

*The ceramics collection
at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
tells an ongoing story of cultural history
one pot at a time.*

Formed with earth Forged by fire

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN



Plate with Avanyu Design,
one of 21 works by Maria Martinez in
the Fred Jones ceramics collections, is featured on the cover of the
University of Oklahoma Press' most recent printing of *Maria: The Potter
of San Ildefonso*, by OU alumna Alice Marriott.

continued

Often overshadowed by its French Impressionist neighbors across the gallery in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, an exceptional collection of ceramics, from ancient artifacts to abstract expressionism, is finally getting its share of the spotlight, including a starring role in a national touring exhibition and an upcoming PBS special.

The exquisite black-on-black *Plate with Avanyu Design*, which will be featured in the spring 2007 PBS series "Craft in America," is a recent addition to the museum's collection. The work by the legendary San Ildefonso artist Maria Martinez and son Popovi Da was one of 476 paintings, textiles, sculpture and ceramics given to the museum in November 2003 by OU alumnus and collector R. E. Mansfield. Another major gift in 2005 from OU alumnus Harrison Jedel of Kansas City, Missouri, greatly strengthened the museum's contemporary collection with important works by Ken Ferguson and Paul Soldner.

"Our porcelain and ceramics from the Chinese dynasties have always been a foundation of the permanent collection," says Eric M. Lee, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director of the Fred Jones, "and now with two major acquisitions in the past three years, we have added significant depth and breadth in the areas of contemporary studio ceramics and traditional American Indian pottery."

Lee's reference to ceramics as a cornerstone of the museum's collection is no mere metaphor. The University of Oklahoma museum of art was founded in 1936, the direct result of a gift by Bartlesville oilman Lew Wentz and British photojournalist Richard Matzene. Wentz funded a number of Matzene's trips to East Asia, where he returned with treasures from tomb figures to tableware.

"A lot of what we know about early Chinese civilization depends on ceramics, since that is what has lasted," says Alan

Atkinson, adjunct professor of history and art. "Not only do ceramics represent distinct traditions within the country, the works themselves are literally 'parts of China.' There is the mud from a thousand years ago along with agricultural and mining products in the glaze. They have power, not only as works of art, but as functional objects people can relate to—a jar or a bowl."

Taken as a whole, Atkinson adds, the Wentz-Matzene Collection illustrates for students the technological and stylistic development of ceramics from the early Han (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) through the Qing Dynasties (1644-1911).

Mary Jo Watson, the curator of American Indian art at the Fred Jones, who developed the American Indian Art History program at OU and now serves as interim director of the School of Art, agrees that the collection has grown in importance as a teaching tool.

"It is a joy to be able to bring students into the galleries and show them the actual work, not just a slide," says Watson, "The museum has wonderful examples of pre-Columbian artifacts through contemporary pueblo works." Many of the pre-Columbian pieces are gifts of R. Donald Walp, collector and long time friend of the museum.

The Mansfield Collection considerably boosted the University's holdings of several important Southwestern pueblo groups including San Ildefonso, Cochiti, Santa Clara and Hopi. Like the works from the Asian galleries, the collections have as much to teach about history, geography and the evolution of a society as they do about art.

Jane Aebersold, curator of ceramics at the Fred Jones, likens the collections to a family anthology. "In our collection you can follow the styling from a pueblo to the families within the pueblo, from pre-historic to contemporary times," she says. "The collections of American Indian ce-

ramics are family oriented and tribally oriented and culturally oriented, which provides a river of information that goes back centuries."

Prized among the museum's holdings are a black gunmetal pot by Maria Martinez and Popovi Da of the San Ildefonso pueblo and works featuring the single-hair brush strokes of



Maria Martinez and Popovi Da
Gun Metal Pot, n.d.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. R.E. Mansfield, 2003

Acoma potter and painter Lucy Lewis. Both pueblos used the technique of building the base of the pot inside a rounded form called a puki and coiling ropes of clay upwards from the base to make the form. From there the pots were shaped with simple tools, burnished with stones, and often decorated with carving and the intricate brush application of “slips,” a liquid clay.

Lewis derived her designs from shards found on the pueblo from ancient Anasazi and Mimbres pottery that dates back hundreds, if not thousands of years. Like her ancestors, Lewis painted freehand a pattern of thin lines to accentuate the shape of the pot, creating an almost optical illusion effect. Contemporary Acoma potters such as Rebecca Lucario and Dorothy Torivio have taken the tradition into the world of fine art.

To fully appreciate this artistic evolution, one only need visit the museum. Grouped by pueblos and families, visitors can see how the tradition emerges and is built upon by subsequent generations. “We have works by sons and daughters, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, extended families. You can see the knowledge base growing,” says Aebersold.

A living example, Barbara Gonzales, the great-granddaughter of Maria Martinez, will visit OU on February 6 for a demonstration and lecture at the art center. The museum also owns works by her son Cavan, who represents the next generation of San Ildefonso potters. A graduate of New York’s prestigious Alfred University, Cavan is gaining a reputation for his revival of polychrome pottery and black-on-black pots.

“It is so exciting to see this new generation take a 2,000-year-old tradition and build on it. The works are contemporary and at the same time respectful of their heritage. To be able to continue with these family lines, to have a work from ‘Old Lady’ Nampeyo or a contemporary piece by Tammy Garcia, great-great-niece of Margaret Tafoya would be fabulous,” Aebersold adds.

She is equally pleased with new works by artists represented in the Jedel Collection, the first major contribution to the museum’s contemporary studio holdings since the 1970s, when



Robert Taylor

Mary Jo Watson, curator of American Indian art at the Fred Jones, uses the ceramics in the museum as a teaching tool in her art history classes. She says taken as a whole the collection provides students a visual timeline through history.

the ceramics collection flourished under the guidance of OU art professor Roger Corsaw.

A potter and collector in his own right, Corsaw donated a large portion of his private holdings to the Fred Jones before his death. But perhaps his most valuable contribution was the technical information and knowledge he brought to the department, says Aebersold.

Also on the OU art faculty at the time was John Frank, an Oklahoma potter, who went on to establish the internationally known Frankoma Pottery. Some of Frank’s early works are also in the museum’s permanent collection.

“Contemporary studio ceramics typically came from a very comfortable frame of reference, a user-friendly, food-oriented clay tradition. The works in the Jedel Collection shake things up a bit,” Aebersold says.

“Included in the collection is a large abstract expressionist tondo by Jim Leedy (think Willem de Kooning on a plate) and later works by Paul Soldner and Ken Ferguson. Ferguson was a major figure in American art and enjoyed an international reputation,” she explains. “He started out as a very traditional, functional potter. His later pieces reflected a rapier wit and penchant for political satire. The Jedel Collection adds these later pieces to our collection.”

continued

Unknown (China)
Tang Dynasty (618-907)
Sancai Jar
Wentz-Matzene Collection, 1936



Jim Leedy
Blue Cup and Saucer, 1970s
Gift of Mr. Harrison Jedel, 2005

Another heavy hitter from the Jedel gift is Paul Soldner, known as the “founder of American raku.” In the collection room at the Fred Jones, Aebersold points out a large Soldner vase purchased by the museum in 1969. The rounded body is taut and smooth, while the pot rises from a small foot and ends with a vigorous and expressive lip, accented dramatically by the circular pour of the glaze.

“This is a very physically expressive piece that reflects a traditional vase form, only abstracted. Soldner made big vessels like this and then his work became more sculptural,” she says. “Thanks to Mr. Jedel, we now have some of his later work.”

The Soldner piece in the Jedel Collection is also a pot, but it functions less as a vessel than as a canvas for a reclining figure. “This piece is a great example of the organic abstraction movement developed in American Studio Ceramics in the mid to late 1970s,” explains Aebersold. “It’s a wonderful addition.”

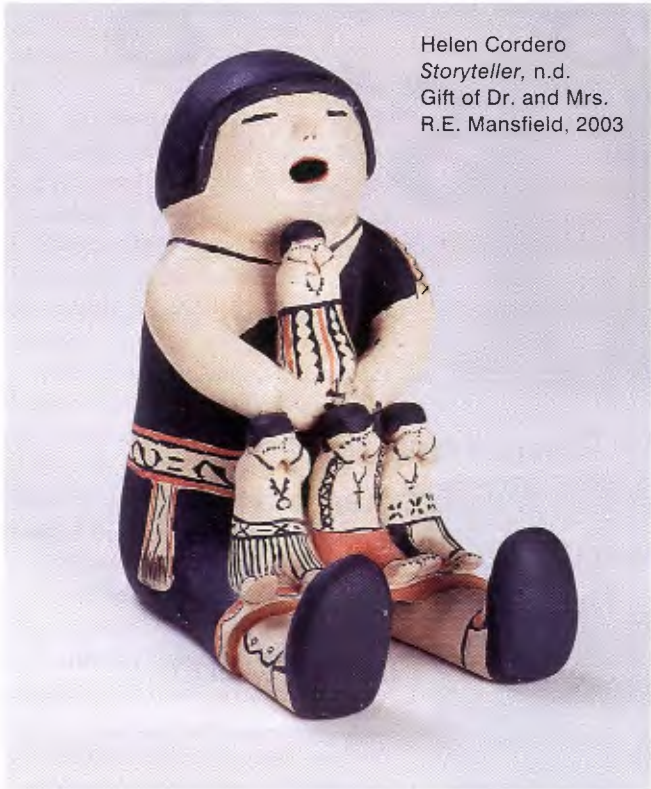
Also in the collection is a “particularly excellent piece,” by Warren MacKenzie and his first wife, Alix. During their collaboration from the late 1940s until her death in 1962, the couple, both students of ceramics icon Bernard Leach, shared a creative passion.

In this instance, Warren threw the pot and while it was still wet, brushed it with a white Japanese slip decoration called “hakeme.” After the pot was glazed, but before firing, Alix decorated the piece with brushwork in a Bauhaus-style design. “It is very rare to find a work signed by both MacKenzies,” Aebersold adds.



Robert Taylor

Ceramics curator Jane Aebersold shows museum visitors a Cavan Gonzales polychrome plate with eagle feather design. Polychrome is a technique that requires the application of three or more colors of clay slips to develop the painted design.



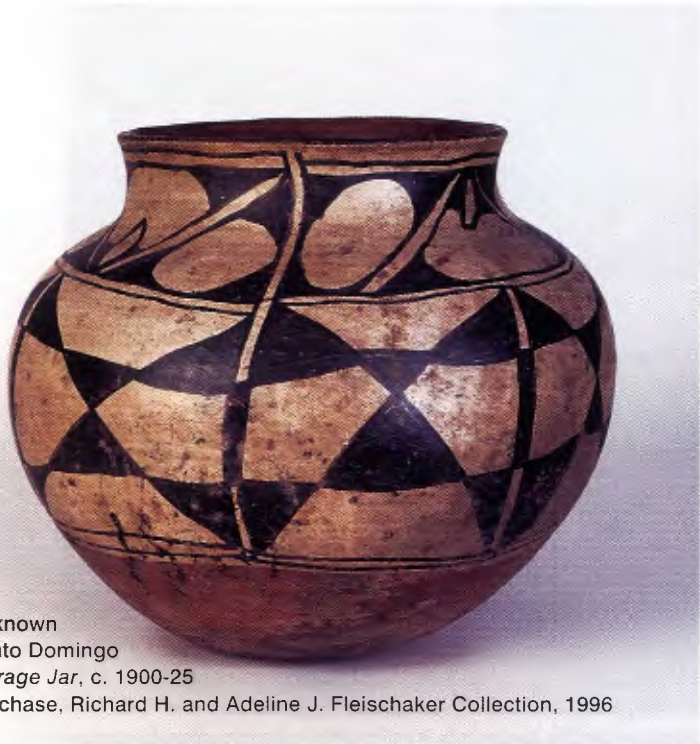
Helen Cordero
Storyteller, n.d.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs.
R.E. Mansfield, 2003



In addition to \$50 million worth of French Impressionist paintings, the Aaron and Clara Weitzenhoffer Estate included several examples of Chinese export porcelain, of which Mrs. Weitzenhoffer was especially fond.



Lucy Martin Lewis
Jar, c. 1960-70s
Purchase, Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, 1996



Unknown
Santo Domingo
Storage Jar, c. 1900-25
Purchase, Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, 1996

A beautiful, yet utilitarian teapot in the Jedel Collection by Shoji Hamada brings the collection full circle to its Asian roots. Declared a Japanese Living National Treasure in 1955, Hamada was instrumental in elevating the importance of the unknown craftsman and celebrating pottery as a cultural expression, no matter what that culture might be. Like his kindred spirits in the galleries of the Fred Jones, Hamada adds another link to the recorded history of civilization, one not written with words, but shaped with earth and hardened by fire.

Lynette Lobban is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.