

[ ARTISTIC PRACTICE ]

# Why *Unconventional* Ceramics Are Alluring Collectors and Curators Alike



Works by Chris Gustin, Babs Haenen and Peter Voulkos — among many others  
— are having a moment.

BY CARA GREENBERG





Ceramics with unusual forms have been in the spotlight of late. This ca. 1945 [AXEL SALTO](#) vase is now on view in “Shapes from Out of Nowhere” at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, © 2021 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VISDA). Top: A display at New York gallery [DONZELLA](#) showcases pieces by artists like [ROSEANNE SNIDERMAN](#) and [ROBBIE HEIDINGER](#) (photo by Alexandra Rowley).

[ AUGUST 29, 2021 ] A few decades back, collecting ceramics — generally defined as objects made of clay and hardened by heat — might have meant acquiring [CHINESE GINGER JARS](#) or [STAFFORDSHIRE SPANIELS](#). More recently, the excitement was around [MID-CENTURY SCANDINAVIAN CERAMICS](#), particularly those by [AXEL SALTO](#), a giant in the field whose work is still very much in demand.

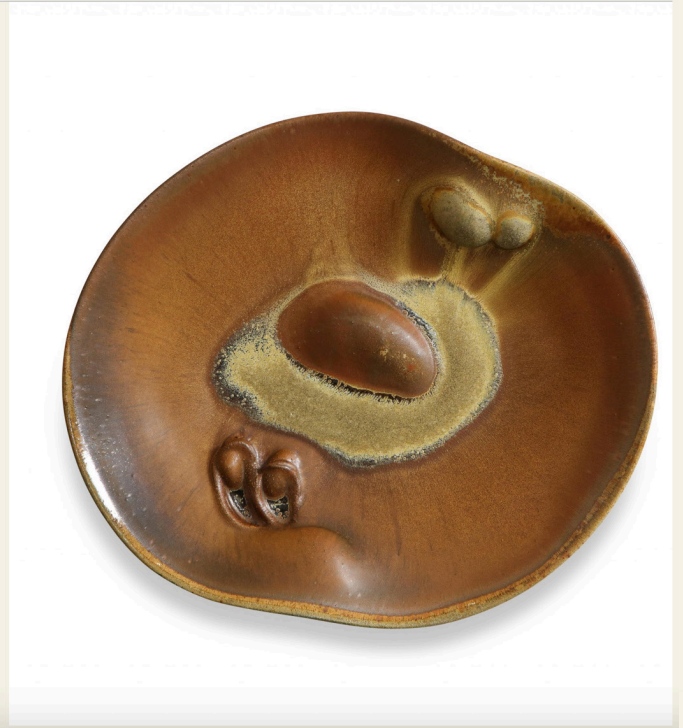
Most ceramists throughout history have produced vases, jugs, bowls or some other version of vessel. One exception was the rock-star American potter [PETER VOULKOS](#), whose hand-built pieces from the mid to late 1900s have an [ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST](#) quality. A few other practitioners have been in the vanguard of ceramics-as-sculpture over the years, but for the most part, the full artistic possibilities of the medium remained unexplored.

That is now changing, and collecting trends are likely to change as well as most forward-thinking collectors seeking out nonmainstream work those exhibited this year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Closing August 29, “Shapes from Out of Nowhere: Ceramics from the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection” celebrates a recent gift of 125 modern and contemporary ceramics that chart the evolution of abstraction in clay — mostly hand-built pieces that evince the boundless experimentation the medium allows.

“Clay is very versatile, and the objects show a real breadth of expression — some coming out of ceramic traditions but many eschewing all associations with historical precedents,” says Adrienne Spinuzzi, a curator in the museum’s American Wing who selected the pieces for the show. “The potter’s wheel is just one tool. Many artists are using hand-building techniques, creating new forms and a different language.”

A number of the artists represented by the 80 objects in the Met show are well-known, including Salto, Voulkos, [ROBERT ARNESON](#), Kathy Butterly and Syd Carpenter. But even *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith, who called the exhibition “robust and riveting,” admitted in her review that she hadn’t known half the names of the artists who crafted the mostly nonrepresentational forms.



Left: CHRIS GUSTIN works on a large-scale piece for his Cloud series ca. 2019 (photo courtesy of the artist). Right: PLATTER, #1702, 2017, by Chris Gustin, offered by Donzella

Another place showing work by a virtuosic contemporary ceramist this summer was Midtown Manhattan's 4,500-square-foot DONZELLA gallery, which hosted *Chris Gustin: Clouds & Vessels* through mid-July. A distinguished professor of ceramics who had been absent from the gallery scene for the past decade, the Massachusetts-based GUSTIN creates sensuously shaped, remarkably glazed wood-fired pieces, including vases, bowls, chargers and sculptures. (A pink 1990 teapot of his is also in the Met exhibit.)

*Clouds & Vessels* was the first solo show that Paul Donzella — known for vintage Italian furnishings and lighting — has given to a ceramic artist. When he first saw Gustin's work, Donzella recalls, "I was instantly blown away. You could see he was working at this advanced level."

Wood firing is difficult, the gallerist explains, with ash and embers floating through the kiln and causing unplanned chemical reactions on the surfaces. "Sometimes they're happy accidents, and sometimes they're not," he says. "Chris's forms are so beautiful, his scale so impressive, and everything on the surface seems completely intentional."



In a Hamptons beach house, designer [DAMON LISS](#) decorated the living room with tall black-and-white vessels by [LONE SKOV MADSEN](#), whose work is on offer at [J. LOHMANN GALLERY](#). Photo by William Abranowicz

New York-based interior designer [DAMON LISS](#) is a great fan of Gustin's work. He acquired some of the artist's sculptural platters, each more than two feet in diameter, for an East Hampton client's home, displaying them as sculptures flanking a minimalist fireplace.

"I bought them out of Donzella's crates before he had even shown them," Liss says. "They felt unique and new, these giant plates at incredible scale, with spectacular depth of color. These had a glaze of blue, green and sand, with a great natural, beachy energy to them."



Artist [MAX LAMB](#) cast this set of bone china tableware for [1882 LTD.](#) from hand-carved plaster molds.