

Contemporary Teapots at RAM

While the teapot as a functional object can be traced back about 800 years to China, the form is familiar in Western Europe and the United States. As the teapot became connected to status and luxury via trade centuries ago, Western manufacture began in earnest. Most of the earliest teapots were metal, yet within the context of contemporary craft, teapots are most associated with ceramics.

RAM—with the largest contemporary craft collection in the United States—has almost 400 teapots in its collection, mostly made of clay, yet also including metal, fiber, and other media. While not on permanent display, RAM's teapots are often included in collections-based exhibitions. A number of examples of different materials, subject matter, and building techniques are represented.



In 1999, collector **Donna Moog** offered RAM a gift of over 250 teapots. The impact of the Moog collection cannot be understated as it represents a large body of work by diverse artists in a range of styles. Since this gift, RAM has added over 100 teapots from other donors, including **Doug and Dale 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.

The teapot is an object rich with meaning—part of social and ritual ceremonies, both past and present, and in many cultures. While the exact origin of tea drinking is hard to pull out of layers of history and legends,



(above)
Beatrice Wood
Man and Mermaid Teapot, 1991
 Glazed earthenware with lustres
 13 x 13 x 7 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 The Donna Moog Teapot Collection

(left)
Akio Takamori
Young Men with a Woman (Teapot), 1992
 Glazed stoneware
 9 x 6 1/2 x 4 1/8 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of Gail M. and Robert A. Brown

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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 of 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 container 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.

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 in the 2003 RAM publication, *Tea Anyone? The Donna Moog Teapot Collection*:

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.

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.

(above right)
Michael Lucero
Teapot Form with Ribbon in Hair from the *Reclamation Series* (recto), 1995
Glazed white earthenware, found wood display stand, ribbon, paint, and horsehair
21 1/2 x 17 x 10 1/4 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak

(left)
Patti Warashina
Apple Breath (Teapot), 1993
Glazed porcelain
10 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 6 3/4 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Gail M. and Robert A. Brown



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.

Artists such as **Susan Beiner**, **Ah Leon**, **Louis Marak**, and **Richard Shaw** manipulate clay so that it looks like 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 other objects, such as a suitcase, screws, or even a shoe.

Marek Cecula, **Michael Cohen**, **Philip Cornelius**, **Keiko Fukazawa**, and **Adrian Saxe** directly challenge the use and function of a teapot as they create conceptual works in clay that may only vaguely reference the form or that serve a purpose other than being an actual 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.

Also looking at the teapot as a metaphor, yet utilizing a much more representational aesthetic and exploring how knowledge is acquired, **Red Weldon Sandlin** crafts ceramic teapots in the form of human and animal characters that are often part of larger, more complex sculptural compositions.

Imbuing their forms with narrative and introducing conversations about social and cultural topics, **Evelyn Grant**, **Michael Lucero**, **Matt Nolen**, **Richard Notkin**, **Yoko Sekino-Bové**, 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 and fantasy.

The human form becomes a mechanism for dynamic design in the work of **George Walker** and **Patti Warashina**—each inventively integrating the body into the shape of the teapot itself.



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,

(above right)
Red Weldon Sandlin
*Bull in a China Cabinet...
 A Story of Pacifitea (Teapot)*, 2006
 Glazed porcelain, wood, and paint
 18 3/8 x 10 3/4 x 11 7/8 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak



(left)
Marek Cecula
Teapot No. II from the Fragment Series, 1989
 Glazed porcelain
 11 x 9 x 13 inches
 Racine Art Museum, The Donna Moog Teapot Collection



reflecting their concerns with the practical as well as the aesthetic. They create ceramic work meant to be held and used, often drawing from Japanese traditions, processes, and ideas regarding pottery.

The teapots in RAM's collection 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. In an interview from *Tea Anyone? The Donna Moog Teapot Collection*, donor Donna Moog offered these further thoughts:

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.

Lena Vigna
Curator of Exhibitions



Portions of this essay are borrowed from Lena Vigna, *Time for Tea: Contemporary Ceramic Teapots from RAM's Collection*, produced in conjunction with the Dane County International Airport for an exhibition of the same name installed at the Airport, March 12 – September 3, 2015.



(above left)
Annette Corcoran
Pileated Woodpecker (Teapot), 1990
Glazed porcelain
11 x 8 1/4 x 7 1/4 inches
Racine Art Museum,
The Donna Moog Teapot Collection

(left)
Ah Leon
Trunk Teapot with Bent Branch No. 749, 1994
Earthenware
11 1/2 x 10 3/4 x 5 7/8 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak
Photography throughout by Jon Bolton, Racine

(above right)
Kurt Weiser
Blue Menu Teapot, 1998
Glazed porcelain with china paint
10 1/2 x 14 3/8 x 4 1/8 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of Devra Breslow