

# The Robert Ellison Ceramics Collection

at the Metropolitan Museum of Art  
in New York City

MARC LEUTHOLD

SHAPES  
FROM  
OUT OF  
NOWHERE

Ceramics from  
the Robert A. Ellison Jr.  
Collection



An unusual thing happened on February 22, 2021 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art – New York City's largest and most renowned museum. Curator Adrienne Spinozzo opened the exhibition, *Shapes Out of Nowhere*, Ceramics from the Robert A. Ellison Collection. The "Met", as it is locally known, is one of the few museums in NYC that occasionally supports contemporary ceramics. In 1999, the Met hosted *Clay into Art* and an exhibit of Lucie Rie's and Hans Coper's work. Uniquely, a few years ago, they organized a solo exhibition of Betty Woodman's artwork in the very same room as the current exhibit. And not surprisingly, Woodman has one of her signature pillow pitchers on view in this exhibit. The pitcher, *Sea of Japan* made in 1985, is exceptionally lyrical.

The exhibit at the Met consists of 125 objects from the collection of Robert A. Ellison. Ellison, born in Texas, came to NYC in the 1960s to become a painter. While painting, he also collected – initially American Art Pottery. Many painters like Ellison and Jasper Johns discovered modern ceramics through the brilliantly eccentric 19th century potter George Ohr. Ohr created primarily thrown vessels that were more sculptural than functional. Throwing clay extremely thin, he deliberately collapsed his work into folded forms that at their most extreme, sometimes hint at vaginal allusions. Unusual too, Ohr sometimes chose not to glaze his work and called them his "babies." Though his work is strikingly modern and transcendently lush and beautiful, his rural Mississippi

Axel Salto  
**Vase**, 1945, h 51 cm  
Royal Copenhagen

bravado was not acceptable to the Northern tastemakers of Victorian America. Southerners were thought to be “backward”, and a man from Biloxi who proclaimed himself “the greatest potter in the world” was not likely to be taken seriously in New York or Boston. Nevertheless, he persevered for years – despite fire and poverty.

When Ohr finally closed his studio, he wrapped his babies in newspaper, stowed them away in a building that his sons turned into an auto-repair shop – confident that someday he would be vindicated. In the 1970s his work re-emerged after a New Jersey antique car dealer bought the entire collection. The NY art world was dazzled by Ohr’s richly glazed undulating diminutive forms.

Some contemporary artists have been inspired by Ohr, but their laboured creations rarely measure up – with the exception in this exhibition of Mary Rodgers’ exquisite tiny piece *Folded Form* from 1974. Yet Ohr’s contemporaries created equally rich and stunning works. Artists Adelaide Robineau, Jacque Sicard, and Taxile Doat, and even factories (Newcombe Potters, Rookwood Pottery, Weller Pottery and many more) created breathtaking works, not in Asia or Europe but in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ellison collected these works and gave them to the Met years ago. That collection was on view in the American Wing, and I was stunned to see that one sensitive man could find and buy so many pieces of such extraordinary quality.

It turns out, Ellison collected a lot of contemporary work too. The 125 modern ceramics pieces in this exhibition are no doubt just a portion of his total holdings. A collection acquired by a private citizen is different from a museum’s collection – it is guided by the tastes, aesthetics, opportunities, and the whims of the collector. What makes a collector choose to buy a work?

In the early 1990s, I first became aware of Mr Ellison and his wife Rosaire as a feature at ceramics gallery openings. They were a remarkable presence, Rosaire friendly and conversational, Robert aloof and pensive – always studying the work. The only piece I recognize from those ceramics gallery exhibitions is Babs Henson’s *Spring Dunes*, 1988. At that time, the ceramics galleries featured highly laboured super-objects, often with playful content. Very little of that work made the cut for Ellison’s discerning eye. Ellison seems drawn to a more primordial, rawer, visceral, passionate and expressionistic approach to clay. That kind of work was (is?) not commercially popular and so he likely had to go to artists’ studios to find it. He



Arnie Zimmerman, *Bladder Tongue and Tangle*, 1994, L 60 cm

Babs Henson, *Spring Dunes*, 1988, h 38 cm





Raymon Elozua, *Digital Sculpture RE 34 1 word*, 2001, w 92 cm

found some masterpieces. There are several Peter Callas works, a Raymon Elozua and an Arnie Zimmerman. Callas' white *Mentori* (page 2) is one of the most beautiful "non-vessels" that I have ever seen. It has a universe of hand-altered undulations and contrasting throwing rings peering through crabbed and crawling glaze that make it mesmerizing. His *Zeno* reinforces the notion that Callas created a greater variety of forms and was more

Elise D Arrigo, *Sidestepper*, 2018, h 24 cm



Syd Carpenter, *Familiar Figure*, 1991, L 126 cm

creative than his long-time collaborator, Peter Voukos – also in the exhibit. Ellison, who admits he is drawn to the "strange and weird", says he was "blown away by the inventiveness" of Callas' work, "Much more inventive than Voukos."\* Zimmerman's *Bladder* is similarly striking. Zimmerman, like Picasso, has phased work and this sculpture seems to lie between his monumental carvings and his more recent narrative work. Zimmerman handles abstraction felicitously here. Similarly, when Elozua first began making ceramics, he created decayed architectonic sculptures of incredible scope and detail. Yet some years later, he shifted radically towards making gutsy non-commercial, highly abstracted and colourful works. His *Digital Sculpture* from 2001 is a large and masterful example. Ellison's independent eye and aesthetic is unusual for New York City apartment dwellers. These fragile works of an unconventional beauty are not the norm. Nevertheless, there are many of the popular master artists in the collection: Takaezu, Arneson, Voukos, Price, Turner, Autio, Mason, Henderson (page 2), Melchert, Natzler. Some of the works in the collection are outstanding examples: the Turner and the Henderson are instantly recognizable – classic examples. Voukos' 1958 *Chicken Pot* is from his most creative period when he made his first large sculptures – each of which was a unique exploration of complex large-scale form. There are much fewer of these than the stacks, chargers, and ice buckets. *Chicken Pot* alone is worth seeing.

What most interested me in the exhibit was studying the works of artists not as commonly exhibited. There were many of these, and this made me admire Ellison's collector's eye all the more. William Parry (*KFS 3* from 1981) taught at Alfred University and was a contemporary of Voukos, Turner and Mason and is represented in the ex-



Gareth Mason, *Carrier*, 2011, w 43 cm



Harris Deller, *Stacked Vase with Key Hole Pattern*, 1990, h 45 cm

hibition with a fine example of his utensile (sic) abstractions. Because his work is so sculptural and inventive, it is not easy to photograph. Perhaps this hindered wider appreciation.

Surprisingly, only one artist has work presented on the wall: Syd Carpenter. *Deep Roots* and *Familiar Figure* reference autobiographical themes. Her work (which I view as self-portraiture) is among the most inventive and important of this kind, and I long to see what this master artist makes in small scale.

Another masterpiece in the exhibit is Lynda Benglis' *Apena* from 1996. It is both an exceptional abstract expressionist painting and a sculpture. The overly strong colours shouldn't complement the form – but do, and they should overwhelm it – but don't. The magic of art (ceramics) occurs when an artist (seemingly) effortlessly defies what is possible.

Christina Carver is another artist one doesn't see often enough. Her powerful but peaceful and rhythmic *Rottolocus* represents her well.

It was a surprise to see Harris Deller's compressed vase. I've long admired Deller's work and yet as an academic, his work is rarely canonized – despite the obvious innovative allusions to modern design. This signature piece, despite almost-crude black parallel lines on a white body, is a study in elegance and modernism.

It's another pleasant surprise to see Amara Geffen's work in the exhibition. Her stately 1991 piece titled *Arhkaikokurios* perhaps alludes to Basque origins.

Elise D'Arrigo, born in 1953 in the Bronx has three works in the exhibition. Like Benglis, she too marries interesting surface with unusual form. Her rich pieces are abstractions of the figure or perhaps garments.

Europeans are well represented in the collection with the artists already mentioned as well as Ruth Duckworth (Germany), Dieter Crumbiegel (Germany), Anne Marie Laureys (Belgium), and more.

Poland's Aneta Regel's *Gut Feeling* (page 2) is striking and powerful, and Britain's Gareth Mason's *Carrier* from 2011 is a richly glazed vessel beauty. Interestingly, European work is solo-featured and highlighted at each of the two entrances of the exhibition:

Entrance 1: Anne Marie Laureys' ethereal *Cloud Unicis* from

2017. Entrance 2: Axel Salto's spectacular *Vase* from 1945, the oldest work in the exhibit besides George Ohr's.

The exhibition is not without contradiction and irony. Ellison and every ceramist admire George Ohr, who used the wheel in inventive new ways to create "shapes from out of nowhere." In commenting about the contemporary works, Ellison observes that, "when potters gave up the wheel, the potter's wheel, to get more freedom", they created the artwork that found a home in the Ellison collection.\* In short Ellison notes that Ohr – who used the wheel so subversively and to such extraordinary effect – is one of many influences that enabled some 20th century ceramists to break free of the wheel and/or stultifying norms and preciousness.

Ellison collected George Ohr's work – long overlooked by tastemakers and decision-makers of his time. And subsequently, Ellison has chosen to include among his contemporary ceramic masterpieces, the works of contemporary artists who (like Ohr) may have been overlooked as well. With his gift, Ellison ensures that all these artists' masterworks will be appreciated for centuries to come.

\*Robert A. Ellison, Jr. interview at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, February 2021

*More images page 2.*

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# Metropolitan Museum of Art New York

"Shapes Out of  
Nowhere"

page 52



Aneta Regel



Ewen Henderson



Peter Callas



Peter Callas