

Ceramics

MONTHLY



Adrian Saxe

by Elaine Levin



A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio

"Large Ampersand Ewer," approximately 10 inches in height, slip-cast porcelain with glazes and lusters, 1989.



At first glance, Adrian Saxe's ceramic vessels appear highly contradictory. He juxtaposes organic with geometric, elegant with commonplace, industrial with handcrafted, refined porcelain with coarse raku. How these seeming inconsistencies work together and how they became a

major factor in his work has a great deal to do with Saxe's eclectic interests and experiences.

As a youth in California, he was fascinated with marine life in the ocean tide pools, and enjoyed the tactile and visual quality of convoluted seashells and water-smoothed stones. Later, living in Hawaii, he became sensitized to such natural forms as pock-marked volcanic rock. The lush vegetation, including exotic bromeliads, rhipsalis and epiphyllum hybrids, also drew his interest.

Before moving to Hawaii, Saxe had studied with an exceptional high school art teacher—Pricilla Beattie—who, he recalls, had potter's wheels and a large gas kiln when most Southern California schools had only small electric ones. Beattie's students also benefited from her travels and sabbaticals as she shared slides on ceramics, art and architecture from Iran, Egypt, Crete and Turkey.

Beattie encouraged Saxe to enter contests for art students. In 1957, he was awarded a summer scholarship to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles; the following year he won a regional first-place medal in the Scholastic Art Awards; and in 1960 he received a Gold Medal in Ceramic Sculpture from the National Scholastic Art Awards.

Yet, on entering the University of Hawaii, he decided to major in chemistry and minor in art, subsequently studying ceramics with Claude Horan during the regular semester ceramics courses and with Toshiko Takaezu (then a recent graduate) in the summer. Once when Shoji Hamada visited the studios on his travels between Japan and the mainland, Saxe kicked the wheel while Hamada threw.

Then financial problems sent Saxe back to Southern California to continue ceramics on his own. He managed to produce tableware and lamp bases at a studio in Costa Mesa while supporting himself as a contract tree mover for a landscaper. Plans to study with Peter Voulkos at the University of California at Berkeley were derailed when an encounter with a drunk driver put Saxe in the hospital; after his recovery, the opportunity had been lost. More odd

jobs in Los Angeles and some courses at City College followed until he heard that Chouinard Art Institute was where art was happening in Los Angeles.

When Saxe enrolled in 1965, Chouinard was ideologically in the spirit of crossing or erasing traditional art/craft boundaries. He and fellow ceramics students Mineo Mizuno, Peter Shire and Elsa Rady were excited by Ralph Bacerra's assignments. At the same time, Sage Belt's survey class on ceramics traditions whetted his appetite for more knowledge about historical ware.

Beginning his second quarter at Chouinard, Saxe received a tuition scholarship and also worked as a lab assistant. In 1967, with classmates George Wight and Elsa Rady, he rented warehouse studio space with live-in quarters for himself. The move enabled him to make sculpture there, while working on pottery at school.

As with many college students, Saxe's education and finances were strengthened through summer jobs. In 1968, working for the ceramic mural division of Interpace Corporation, he researched glazes that would become the basis for later work.

By 1969, however, limited funds had once again forced him to leave school before finishing the intended course of study. Not wanting to take a day job he was certain would stifle his artistic goals, Saxe began to make mugs and other functional ware to support himself and keep the focus on clay.

A year later, he received a commission from the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino, California, to make a group of jardinières. The gallery's collection of 18th-century, aristocratic, European and Oriental porcelains had captivated Saxe's imagination on earlier visits. There were elaborately gilded vases supporting laurel wreaths, swags and tassels, and allegorical figures surrounded by plants and animals that had once served royalty as table centerpieces.

Soon Saxe's functional ware began to sprout lids whose knobs were replicas of diverse plants—cacti and roses. The edges of bowls took the form of a quatrefoil or trifold. Tureens became the bases for tableaux of small chateaux and cactus gardens.

At the same time, his sculptures were very much in the "fetish finish" spirit prevalent in Southern California aesthetics. Encouraged by Ken Price, who had made lumps and dome-shaped sculptures into precious objects, Saxe invented a vocabulary of parabolic domes he labeled "lollycocks" and "huladicks." In contrast to these elaborate, tactile and lustered surfaces were wall-hung, subtly

Right: "Sur le Bout de la Langue," 15 inches long, porcelain and stoneware with mixed media, 1991.

Middle right: "Untitled Ewer," 15 inches high, porcelain with mixed media, 1992.

Far right: "Untitled Bowl on Stand," 12 inches in height, porcelain vessel on raku base, 1985.





*Bottle, approximately 10 inches in height,
glazed porcelain and stoneware, 1979.*



Far left: "Untitled Jar with Antelope Finial (Prosperity)," glazed and lustered porcelain on raku base, approximately 32 inches high, 1987.

Middle left: "Untitled Torso Jar with Antelope (Esperluète)," approximately 21 inches in height, 1987.

Left: "Untitled Covered Jar (Blue w/ Snails)," 16 inches wide, 1987.

glazed hemispheres spaced either in a line or in a triangular configuration. The individual hemispheres ranged from 12 to 15 inches in diameter, engaging space through their alignment. This body of work propelled Saxe into his first one-person exhibition in Los Angeles at the small but important Canyon Gallery. The next year (1971), the California Design show included his 30-dome wall sculpture and a group of porcelain jars.

Ken Deavers (a Washington, D.C., dealer) had begun showing Saxe's work in 1968. He opened the American Hand Gallery a year later, and in 1973 presented Saxe's ceramics in a one-person show. Ever since, the gallery has regularly featured Saxe's work. Still, selling in a limited number of galleries does not guarantee steady income.

Teaching as a means to support his art initially had not attracted Saxe; however, when offered a part-time position at the Palos Verdes Art Center in 1971, he accepted. A year earlier, Laura Andreson had retired from a 30-year career at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.). When Ed Trainer, her successor, took a year's leave of absence, Saxe was invited to teach full time as his replacement. Shortly afterward, Trainer resigned and Saxe was offered a permanent position. He is now a full professor at U.C.L.A.

At about the same time, the earlier functional ware topped by eccentric knobs evolved into what became synonymous with Adrian Saxe—the antelope jar. Actually, early versions featured goats, rams and bighorn sheep atop celadon-glazed and carved cylinders. As the antelope image gained prominence in his work, Saxe focused on the more exotic species—the African eland and oryx—rather than the commonplace and familiar. In a larger sense, these vessels pay homage to 19th-century European court or presentation ware that featured scenes of the hunt.

Parts of these covered jars were produced with molds, a process that had aroused his curiosity in the early sixties when he discovered a cache of old molds in an abandoned artware factory. Molds had long been considered a primary tool of industry, but one to be shunned by serious potters. However, by 1972, when Richard Shaw first exhibited sculpture assembled from cast objects, attitudes had begun to change and mold use was gaining acceptance as an art tool. By the early 1970s, Saxe also had realized the potential for expanding his vocabulary of forms through the use of molds.

Teaching at U.C.L.A. gave Saxe the freedom to experiment without pressure from the marketplace. A new series of bottle forms, like earlier work, combined many disparate elements. Colored porcelain rods formed

swanlike necks, and tiny gears or elaborate ormolu handles graced a round, brilliantly glazed body. Placed on bases that varied from sophisticated, Chinese-style, glazed pedestals to rough, pock-marked raku rocks, the bottles (like the antelope jars) refer to a range of historical decorative art traditions and often industrial (gears) with natural (animals and plants) images.

Saxe's work of the 1970s differed sharply from the general direction of the period. While his aesthetic was strongly influenced by the whole range of European decorative arts, many American ceramists were fascinated with Japanese ware. "Going to the source" became a watchword as Americans traveled to Japan, seeking apprenticeships with folk potters. Saxe was very aware of this trend, but—except for the raku-fired bases and interpretations of incised (Chinese) Tz'u-chou ware—persisted in porcelain translations of 18th-century rococo, baroque and neoclassical styles, which were commonly regarded as decadent.

By the early 1980s, Saxe's blocky, cylindrical or rectangular antelope jars had acquired a more graceful, torsolike shape. The shift is indicative of Saxe's circular stylistic evolution; he feels free to borrow from the past, but also takes images from his own, earlier work. In this case, the torso shape evolved from a series of oil lamps and garden lights dating back to the early 1970s. Along with the change in shape, Saxe introduced more complex surfaces and attachments. The small gearlike handles from bottles migrated to the antelope jars, now adorned with four ornate legs on a stepped, raku-fired base. Ratchet cuts enlivened the rims of bowls perched on raku "couch arm" bases. Whimsical teapots in the shape of pattypan squash, Chinese bittermelon and eggplants (returning to some of the vegetable molds he had used in the early 1970s), and oil lamps resembling chili peppers sometimes sprouted handles in the form of a French curve, a complex drafting instrument with scroll-shaped cutouts.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, the French government-supported factory famous for its production of ornate porcelain since the 18th century, should discover the work of Adrian Saxe. The connection came in 1982 when Georges Jeanclos, a professor of art at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris, visited the United States. Jeanclos was seeking ceramists who could introduce new forms and designs at Sèvres, and invited Saxe to work there for a six-month period.

What seemed like an ideal opportunity for both proved at first to be an irksome arrangement. In 1983, Sèvres was an inefficient, tradition-bound establishment with little tolerance for new ideas or what the staff viewed



"Untitled Ewer (French Curve)," 11 inches in height, slip-cast, lustered porcelain with mixed media, 1989.

as a parvenu American ceramist. Not until Saxe showed slides of his work did his obvious technical expertise assuage their antagonism.

Since apartments at the factory for visiting artists were not yet available, Saxe made a daily two-hour round trip on public transportation from an apartment in Paris. (This cumbersome schedule was tempered by his having easy access every weekend to all the museums in that venerable city.) The factory itself had locks on the kilns, no hot water and limited facilities for invited artists, but Saxe relished a daily encounter with the contents of the *Résources Bibliothèque*, a library and archive of original designs, models and molds from the factory's beginnings to the present. Added to that was the incredible display of 18th-century porcelain in the *Musée Nationale de Ceramique de Sèvres*.

Sèvres reinforced Saxe's ideas about his work. He considers his time there an "experience of historical art" in the environment in which it was produced. Living in Paris enabled him to gain an in-depth understanding of another culture, plus a "unique opportunity to do research and push change in form for myself." Sèvres also made Saxe keenly aware of "the symbolic things people focus on"; as a government-supported institution founded in 1738, the factory had used its resources to supply luxury objects for an elite class, which ultimately helped fuel the French Revolution of 1789.

Back in Los Angeles, the two shapes for the antelope jars (cylinder and torso) acquired a variety of attachments between 1984 and 1989. Vacillating between crudeness and sophistication, the surfaces sprouted rough raku pieces or sleek, silvery buttons. As a focus for such organized chaos, Saxe added a diverse group of emblems—a fleur-de-lis, foreign alphabet letters, an ampersand and alphabet letters in an old English typeface—because the shapes were intriguing. These additions are a global, contemporary embellishment yet not unlike Sèvres jars and bowls overlaid with drops of thick, jewel-like enamel or swags and rosettes.

A National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1987 gave Saxe the resources to do more with molds, and among the shapes he added to his cast forms were double gourds (previously he had thrown gourd shapes). Seeking some truly unusual examples for casting, he started to grow his own, but then discovered a gourd ranch in central California. There, stepping gingerly between the ranch's roaming chickens, goats and cats, he found a variety of bizarre shapes that, after casting, he could playfully endow

with human characteristics. Placed on a base that imitated feet, enhanced with handles that hinted at ears or arms and with gemstones as eyes and mouth, the gourd-vessel opened the way for more outlandish garniture than was possible on earlier forms. Certainly the torso antelope jars hinted at this direction, but the gourd's more obvious anthropomorphic associations easily lent it to an even more humorous interpretation.

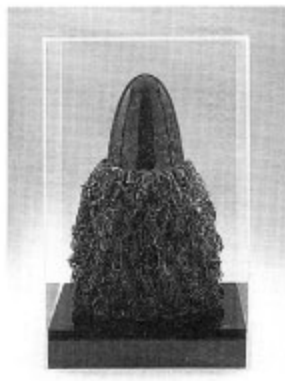
A parallel direction began in 1989 with a series of teapots in the form of lustered ampersands and French curves. Once again, what Saxe had used as finials and handles on earlier forms were given a life of their own. The predecessor of these vessels with their cactus finials and ornate handles is not the English teapot. Rather, they owe their pedigree to 19th-century Chinese wine pots or ewers made in the form of good-luck charms or prosperity symbols, and used as gifts or for ceremonial purposes.

Like all Saxe's vessels, no matter how elaborate or embellished, the ampersand ewers are functional—lids and spouts work properly. But use might be hazardous; attached to some of the looped tassels are dainty fishing flies, capable of bodily harm as one tries to fill the vessel through an opening in the base.

In Saxe's recent work with gourd shapes, the ornaments have become increasingly exotic and purposefully ephemeral. Intended as tokens of personal memory, charm-bracelet trinkets, found objects, semiprecious stones, dried flowers and antique silk tassels dangle from handles and finials. (He is, however, amenable to having them replaced by an owner's own memorabilia.)

Almost all the gourd forms, their molds, a variety of tassels and jars of glazes that go into Saxe's sculptures can be seen on the shelves of his orderly studio. The only hidden items are the eclectic collection of gems, shells, rocks and driftwood housed neatly in shallow drawers. Beyond attesting to his acquisitive nature and sensitivity to form and texture, all these objects have contributed to making recent work a postmodern fusion of art-historical associations with erotic and often humorous references to human anatomy. Saxe has accelerated and enriched the witty, intellectual aesthetic in earlier work for an opulent confection of diverse materials. What at first appears as attachments unrelated to the whole, gradually coalesces into an object tantalizing the eye and mind.

The author *A frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly, author/historian/lecturer Elaine Levin resides in Northridge, California.*



Far left: "Gourd," 12 inches in height, glazed and lustered porcelain with mixed media, 1989.

Left: "Huladick (Lavender)," glazed porcelain in Plexiglas case, approximately 15 inches in height, 1969.



*"Vomituration," approximately 24 inches high,
glazed and lustered porcelain, 1990.*



"Mable Manatee," approximately 18 inches high, lustered porcelain with mixed media, 1991, by Adrian Saxe, Los Angeles.