

The contemporary landscape of clay cannot be easily summarized except to say that it is fluid and full of examples of different approaches to an ancient material. In the mid-twentieth century, those working in clay purposefully pushed the boundaries of the medium, both literally and figuratively. Narrative, sculptural works and abstract, non-functional forms began to crop up in studios and galleries nationwide as artists explored the past, present, and future of a medium wrought with history. Simultaneously, potters and those creating functional work continued to do so—forging new paths and maintaining, even if modifying, traditions. Each of these approaches to addressing the teapot is well-represented in RAM’s collection.

Interested in the past but also looking to investigate and innovate, contemporary artists sometimes use the teapot form specifically because it is both easily understood and ripe for experimentation. By drawing on a familiar type of object, they can connect with others fairly easily—even if they ultimately upend expectations or specific notions about how a teapot should look or what it does. While it would be a challenge to list all avenues of investigation, there are a few areas that are exemplified in RAM’s collection and this exhibition.



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Marek Cecula, Michael Cohen, Keiko Fukazawa, and Adrian Saxe directly challenge the use and function of a teapot as they create conceptual works that may only vaguely reference the form or that serve a purpose other than being a container for tea. Playing with postmodern ideas that involve looking critically at conventions and history, these artists offer pieces that are more about the teapot as an idea than as functional serving ware.

Imbuing their forms with narrative and introducing conversations about social and cultural topics, Michael Lucero, Matt Nolen, Richard Notkin, Yoko Sekino-Bove, and Jason Walker address foreign trade and relations, politics, history, and the environment. Others such as Annette Corcoran and Beatrice Wood weave birds or mermaids into their forms as they look at the natural world, fantasy, or the human body.

Maintaining more “traditional” shapes and a sense of function, Ken Ferguson, Karen Karnes, Warren MacKenzie, Jeff Oestreich, and Mark Shapiro offer somewhat more conventional versions of the teapot, reflecting their concerns with the practical as well as the aesthetic. They create work meant to be held and used, often drawing from Japanese traditions, processes, and ideas regarding pottery.

The 40 teapots included in this exhibition are shining examples of a modern take on tradition. They reflect a general interest in analyzing the past and a particular interest in exploring the idea of form and function. Please visit RAM to see further examples of artists exploring similar ideas as well as many other topics as they shape the field of contemporary crafts.

Further information can be found at:
www.ramart.org



Artists such as Susan Beiner, Ah Leon, Louis Marak, and Richard Shaw manipulate clay so that it looks as if it is another material. Their trompe l’oeil style (a French phrase that roughly translates to “fool the eye”) offers teapots that are sculpted from clay but look as if they are made of a twisted tree branch or a pile of objects such as a suitcase, screws, or even a shoe.

- [1] Martin and Judy Bibby
Bellhop Teapot, ca.1985
 Whiteware with glazes and lustres
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [2] Marek Cecula
Fragment Series Teapot No. II, 1989
 Glazed porcelain
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [3] Sergei Isupov
Fan the Fire, 1996
 Glazed porcelain
 Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak*
- [4] Karen Karnes
Teapot, 1989
 Glazed stoneware
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [5] Ah Leon
Trunk Teapot with Bent Branch No. 749, 1994, Earthenware
 Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak*
- [6] Michael Lucero
Teapot Form with Ribbon in Hair (Reclamation Series), 1995
 Glazed white earthenware, found wood object, ribbon, and horsehair
 Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak*

- [7] Matt Nolen
Foreign Interest Tea Set, 1991
 Glazed whiteware
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [8] David Regan
Hand Teapot, 2001
 Glazed porcelain
 Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd*
- [9] Adrian Saxe
Ewer (French Curve), 1989
 Porcelain with glazes and lustres
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [10] Michael Sherrill
Queen of Hearts, ca. 1990
 Stoneware with glazes and lustres
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection
- [11] Beatrice Wood
Man and Mermaid Teapot, 1991
 Earthenware with glazes and lustres
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection

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Time for Tea: Contemporary Ceramic Teapots



[11]

from
 Racine Art Museum’s Collection

1 Glenn Adamson, “Why Teapots?” from *Tea Anyone? The Donna Moog Teapot Collection*. Racine Art Museum: 2003, p. 11.

2 Davira S. Taragin and Donna Moog, “Donna Moog, a Collector of the 1980s and 1990s, Reminisces with Davira S. Taragin, “ from *Tea Anyone? The Donna Moog Teapot Collection*. Racine Art Museum: 2003, p. 11.



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Time for Tea: Contemporary Ceramic Teapots

from Racine Art Museum's Collection

Curated by Lena Vigna

The teapot is an object rich with history and meaning—part of social and ritual ceremonies both past and present and in many cultures. While



[2]

the exact origin of tea drinking is hard to pull out of layers of history and legends, objects connected to the ceremony—such as teapots—have helped to shape general associations. Chinese and Japanese traditions of tea ceremonies were often spiritual in content. When tea, and the teapots that held it, made its way as an import to European countries, the drink and its method of transmission became connected to wealth, class, power, and social status. As time went on, many cultures established etiquette and rules regarding the practice of tea drinking. And, of course, the significance of tea as a cultural symbol came to the forefront as colonials fought the British taxation on tea imported to the North American colonies in the 1770s.

Objects that are connected to rituals—and therefore connected to social and cultural traditions—have a symbolic or metaphoric significance as well as a practical function. The teapot can be a vessel for liquid but it could also be considered a vessel for communication and a symbol of interpersonal relationships as well as historic events. As part of a ritual, it is held in human hands yet it can also be “understood” without being touched. As such, the teapot is a rather mundane object that can still have power.



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With all of this potential in form and content, contemporary artists, especially those working with clay, have seen fit to take the teapot to new dimensions. As craft historian and curator Glenn Adamson suggests:

Perhaps no other subject in contemporary ceramics has been more exhaustively explored — in books, in exhibitions, in collections. To be sure, the form is instantly compelling. Its four main components (spout, handle, body, and lid) are inherently sculptural and impose few limits on the imagination.¹



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Racine Art Museum (RAM), with the largest contemporary crafts collection in the United States, has artworks made of ceramics, fibers, glass, metals, polymer, wood, and many other materials. Established in 2003, as an extension of the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, also in Racine, RAM produces between 15 and 20 exhibitions annually. These exhibitions, featuring a combination of works borrowed from across the country and drawn from RAM's own collection, reveal the museum's interest in art as a creative act, with craft media being shown alongside drawings, prints, watercolors, and photographs.



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Including leaders in contemporary crafts, such as Wendell Castle, Dale Chihuly, Arline Fisch, Albert Paley, Toshiko Takaezu, and Peter Voulkos, RAM's holdings have grown exponentially since the 1990s. If analyzed by individual media, ceramic works comprise the highest percentage, numbering almost 1,500 objects by both emerging and established artists, including over 400 ceramic teapots. While large-scale clay sculptures

and narrative reliefs command attention, smaller-scale teapots and functional objects also impress RAM's visitors. They showcase each artist's style, approach to subject matter, and response to a traditional form. While not on permanent display, RAM's teapots are often included in collections-based exhibitions. A number of options for different clay bodies, firing, and building techniques are represented.



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In 1999, collector Donna Moog offered RAM a gift of over 250 teapots. The impact of the Moog collection cannot be understated as it offered a large body of work with diverse artists and styles represented. Since this gift, RAM has added over 100 teapots from various other donors including Dale and Doug Anderson, Karen Johnson Boyd, Gail M. and Robert A. Brown, David and Jacqueline Charak, and Iris and Jay Leonard with the Kohler Foundation, thereby establishing one of the largest public collections of contemporary artist-made teapots in the United States.

A quote from Moog offers her perspective — a key collector's perspective — on the importance of the teapot in terms of an artist's interest in the form as well as its use as a means of understanding an artist's ideas and aesthetics. She states:

I began to start really noticing teapots and how different artists interpreted the form. I became aware that to a ceramic artist, the teapot is more than a vessel: it has an almost mythical presence and is considered by many artists to be the consummate test of a potter's skill. For me, it became a clear avenue through which to assess and contrast the work of different artists on a relatively accessible and collectible scale.²



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