ceramic arts center. A ceramic artist in her own right, she did not impose her own view but created an environment that encouraged the major dialogue of her time, a re-evaluation of the vessel tradition versus more strictly functional work. She sought to "bring in the individual to establish a philosophy" by providing work space, teaching opportunities and, as we celebrate in this anniversary exhibition of the gallery named after her, a place to exhibit.

The foremost voice in ceramics when Jane Hartsook began at the Pottery was that of Bernard Leach, a point of view that emerged near the end of the Art Pottery movement. Pat Stetson, the Pottery's director from 1941 to 1942 and Maude Robinson's apprentice in the late 30's, watched the transition. Stetson recalls: "When Bernard Leach wrote *A Potter's Book* in 1940, I was beginning in pottery. That was the only book that was

published, I think, for a studio potter. For a lot of people it was their bible. We would always try to make the glazes like Bernard Leach's. Of course, it was very much influenced by the Japanese and Chinese pottery and glazes."

Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada marked their influence with a short visit to Greenwich House Pottery during their American tour in 1952. In 1920 they had established Bernard Leach's pottery in St. Ives, England, and by the 40s their influence in ceramics was felt worldwide. Bernard Leach was considered "perhaps the most renowned potter living." (Time magazine, 1959). The style at the Leach pottery was based on the strong, unpretentious shapes and simple browns and earth colors of English country pottery. This was combined with Asian influence in brush work, spontaneity, Eastern forms and glazes, and an esoteric sense of a restrained, ideal beauty called *shibui*.

Greenwich House Pottery continued to experience the Leach tradition through successive years. Primarily, Leach's influence was transmitted through his former apprentices--Warren MacKenzie who lectured and gave a demonstration to the Pottery's community in 1981 and in 1992, and Byron Temple who had been his apprentice in the early 60s and returned to work as Leach's "eyes" in 1978/79 when the master potter was nearly blind. Temple's teaching at Greenwich House from 1970 to 1972 stressed the

harmonious balance of utility and aesthetics evident in his work later exhibited at the Pottery in 1976. In 1963, Temple started his own pottery in Lambertville, New Jersey where he produced functional work which included a distinctive saltglazed ware created through his innovative, salt-dust firing in saggars that resulted in a wavy ribbon of light around his pots. In addition, Bernard Leach's philosophy was presented to students in 1974 through a film shown of him working at the wheel. In 1978 his son, David Leach, gave a demonstration and returned again in 1987 with his son John, who has continued the family tradition.

Greenwich House Pottery was also coming to terms with the enormous impact of Peter Voulkos when he first began to teach at the Pottery during the summer of 1960. Just a few months earlier, Voulkos' work was included in the Museum of Modern Art's "New Talent" exhibition and was reviewed by Dore Ashton in the New York Times. She described his over-life-size ceramic sculptures as "taut, irrepressibly full forms..." and asserted that Voulkos "considered by many to be America's most original potter... now proves himself to be a naturally gifted sculptor and painter." Voulkos sliced, pushed through and pounded the clay with tremendous energy, unleashing a force and magnetism unprecedented in clay. His point of view and his method of dynamic improvisation in a media well suited to gestural impression blurred the distinction between sculpture and pottery.

Jane Hartsook recalls: "It was Rose Slivka [editor of Craft Horizons magazine, now named American Craft] who... brought Peter Voulkos to the Pottery in 1960. And it was Peter who finally put us on the map." Voulkos continued to give three more memorable workshops in 1961, 1962, and 1964, creating works that are illustrated in Rose Slivka's 1978 book on Voulkos, as well as included in the Greenwich House Pottery Permanent Collection.

Short trips to New York City starting in 1951 and longer periods facilitated by his time teaching at Greenwich House Pottery, enabled Voulkos to connect with the New York School, to both absorb and give back to the art community: "It was a chance to come to New York...I'd just work and teach there [at Greenwich House Pottery]... I began to know a lot of other artists there, like painters and sculptors--that was very important to me... [Cedar Tavern] was the watering hole, that's where I would run into all those guys. Franz Kline, he had a stool at the end of the bar...I went to his studio, he invited me up... A couple of them would try and make some work, like Ray Parker...I tried to get these artists interested in clay, they'd all come from a different point of view...artists, musicians...poets. Before I was there, Louise Nevelson was making animal forms down at Greenwich House. Pretty

amazing. Then I met her...she'd watch a demonstration, didn't seem that interested but it hit...I ran into her later when she told me."

Voulikos' abstract improvisation in clay, his breaking the containment of the vessel, as well as the actual presence of his pieces, all had an impact on Tony Hepburn, when he came to teach at the Pottery in the summer of 1970, his first teaching job in the United States: "I remember going out into this courtyard [at the Pottery]...there were two or three Voulikos pieces...I had vaguely seen some work by Abstract Expressionists but very little, so to make a connection between that and clay..[as in the work of] Voulikos and Mason...was hard. In England my teachers had been Hans Coper and Lucie Rie, and it was a very definite view. Of course, there was 'chance' but not to the same degree ...This physical engagement was unlike anything I had ever seen..." Furthermore, Hepburn was staying with Joseph Kosuth on Grand Street: "At that time, Kosuth was just beginning to formulate ideas about his position on conceptualism. I spent the evenings with him in this kind of minimalist loft. Then I'd come to the Pottery and teach and work. There was kind of a dual thing going on in terms of the concepts within which my work developed...Kosuth and Voulikos, the same country."

Hepburn credits Jane Hartsook with bringing him to the US: "from that summer here, I never really found my way back." The result was an

integration that he calls his "mid-Atlantic mind." Later, two exhibitions at the Pottery show the evolution of Hepburn's work. In 1978 titles like "Slats," "Cone", and "Dome Mapping" were given to pieces put together from varying-sized clay slats, some askew, some abutting glass sheets. This work tests concepts, such as placement, location and the security given by containment walls. Hepburn's 1988 work combines real objects with fluid clay compositions that reference the clay process and object's function.

Hepburn points to Robert Turner as another guiding force among potters and clay artists: "Once I semi-digested Voulkos, then I met Turner... The degree of interaction that Turner has with his pots is so spiritual and quiet..He is able to look in a way that I have never seen anybody else do...His looking and listening level is of such a high order it's beyond most of us." Jane Hartsook invited Turner to the Pottery for an exhibition and workshop in 1977. An unglazed, wheel-thrown jar and a vase which remain in the Pottery's collection from that workshop are incised, marked and altered with a subtle intensity. Turner explains: "For me clay became a medium of mutual forming--of the clay and me, an interchange. That process challenges and can alter thinking and perceptions, about us and the world."

Another deeply felt presence, from her long tenure as a teacher at the Pottery from 1958 to 1987, was Margaret Israel. She was involved with

primitive sources, especially Etruscan, Egyptian, Mexican and American Indian pottery. As early as 1957, her work appeared on the cover of *Craft Horizons*, and in 1978, the year before her one-person exhibition at Greenwich House, it caught the attention of Hilton Kramer. In a *New York Times* review he recognized the poetic sincerity of Israel's style, apart from prevailing minimal currents: "Not for her the stripped down, cerebral look of so much contemporary art. Sensuous, evocative, full of recognizable images...her method is to anthologize her own favorite images, and this involves mixed-media..sculpture, painting, ceramic, fabric constructions...the hungry eye seizes whatever it adores." Besides the tumult of stacked objects like dishes, beads, and animals, her work encompasses spare geometric forms, which double as torsos or moons, some pierced with black holes. The holes "have a function--to hold dark air," according to Israel's comments at the time, adding irony and poetic allusion to issues of function.

Stanley Rosen began at the Pottery as Studio Manager and teacher in 1956, two years before Marge Israel. Rosen describes that period: "There was a different dimension at this time.. you have to think of the Pottery as a place that was located in the Village...[it] still had the remnants of a bohemian art world." Rosen taught for four years, then returned for a one-person show in 1970 with modular clay sculpture, clay flats rising to mesas within a square

format. The artist worked "through a kind of basic unit, in which I take myself into a more objective posture, by picking up the clay, focusing on it...almost with a Giacometti-like intensity, and setting it up in a compressed unit going into a square...I think it has a lot to do with Rothko."

Rosen's inclusive view of history is also a concern of Don Reitz who feels that: "What we've forgotten to let people know is why you can do the things you're doing now. It's because of the people who came before you. You need to know your history." Reitz went through a period of dramatic self-discovery evident in his 1987 Greenwich House exhibition in which he showed colorful slip-painted slabs conveying: "What is important--spirit, energy, and what we know prior to our five-year-old mind." These subconscious markings are carried over into his current large scale, saltglaze vessels which are based on a vocabulary of form from an earlier period of his work.

In the Greenwich Village of the 50s, Val Cushing saw the Pottery as a magnet, although the exhibition of his sophisticated, functional work was to take place there much later in 1986: "When I was drafted in 1952 during the Korean War, I was stationed at Fort Dix...I would get on a bus, go up the New Jersey Turnpike to the Port Authority. I'm talking 1953, and I can remember this so well. I'd walk around the Village, and I'd heard of Jones

Street through Charles Harter at Alfred...we all heard about Jane as someone who had studied there [at Alfred] and gone on to do work that we were all interested in...It was just such a refreshing thing to me, especially being in the army, to see people doing what I wanted to do when I got out. That was my first real connection with Greenwich House...That sense of what it represented, and I didn't even realize at the time how few opportunities there were in Manhattan to participate in clay."

Bruno LaVerdiere, a Benedictine monk and artist in residence for fifteen years at St. Martins Abbey in the Seattle area, came to New York in the spring of 1965 and "was looking for a place to work in clay...difficult in the 60's. I knew about Greenwich House through Craft Horizons magazine. Jane Hartsook invited me on as a resident artist and in the fall offered me a job teaching." Hartsook remembers LaVerdiere building "large coil pieces...tooling with an old rasp or heavy saw blade to perfect his form..." Leaving New York City for an isolated Adirondack studio, the evolution of his style as in his crypt-like monoliths, "Sacred Vessel" group (1972-76), and monumental ceramic arch (over 7 feet high in Hadley, NY), was reflected in work shown at his 1978 Greenwich House exhibition.

Jane Hartsook's invitations to teach, give workshops or exhibit opened up possibilities for many artists who came to the Pottery, as well as the ceramic community who experienced their point of view. Viviko Heino, whose early teaching year 1946/47 came at a crucial, formative time for the Pottery, Ruth Duckworth, who gave a workshop in 1975 and Jun Kaneko, who also gave an exciting workshop in 1986, are a few of the artist alumni who have made important contributions to the Pottery and to the ceramics field. Betty Woodman's 1978 lecture at the Pottery showed the ebullient fluidity of her basket-inspired forms and revealed her interest in Chinese and Italian sources, as she was among the early modern potters to reinvigorate an earthenware tradition. Her participation in the Pottery's 1992 "A Vase for Flowers" exhibit brought viewers up to date on the development of her shaped-slab vase--a color field of interlocking segments that boldly contour space. James Makins, who had apprenticed at Byron Temple's pottery, became a teacher at Greenwich House early in his career (1969-71) and returned to teach from 1977 to 1978. Makins' functional porcelains record his most delicate impressions, pressure variations as finely tuned as a great draftsman, while his overall forms stretch out as part of a geometric continuum or pass through as they relate to a counterpart form. Makins explains his intention: "[to make] an object that was to be used and that could abstractly manifest a sense of one's person and the spirit of the time in which we live."

The focal point the Pottery provided is remembered by Rudy Autio. Teaching in Montana and visiting his friend Peter Voulkos in California, he heard of the Pottery during the pivotal 50s and 60s period: "He [Voulkos] was very impressed by all the activity down at the Cedar Tavern, all the Abstract Expressionists he met, de Kooning and others. So I had some very glowing kinds of impressions of what New York and Greenwich House Pottery was about." At the time, Autio's freewheeling slab-built and painted vessels, encircled with the spirited images of women and horses, gave him recognition with a 1962 gold medal in Prague and a Tiffany award the next year. Consistently innovative work, along with a desire to get to New York, brought him to the Pottery to give workshops in 1978 and 1984 and for a 1980 exhibition: "We had a feeling...that once you got to New York that this is where it's at, this is where the action is, this is where the collectors and the knowledgeable people live."

Over the years, shared themes and common threads linked a great number of students, artist faculty, and visiting artists. They found a prized haven in the midst of New York City to which they gave immeasurably of their creativity. The Pottery was also fortunate to have 30 years of Maude Robinson's leadership (1911-1941) in the first half of the 20th century and 37 years of Jane Hartsook's during the second. In responding to their times,

they assured the Pottery's growth while forging its reputation as an internationally known ceramic art center. The value to society of continuity in an arts institution is perhaps best described by Robert Turner, when he reflected: "Visual and tactile literacy becomes more needed than ever in our culture. The overriding importance of Greenwich House Pottery is commitment--committed teachers and accessibility in the city, a focus for those serious about the ceramic medium. Such a place becomes uniquely important."