

# VOULKOS

## THE BREAKTHROUGH YEARS

Peter Voulkos (1924–2002) is arguably the most radical figure in the history of ceramics. He broke every rule in the potter's book, and in doing so influenced a generation of artists working in clay and other media. Voulkos had a long and distinguished career, but the astounding thing is that he fundamentally transformed the field so quickly—over the course of just fifteen years.

This exhibition focuses on this period of artistic breakthrough, from 1953 to 1968. During this time, Voulkos rejected the ceramics orthodoxy of proper technique, utility, and form, and instead pursued a range of ideas that were entirely new to the medium. He violently attacked the vessel form, breaking down its parts and reconfiguring them into a new visual language. He used color and contrast to disrupt the visual integrity of his objects. He built monumental sculptures, ambitious in scale and complexity. He explored other media alongside his pottery, and developed distinctive bodies of work in painting and bronze sculpture. He staged theatrical demonstrations that were almost a kind of performance art. Through it all, he continually returned to pottery forms to demonstrate their endless potential for experimentation.

Today his breakthrough continues to be relevant. Ceramics have never been more popular in the art world, and Voulkos's conviction that "painting helps the sculpture, sculpture helps the painting, pottery helps both" seems ahead of its time in the way that it anticipated the cross-disciplinary habits of many of today's artists. This exhibition gives viewers the chance to encounter these crucial works afresh.

#Voulkos @MADMuseum

*Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years* is co-curated by Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute, and Guest Curator Glenn Adamson, with Assistant Curator Barbara Paris Gifford.

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*Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years* is part of *MAD Transformations*, a series of six exhibitions that address artists who have transformed and continue to transform our perceptions of traditional craft mediums. MAD's six fall exhibitions consider fiber, clay, and jewelry & metals, disciplines that were the bedrock of the museum's founding mission and collection, and that continue to morph in the hands of contemporary artists today.

### MAD ACTIVATES

#### demonstration

In the Studios with Featured Artist Nicole Cherubini  
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20, 3 PM | 6FL ARTIST STUDIOS

#### encounter

Curator-Led Tour with Elissa Auther and Arlene Shechet  
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20, 6 PM AND 6:30 PM | 3FL GALLERY

#### talk

Voulkos, Then and Now  
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20, 7 PM | THEATER

#### cinema: breaking form series

Peter Voulkos Working  
THURSDAY, JANUARY 19, 7 PM | THEATER

The Films of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha  
THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 7 PM | THEATER

#### family

MADreads: A Literacy-Based Program  
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 11 AM | 3FL GALLERY

Studio Sunday: A Hands-On Making Program  
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 10 AM | 6FL CLASSROOM

#### teachers

Teachers' Open House: Fall Exhibitions Preview  
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28, 4:30 PM | 6FL AND GALLERIES

#### docent tours

Featuring Highlights of Fall Exhibitions  
DAILY, 11:30 AM AND 3 PM, THURSDAYS, 6:30 PM | LOBBY

Visit [madmuseum.org](http://madmuseum.org) for additional information.



# SECTION ONE

## EARLY WORKS, 1953–56

After military service in World War II, Voulkos went to college in his home state of Montana. There he studied with Frances Senska, who taught him how to throw on the wheel, process his own clay, and make his own glazes. Voulkos quickly established himself as one of America's most skilled functional potters as he won awards for his tureens, vases, and bowls.

This first section of the exhibition shows how he moved past this promising but conventional beginning. He experimented with new techniques, such as the development of a wax-resist process adapted from fabric dyeing. He learned from Japanese pottery—its asymmetry, abstract decoration, and chance effects—and from fine art, particularly the work of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

After settling in Los Angeles, where he was hired to teach at the Otis Art Institute, Voulkos returned to Montana in the summer of 1955. This was a key turning point. There, he remembered, he “did some stuff that was very different than I'd done a year before and it was quite a breakthrough for me... psychologically and even technically.”

Upon his return to Los Angeles he made his first really adventurous works. Three are shown here. The squared-off plate and vase, from 1956, show the clear influence of Matisse and Picasso. Both feature “slip stencil” decoration created by painting liquid clay over a heavy paper cutout and then removing it to produce a relief effect.

*Standing Jar* reflects Voulkos's 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 downwards. The combination of thrown and slab-built elements soon became a cornerstone of Voulkos's working practice.

## SECTION TWO

### **POT ASSEMBLAGES, 1956–58**

Most of the works shown in this section are from 1956, perhaps the most important year in Voulkos's artistic development. He invented a new way of working: first throwing elements on the wheel and pounding them out of the round, and then assembling and joining them, improvising as he went along. His surface painting sometimes echoes the sculptural form and sometimes disregards it and breaks up its visual integrity.

Voulkos's colleague John Mason called these works "pot assemblages." They preserve the scale and formats of traditional ceramics, but also represent a complete departure from precedent. *Rocking Pot*, now in the collection of the Renwick Gallery, is an iconic example. It is 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. It is shown here alongside a related work recently acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

At this time Voulkos was also establishing himself as the charismatic leader of a group of other ceramics artists in Los Angeles, including Mason, Paul Soldner, and Ken Price. Like his work, the example he set for others was physical and intuitive. As Soldner put it, "he didn't lecture, he didn't teach, he just worked."

## SECTION THREE

### PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, 1958–59

In 1957 Voulkos began sharing a studio with artist John Mason on Glendale Boulevard in Los Angeles. There they created a facility that would allow for the production of large-scale ceramics. They built a huge kiln, then the largest in use outside of a factory. They formulated a clay recipe that was ideal for monumental sculpture, and modified a potter's wheel to give it extra horsepower. They acquired an industrial dough mixer secondhand from a bakery to prepare large amounts of clay. To keep the clay from drying out, they brought in humidifiers designed for California's fruit warehouses.

As Voulkos stretched the medium to its physical limits, he also expanded his aesthetic vocabulary. Monolithic works such as *5000 Feet* seem to reference prehistoric sculpture or piled chunks of rock. *Sitting Bull* and *Little Big Horn* are complex amalgamations of wheel-thrown and slab forms that have been paddled and gouged, while *Tientos* is cut open in places to expose the interior.

The large sculptures have a novel method of composition akin to architectural construction. He extended the lessons of his earlier pot assemblages so that, as he put it, "[the] outside and inside grew together, building on themselves and each other." Voulkos energetically addressed the surfaces of his sculptures by scratching through slips and glazes or using unexpectedly bright colors, as in the iconic *Cross*, the Museum of Arts and Design's most important work by the artist.

In 1960 Voulkos staged a one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which won praise from *New York Times* critic Dore Ashton. She called him an "artist of exceptional vitality" and perceptively noted the importance of his background in craft to his avant-garde achievements.



## SECTION FOUR

### EXPERIMENTS IN COLOR, 1960–61

For Voulkos, painting and sculpture were always in dialogue. 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, including the rocket-like *Red River*, which was acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art shortly after it was made. Critic Rose Slivka, an important advocate for Voulkos, summarized the synthesis he had achieved: “Greek classical culture combined with French modernism and American muscle-toting, mud-slinging, refinement and roughhouse.”

Also in 1960 Voulkos completed a move from Los Angeles to Berkeley, where he took up a teaching position at the University of California. He once again inspired a following of students and other young artists, among them Ron Nagle, Jim Melchert, and Mary Heilmann, who recalled the way “he’d throw a big form and step away from the wheel and he’d drop it on the floor. And then he’d make it into a pot... . That was pretty radical, [to] cultivate mistakes as part of the discourse.”

During the transition from his Los Angeles studio to the new situation in Berkeley, Voulkos began to experiment with bronze casting. His first works in this medium, such as *Remington 2* (pictured), were cast from large slabs of wax that he broke into rough chunks. The painting seen here relates to his early bronzes both in its composition and its title.

## SECTION FIVE

### PROCESS AND DEMONSTRATION, 1961–63

Commissions for large-scale works in bronze occupied a good deal of Voulkos's time in the early 1960s, but he continued to work in clay energetically and innovatively. Many of his ceramic works of this period were made in public demonstrations. Voulkos was a natural performer who loved working in front of a crowd. One observer who saw him make *Josephine* at Greenwich House Pottery in New York remembers how "he worked with total abandon and total focus all at the same time," first pounding the piece as it rose on the wheel, then slicing it in half, then welding it together with wet clay as he worked it with his fists from the inside, and finally splashing its surface with slip and glaze.

Voulkos's demonstrations were great theater, and even the ceramic works that he was making in the studio at this time, such as a series of cracked and fissured plates, capture this sense of immediacy. They can be compared with contemporary Abstract Expressionist paintings, many of which project a similar, stereotypically masculine combination of authority and aggression. Yet Voulkos's improvisations also relate to his interest in jazz and Spanish flamenco, which he played proficiently on the guitar. "I think that working in the form of pottery is a very demanding thing," he said. "The minute you touch a piece of clay it responds, it's like music—you have to know all the structure [and] know how to make sound before you can come up with anything."

## SECTION SIX

### **BLACKWARES, 1968**

In June 1968 Voulkos presented a group of nineteen ceramic works at the Quay Gallery in San Francisco (pictured). Stark and simplified in shape and palette, they have become known as the “blackwares” because of their dark metallic surfaces, achieved using iron-based slips. After the restless experimentation of the previous fifteen years, this was an initially surprising return to a restrained pottery format. Taken together, the works have a strong presence that is more tactile than visual. As Voulkos’s friend and fellow artist Jim Melchert put it: “The group is composed of the most haptic pottery I’ve seen in a long time; it wouldn’t surprise me if the pots had been made in the dark.”

The blackwares exhibition was like the neck of an hourglass: a moment when all of Voulkos’s artistic intelligence was concentrated into a single group of related forms. It marks the end of one phase of his career and the inauguration of another. For the remainder of his career, he committed himself to a few signature formats, with particular emphasis on the so-called “stack” or vase form seen here. The vocabulary of controlled attack visible in the blackwares—his many ways of cutting, poking, and working into the surface of his pots, a process that he jokingly called “putting the art on,” remained important to him, as did the idea of making numerous variations across a series.

The blackwares reestablished the core value of pottery to Voulkos’s practice. Though he continued to work in bronze, paint, and printmaking throughout his career, ceramics were 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 blackwares confirm this facility. Given their limited palette of color and shape, they could have been dull or repetitive. Instead, in their vitality and variety, they are one of the high points of Voulkos’s career, and of all modern ceramic art.