



## IN MEMORIAM

Peter Voulkos  
Professor of Art, Emeritus  
Berkeley  
1924 — 2002

Peter Voulkos, whose gift for awakening in students a passion for art-making and for living life to the fullest, died on February 16, 2002. At the time of his death, he was conducting a ceramics workshop in Ohio, the last of many master classes in which he made new work in the presence of an audience.

Named Panagiotis Harry Voulkos by his Greek immigrant parents, he was born on January 29, 1924, in Bozeman, Montana. The G.I. Bill enabled him to study painting as an undergraduate and to discover ceramics, which he later pursued for an M.F.A. degree at the California College of Arts and Crafts (1952). Voulkos soon gained national recognition for his large, well-crafted vessels. His career as a functional potter ended, however, after he encountered the work of Abstract Expressionist painters whom he met in New York, particularly Franz Kline; the impact on him inspired him to reinvent ceramics as he knew it, a decision that yielded a lifetime of monumental and bold sculpture that had tremendous influence on the field of ceramic art worldwide.

Voulkos taught at the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles for five years, beginning in 1953. Much has been written about that unique period in which he, his students, and his colleagues essentially raised ceramics to the level of high art.

The University of California, Berkeley, brought Voulkos north in the fall of 1959 to establish a ceramics studio for the Department of Decorative Art, later to be renamed the Department of Design. His arrival could not have been better timed or more enthusiastically welcomed. The "potshop" was located in the basement of the campus housing office, where the Berkeley Art Museum now stands. He made it a dynamic workspace by opening it to students and faculty from the Departments of Art and Architecture as well as Decorative Art, blurring the lines between the disciplines, and enriching the mix of users. The doors to the shop were seldom locked, and there was no shortage of clay.

Voulkos' energy and charisma are legendary. An unusually well-centered person, he had great presence. His lively wit, personal warmth, and mental acuity made him seem larger than life. His way of motivating students was to help them understand that art making was serious business. Voulkos may well have been the least academic of all professors, for he related to students more as a catalyst than as an instructor. He believed that you learn best by seeing for yourself and doing. Asked how something was made, he would show you by demonstrating how it was done rather than telling you. He gave no assignments, leaving the decision on what to make to the student. It should be noted that nearly all the leading ceramic sculptors in America today either studied with Voulkos or were colleagues who had worked alongside him.

Voulkos added to the excitement over clay when he set up a bronze foundry off-campus in the early 1960s, anticipating the day when Wurster Hall would be built and equipped for metalcasting. (His appointment was divided equally between the Departments of Design and Art in 1966. Promoted to full professor in 1967, he joined the Department of Art faculty full-time in 1975.) When he took up casting, he didn't abandon clay, but the bronze occupied him for over a decade. There were both private and public commissions available for large-scale sculptures that would hold their own out-of-doors and that weren't in danger of being broken.

Voulikos advocated working large, the bigger the better, and metalcasting made it possible to spread out and engage considerable space. Local examples of his work from this middle period of his career are situated at the entrance to the Oakland Museum of California, in the garden of the Berkeley Art Museum, and outside the main police station in San Francisco.

Ill health made it advisable for him to retire from teaching in 1985. Working full-time in his own building, he returned to clay as his principal medium. From then on, nearly all his sculpture was based on vessel forms. Firing in woodburning kilns gave him new surfaces to explore along with new claybodies that he discovered while working in Japan, namely clay from Shigaraki. Voulikos was not an artist whose creative energy would wane in his late years; if anything, the body of work that he produced throughout the last decade of his life may well be the strongest and mostly deeply felt. His productivity even seemed to accelerate.

There is hardly a major museum in America without a work of his in its collection. The best examples in Europe are at the Stedelijk Museums in Amsterdam and Eindhoven, and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. His largest following abroad has been in Japan, where there are Voulikos works at the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto and in the many prefectural ceramics museums that one finds there.

Voulikos' contribution to world art has not gone unrecognized. His first gold medal was awarded him at the International Exposition of Ceramics at Cannes in 1955. He won the silver medal at the Second International Congress of Contemporary Ceramics at Ostend, Belgium, in 1959. The American Crafts Council awarded him gold in 1986, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse another in 1994. The New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University honored him with the Charles Fergus Binns Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Ceramic Art in 1998. He was made an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 2001.

Voulikos was also the recipient of six honorary doctorate degrees, beginning with Montana State University in Bozeman in 1968. The others are from the California College of Arts and Crafts (1972), the Otis Institute of Parsons College of Design (1980), the San Francisco Art Institute (1982), the Kansas City Art Institute (1998), and Alfred University in New York (1998). Other awards included fellowships: three from the National Endowment for the Arts (1976, 1978, and 1986), and one from the Guggenheim Foundation (1984). The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters presented him with the Louise Nevelson Award in 1992, the College Art Association of America with the Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1997.

Voulikos is survived by his first wife, Peggy, and their daughter, Pier; his wife, Ann, and their son, Aris; a brother, John, and two sisters, Mary and Margaret.

Robert Hartman  
Karl Kasten  
James Melchert  
Brian Wall