

# The Global Potter

Adrian Saxe uses clay to bridge the long-separated worlds of art and craft and to redefine the notion of the village artisan

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

**A**drian Saxe is the village potter. Every village has to have at least one, and Saxe is ours.

Of course, villages are different than they used to be. Profoundly so. No longer rural and organized around farming, the village today is urban and suburban in bearing, industrial and post-industrial in composition, unbound in its interconnections. Consequently, the idea of the clay pot as a handmade, utilitarian necessity no longer holds.

"I'm in a global village, so we have to have new kinds of potters," Saxe explained recently, in reference to the ravishingly odd vessels he has been making for more than a decade. "This is not tribal village art."

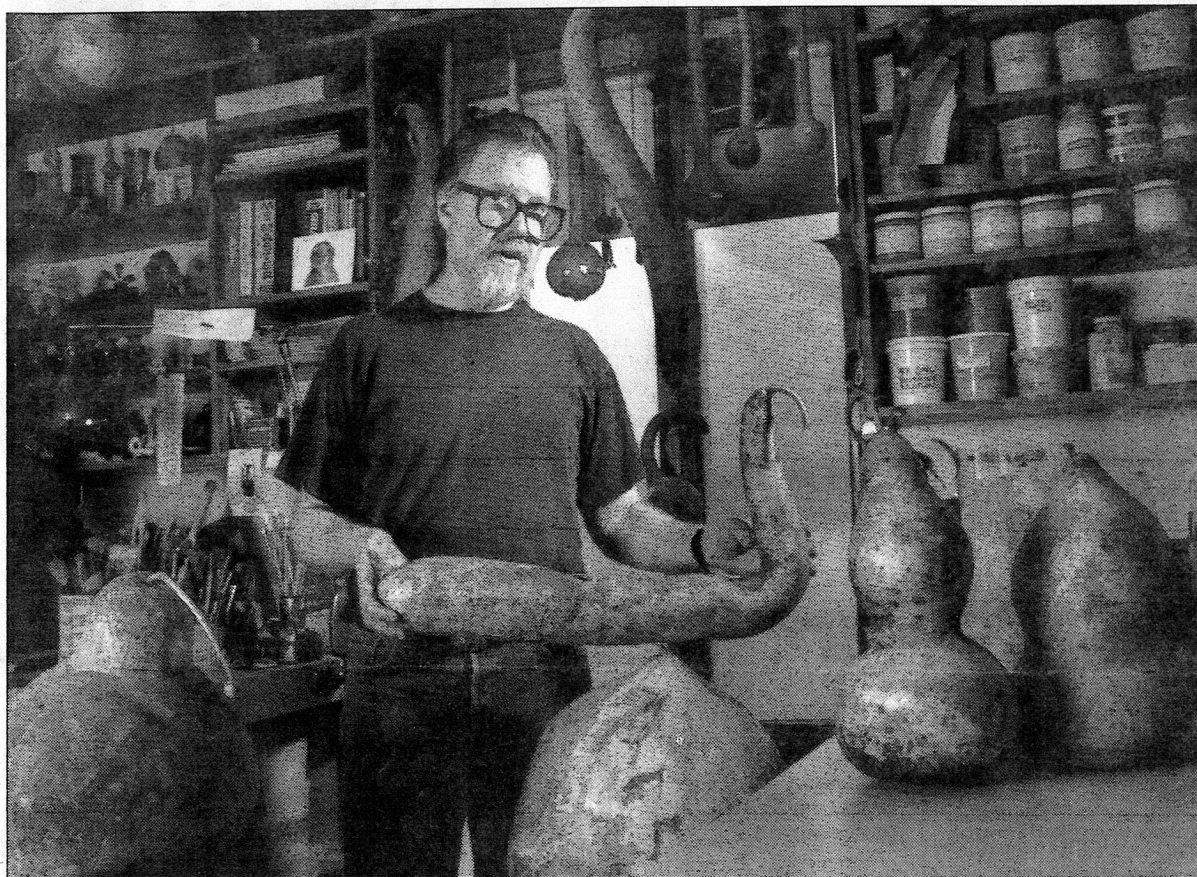
Not by a long shot. Nobody would mistake the 16 new teapots, ewers and stoppered vessels in his exhibition at Garth Clark Gallery (through Wednesday) for that. To be sure, all of them are functional. You can fill the ewers with water, pour tea from the pots and lift the perfectly fitted lids from any of the jars. But, you can also rearrange the braided swags and silk tassels that festoon them, polish the encrustations of mirrored-crystal rhinestones that doll up various surfaces or fiddle with the feathered and glittered fly-fishing hooks that dangle, like dangerous earrings, from ornate handles and knobs.

Furthermore, in a single Saxe vessel you can tally up stylistic collisions so numerous as to recall a rush-hour pileup on the 405: French Rococo whorls and stepped Chinese bases and Old English script and dime-store doodads, all gaily decorating American-made ceramics.

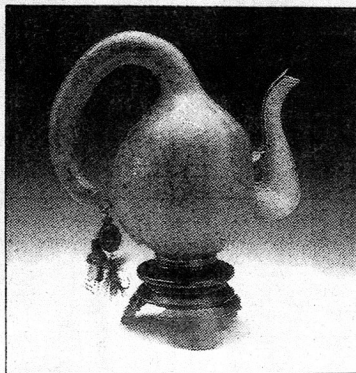
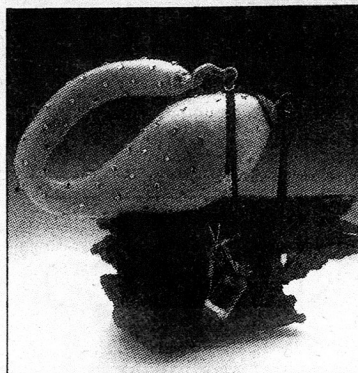
Even his clay collides: Elegantly refined porcelain and coarse and earthy stoneware frequently cohabit in a single work.

**S**axe does pay fairly strict homage to the traditional division of a pot into three anthropomorphic segments: foot, body and lid. It's just that he sees no compelling reason to integrate them, stylistically or materially, into one seamlessly unified form.

Often he nudges to the surface the submerged anthropomorphism of those parts—not least in the erotically charged form of the gourd, which visually unites phallic and womb-like shapes into one. There are also pots that wittily approximate personages: A fat, bulbous vessel dotted with a child's glass marbles leans forward on its base like a drunken sultan sliding off his pillow, while across the room a sinuous, gem-encrusted porcelain gourd reclines horizontally across its stoneware



BRIAN GADBERRY / Los Angeles Times



TONY CUNHA

perch, like Madame Recamier languishing on her chaise or a mythological siren beckoning from her rock.

With bravura displays such as this, Saxe is pleased to locate his work within a long and venerable tradition of the decorative arts while simultaneously remaking it from scratch in order to fit his cultural circumstance. The result has been a body of work that first dipped its toes, then plunged head first into two long-separated arenas—the craft world and the art world. In the process, his program has tended to confuse denizens of both.

Adrian Saxe, above, in his studio in Highland Park; left, two of his teapots. Says the artist: "The [art crowd] would tell me [ceramics] is irrelevant, that it isn't art."

Saxe's decidedly "inappropriate" work—betrayed a certain backhanded recognition of its seductive power.

So did the quiet admiration felt by some in the art world for the sheer surface beauty of his exquisitely composed work, as well as for the conceptual complexity that had begun to emerge. In postwar culture, only two ceramists had elicited that response before: Peter Voulkos in the 1950s and Kenneth Price a decade later. Like Saxe, both emerged in Los Angeles.

Such admiration for Saxe's vessels tended to be tucked away and hidden, however, admitted only on the sly, as if a dirty little secret. After all, in the art world the very medium of ceramics was easily dismissible as anachronistic, minor and stuck with a hopelessly demeaning label of pure decorativeness—not serious enough for art.

"The clay world—especially 20 years ago—thought it was the most audacious  
*Please see Page 102*



# Adrian Saxe

Continued from Page 92

thing to take a blue-and-white Chinese decoration and add a European-style modeled rose on top."

Saxe explained, marveling at the simplicity of this gesture in his early work, as compared to the over-the-top rambunctiousness of his mature endeavors. "Everybody was into that whole sensibility of Japanese tea ware, with what they called 'natural surfaces.' But for what? It wasn't for me. I mean, I live in Los Angeles!"

So, an eclecticism tied to contemporary experience, rather than to an idealized mythology of what was "natural" or "unnatural"—and thus right or wrong—for the ancient medium, began to enter his work. "[My work] would get the art crowd, those people who were dealing with post-conceptual concerns," he went on, widening his eyes with bemusement, "but they would also tell me [ceramics] is irrelevant, that it isn't really art."

Clearly betwixt and between, Saxe had found a provocative gap in which to work. If art has something to do with a determined refusal to be hedged in by enforced classifications of experience, then the double-edged repudiation of the direction he was taking was a very good, if vaguely nerve-racking, sign.

Just how good a sign is, in retrospect, abundantly clear.

For some time it has been evident that, as an artist, Saxe is heir to the Voulkos-Price mantle. In August, 1993, the assertion will be given the pleasant imprimatur of officialdom, when his work since the 1960s will be the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

LACMA has mounted important shows of Voulkos and Price in the past. But Saxe's, which is expected

to travel abroad as well as across the United States and Canada, represents the first time the museum has accorded a full retrospective reckoning to an artist who works with clay.

Saxe is immensely knowledgeable about ceramics, both technically and historically. The porcelain collection at the Huntington Art Gallery in San Marino was a youthful source of fascination to the Los Angeles native, and a high school art teacher who knew of his interest would take him to shows by Voulkos and colleagues from the Otis Art Institute, whose now-legendary revival of the ceramic medium has come to be known as Otis Clay.

After an abortive attempt to work with Voulkos in 1963—serious injury in an automobile accident kept him from following his idol north to Voulkos' new foundry in Berkeley—Saxe enrolled at the old Chouinard Art School. There, a younger generation of ceramists had gathered after the dispersal of the original efflorescence at Otis.

Following a hiatus of several years, he graduated in 1974 from Chouinard's new incarnation—the California Institute of the Arts—which turned out to be a fecund source for much of the most interesting art of the 1980s.

Now a tenured associate professor at UCLA, the 48-year-old artist knows his ceramic chemistry and engineering inside out. He has worked with master technicians at the Sèvres porcelain factory in a suburb of Paris, and his own work makes informed reference to the intricacies of ceramic tradition—especially that of commercially produced European porcelain born at Meissen, Germany, in 1710 and brought to dizzying heights of courtly grandeur at Sèvres.

And Saxe himself is no slouch in the craftsmanship department; he studied with Ralph Bacerra, a potter who is known principally for the technical refinement of his work. Yet celebration of virtuosity is, in the end, anathema to Saxe's enterprise.

"That's what devolved at Sèvres," he explained. "By the middle of the 19th Century they could do anything, they could do it 10 feet tall, they could do it so perfectly that it just *died*. All this expertise came in from so many directions without any real vision driving it, except to be virtuosic. They kept loading things up with-

out adding any real content. That's one reason that, in the modern ceramic world, there was finally a rejection of European traditions."

Too much attention to stunning technical achievement has, in Saxe's view, come to burden the modern ceramic art that itself grew out of that earlier rejection of empty hyper-refinement. Claims today of virtuosic "naturalness" in surfaces and forms are just as culturally loaded and restrictive as those of virtuosic "artifice" that finally toppled Sèvres.

"What was interesting to me [about European ceramics] was the 18th-Century stuff, when it was all new, when they were inventing it out of whole cloth and doing something quite difficult at the same time."

And so, Saxe has gone after something similar—not in style, but in sensibility. His work is characterized by a searching inventiveness, pieced together from a variety of sources, but its subject is not the very real possibilities of technical refinement. The subject, instead, is pottery itself.

As his sometimes flashy, sometimes sultry, always glamorous vessels attest, he retains the full-throttle commitment to sensuality fundamental to the decorative arts. Compared to the dominant humanism of modern crafts, which over-values righteous technique, a Saxe pot is like a hussy at a church social.

"It's been on my mind lately how to make it clear that pottery is the subject of the work," Saxe continued. "I'm not dealing with the 'image' of a pot, not an image that signifies something; the subject is pottery. That's why all my stuff is mechanically operational. It acknowledges gravity; it acknowledges fluidity and containment. Lids work and fit. Spouts pour. A big part of experiencing pottery is the physicality of it. Touch, lift, balance—I want to more directly address these physical things."

Saxe has in the past found ways of presenting these notions in arresting and witty ways. For instance, he has made an extensive series of tea pots whose bodily shape is a linear interlace that mimics an ampersand.

The ampersand shape—&—resonates, when applied to a pot, with associations that are at once historical, social and physical. It recalls a specific form of popular

Chinese ceramics, no longer produced, whose unusual body was a linear interlace. As a sign for *and*, the ampersand also invokes the sociality of a tea service that brings people together for communal fellowship—both a fact of life and a reigning cliché of the folksy value of crafts.

At the same time, it wryly describes the parallel eclecticism—a communal gathering of individual styles—at the core of Saxe's work. Finally, the swoops and curves of the shape trace the fluid path of the tea in its journey through pot to cup, not to mention the physical act of pouring.

In a typically off-centered way, the new work at Garth Clark Gallery indicates Saxe's growing attention to the physicality of pottery. As decoration is obviously of primary significance to the decorative arts, he has begun to explore the possibilities of engaging the spectator's participation in decorative embellishment. The cords, tassels, bracelet charms, dried orchids and pears, electronic components, antique marbles, fish hooks and such with which these sumptuous and sexy vessels are gussied up invite your play. Given the anthropomorphism, the pots are vaguely doll-like in feeling.

"Most people experience the decorative arts in a state of distraction," Saxe said. Like buildings, they tend to hover in the background behind other, more pressing activities. For this reason, the fly-fishing hooks that garnish several of his new pots take on a cautionary, slightly diabolical air: Experience these seductively decorative little objects in a state of distraction and you're liable to draw blood.

So it is with Saxe's art, which merrily uses decoration to hook you into unanticipated modes of experience.

"I want people to see my work and be utterly confused, or else validated in whatever they might have been thinking only indirectly," he declared. "I mean, I really want to change the way people encounter this kind of thing. Forever."

Such an ambition is high but, in Saxe's gifted hands, far from immodest. In fact it's simply the stuff by which important art, decorative or otherwise, finally gets made. □

Christopher Knight is *The Times* art critic.