



museum of arts and design

VOULKOS: THE BREAKTHROUGH YEARS IS FIRST EXHIBITION DEVOTED TO PIVOTAL EARLY WORKS BY PETER VOULKOS



NEW YORK, NY (October 18, 2016) – The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) presents *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*, on view from October 18, 2016, through March 15, 2017. Spanning the years 1953–1968, the exhibition is the first to focus exclusively on the early career of Peter Voulkos, whose radical techniques and ideas opened up new possibilities for clay that are still being felt today.

In the words of Glenn Adamson, the co-curator of the exhibition, “Nearly everyone involved in ceramic art has a Voulkos story to tell. He was a charismatic figure, and his influence was tremendously important for the history of the medium. This exhibition gets past the personality, and follows the progression of his ideas in this crucial period of his career. It is fascinating to see him wrestling his materials into new forms, producing one breakthrough moment after another.”

Initially trained as a traditional potter, Voulkos defied mid-century craft dictums of proper technique and form to completely reinvent clay as a medium. He combined wheel throwing with slab building, traditional glazes with epoxy paint, figuration with abstraction, and made huge sculptural structures with complex internal engineering. *Rocking Pot*, an iconic early example, is a massive upside-down bowl punctured with saber-like forms penetrating the exterior walls. Intentionally kinetic, the sculpture is a mockery of the rule that properly made ceramics should never rock on a flat surface.

Though Voulkos would continue to work in bronze, paint, and printmaking for the remainder of his career, ceramics was the medium he always found the most instinctive: “Now me and a ball of clay, we’ll get together and it’s perfect,” he once said. “I almost feel I could take a pile of rough sand and make a pot out of it.” The exhibition will feature approximately 30 examples from this crucial body of early work in ceramic, most of which have not been exhibited on the East Coast for four decades. Also included will be three of the artist’s rarely seen mixed-media paintings, which help to demonstrate how Voulkos developed his ideas concurrently in painting, sculpture, and pottery.

Voulkos is a central figure in the history of MAD, featured in numerous past exhibitions, including two monographic surveys, and an exemplar of the cross-disciplinary thinking that the Museum supports. Both the exhibition and accompanying scholarly catalogue will provide a detailed account of the breakthrough works from Voulkos’ vital period of experimentation.

Exhibition highlights include:

- *Standing Jar* (c. 1956), which reflects Voulkos’ interest in contemporary painters such as Jack Tworkov and Franz Kline. Thick strips of clay act as three-dimensional brushstrokes and colored drips are allowed to trickle downward. The combination of thrown and slab-built elements soon became a cornerstone of Voulkos’ working practice.
- *Rocking Pot* (1956), an iconic example of the artist’s “pot assemblages,” now in the collection of the Renwick Gallery. Voulkos’ colleague John Mason coined this term to describe works that Voulkos assembled and joined after first throwing them on the wheel and then pounding them out of the round, improvising as he went. A massive upside-down bowl with cutout holes and saber-like forms that penetrate the exterior walls, the sculpture is notionally kinetic, fitted with two tapered skids, a mockery of the rule that properly made ceramics should never rock on a flat surface.
- *Sitting Bull* (1959), *Little Big Horn* (1959), and *Tientos* (1959), complex amalgamations of wheel-thrown and slab forms that have been paddled, gouged, or cut open. These three works, borrowed from prominent West Coast museums, represent the monumental height of Voulkos’ achievement in his breakthrough period.
- The iconic *Cross* (1959), the Museum of Arts and Design’s most important work by the artist. Voulkos energetically addressed the surface of this totemic sculpture by scratching through slips and glazes and using unexpectedly bright colors.
- The rocket-like *Red River* (c. 1960), which was acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art shortly after it was made. For Voulkos, painting and sculpture were always in dialogue, and in 1960 he began making this connection more explicit by adding epoxy-based paint to the surfaces of his ceramics after they had been fired. This was a highly unorthodox maneuver by ceramics standards, but it helped him to achieve some of his most complex relationships between volume and surface composition.
- A group of Voulkos’ 1968 blackwares, which marked a return to monumental pot forms and an emphasis on tactility. These works made for a dramatic finale to his breakthrough years, and are reunited for the first time since their initial presentation.

Voukos: The Breakthrough Years is co-curated by Glenn Adamson, former Nanette L. Laitman Director of the Museum of Arts and Design, and Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute, with Barbara Paris Gifford, Assistant Curator at MAD.

Following its run at MAD, *Voukos: The Breakthrough Years* will be on view at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC, from April 7 through August 20, 2017.

Voukos: The Breakthrough Years is part of MAD Transformations, a series of six exhibitions presented this fall that address artists who have transformed and continue to transform our perceptions of traditional craft mediums. The MAD Transformations exhibitions consider fiber, clay, and jewelry and metals—disciplines (along with glass and wood) that compose the bedrock of the Museum’s founding mission and collection, and that continue to morph in the hands of contemporary artists today.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Major funding for *Voukos: The Breakthrough Years* is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Additional support is generously provided by Nanette L. Laitman, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Regina and Marlin Miller, Jun and Ree Kaneko, the Robert Lehman Foundation, Leatrice and Melvin Eagle, Dick and Gloria Anderson, Ted Rowland, the Knafel Family Foundation, and Jeffrey Spahn Gallery.

This project is also supported by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This research was supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Inc.

Media Partner: artnet.

PUBLICATION

Published by Black Dog Publishing in collaboration with the Museum of Arts and Design, the 208-page *Peter Voukos: The Breakthrough Years* is the first monograph in over 20 years on the artist Peter Voukos. It includes essays by Glenn Adamson, Elissa Auther, Barbara Paris Gifford, James Melchert, Ruby Neri, Andrew Perchuk, and Jenni Sorokin.

Covering the most prolific span of Voukos’ career, from the early 1950s to the 1970s, the book includes both his well-known ceramic works and his largely overlooked paintings. The contributors examine this period in Voukos’ career in detail, situating key works in an art-historical context. Also considered are the gender dynamics of Voukos’ early training and immediate circle of influence. In addition to engaging with the breakthrough years of Voukos’ practice, the book considers his legacy today, as numerous artists explore the expressive language of clay that he helped to reinvent.

RELATED PROGRAMMING

TALK

Panel Discussion: Voukos, Then and Now

Moderated by Glenn Adamson, with Nicole Cherubini, James Melchert, Andrew Perchuk, and Arlene Shechet

Thursday, October 20, 2016 – 7:00 pm

Tickets: \$10 general / \$5 members and students

The Theater at MAD

Between the early 1950s and 1968, Peter Voulkos reshaped expectations around the ceramic medium, and created a varied body of work both in abstract and pottery forms. Today, this work seems more relevant than ever, as artists increasingly turn to ceramics for its expressive possibilities. This panel, composed of the leading specialists on Voulkos and contemporary artists, will consider the nature of his achievement and its ongoing resonance. Also under discussion will be the cultural associations that Voulkos has inspired. The panel will consider his work not only in aesthetic terms, but also in relation to issues of gender and American identity.

Panelists include:

- **Glenn Adamson**, moderator and co-curator of *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*.
- **Nicole Cherubini**, artist working primarily in ceramic sculpture and mixed media, whose solo exhibitions include the Pérez Art Museum Miami (Miami, FL), the Santa Monica Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), and the Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia, PA), among many others.
- **James Melchert**, artist, former student of Voulkos in the 1950s, Professor Emeritus of Art at UC Berkeley, and former Director of the Visual Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts.
- **Andrew Perchuk**, Deputy Director of the Getty Museum and co-curator of *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*.
- **Arlene Shechet**, artist, whose solo exhibitions include the RISD Museum (Providence, RI), the Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC), the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art (Overland Park, KS), the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery (Sarasota Springs, NY), the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver (Denver CO), and a 20-year survey of her work at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (Boston, MA), in June 2015, among many others.

ENCOUNTERS

Curator-Led Tour of *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years*

Thursday, October 20, 2016 – 6:00 pm and 6:30 pm

Free with KLM Pay-What-You-Wish Admission

3rd floor galleries

Discover the new exhibition *Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years* with Windgate Research and Collections Curator Elissa Auther and artist Arlene Shechet as your guides.

In the Studio with Nicole Cherubini

Thursday, October 20, 2016 – 3:00 pm

Free with Museum Admission

6th floor | Artist Studios

In response to several exhibitions highlighting ceramic innovators this fall, Nicole Cherubini visits the Museum for a featured artist demonstration in the Artist Studios. Cherubini will demonstrate her unique approach to using clay by creating a small work, discussing with visitors how she challenges ceramic traditions by placing her practice within the fields of contemporary painting, sculpture, and performance. Visitors are encouraged to ask Cherubini questions about her materials, processes, and ideas, and to visit the Museum's exhibitions before or following the demo.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) champions contemporary makers across creative fields, presenting artists, designers, and artisans who apply the highest level of ingenuity and skill to their work. Since the Museum's founding in 1956 by philanthropist and visionary Aileen Osborn Webb, MAD has celebrated all facets of making and the creative processes by which materials are transformed, from traditional techniques to cutting-edge technologies. Today, the Museum's curatorial program builds upon a rich history of exhibitions that emphasize a cross-disciplinary approach to art and design, and reveals the workmanship behind the objects and environments that shape our everyday lives. MAD provides an international platform for practitioners who are influencing the direction of cultural production and driving twenty-first-century innovation, fostering a participatory setting for visitors to have direct encounters with skilled making and compelling works of art and design. The Museum will be celebrating its Diamond Jubilee 60th Anniversary this year.

For high-resolution images, visit our press image archive:

<http://press.madmuseum.org>

User ID: mad

Password: media

#Voulkos #MADmuseum

twitter/MADmuseum

facebook/MADmuseum

instagram/MADmuseum

youtube.com/MADmuseum

PRESS CONTACT

Museum of Arts and Design
Claire Laporte / Hally Wolhandler
[212.299.7737](tel:212.299.7737)
press@madmuseum.org

Third Eye
Alexandra Israel / Katie Wisniewski
Alexandra@hellothirdeye.com / Katie@hellothirdeye.com

image caption

Peter Voulkos. Photo by Oppi Untracht. Courtesy of the American Craft Council Library and Archives.