



**THE CERAMICS OF
GERTRUD AND OTTO
NATZLER**





Gertrud and Otto Natzler's connection to Portland began shortly after they emigrated from German-occupied Austria to Los Angeles, California in 1938. For its inaugural exhibition in 1939, Oregon Ceramic Studio (now Museum of Contemporary Craft) hosted the *California Second Annual Ceramic Exhibition*, introducing modern ceramics to Portland through the work of Laura Andreson, Glen Lukens, Gertrud and Otto Natzler, and Beatrice Wood. Several decades later, former director Jan de Vries organized the retrospective *Natzler Ceramics* (1975) for Contemporary Crafts Gallery (now Museum of Contemporary Craft).

The Ceramics of Gertrud and Otto Natzler marks what would have been the 100th anniversary of the birth of Gertrud (d. 1971) and Otto (d. 2007). It is an opportunity to reacquaint those familiar with the work of the Natzlers, and to introduce new audiences to this pair of artists who continue to play a critical role in the history of craft. Drawn from local collections and several West Coast museums, the nearly 100 objects on view survey the range of forms produced over a period of several decades by this prolific couple. Two documentaries from 1966 and 1992 show the artists at work in their studio, connecting ideas, process and product. A tape recording of a lecture by Otto Natzler, held in conjunction with *Natzler Ceramics* in 1975 was recently discovered in the Museum archives, and is publicly available for the first time as an audio podcast on the Museum's web site. Selected vessels by two contemporary artists, Jeremy Briddell and Adam Silverman, reveal the ongoing impact of mid-century modernism and the Natzler's work on ceramics today.

The installation of the exhibition pivots on Gertrud's comment that "in pottery, form is the content."¹ For the four artists in this exhibition, structure and materials are inseparable. Each form seamlessly integrates a range of elements: silhouette and line, texture and color, form and glaze, repetition and variation, history and innovation. Undeniably beautiful, the works on view operate between sculpture and functional form, inviting slow, luxuriant looking while raising questions about how pottery resides in today's concept-driven art arena.

Namita Gupta Wiggers

CURATOR, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

¹. Quote taken from the 1966 documentary film, *The Ceramic Art of the Natzlers*, produced in conjunction with the Natzlers' retrospective exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



“I love to control what cannot be completely controlled, what nature creates – the accidental and, at times, the impossible.”¹

—Otto Natzler

From the moment they first exhibited their work, Gertrud and Otto Natzler found critical success: sales at a prestigious gallery in Vienna and a silver medal at the 1937 World Exposition in Paris, just four years after their partnership had begun. So focused were the couple that they barely skipped a beat when they were forced to flee German-occupied Austria in 1938 and make their way to Southern California. Their belongings, including a small electric kiln, a potter's wheel and 100 of their best pots, arrived in a few months. They lost no time in setting up their new studio. In 1939, they received first prize at the prestigious National Ceramic Exhibition at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, New York, and their work was included in a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1940.

For nearly four decades – until Gertrud’s death in 1971 – the Natzlers’ collaboration produced what many consider to be among the most important ceramics of our time, but the combination of Gertrud’s ineffable forms and Otto’s elemental glazes produced objects that really have no equivalent in ancient or in modern eras. Seeing a number of their pieces displayed together – as in this exhibition – allows one to explore the myriad, albeit quiet, variations they achieved within a deliberately limited repertoire of shapes. Here, lyrical colors, crystalline patterns and glazes look like the floor of a lava field applied to pieces ranging from exquisitely thin and delicate bowls to vessels with massive, perfectly proportioned walls.

Largely self-taught, the Natzlers were drawn from the start to the age-old alchemy of clay, what Otto would term the “magic commingling” of earth, water and fire. They first developed their ideas at a time and place in which two aesthetics were dominant: the colorful and decorative Arts and Crafts influence of the Wiener Werkstätte and the cool simplicity of the Bauhaus, where artists worked with hand and machine to produce elegant, well-made objects for the marketplace. While they avoided the extremes of each style, their work evidences an awareness of the importance of handwork as well as the unadorned shapes of modernism. For the most part, their forms are functional – the bowl, the vase, the bottle and the chalice – and modestly sized. Many can be cupped between two palms. Thus, their impact lies in an absolute mastery of material and technique and a perfect match of glaze with form.

Gertrud was known for her ability to achieve walls as thin as eggshells and to make shapes so unified that there is frequently no interruption between base, body and lip. They flow into one another with the certitude of a beautiful line drawing. In writing about her process, she spoke of knowing when to stop so that “the curves will appear to be held in motion – be motion itself.”² Critics often noted that certain vessels seem to leave the horizontal plane: to levitate, as it were. Such is the case with the *Untitled oval bowl* (c. 1940s, Ceramic with Pompeian glaze, 3.75 × 5 × 1.5 inches, Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber, page 3). Made by bending a round bowl while the clay was leather-hard, it was a form Gertrud used frequently, particularly early in her career. The irregularity of the glaze, which pools in the base of the vessel, is deliberate – designed to allow the clay to be visible – and to emphasize the connection between glaze and clay, both derived from the earth’s elements and transformed through firing.

In his meticulous records – notes for some 25,000 pieces – Otto described the details for more than 2,000 glazes developed over the years through careful research and observation. Just as Gertrud chose to focus on the simplest of forms, going back to the fundamentals of ceramics, so too did Otto reject commercial, ready-made products. First consulting his chemistry textbook from high school, he began to learn the properties of materials he could use to mix his own recipes. Admittedly, disaster after disaster ensued before he finally achieved a consistent, smooth glaze. Ironically, Otto found himself more fascinated by his failures. “Instead of working toward a smooth surface, I tried to increase the blisters, make the pockmarks, the holes and craters more pronounced, get away from those bright shiny colors,” he later wrote.³ Thus were born some of the Natzlers’ trademark glazes, with names that suggest geothermal forces like “Pompeian,” “Lava” and “Crater.”

When Otto applied these concoctions to Gertrud’s pots, “the results were strange indeed. They certainly did not look like any of the ceramics one could see in stores.”⁴ And indeed, an object

such as the *Untitled bowl* (date unknown, Ceramic with Crater glaze, 1.25 × 4.75 inches diameter, Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber, page 4), with its raspy Crater glaze, still seems as exciting and fresh as it must have when primordial finishes first appeared in the 1940s. The rich complexity of the surface, with its gaseous bubble marks and warm earthiness, makes the piece seem ceremonial – even monumental – despite its delicacy and diminutive scale.

As he learned to control – or at least to predict the likely outcome of – his process, Otto also learned the value of the accident: of letting the force of fire become one of his materials rather than simply the fuel for a kiln. By the mid 1940s, he was working with reduction firing, in which oxygen is removed from the kiln by burning various substances, from wood to paper to plant materials. This alters the colors of both glaze and clay; smoke, ash and flame also leave their marks on the vessels. Fissures, iridescence, wrinkles and skinning are some of the expressive side effects of reduction firing.

In looking at the Natzlers’ work, it is interesting to note how little their aesthetic changed over time. Whether making thin-walled pots or so-called massive ones (*Untitled massive bowl with recessed rim*, date unknown, Ceramic, 3.5 × 7.75 inches diameter, Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber, page 3), Gertrud’s absolute purity of form is never obscured by a busy or obtrusive glaze. Their quest was always for the perfect combination of refinement and accident: the miraculous and unpredictable side of ceramics.

In spite of their remarkable influence, the Natzlers had few students and few friends in the art world. They pursued their vision privately and eschewed the aesthetics that surrounded them, first in Vienna and later in Southern California. Instead, they focused on pushing simple materials and techniques as far as they could without violating them. It is telling that they worked with local clay and that they fired the majority of their pieces in the kiln they brought with them from Vienna. Because they never followed trends, their glazes and their forms are timeless.

Prudence F. Roberts

Prudence Roberts is an educator, art historian and arts writer in Portland.

1. “Interview with Otto Natzler,” conducted by Ruth Bowman, *Gertrud and Otto Natzler: Collaboration/Solitude* (New York: American Craft Museum, 1993), 43.

2. Quoted in Otto Natzler, “Immortal Clay: The Exploration of a Medium,” *Form and Fire: Natzler Ceramics 1939–1972* (Washington, D.C.: The Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 19.

3. Natzler, Otto, “The Beginning of It All,” *Gertrud and Otto Natzler Ceramics: Catalog of the Collection of Mrs. Leonard M. Sperry and a Monograph by Otto Natzler* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968), 25–26.

4. *Ibid.*, 26.





RELATED PROGRAMS

EVENING DISCUSSION

Craft Conversation:

Dawn Odell and Namita Gupta Wiggers on *Shards*

Thursday, October 9, 6:30 PM. Free.

Join us for a lively discussion about some of ceramics' most controversial and topical issues. Dawn Odell, assistant professor of art history, Lewis & Clark College, and Namita Gupta Wiggers will facilitate a discussion of *Shards: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art*. Please email education@MuseumofContemporaryCraft.org to receive a free copy of the excerpt from *Shards* to be discussed.

EXHIBITION TOUR

Curator Walkthrough

Tuesday, October 14, 12 PM, Tour convenes at front desk. Free.

Learn more about the exhibitions on view in a guided tour with Curator Namita Gupta Wiggers.

LECTURE

CraftPerspectives Lecture: An Evening with Garth Clark
How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement: An Autopsy in Two Parts
Thursday, October 16, 6:30 PM, Location TBA. \$5 (Free for members and students with ID).

New York gallery owner, curator, writer and historian Garth Clark presents a provocative lecture and dialogue based on his new essay examining how aesthetics, economics and art-envy has "killed" the crafts movement. Clark will first present his paper and then engage in an extended conversation with the audience. One of craft's most influential thinkers, Clark has edited and contributed to over 50 books, is author of over 200 essays and articles, and was the recipient of the prestigious Mather Award from the College Art Association. Sue Taylor, assistant chair of the Portland State University Art Department will provide an introduction.

COMMUNITY SHOWCASE

Oregon Potter's Association

September 9–October 19, The Lab, Free.

Saturday Demonstrations: September 13, 20, 27, October 4, 11, 18 (1–4 PM)

The Ceramics of Gertrud and Otto Natzler is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Craft from August 2, 2008 to January 25, 2009.

ON VIEW IN THE MUSEUM

Two documentaries about Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *The Ceramic Art of the Natzlers, Artists of the World Series* (1966) and *Earth, Fire, Water and Wind: The Ceramics of Otto Natzler* (1992), are on view in the exhibition. Total running time: 40 minutes.

ON THE WEB

A lecture by Otto Natzler is available as an audio podcast at www.MuseumofContemporaryCraft.org. This lecture was presented at the Portland Art Museum in conjunction with the exhibition *Natzler Ceramics* at the Contemporary Crafts Gallery (now Museum of Contemporary Craft) on March 11, 1975. From the archives of Museum of Contemporary Craft.

THANK YOU TO THE INDIVIDUALS AND MUSEUMS

WHO HAVE LENT OR DONATED WORK FOR THIS EXHIBITION

Art Adler

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Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery

Adam Silverman

Carol Smith-Larson

CAPTIONS

PAGE 1: Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled yellow bowl*, date unknown; Ceramic; 3.5 × 3.5 inches diameter; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 2 (TOP LEFT): Otto Natzler, *Untitled rectangular vase with foot (X008)*, 1977; Ceramic; 6.5 × 4.5 × 1.75 inches; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 2 (TOP RIGHT): Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled vase (N626)*, 1965; Ceramic with hare's fur glaze; 3.25 × 5.5 inches diameter; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 2 (BOTTOM): Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled chalice (H633)*, 1957; Ceramic, Nocturne glaze with crystal formations; 5 × 8.375 inches diameter; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 3 (TOP): Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled oval bowl*, c. 1940s; Ceramic with Pompeian glaze; 3.75 × 5 × 1.5 inches; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 3 (BOTTOM): Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled massive bowl with recessed rim*, date unknown; Ceramic; 3.5 × 7.75 inches diameter; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 4 (TOP AND BOTTOM): Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Untitled bowl*, date unknown; Ceramic with Crater glaze; 1.25 × 4.75 inches diameter; Collection of Carol and Seymour Haber

PAGE 5: Gertrud and Otto Natzler, *Bright Blue Bowl*, 1968; Ceramic; 5.25 × 3 inches diameter; Museum of Contemporary Craft, Gift of Tom Hardy; 1998.68.13

PAGE 6: Installation view, *Natzler Ceramics*, 1975; From the archives of Museum of Contemporary Craft

All photographs by Dan Kvitka unless otherwise noted.

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MuseumofContemporaryCraft.org | Tuesday–Sunday 11 AM–6 PM and Thursday 11 AM–8 PM

Museum of Contemporary Craft