The Ceramic International

by Carl Christian Dauterman,
Associate Curator, Post-Renaissance Art

In both Europe and America the studio ceramist, as distinguished from the industrial artist and craftsman, personifies a youthful movement in an age-old art. Working independently but keeping himself informed of foreign and domestic trends through exhibitions, lectures, and periodicals, together with craft organizations and travel, he has taken the measure of an evolving international style. From this he has borrowed and to this he has contributed, selecting and translating in terms of his own environment, temperament, and ability.

The studio ceramist is an artist-intellectual who may be an art director, teacher, or any other person who finds creative stimulation in working with clay. His output is wide in scope, ranging from stoneware cups to gigantic pottery jars, and from wall plaques to sculpture in the full round. Often he is a free-lance artist whose work, not confined by the limitations of commercial reproduction, is nevertheless recognized sporadically by the ceramics industry.

Buffalo with Sitting Figure, by Josje Smit, The Netherlands. Glazed terra cotta. Height 15 1/2 inches

The Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts initiated in 1932, in memory of the local potter Adelaide Alsop Robineau, a series of traveling exhibitions which have given periodic encouragement to American ceramists. The current showing marks a milestone: it is the twentieth of the series and it is international in scope. The guiding hand in assembling the material has been that of Anna W. Olmsted, Director Emeritus of the Syracuse Museum, whose name has become synonymous with this sequence of Ceramic National exhibitions. The Syracuse China Corporation and the Ferro Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio have served as cosponsors of this international version. For the present month and until March 8 we have the pleasure of showing it in our Special Exhibition galleries, adjacent to the Winslow Homer exhibition.

It is thirty years since our Museum has held a
comparable show. In the intervening period strong national and international trends have asserted themselves among ceramists. The present exhibition thus affords a long-awaited opportunity to view American and Canadian work side by side with examples submitted by ten European lands. Altogether, about three hundred and fifty pieces are shown. Somewhat more than half are of foreign origin.

The Museum has supplemented the Syracuse exhibition with a small but select group of ceramics drawn from the permanent collections of seven departments and serving as an index or frame of reference to more extensive displays throughout the building. Thus today's work may be evaluated in a perspective of thousands of years of man's achievements in fashioning objects of clay.

By its very nature, ceramic ware has always been invested with challenge and mystery. Its technical aspects exert an irresistible fascination upon those who work in it. Potters at every cultural level have marveled at the effects achieved by others. There is as much of this feeling alive today as there was almost a thousand years ago when the importation of Chinese earthen and porcelaneous ware stimulated the potters of that area to create new forms and designs. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Persians changed their techniques, resorting to ground white quartz and a transparent alkaline glaze in an effort to simulate Chinese porcelain. Just as the Chinese excelled in high-fired glazes, so the potters of Islam rose to new eminence in other directions. This is illustrated by their success with lusterware which nourished the eye with metallic accents, their dexterity in creating openwork designs, and their ability to arrest the play of light with subtle relief decoration. With all this, they retained colors that were essentially their own, combined with a freehand quality that often belied the molds which imparted the form to their vessels.

The sense of inspiration from afar will be felt by visitors to the present exhibition. One familiar with traditional ceramics will recognize continued indebtedness to ancient forms and techniques, and may discover fresh solutions to the potter's eternal challenge—that of finding the proportions, the colors, and the decoration most

Demitasse set, by Karen Karnes, New York. Orange-glazed stoneware. Height of pot 8 3/4 inches

aptly suited to a given object in terms of its purpose and material.

The first general impression one receives is that mellowness of tone and preoccupation with texture are characteristics shared on an international scale. A pervasive sobriety is due in part to the increasing popularity of stoneware over ordinary earthenware. In the less refined earthenware, there has long been a temptation to conceal the crudeness of the material with a masking coat of colored slip or glaze; in stoneware, on the other hand, one observes a desire to permit the improved color and texture of the "body" to assert themselves.

The rise of stoneware is a sign of greater technical proficiency. As a medium, it is vastly superior to the common clay of our flower pots and other low-fired wares. Because it can stand much hotter temperatures in the firing kiln, stoneware develops a close-knit texture that makes it virtually impervious to liquids. Therefore it can be left unglazed, as it was in the early eighteenth-century Dutch teapots of Arij de Milde, and as it is in numerous pieces in the exhibition. Alternatively, it can be glazed by the simple expedient of throwing rock salt into the kiln during the firing. This was done to the fine old drinking vessels of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany, which exhibit browns and grays close to those of modern stoneware. The practice of salt glazing is, however, more closely associated with the European past than present, for today the feldspathic glazes of Far Eastern origin are customarily used.

Along with the use of stoneware goes a pre-dilection for wheel-turned vessels, particularly slender tubelike forms. Such attenuated vessels represent an influence from another source which has been pioneering in design in recent years—Scandinavia. Tapering vases and willowy bottles provide a striking departure from the more cozily rounded jars and bowls of conventional dimensions.

*Vase, by Raija Tuumi, Finland. Glazed stoneware. Height 24 inches. Two vases, by Toini Muona, Finland. Porcelain*
Colorwise, there is a decided shift toward combinations of black and metallic brown, as found in certain of the Oriental porcelaneous wares. One thinks of the Chinese Chien-yao, named after the town in Fukien where it was first made, and of its Japanese variants, loosely known as temmoku, finely streaked like hares’ fur or the breast of a partridge. There are modern suggestions of the glaucous “green of distant hills” seen in the yüeh wares of Sung, or in the grayish Korean celadons. Other hues are gauged to the soft dry-blue of ancient Egyptian faience or the ochorous tones of neolithic Chinese jars. Yet the underlying colors are the natural grays and browns deriving from high-fired stoneware clays, left bare or little altered by the application of glaze.

The prevalence of muted tones may also be

_Polar Fox, by Michael Schilkin, Finland. Glazed stoneware. Height 17 inches_

_Seven Sisters, by Finn Hald, Norway. Glazed tile. Length 33 inches_
ascribed to something much more general than the increasing use of stoneware. Present-day glass, for example, has eschewed vivid colors in favor of water clarity or the low chromatic values of topaz and smoky quartz. The trend is observable even in paintings. One critic of the current Pittsburgh Bicentennial International Exhibition has characterized the prize-winning foreign paintings as gray-on-gray, or brown-on-brown.

As opposed to internationalism, the stamp of national self-assertion, so evasive of definition, can be recognized more clearly among the freely manipulated sculptures than among the products of the wheel. Nowhere is this more marked than in the sculptures from southern and eastern Europe. The grotesque Warrior by Leoncillo Leonardi illustrates this effectively: a jagged terracotta figure in white glaze and areas of metallic luster recalling the ruby and golden iridescence of sixteenth-century Gubbio maiolica. French contributions differ from the Italian in that they vary from the serious egg-smooth White Top, of Jouve, to the carnival quality of the group called Lion and Bird, by Guidette Carbonnel. The Federal Republic of Germany shows Lorcher’s relief panel, in the turquoise blue of medieval Sultanabad pottery, with a band of horsemen apparently gathering for combat. Belgium contributes a forward look in a bristling, compact figure called Heavy Animal, by Pierre Caille, executed in gunmetal glaze and golden underglaze. Finland rather appropriately offers a Polar Fox in white-glazed stoneware, by Michael Schilkin. Lastly, a type not duplicated elsewhere is represented in two mosaic landscape panels by the Norwegian ceramists Dagny and Finn Hald.

It may be that in such a limited showing the traits that deserve to be called national have come through only weakly, if at all. One must make a distinction between that which has been traditional and that which is representative today. Thus the twenty or so examples of Dutch ceramics may at first give a jolt to the mind that automatically conjures up in this context the blue-and-white wares of Delft or the fragile por-

Lion and Bird, by Guidette Carbonnel, France. Glazed terra cotta. Height 33 inches
celains of Weesp. A terra-cotta water buffalo with a child upon its back invokes a theme from the last days of Dutch colonialism in the Orient. It becomes a historical symbol, while a porcelain bottle in flecked white glaze may prove a mere technical fad.

The relatively few Scandinavian wheel-thrown pieces that are included in this exhibition give the impression that potters there are also wrapped in the Far Eastern spell, but this is not consistently so. Sweden, for one, reverses the trend. In the work of Wilhelm Kage, especially the fish-shaped vase that shared in the highest award of the Syracuse jury, one finds a more universal appeal. The piece is essentially a U-shaped tube serving as a double-mouthed vase. As a geometric form, this was known to the predynastic Egyptians who employed it in their polished red ware and decorated it with linear motifs in yellow slip. The artistry of Kage has infused this form with a new meaning. Turning to nature, he has summoned the analogy to a thrashing fish. This is originality of conception. In the imagination it displays, as well as in the exploitation of

*Big Catch, by Wayne Long, California. Glazed terra cotta. Length 35 inches*
stoneware with incised and slip decoration, this piece clearly epitomizes the leading attributes of the present movement.

No account of today’s interchange among ceramists of different lands should leave unmentioned the influence of Bernard Leach and his English circle. If the English entries seem more closely allied to the American than any others, it is largely because we owe a profound debt to our English mentors for opening our eyes to the potentialities of Japanese ceramics.

*Vase, by Bernard Leach, England. Glazed stoneware. Height 15 inches*

*One senses the great dedication to and absorption of the Oriental tradition in Leach’s sgraffito-decorated stoneware bottle banded in gray and white slip, its glaze halting in a controlled line high above the beveled foot; or again, in his ice-blue porcelain bowl with fluted and incised decoration. Concern with texture is strikingly expressed by the bubbly, pumicelike ware of Lucie Rie, and by the suggestion of dark brown horn against a foil of ashy gray, achieved by Hans Coper in a funnel-mouthed jar. Coper is also the maker of a large anthropomorphic bottle in brown-and-white stoneware, England’s only entry with any claim to sculptural interest. Other vessels display much concern with incised lines which may be straight and crisscrossed to form close networks, or spirally carved into swirling flutes.*

The American potter offers greater variety. His regard for Oriental canons is impressive but not slavish. One can discover relationships of form and decoration in a dozen other fields of ceramic inspiration. Most conspicuous here are the spiny-textured vessels and the slender taper-like forms already mentioned. These wheel-thrown articles display a healthful vigor coupled with a sense of direction in their variety.

American sculptures, however, are heterogeneous in impact. Our sculptors have run the stylistic gamut from the grimly primitive through the stolidly medieval traditions, and from a vapid academism to a mechanistic surrealism. Most of their work is serious; very little is trivial.*
It employs some novel combinations of materials, as in porous pottery figures inlaid with glass mosaics, and an abstract horse in gray stoneware with a blanket of welded steel in matchstick reticulations. Perhaps the surest way of characterizing this sculpture is to point to its complete independence from the Eastern influence that pervades the wheel-thrown pieces.

It may be claimed that diversification is so conspicuous among the American entries that it emerges as a national trait. Perhaps that impression comes from the vastly fuller representation given our own ceramists. To some degree the lack of a national “stamp” expresses the varied nationalities represented by our artists. Assuredly it reflects the widely differing environments in which they live. Finally, one senses that our ceramists have found an expanding field of stimulation in ethnological collections as well as art museums. The sculptures of primitive Africa and the pottery of pre-Columbian America provide resources as fertile for our ceramists as the work of the Oriental potters and our heritage from the Old World. In evolving an international art the artist turns repeatedly to the museum for those components which he synthesizes.
Opposite: Bowl, by Edwin Scheier, New Hampshire. Glazed stoneware. Height 9 1/2 inches

King Bird, by Thelma Frazier Winter, Ohio. Glazed terra cotta. Height 26 inches