

California artist puts work in its place

Geography has part in pottery of Adrian Saxe

By Donald Hoffmann

The Star's art and architecture critic

Adrian Saxe thinks geography played its part in shaping his distinctive—not to say eccentric—ceramic sculptures. It wasn't just where he was, but where he wasn't.

Saxe was born in Los Angeles, he grew up in Los Angeles and, at 44, he remains a Los Angeles artist who teaches at the University of California at Los Angeles.

"When I was younger, I was poor and couldn't go to Europe," he said the other morning as his exhibit was being installed in the UMKC Gallery of Art, where it continues through April 24.

"Probably, if I grew up in Europe or in New York, I wouldn't make this kind of stuff. I would have been both so saturated and intimidated by the originals that I wouldn't have made this . . .

"Even the Getty Museum [in nearby Malibu, Calif.] has only recently been buying things like Sevres porcelain. A small piece might go for \$300,000 or \$400,000, so they're the only museum making an aggressive accession campaign in 18th-century French decorative arts—the only one that can afford it, I think."

Saxe's curiously conglomerate jars, bowls and teapots fall into recognizable types but don't look much like real vessels. Are they meant to be?

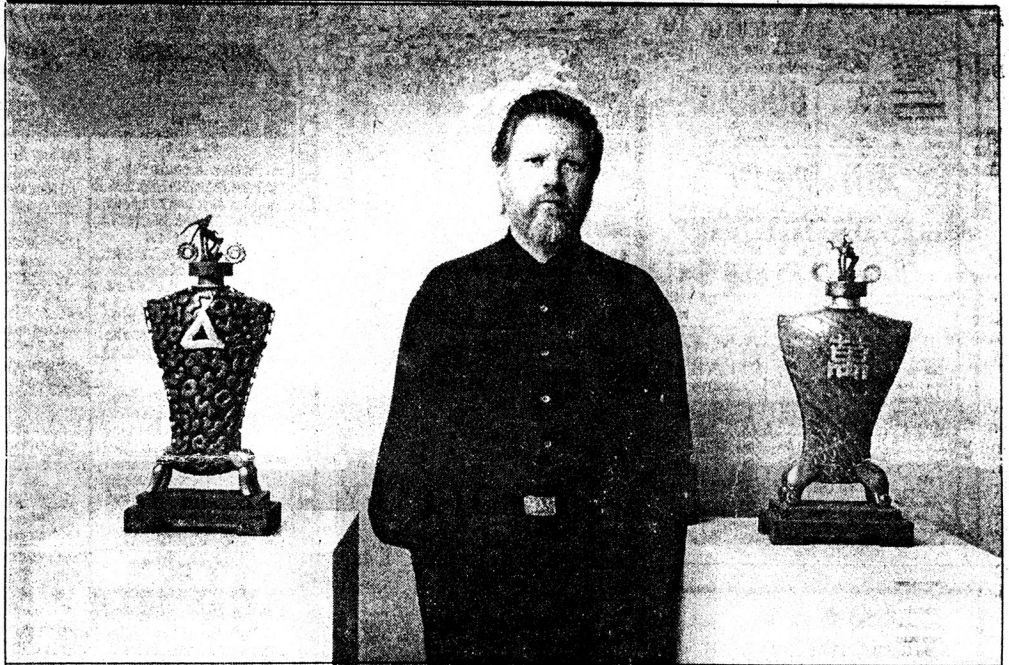
"There are all kinds of traditions of use," he answered. "The function of objects doesn't have to be utilitarian . . . They are decorative objects. They increase the information present in the room, and they're visually integrated with the rooms they exist in. Their function—what they hold—is information."

His tall jars often start from a roughly textured raku base, change to a decorated porcelain body, incorporate forms in gold luster and terminate in tiny antelope figures.

"Certainly in the last 10 years," Saxe said, "there has been a great deal of interest in mixing conflicting styles and sources of imagery: for the ironic effect, and also because of the awareness, even in popular culture, that we instantaneously appropriate things from all kinds of sources, then reorganize them either by convention or invention so that we can have everything coexisting."

The tradition of European immigration and the ideal of America as a melting pot resulting in something new, he continued, might be contrasted to the status of Los Angeles as a concentration of the most diverse cultures, a sort of fruit salad in which all the parts remain distinct.

"So this is a natural response



Ceramicist Adrian Saxe . . . the object as information (staff photo by Talls Bergmanis)

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—Adrian Saxe

to living in our times," Saxe said of his work. "By using these historic conventions of pottery forms and the elaboration of those forms in European traditions, depending on what you insert, the elements can have real provocative qualities."

"They're either unfamiliar or they speak of things that from time to time have been out of fashion. Because they're organized in conventional ways, it all fits; yet the differences become very apparent."

The tall jars, he said, rise from a relatively unformed primal material into more elaborate and technologically sophisticated form that supports images and symbols of wealth, power, the control of nature and the hierarchies of social organization; the overarching antelope at the top speaks again of the intuitive life-force.

As a child, Saxe already was interested in art at the time Peter Voulkos was in Los Angeles and leading pottery away from a polite craft and into the realm of abstract-expressionist ceramic sculpture. His own work nevertheless moved in a different direction.

"I was trying to make art with a capital 'A,'" he recalled, "and I didn't recognize—nor was anybody articulating—what the potential for having really complex content in pottery was.

are the emphasis. Serendipitously, I come across things I would never know about or think about otherwise.

"I'm working with doctoral candidates in fields like archaeology and engineering and anthropology and art history. I would never have that happening if I just stayed in the studio."

"When I got out of school, I made and sold mugs and bowls and teapots to support the [more ambitious] work; I did these elaborate things on the side."

After 15 or 20 years, the popularity of ceramic sculpture and the market caught up with Saxe's efforts, and now one of his pieces might sell for \$5,000 or \$6,000 or more. Saxe can't even keep up with the demand.

"There have been people waiting for two years," he said, "and I don't make that much work. If I'm teaching full time, I'm probably able to get out 12 to 15 of the major pieces each year . . .

"It's always marginal. I'm just barely supporting the work from the sales. I lose half the work in the making of it. Sometimes I do a little better than that, but if I average 50 percent success on the technical level, I'm happy."

"I've always made things that were elaborate, but I couldn't get the prices for them early on, because the buying public wasn't educated about what was involved or the value. Now I'm in a position to capitalize on the market; but even at the prices I sell my work, I'm just beginning to make money, and I'm really dependent on my teaching job for economic stability."

"More important, teaching is very stimulating. I'm teaching at a major university where research and graduate programs