

1981

# Abstract Expressionist Ceramics: Peter Voulkos, Kenneth Price, John Mason

James J. Maher

*Eastern Illinois University*

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Author

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST CERAMICS:

PETER VOULKOS, KENNETH PRICE, JOHN MASON  
(TITLE)

BY

JAMES J. MAHER  
=

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master in Arts in Art

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1981  
YEAR

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DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST CERAMICS:

PETER VOULKOS, KENNETH PRICE, JOHN MASON

BY

JAMES J. MAHER

B.A. in Creative Arts, Sangamon State University,

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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surfaced and brightly colored, and no longer related to gestural Abstract Expressionism. The geometric forms can be associated with the Abstract Expressionist painters who dealt with the expressive use of color in large size works; like Clifford Still or Mark Rothko. With these forms, Mason's works took on a more subdued clay surface. Because of their large scale and rich glaze surface the geometric forms have the intensity and expressive qualities of his more activated, gestural wall reliefs.

Kenneth Price worked with Voulkos and Mason in Los Angeles and at first also adopted the action or gesture approach to clay. After he moved to New York, Price abandoned both the large scale and concern for manipulating the clay surface. He adopted a small, more intimate form and scale which called for closer viewer contact, like the Japanese miniature tradition. At the same time, the biomorphic forms he used were out of Abstract Expressionist painting, and possibly most directly related to the works of Arshile Gorky. Like Mason's geometric forms, Price's shapes were intensely colored, but unlike Mason's pieces Price's works often reveal the artist's gesture in the obviously free application of colors. Price's later works, although taking on a vessel form, were connected to the most basic ideas of Abstract Expressionist ceramics. These cups are first surface and shape, and do not serve as the vessels which they represent.

Voulikos returned to vessel forms in his works, but retained the activated surface and non-symmetrical forms of his first Abstract Expressionist works. Mason took up a completely different direction, adopting firebrick as his medium. His firebrick sculpture is probably as unrelated to Abstract Expressionism as any style or type of art. Price, although distinctly separate from Mason or Voulikos, kept some connection, at least in concept, to the nonfunctional ideas of Abstract Expressionist Ceramics.

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## Introduction

Peter Voulkos is probably one of the best known names in ceramics today. Most students of ceramics are familiar with his works, style, and employ at least some of the techniques which he explored some twenty-five years ago.

At the beginning of his ceramic endeavors, Voulkos was a traditional potter, in the sense that his works were smooth, symmetrical, highly finished pieces. Voulkos was well known, even internationally, for his ceramics which were of this style from the early fifties.

At some point in his works, usually considered to be when he began the ceramics department at Otis College in California, Voulkos' style underwent a radical change from traditional ceramics to a loose, expressive and highly individual style which has become known as Abstract Expressionist Ceramics.

In the many articles written about Voulkos which encompass the years at Otis and the progression of his work, seldom, if ever, is mention made of other potters who are his contemporaries. However when one reads of his contemporaries, Voulkos' name is almost always mentioned. That Voulkos was the main force in Abstract Expressionist ceramics is clear, but without the environment which existed during his early days at Otis, the course of modern ceramics might have been considerably

different. The interaction of three artists, Peter Voulkos, Kenneth Price and John Mason began the new trend in ceramics. Following the innovative styles of these three, artists who later joined the group at Otis developed funk ceramics, whose most widely known proponent is James Melchert. Also a student of Voulkos at Otis was Paul Soldner, who explored the Raku ceramics of Japan and brought this form into wide acceptance in the United States.

In order to understand ceramics as it is today, particularly ceramic sculpture of the many forms of pottery other than manufactured ware, it is important to look at the Abstract Expressionist ceramists. Non-symmetrical forms, expressive decoration, sgraffito decoration, and colors used expressively are all characteristic of Abstract Expressionism in ceramics.

Initially, a look at Abstract Expressionist painting is helpful, because it was there that Voulkos was first inspired to quit the traditional forms for which he had become known. The objectives as well as the methods of the Abstract Expressionist painters were incorporated into the works of Voulkos and his contemporaries, notably Kenneth Price and John Mason.

During the late forties a new school of painting was forming in New York. This style, which later became known as Abstract Expressionism, swept the country and received international acclaim as well. (12:454) The movement first received official recognition with a major exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1951.

Abstract Expressionism, according to Irving Sandler in The Triumph of American Painting, came out of the artists' need to arrive at "fresh expressive meaning and could only be understood with regard to those needs." (24:274) The paintings were certainly a reaction against traditions in art, but were at the same time a search for a new and more direct approach to painting. In that sense, the Abstract Expressionists were continuing the traditions of modern art; by pursuing new or as yet unaccepted methods of composition and painting. (24:271) In order to arrive at a completely new style of painting, the Abstract Expressionist painters sought to eliminate influences from previous movements or styles. (24:270) Their concern for the creative process and attempts to impart personal emotions into abstract compositions was the most unifying quality in Abstract Expressionism. (24:271)

Other characteristics of Abstract Expressionism were the desire to avoid explicit representation, or "clearly articulated structures," as related to cubism, (24:92) and to create abstract, yet coherent and expressive paintings. (24:91) At the fore of the movement were painters like Jackson Pollack, Wilhelm DeKooning, and Hans Hofmann. These painters, called Action painters, used "free gestures" (24:91) to build up their paintings into abstract, expressive images.

During the time that Abstract Expressionist painting was gaining national attention, the main concerns of ceramic artists were functional or decorative containers and representational sculpture. A good example of these concerns could be seen at the International Exposition of Ceramics at Cannes, France. In 1955, the award for "Esthetics" at Cannes went to M. Duval for Woman and Bird Carrying a Dish (Fig. 1). This slightly abstracted, whimsical sculpture is typical of the best ceramic sculpture of the time. (13:13) Peter Voulkos received a Gold Medal at the same exhibition for his tall stoneware vase (Fig. 2). In a major exhibition the previous year, Voulkos is singled out as among the best potters of the time:

One of the outstanding potters of our time, Mr. Voulkos is still in his twenties. In this, his first one man show in New York, he is superbly represented by the stoneware he is

known for - huge platters, vases, tureens, and massive covered vessels which he calls cookie jars. The eye accepts readily the size of his pieces for they are subtly interesting; colors run from beige to brown, purple-bronze and include light blues, some with metallic effects. Sgraffito decoration cuts deeply and in complicated patterns. (8:14)

Influenced by the new ideas of Abstract Expressionism, many sculptors and potters sought to expand the concepts of Abstract Expressionist painting into three-dimensional media. Lewenstein and Cooperin New Ceramics credit the new trend in American ceramics to Peter Voulkos:

Clay, traditionally used to make pots or representational sculpture, was now used by these potters to make almost any sort of object. ...In the USA the work of Peter Voulkos has probably had most influence in establishing a new set of values and attitudes to ceramics. His work originated in basic pottery forms and then moved completely away from the concept of the container to pure sculptural considerations. (19:19)

Voulkos, a ceramist then recently graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, moved to Los Angeles to establish the ceramics department at the Otis Art Institute in 1954. In Los Angeles he saw the works of the New York Abstract Expressionists. Greatly impressed with Abstract Expressionism, he saw in it freedom from the constrictions of traditional ceramics.

Greatly impressed with their work, he became dissatisfied with the decorative nature of his ceramics and sought a more expressive use of the clay medium, ...Voulkos dispensed with the symmetry and began to enrich the surface colors and textures of his pots in the manner of the Abstract Expressionists' paintings. (1:164)

It was during his stay at Otis that Voulkos began to develop his non-traditional style, his own use of form, texture, and color which were derived to a large degree from Abstract Expressionism.

At Otis, Voulkos was joined by two students, Kenneth Price and John Mason. Together these three artists developed what has become known as Abstract Expressionist Ceramics. (2:187) None of the three artists involved himself in the traditional direction of ceramics. Rather than producing vessel forms or representational sculpture, they sought to demonstrate a concern for surface, color and shape in abstract form. Their concern was for the use of clay primarily as an expressive medium; a three-dimensional counterpart to the trend set in painting by the Abstract Expressionists. The manipulation of the material and the creative process were their main emphasis. Voulkos and Price continued using the potters wheel for their work, while Mason began employing hand modeled forms. Voulkos and Mason in particular were dealing with the shape and surface in creating large scale ceramic works. The importance of size, similar to the large scale works of the Abstract Expressionist painters, arose partly out of the need to demonstrate the gesture and involvement of the artist. The interest in showing the process and action of the artist in his works is one of the most notable characteristics of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Large scale was also important in that Voulkos and Mason were creating sculptures designed to have a powerful and imposing effect upon its audience. Price concerned himself with the use of color on his ceramic forms. The desire to evoke response to a work by its color and the expressive use of color as related to Abstract Expressionism is evident in Price's earliest works at Otis. (2:299)

Voulkos', Price's, and Mason's works are not necessarily similar in appearance or interrelated as other "schools" of art. Like the Abstract Expressionist painters, the unifying features of the three were intent and motive. Their works which began at Otis eventually took quite different stylistic directions. The initial connecting factors were geographical, personal contact, and a desire to create abstract and expressive art forms in ceramics.



Chapter I  
Peter Voulkos

For Peter Voulkos, one of the most important departures from traditional ceramics was the development of non-symmetrical forms. This, combined with an active surface, not common in ceramic works at the time, typifies his innovations in ceramics. The most identifying characteristics of Voulkos works: the activated surface, with cuts gouges and punches in the clay, had been noted as early as 1956 by Howard Cherry, a New York painter who had visited Los Angeles. He described Voulkos as "a quiet, wiry Greek who punches his pots." (25:55) The free gestures and unfettered expression of the Abstract Expressionist painters was beginning to appear in Voulkos' works. Along with this new approach other influences can be identified; such as that of Japanese pottery. The Abstract Expressionist aesthetic in ceramics combines these influences. Armstrong explains that:

Two traditions reinforced the basic orientation of these artists [Voulkos, Price and Mason]. One was a tradition in Japanese pottery which accepted asymmetry and apparent imperfection or incompleteness. The other, and perhaps more influential, was Abstract Expressionist painting, whose active, intensely energized surfaces could be translated directly into clay. Similarly, the gestural spontaneity and process involvement of Abstract Expressionism were suited to clay, which can be worked quickly when wet. (2:188)

Another effect of Abstract Expressionism on Voulkos was in his use of color, applied as glaze to his ceramics. His works done at Otis Art Institute, were often brightly colored, and were derived from painting. Voulkos says his color is used toward emotive ends and is actually painting on a three dimensional surface. (1:299) His emotive colors developed beyond the idea of merely painting on clay however. An interaction between form and color was evolving in which color would completely change the perception of form:

By the late fifties, his scale moved out of the range of pottery with massive structures like Rondena (1958) and Little Big Horn (1959) (Fig. 5) ...and began to use color as a means of altering and denying the form of the clay itself. (1:165)

The influence of Abstract Expressionism and its subsequent translation into the clay medium by Voulkos, has received a great deal of attention by many writers, often to the exclusion of other influences, such as that of the Japanese pottery tradition noted previously. Certainly Abstract Expressionism was the foremost movement during the early fifties, and knowledge of it was widespread. It has been noted that Voulkos was greatly impressed with the Abstract Expressionists works, especially those of the gesture painters. Voulkos was, however, familiar with the

history of ceramics and painting as well as contemporary developments in art. One influence not commonly associated with Voulkos was that of Picasso:

Pete credits Picasso with having a vital influence on his own feeling for surface. 'I was very interested in Picasso. I looked at some of his ceramics and his painting of the clay surface... I made a series of big jars one time and painted clear down over the foot base. That started breaking up the planes. When I was making the big ceramic sculptures, [I found I] could completely destroy a form by painting on it - re-do a form by making a line across a plane, have it go clear around. (18:67)

To substantiate Picasso's influence on Voulkos' concept of color as it affects form, one could look to a number of Picasso's ceramic works (Fig. 3&4). It would be difficult to attempt a direct comparison between the two artists, however. Picasso developed the use of color and line to alter form in his ceramics. In most cases he used line and superimposed images to draw the viewer's eye away from the three dimensional shape. Voulkos, in works like Little Big Horn, (Fig. 5) uses wide patches of color to deny form, and often his use of line is directly in the clay rather than painted line like Picasso's. One can find intense color in Picasso's ceramics, which suggests that Voulkos might have been influenced by Picasso's colorful decoration

as well as the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism. The interplay between color, line and form as used by Picasso are also evident in Voulkos' works, especially during the late fifties and early sixties. A distinction arises in the use of similar concepts for different reasons, however:

A number of extraordinary artists, for example Picasso, Miro, and Leger, have worked with ceramics at one time or another, but they accepted the traditional limitations of the medium, using it as an extension of painting. His (Voulkos') first problem was to return the medium to the inherent sculptural tradition by making sculpture; the second was to relegate craft where it belonged.  
(5:65)

The creation of these ceramic sculptures was Voulkos' most widely recognized contribution to ceramics, and brought the use of clay for sculptural works into popularity.

In his search for non-functional forms during his stay in Los Angeles, Voulkos came under another influence which led him to a more abstract style and form in his sculpture. An Austrian sculptor, Fritz Wotruba, had an exhibition in Los Angeles; and one can see something of the Cubist, block-like forms of Wotruba's in Voulkos' early sculpture:

Voulkos' first sculptures consisted of slabs of clay piled into asymmetrical blocks over an armature of thrown cylinders. Committed to an Abstract Expressionist aesthetic, he was nonetheless greatly inspired by the

slab-like configurations of the Cubist sculptor, Fritz Wotruba, carrying into his own work Wotruba's handling of mass and void. (1:164-5)

Most of Wotruba's sculpture is figurative (Fig. 6). One can see, however, that Voulkos turned to blocky, massive slab forms suggestive of Wotruba's stone carvings for Little Big Horn, Rodena, and Callas Rock. Much of Voulkos' innovation was in the massive scale of his clay sculpture. Once he achieved the desired scale and form, he decorated the works with freely applied colors. The tension between color and form carries on into many of the works in the late fifties. (1:165) Little Big Horn represents the monumentality of Voulkos' ceramic sculptures as well as his use of texture and color. While many influences are apparent in the work, the use of line, form and color represent his break from traditional ceramics and establish him as an important sculptor-potter in the Abstract Expressionist movement. It can be argued that the freely applied color of Little Big Horn, as derived from Abstract Expressionism becomes "dangerously decorative" as described by Nancy Marmer in an Art Forum review. She compares it to the more naturalistic work, Callas Rock, which she says "avoids arty graces." (21:10) Nevertheless, for Voulkos the use of freely applied color continues in his works:

By chance, Pete found brightly colored, low-fire glazes as an answer to his quest for colors that would evoke emotional responses. The bright colors on "Cross",

"USA" (Fig. 7) and the vases made in 1963 are a dramatic contrast to Pete's current ware (after 1968). (18:68)

In Little Big Horn the free gestures of Abstract Expressionism, along with the abstract use of color and form become an integral part of the work.

The use of non-symmetrical forms, begun in his clay sculptures in the late fifties, motivated Voulkos to take a new direction in the early sixties. At that time, he began working in cast bronze for his monumental pieces. These bronzes resemble the slab-like work of his ceramic sculpture, but keeping the bronze finish, lack the tension and excitement provided by the color of their ceramic predecessors. With the bronze casting, Voulkos retained the immediacy of clay but could expand his scale:

For Voulkos, the new material enabled him to work on a larger scale than that permitted by clay. At the same time he was able to retain the immediacy of hand modeling through the sensitivity of the wax casting process. On his earlier pieces, slabs of bronze were joined ...either piled together like the ceramic sculpture, as in Bad Day at Shattuck of 1962-4 or strung out in a rhythmic sequence, as in Vargas (1961-4). (1:169)

Voulkos, while producing monumental bronzes, continued working with thrown forms. In the late sixties he began once again to create monumental sculpture in clay. This time however, the forms related more to wheel thrown

vessel forms. Typical of these works is the active surface, reminiscent of his previous clay sculpture. Many of these pieces are large, combined forms stacked one on the other to create "synthetic forms" (Fig. 8). These new forms typify the evolution of Voulkos' style:

Probably the most decisive shift by Voulkos was in constructing wares of multi-part form. Dependence on the repertoire of shapes inherited from the functional vessels ceased, synthetic forms could be created. Although it took some time to exploit this idea, it nevertheless inevitably led towards a more sculptural concept. (5:41)

In these new forms, Voulkos depends much less on color than in the works from the late fifties and early sixties. The new works are generally glazed in more subdued earth tones, with only one or two colors overall. This shift to less intense color indicates Voulkos' new preference that the clay surface itself should reveal the action and intensity of the artist without becoming obscured by color:

His concern for surface began to take a new direction by 1968, moving toward greater simplicity. Color had diminished to an overall application of an iron-copper slip (in vases of 1968), or the natural look of fired stoneware, just barely glazed (as in his later vases and plates of 1973). (18:67)

With Voulkos, the act of creating becomes his primary motive. The touch of the artist's hand as revealed in

the clay are equated with the application of paint by  
Abstract Expressionist painters:

'I'm not concerned about the glaze; I am concerned about the surface. It has to be just right. I don't want to lose all my traces and fingerprints.' Pete's traces and fingerprints are a continuation of Abstract Expressionist ideas. The clay surface of his current work is gashed, gouged and torn. Then these areas are accentuated with iron oxide, or a small pug of clay - usually porcelain - making what he calls pass-throughs. (18:68)

Voulikos' activation of the clay surface, with gashes and cuts is intended to demonstrate the activity of the artist's hand on his work, but perhaps in a more direct sense reveal his approach:

'If I don't do it intuitively, by gut feeling ...there's no way (it will come out right). But I wouldn't do it if that risk were not there.' (12:455)

This intuitive approach, perhaps the most essential aspect of Abstract Expressionist painting (12:455), was translated into the clay medium by Voulikos; carrying action, gesture, and expression on and into the clay surface itself.

Voulikos, taking a medium at that time not usually associated with great art, began making ceramic sculpture. He derived concepts from Picasso, Wotruba, and the Abstract Expressionists as well as his personal experiences and ideas. This beginning evolved into new and unique forms, activated by texture, line, and color, and became Abstract Expressionist sculpture. (5:65) As his work continued, the earlier influences



faded, becoming concepts which he had accepted as relevant. These concepts were expanded and used by Voulkos according to his ideas of expression as it related to the clay medium. Though connected with Abstract Expressionism, Voulkos' work as a ceramic artist became more a sculptural parallel to the movement in painting. It was within the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic that Voulkos first became recognized as a sculptor. With his later works - those done after 1968 - he returned to thrown, vessel forms, but retained the active surface and intuitive approach as well as the monumental scale of his earlier ceramic sculptures. With the new wheel-thrown forms, Voulkos developed forms suggestive of pottery, while still maintaining his intent to create Abstract Expressionist sculpture.

## Chapter II

### John Mason

John Mason moved to Los Angeles in 1949 and attended Otis Art Institute from 1949 to 1952. When Peter Voulkos began teaching at Otis, Mason returned to school and studied under Voulkos. They both began experimentation in what later became known as Abstract Expressionist ceramics. Close contact between Mason and Voulkos continued for several years, and they shared a studio in Los Angeles from 1957 to 1960.

Like Voulkos, Mason was known as a potter for some time before they worked together. It was during his association with Voulkos that he began working with more abstract forms and developing sculptural concepts in clay. According to Jules Langsner of Art News, Mason began "roughening surfaces, twisting, pounding, gouging the clay; and after firing, sawing and chiseling it." (15:26) Mason's contact with Voulkos and their development together of Abstract Expressionist ceramics arose out of interest in the Abstract Expressionists' handling of their medium:

John Mason's first ceramic sculpture consisted of Abstract Expressionist reliefs emphasizing the responsiveness of the clay with rich, agitated surfaces. ...like Voulkos, however, he was attracted to the vigorous handling of their medium by the action painters rather than to the decorative effects of the European artists. After the reliefs, Mason began making large, free standing sculpture in 1957, building up the clay in pieces, modeling the surface with his hands, and then adding splashes of color. (1:165)

According to the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism, Mason sought to develop beyond the accepted limitations of ceramics, and worked toward a more expressive use of clay. (9:125) The concern for surface, color and process involvement of the artist are evident in Mason's works, especially during his contact with Voulkos, and continue well into the sixties. Particularly, in his wall reliefs Mason works the surface vigorously and uses color and rough textured surfaces to demonstrate his physical involvement and action. Langsner credits Mason with having fully exploited the range of ceramics as it relates to Abstract Expressionism:

While the works exploit ceramic properties, they violate the cannons of the medium, confronting the spectator with forms, surfaces, textures, colors and organizations recalling the vehemence of a DeKooning in the early pieces and the purity of an Albers in the later ones. (15:26)

Like Voulkos, Mason developed methods of working with clay which allowed a scale quite larger than previous ceramic works. The impact of such size in ceramic sculpture is considered by some critics to be one of the most innovative contributions by both Voulkos and Mason. Mason's wall reliefs and his later geometric forms represent, says Helen Giambruni:

Perhaps his most important contribution, and the most difficult to describe or communicate, is his extraordinary sense of scale. (10:39)

Even though Mason worked closely with Voulkos, his first large scale works were constructed by hand modeling rather than with wheel thrown armatures as Voulkos used. Beginning quite early in his development as a sculptor, Mason worked on wall reliefs (Fig. 9). (10:39) It was in these works that Mason found a direction which he explored independently. The wall reliefs are an enormous technical achievement which still reflect his main concern for the expressive qualities of the medium. Mason also developed in a direction different from Voulkos in the surface textures and use of color in his work. While the forms he used were modeled and active like Voulkos', Mason chose contrasting shiny and matt glazes, and his forms were subtly facted to have an appearance of "cracked and sun-baked earth." (11:17) Armstrong, in 200 Years of American Sculpture, attributes Mason's use of earthy qualities in surface and texture to his early experiences living in Nevada:

Mason experimented with the properties of clay, exploring shape and surface qualities and variations of desert textures in his work. (2:292)

This use of nature-derived themes, particularly in his early sculpture, identified Mason with the ideas of Abstract Expressionism:

Mason's earlier sculpture, irregular in shape and varied in surface, with references to natural forms and with revealing traces of the artist hand, was an immediate and powerful expression of individuality and, as such, clearly placed him within the camp of Abstract Expressionism. (10:38)

Mason, unlike Voulkos, did not use the potter's wheel to form the armature for his sculptures. John Coplans asserts that since he did not develop his forms from cylinders, the character of his work was quite different from that of Voulkos. It demonstrated more of the nature of the clay medium and allowed for works of great variety and inventiveness. (4:40) Mason's wall reliefs and his monolithic sculptures are examples of his attachment to the material.

In his Craft Horizons article of 1960, Paul Laporte remarks:

In these reliefs, as also in the three-dimensional pieces, Mason has developed an idiom definitely all his own. A design appears to be so thoroughly derived from the nature of the material, the clay, that any notion vanishes of there having been a design at all. Spontaneity appears as the very subject matter of the work. The curves and undulations and convulsions of Mason's clay are frozen into a record of forces that acted upon this once pliable material. (16:43)

Mason's wall reliefs continued well into the sixties, with his typical concern for contrast in glaze surface and active handling of the clay. During that time, however, his free-standing sculpture changed directions. He adopted more solid, massive forms, which he glazed with more intense colors (Fig. 10). Wayne Anderson describes Mason's new interests as relating to a greater involvement with color:

Mason found that the broken surfaces were disruptive. He began to solidify his forms, arriving in the early sixties at simple X and cross-shapes which were further reduced to hard edge rectangular solids colored with glazes. (1:165)

In the early and middle sixties, Hard Edge or "reductive school" sculpture was not unheard of in Los Angeles. (10:38) It was Mason's interpretation of the idea which gave his work its individuality. The fact that his sculptures were monumental ceramic pieces developed out of his past work with clay was important to their uniqueness. Further, according to Helen Giambruni of Craft Horizons, Mason's pieces displayed more sensitivity to his medium than many artists:

His newest work, however, reduces shape and surface to one clear entity, graspable only as a whole and referring to nothing outside itself - neither to nature nor to the artist who gave it form. The shapes are geometric-oblong boxes, crosses, X's - but their starkness is somewhat counteracted by those slight irregularities inevitable to large areas of handformed clay and by the accidents of melting glazes and the seductive surfaces they afford. Thus, although Mason's work is related to other new sculpture of the Hard-Edge, reductive school which is especially important in Los Angeles, it has a totally different feeling from the machine-made precision of so many of his colleagues. (10:38)

Giambruni credits Mason with having solved the problem of color in his work, and having integrated color into his sculpture rather than it being an embellishment on the pieces. (10:40) He used single, intensely colored glazes on his geometric forms. The colors, often brilliant reds, yellows and others equally intense create a curious tension between the bare geometry of the forms and their sumptuous surface of their glazes. (10:39) While Mason no longer cut

into the clay or directly worked into the clay surface, the use of brilliant colors and their visual excitement, in contrast with simple geometric forms, are an outgrowth of Abstract Expressionism. The tension and excitement which Voulkos established in the clay surface and free application of glaze are paralleled in Mason's geometric forms and rich glaze surface. Mason's more subtle approach still demonstrated the interest in surface, and emotive use of color as did Voulkos'. Mason's works, however, encourage a greater attention to the subtleties of surface. The bright colors he used draw attention to the contrast between somewhat stark forms and rich glaze surface.

Mason's interest in color is comparable to Abstract Expressionist painting, especially that of Clyfford Still. Fredrick Hart described Still's new direction in the development of Abstract Expressionism:

For the qualities that Still exerts, it was essential for him to work on a considerable scale. He covers immense canvases, such as Painting, 1951, with areas of color that move slowly, like ocean currents. Restricted generally to two or three basic hues, these streams of color ebb and flow in such a manner that the observer seems engulfed in their action, almost to the point of abandoning his connection with the solid earth. (12:458-9)

In words that almost echo Hart's description of Still, Craft Horizons author Helen Giambruni remarks of Mason's geometric shapes:

...their starkness is somewhat counteracted by those slight irregularities inevitable to large areas of handformed clay and by the accidents of melting glazes and the seductive surfaces they afford. (10:38)

Like Still's paintings in which scale is important to the expressive qualities he seeks, Mason used large scale forms to achieve an overpowering effect:

To walk among that giant geometry, however, is awe-inspiring. The great red X, the center of the show and its best work, is simply inescapable. (10:39)

Mason's first Abstract Expressionist works were directly related to Voulkos in his handling of surface and form. As he explored the medium, Mason found a more unique means of expression in his wall reliefs, and developed the technical methods of producing his later monumental geometric forms. Although these forms lacked a rich, activated clay surface, they mark a more dramatic difference in Mason's and Voulkos' works. Rather than choosing the active surface which is connected with "gesture" and the artist manipulation of the medium, Mason's interest became more directed to the subtleties of the glaze surface. In his geometric works, color and form and the glaze itself are more integrated. This cohesiveness gives his large scale sculpture an imposing nature but are also rich in surface color and subtle variations of texture.



Art News reviewer Jules Langsner noted the significance of Mason's geometric forms:

Recently he abandoned gestural expression and turned to such simple basic shapes and the crosses, X's and rectangular blocks, glazing surfaces in black and shimmering reds. With this exhibition, Mason takes his place at the forefront of contemporary American sculptors. (15:26)

In his most recent works, Mason has abandoned all association with Abstract Expressionism. Beginning in the early seventies, these works are arrangements of firebricks, often forming geometric designs (Fig. 11). These works, because of their reliance on manufactured components, are completely divested of any trace of the artist work in forming or individual handling. In the context of ceramic art, Mason's work has arrived at a complete opposite from the gestural, asymmetrical works he did in the 1950's at Otis.

### Chapter III

#### Kenneth Price

Kenneth Price attended Otis Art Institute in 1957-8. He was involved in the development of Abstract Expressionist ceramics with Peter Voulkos and John Mason, but worked with them for only one year. In 1959, he attended New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.

While at Otis, Price's very early Abstract Expressionist works were part of larger group produced by many artists who worked with Voulkos. In tracing Price's unique contribution to Abstract Expressionist ceramics, Peter Layton recalls the group's activities at Otis:

The 'egg' forms evolved from the dome-shaped pots and jars which Price was making in the mid-fifties. When, working in Los Angeles, he was one of a group of potters, painters and sculptors including Billy Al Bengston, John Mason, Mike Frinkess, Jim Melchert and others who gathered around Peter Voulkos and who worked together in a spirit of friendly competition, spurring one another to push the clay thing beyond its pot-bound limits and break down the quasi-oriental questions of clay usage and expression. Much effected by the works of Picasso, Miro, Noguchi and especially by the abstract expressionist paintings emanating from New York at the time, inspired by the undiminishing vitality of Voulkos himself, and aided by technical advances in the development of epoxy glues and paints, the group, subsequently labelled Abstract Expressionist Ceramists, produced as individuals a volume of work of an unprecedented quality and scale. It has been said that the group's work was 'the most ingenious regional adaptation of the spirit of Abstract Expressionism' at any rate 'it opened the way for polychrome sculpture on the West Coast' and gave hitherto unrealized significance to Herbert Read's statement that 'pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence'. (17:75)

After his move to New York in 1959, Price's work developed in a direction different from either Voulkos or Mason. While their interest was in large-scale works which demonstrated a lot of surface activity, Price quickly took an interest in intense, emotive colors. Voulkos and Mason were concerned with emotive use of color also, but a good deal of the impact of their works in the mid-fifties came out of the use of this intense color on large sized works. Price's use of bright colors was clearly out of Abstract Expressionism and his contact with Voulkos. (1:164) At the same time, Price developed smooth surfaces, on organic, or biomorphic shapes (Fig. 12). These were quite unrelated to other Abstract Expressionist ceramists. The biomorphic forms can be directly related to Abstract Expressionist painting, however. The earliest of the painters, Arshile Gorky, employed "clearly contoured biomorphic shapes" (12:455) in his paintings. Hart, in his History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture calls Gorky's shapes "often erotically suggestive shapes" (12:455), while in a similar vein Armstrong describes Price's pieces in a similar way:

These pieces incorporate intense color combinations and biomorphic and sexually-associative forms. (2:166)

Another aesthetic is evident in Price's works, that of Japanese art. His forms are small; almost miniature in scale. Reviewer David Thompson in Studio International associates Price's works with the intimacy of oriental miniatures:

At the same time, their smallness and lustre turn them into objects deluxe, 'precious' in both senses. And their viewing height turns them into objects of contemplation, with a strong hint of that orientalism which keeps creeping into American West Coast attitudes. With the dwarf Zen gradens and table-top landscapes of Japan in mind, one reads the scale of these pieces as entirely relative. (27:200)

As with Mason, who eventually moved away from direct adaptations of Abstract Expressionist concepts in his works, Price's style became independent of the main conventions of Abstract Expressionism. Bernard Kester of Craft Horizons notes the individuality of Price's style:

Price began to find his personal mode of expression and soon became known for his lacquered spherical and void sculptural forms. But what has earned him a place in contemporary ceramic art is his sustained kinship with the cup form - the ubiquitous cup transformed by ways of various formal and stylistic conventions, including Abstract Expressionism - nurtured by a fertile imagination and always executed with satire and wit. (14:57)

Noted critic John Coplans also remarked about Price's ability to use stylistic conventions in a personally expressive manner:

Price is also completely uninhibited by any tradition of technique, form, or style. He can delve right back to the roots of what he admires in Miro or Brancusi, adapting it to his needs in such a way that it remains clear of the issue of eclecticism. This lack of a sense of the burden of ancestry also permits him to use - with an incredible sense of excitement - any of the inherent rather than esthetic, properties of the environment. (3:41)

Price's works, in general, emphasize bright colors and smooth surfaces, in the earlier works on biomorphic shapes; later on the cup forms. The works of the mid-seventies, the cup forms, do not in any sense show an abandonment of Abstract Expressionism. The earliest concern of Abstract Expressionist ceramics, that of dealing with shape and surface without regard to utility is an integral part of Price's cups. Studio International reviewer Peter Layton remarks:

The cups are in fact highly impractical, some by virtue of their fragility and others simply because their boat-like shape would not permit liquids to flow easily. Function and practicality are not, however, the significant issues here - Woolworth, Wedgwood and any number of paper or plastic cup manufacturers will readily serve our needs in this respect. So quite rightly Price abdicates this problem and we are left with objects to be judged on purely aesthetic grounds. (17:76)

The cups, with the emphasis on the sculptural rather than utilitarian concerns, are out of Abstract Expressionism. Though not immediately related to other Abstract Expressionist ceramics, they relate to one of the most basic of the ideas Voulkos and others explored; that abstract and expressive considerations could be placed above function.

Price's ability to interpret stylistic conventions and to use them for personal expression gives him a unique position as a ceramic artist. Craft Horizons critic Bernard Kester comments that Price is known for his artistic independence and maturity "outside the mainstream of developments in clay." (14:57) While having participated in the early development

of Abstract Expressionist ceramics, he then continued to independently explore the possibilities of color and form for expressive purposes. According to Kester, Price's use of the cup form to explore formal and stylistic conventions is his most significant contribution to contemporary ceramic art. (14:57)

## CONCLUSION

The major contribution by Peter Voulkos to ceramics was transforming what had been considered a craft into an art form. Art critic John Coplans claims that Voulkos' first task was to explore the inherent sculptural qualities of clay. (5:56) Voulkos' sculpture was abstract and large. Those were the two most obvious innovations in his works. The fact that he followed Abstract Expressionist painting, at the time a new trend in art, in a sense cleared the way for critical acceptance of his work. Lewenstein and Cooper in New Ceramics credit Voulkos with having started a new trend in ceramics which is more difficult to clearly define:

...Peter Voulkos has probably had most influence in establishing a new set of values and attitudes to cermaics. His work originated in basic pottery forms and then moved completely away from the concept of the container to pure sculptural considerations. (19:19)

More than stylistic changes came from Voulkos' new direction in clay. New values and attitudes toward clay came into acceptance. Clay for abstract sculpture, used as an expressive rather than decorative purpose became acceptable. The attitudes and values which Voulkos established were that clay could be used as expressively as any other medium.

Along with the new approach to ceramics, Voulkos gave his clay sculptures the surface treatment which showed his manipulation of the clay. Cutting, gouging and splashing color on his pieces, Voulkos showed activity and emotion in his work. Unlike earlier representational sculpture, the material and the artist were the focus of attention.

The way was open for sculptors and potters alike to fold, cut, and shape clay to suit their expressive needs. This was something which in the past would have been considered poor craftsmanship. With Voulkos, the craft concept was replaced with the idea of producing abstract sculpture. Also, instead of muted earthy tones and traditional glazing Voulkos overlapped, splashed on glaze, and used freely applied colors. The use of these glazing techniques were soon a part of the vocabulary of other ceramic artists. Probably no one since Voulkos has made such a sudden or dramatic change in ceramics.

While exploring the possibilities of ceramic sculpture, Voulkos worked with Kenneth Price and John Mason. Writer T. Armstrong attributes the development of Abstract Expressionist ceramics to these three artists. (2:187). Each of them developed their own individual style while they were maintaining the common aim of exploring the expressive use of clay. In terms of ceramics, the three revolutionized the use of clay by adopting abstract forms. These forms directed their interest toward expressive rather than decorative concerns.



John Mason began working with Voulkos at Otis and to a large extent in the early days adopted the forms and style of Voulkos. Before long however, he began his wall reliefs (Fig. 7) which showed both technical ability and a unique expressiveness on a grand scale. While keeping the abstract and expressive qualities of his free standing sculpture, Mason became an innovator in his own right. From the wall reliefs, Mason moved on to simple geometric forms. No longer identifiable as being connected with the action painters, his works were large scale abstracts somewhat comparable to the paintings of the Abstract Expressionist painter Clifford Still. Large areas of color, subtly varied on imposing geometric forms show Mason's desire to evoke emotional response by the sheer size of the works.

Kenneth Price worked at Otis for one year only, and during his stay there he adopted the Abstract Expressionist idiom, but in a different way than either Voulkos or Mason. His interest centered on color and forms of the Abstract Expressionists, but not on the active surface treatment characteristic of the others. Price found his direction at Otis, but it was quite different from those with whom he came into contact there. Price never adopted the large scale employed by the other Abstract Expressionist ceramists, but his works attracted the viewer by their more intimate nature.

In considering the effect Voulkos and his contemporaries have had on ceramics, one thing is clear; clay as an art medium has taken its place with the other media. Beyond that, the controversy continues. Pottery is generally viewed as a craft, and ceramics sculpture as an art form. In spite of this popular view, Voulkos continues throwing plates, vases, and other vessel forms and is heralded as a ceramic artist. The most prominent potters are considered artists today, but for the unrecognized ceramist, sculpture appears to be the direction to take for artistic recognition.

The potter has more latitude in decorating technique than he may have had before Voulkos, but the vigorous and active handling of the clay surface in functional pottery which Voulkos developed is generally not accepted as good craftsmanship. As such, expressive considerations are still placed second to decorative concerns as far as the general art buying public is concerned.

The general public has accepted ceramics produced by the individual artist, whether as art or craft is hard to determine. It remains to be seen whether pottery will take the directions that Voulkos, Price, and Mason did. At least the precedent has been set by them and others. Of course, functional vessels have to serve the needs of the public as well as the expressive aims of the artist. Because of that potters must concern themselves with practical use of

their work more so than creating purely visual effects with texture and form.

Artists often resolve their difficulties with functional versus artistic considerations by making pottery for public consumption and save the more innovative works for competitive shows or galleries. Whether the resultant dicotomy is beneficial to the individual must be resolved by the artist himself.

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Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.





Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 24. John Mason. *Gray Wall*. 1960. Clay, 7" x 14".

**Figure 9.**



Figure 10.

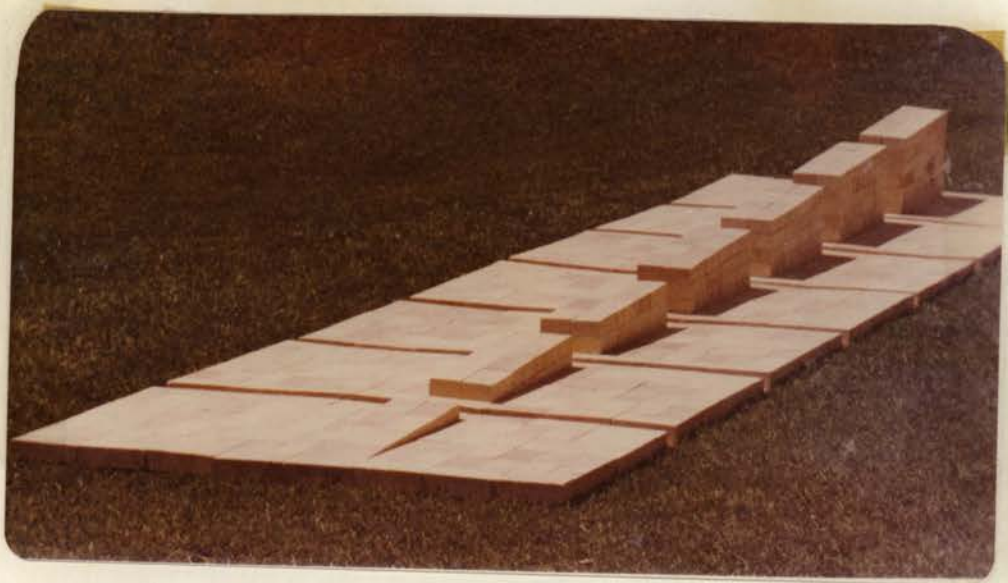


Figure 11.





Colony of Kenneth Pine  
S. D. Green, 1900, United States  
2" high x 1 1/2" long. Photo  
Robert Kaye

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Figure 12.