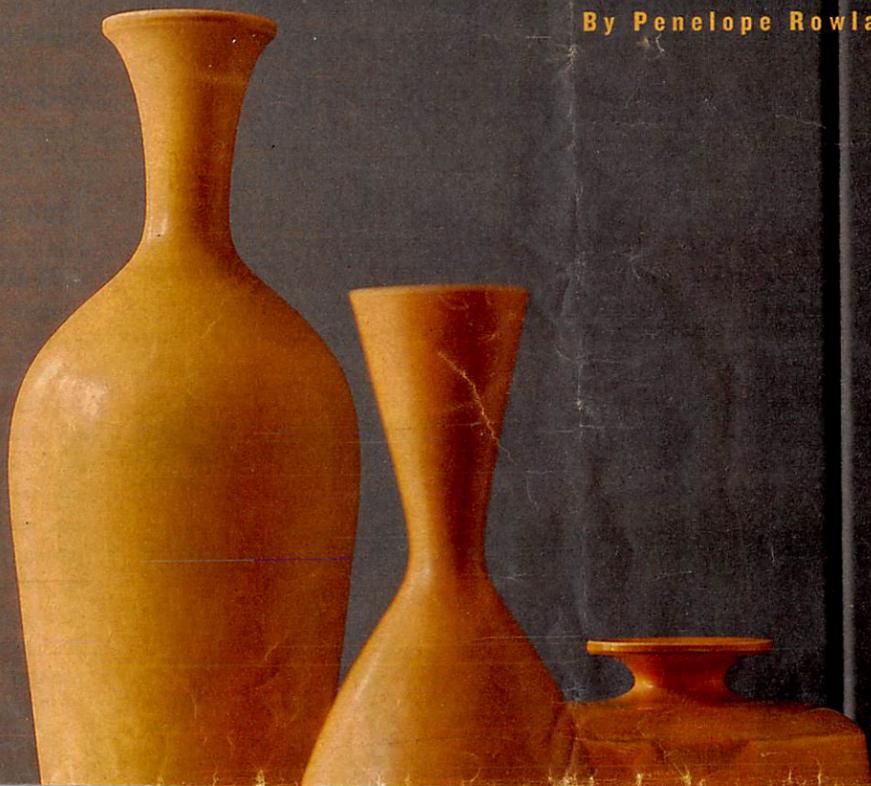


# Feat of Clay

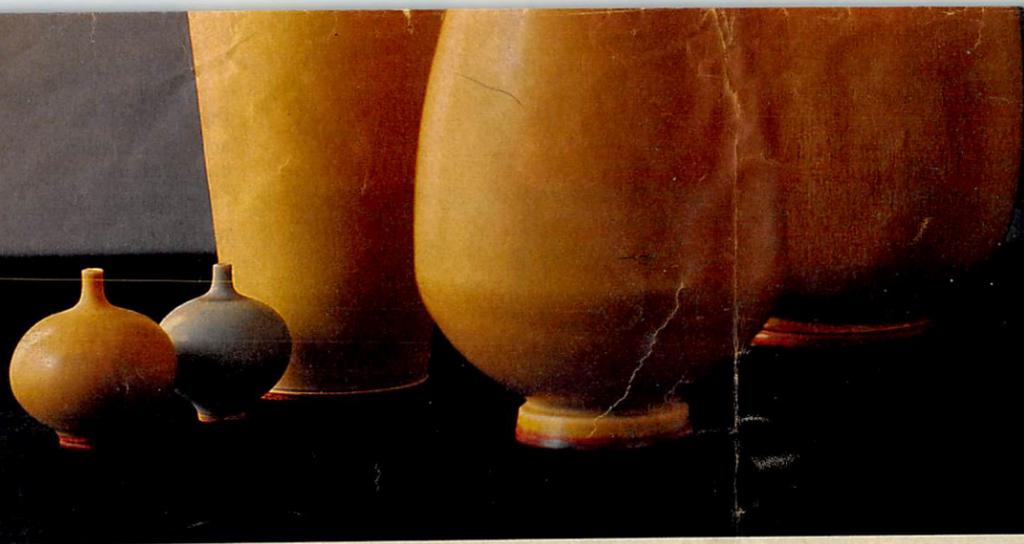
By Penelope Rowlands



IS THERE ANYTHING THAT can't be contained in a bowl?

From a design perspective, the answer has to be no. A well-wrought piece of pottery — a bowl, a vase or almost anything else that's been fired in a kiln — can command as much attention as a perfect piece of furniture or a well-proportioned room. "A really beautiful piece of studio pottery elevates the whole interior," says Liz O'Brien, the owner of Forty One, a Manhattan gallery specializing in mid-20th-century furniture and objects.

These days, nothing quite elevates like modernist pottery. To contemplate a subtly shaded bowl by the Swedish master Wilhelm Kage, a deliciously delicate tea service by the American ceramicists Edwin and Mary Scheier or a rough-textured vase by California's Glen Lukens is to experience an immediate rush. Unlike painting or sculpture, art forms typically regarded from a distance,



Vintage stoneware vases by Berndt Friberg, a Scandinavian potter with a reputation for superb throwing and exquisite glazes.

With their spare silhouettes and sensuous surfaces, mid-century ceramics from Scandinavia and the United States are shaping up as the next must-have modern collectibles.

regarded from a distance, this work demands a more tactile approach. "To really appreciate pottery, you have to hold it and look at it in your hand," says Philip Aarons, a New York collector. "That's part of what makes it special."

Clean-lined and in a wide array of colors and textures, the pottery of the 1930's through the 1950's — especially from the United States and Scandinavia — can look as contemporary as almost anything being made today. And it's at home in the most unlikely settings. One avid fan of Scandinavian ceramics, John Birch, the owner of Wyeth, a Manhattan furniture shop, uses pieces from his extensive collection to offset his store's eclectic offerings: 19th-century Chinese tables, carved Ethiopian thrones, room dividers by the French designer and engineer

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARIA ROBLEDÓ STYLED BY SUZANNE SHAKER

BACKDROP: SABINE TUCKER



Vintage ceramics, left to right: earthenware plate by Glen Lukens; stoneware vase by Berndt Friberg; stoneware dish by Maija Grotell; earthenware bottle by Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and footed stoneware bowl by Wilhelm Kage.

Continued from page 62 Jean Prouvé. Amid such diversity, Birch's pottery — including matchless pieces by masters like

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Berndt Friberg, Gunnar Nylund and Carl-Harry Stalhane — holds its own. "These pieces can go anywhere and look amazing," Birch says.

Others, apparently, agree. Mid-20th-century ceramics are more popular than ever. "I used to buy them at flea markets, but everyone's hip now," says David Shaw, another collector. "It's almost an epidemic." Because relatively little modernist pottery was made in this country, American pieces are becoming scarce, although they can still be found at certain galleries (including Forty One and Gansevoort, in New York) and auction houses — not just Sotheby's and Christie's East, but smaller places like David Rago Auctions, in Lambertville, N.J., and Boston's Skinner auction house.

At a time when many collectibles seem priced to shock, modernist pottery makes a design statement disproportionate to its size. Still, prices for the work of some potters have risen by up to 20 percent over the past year. A good Lukens piece, for example, can be priced between \$4,000 and \$6,000. (Important pieces of the artist's work command more than \$40,000.) Ceramics produced by the Scheiers sell in the \$700 to \$5,000 range, with most priced below \$2,500. Some Kage pieces fetch between \$500 and \$10,000; others can command about \$12,000.

Pottery is guesswork, in a sense. Unheated glazes rarely resemble the colors they will assume after their time in the furnace. Other factors — the way ash falls on the pot during firing, the way the pot cools afterward — can affect the final product. Even the most accomplished artist can't know exactly what he will find when he opens the kiln. "Fire is full of sur-

*Penelope Rowlands, a California-based writer, is a contributing editor at Metropolis magazine.*

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prises," the noted ceramicist Otto Natzler said in 1980, "sometimes pleasant, and sometimes not so pleasant."

There's an empirical quality to much of this pottery. "You had to be a sort of alchemist," notes Jane Adlin, a research associate in the department of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, referring to the process of testing different glazes and kilns, whether gas-, electric- or wood-fired. The modernists, Adlin adds, "kept experimenting. They kept changing and refining. They would go and fire things at different temperatures, and with different combinations of things, and see what they got. I think there was a certain freedom in that." Lukens, for example, coated some of his pots with the residue of desert salt beds. "Others would sweep up stuff off of the floor, throw it on the pot and see what happened," says Steven Cabella, a California collector and gallery owner. Natzler frequently toyed with bronze, copper and other metallic elements in his glazes.

Part of the appeal of these ceramics lies in their sheer variety: there's a style or an artist to match almost every taste. Infinitely subtle and restrained, the work of such great Scandinavian potters as Kage, Nylund and Friberg can seem worlds away from the sometimes iconoclastic, often exuberantly textural, American style exemplified by practitioners like Lukens, Maija Grotell and Gertrud and Otto Natzler.

All of these artists worked within an art pottery tradition that can be traced to the Industrial Revolution, when "designs were coming out of factories by the

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STYLIST: SUZANNE SHAKER. BACKDROP: SABINE TUCKER.

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hundreds of thousands," according to David McFadden, the chief curator of the American Craft Museum, in New York. "The idea of pottery as an artistic medium took root as a reaction to this."

In Sweden, the modern design era began in about 1916, when the Arts and Crafts Society of Sweden began encouraging the owners of glass, ceramic and other factories to hire artists and designers. The goal was to elevate the national level of product design. From then on, most Scandinavian ceramic artists spent part of their time creating what the Swedish author and critic Gregor Paulsson called "beautiful things for everyday use." Even the most celebrated Scandinavian potters worked in factories — in-

cluding Gustavsberg and Rörstrand in Sweden and the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Manufactory in Denmark — throughout their careers, designing both commercial products and their own studio lines.

At Gustavsberg, where the legendary Kage served as artistic director until 1949, Friberg became known for superb throwing. He also developed hundreds of original glazes. During one phase, while creating stoneware influenced by China's Sung Dynasty, he also replicated the glazes used during that ancient period. Much like the Chinese pots that inspired him, Friberg's work has a severe, almost mournful beauty.

For many collectors, the appeal of modernist pottery is literally surface deep. "The glaze work is really what stands out to me," says the San Francisco artist Sid Garrison, who, with his

wife, Terry, has amassed a collection featuring many Danish and Swedish pieces. "It has a depth of color that contemporary glazes completely lack." Garrison came across some 1940's-era pieces by Nylund, a Swedish potter with a background in architecture, at a Toronto gallery five years ago, bought them and was hooked. Like many collectors, his taste has evolved with his collection. Initially taken with Nylund's sleek lines, Garrison has moved on to appreciate Kage and Axel Salto as well. "They put more energy into the surface treatment," he says. "They're a little bit more of an acquired taste."

The work of Salto, a Dane intermittently associated with Royal Copenhagen from 1933 until his death in 1961, can take exotic forms: his fruit-form bottles truly resemble bunches of over-ripe grapes, and his sprouting-style vases burst with

**Part of the appeal of modernist ceramics lies in the sheer variety of work produced: it seems as if there's a style or an artist to match every taste.**

life. Kage, for his part, took his ceramic experimentation at Gustavsberg in other directions. Beginning in the 1930's, he produced his famous dark red "Farsta" stoneware. Vases and other pieces in his 1940's-era "Surrea" series display an almost cubist sense of dislocation. Studio pieces by these potters were meant to be more exclusive than their mass-produced lines, which, while relatively low

priced, still packed a lot of craftsmanship into a relatively affordable package.

American art potters, by contrast, generally produced only studio pieces and supported themselves by teaching. Nonetheless, "a lot of the American studio stuff was influenced by the Scandinavian stuff," Garrison says. Other forces were also at work. The emergence in the 1920's of the Bauhaus and other European art centers fomented a design revolution. When artists associated with this movement fled the troubled continent for America in the 1930's, they brought with them their rigorously modernist esthetic.

Among the celebrated Bauhaus-trained arrivals were the French-born Marguerite Wildenhain, who founded California's famous Pond Farm workshop in 1942, and her German husband, Frans. Other immigrants, whether affli-

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ated with different schools or lacking formal training altogether, also had new ideas they spread by teaching. For example, starting in the 1930's, the Finnish-born Maija Grotell headed the ceramics program at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, in Michigan, for almost 30 years. Both women influenced generations of young American potters, although in different ways. "Wildenhain introduced an esthetic and ideology for the modern functional potter," Garth Clark wrote in "American Ceramics." Grotell, meanwhile, focused on decorative pottery.

So, too, did the Natzlers. The Austrian husband-and-wife team had earned excellent reputations before their 1938 arrival in the United States. She was known for her excellent throwing, he for developing a kaleidoscope of glazes — some rough, others marked by a smoother look. Extraordi-

**Some American potters cultivated imperfection, leaving their pieces 'a little off' to emphasize that a person, not a machine, created it.**

narily prolific, they collaborated closely until Gertrud's death in 1971; since then, the Los Angeles-based Otto Natzler has worked alone.

Some of the Natzlers' later pieces, including the pockmarked "Round Bowl" from 1956, now in the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, deliberately evoke the fiery conditions under which they were made. So, occasionally, did those of Glen Lukens, another of

the many prominent Los Angeles potters. (The San Francisco Bay area was another modernist pottery center.) Lukens, who died in 1967, taught for many years at the University of Southern California. Cabella touches upon the almost painterly quality of some of Lukens's ceramics when he describes as a "little painting in the round" a drip-glazed, cylindrical Lukens vase he owns. It has a rough, alkaline surface and is thickly coated in white on the inside. In this and other pieces, Lukens's sheer delight in the medium comes through. "You really felt his joy," Otto Natzler said.

The same could be said of Edwin and Mary Scheier, whose twin careers developed in the freewheeling, serendipitous way common to so many of this country's studio potters. The couple met in the 1930's at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when both

were contemplating red Chinese vases. Later, they fell in love, working together as puppeteers before founding their first pottery studio in 1939 in Glade Spring, Va. (They discovered the town after stopping there to repair a flat tire.) Having fashioned a potter's wheel from parts taken off an old Model T Ford, Mary Scheier taught herself to throw clay by reading books. Edwin Scheier chose the kiln as his domain, embarking on a lifelong experiment with firing and glazes. After teaching for years at the University of New Hampshire, the octogenarian couple now live in Arizona, where they continue to work.

The Scheiers often incorporate designs, many of them folkloric, in their work. Other American potters cultivated imperfections, sometimes leaving their pieces just "a little

off" to emphasize that a person, not a machine, had created it, Cabella said. He prefers such idiosyncrasies to the more consistent output of factory-backed foreign artists. "There's more of a sense of the human hand behind it," he explains, dismissing Scandinavian ceramics altogether. "A machine could have made them."

Many collectors might disagree. You could debate forever which group — the sometimes rough-hewn Americans or the more polished Scandinavians — created the best ceramics. Yet the artists' intentions were very much the same. As a group, they were after a kind of everyday alchemy: they wanted to take something as humble as a bowl and transform it into something extraordinary. The wonder is that so many of them succeeded, and in such intriguing — and very different — ways. ■



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