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## On View: 'Common Ground' at the American Museum of Ceramic Art

**The Pacific Standard Time show in Pomona explores the postwar revolution in ceramics through the influence of artist and teacher Millard Sheets.**

By Scarlet Cheng, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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The shift in ceramics from craft to art form was a quiet revolution in postwar Southern California. "Common Ground: Ceramics in Southern California 1945-1975" at the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona explores that big topic through the influence of one man, Millard Sheets, a painter who taught and was an administrator at Chouinard Art Institute, Otis Art Institute and Scripps College.

It was Sheets who brought the legendary avant-gardist Peter Voulkos to California to run the ceramics department at Otis. For years, Sheets also organized the art exhibition at the L.A. County Fair and included a section for ceramics.

With more than 300 objects by 53 artists, "Common Ground" is the largest survey of SoCal ceramics in recent years. Why was there such a boom? In addition to the influx of talent — some from out of state and some, such as Austrians Gertrud and Otto Natzler, from abroad — there was demand generated by an explosion in home building.

Christy Johnson, AMOCA's director and exhibition curator, points out that ceramics offered an affordable way to decorate the home: "People had some disposable income — not enough for painting or sculpture, but maybe enough for ceramics." Ceramists sold from their own studios, some showed at high-end department stores and some even had jobs designing tiles and lamps for mass production.

"Common Ground" is a who's who of the postwar ceramics world. It opens with work by teachers at the three local colleges that established ceramics departments in the 1930s — Glen Lukens at USC, William Manker at Scripps and Laura Andreson at UCLA. Later, other colleges added ceramics to their curriculum too.

Harrison McIntosh was part of the boom. "After the war, I could use the GI Bill to study more about ceramics, so I went to Claremont Graduate School," he says. "I realized that you could create very sculptural forms in clay. That's what I was mostly interested in, though most of my forms are container shapes."

Much of the work in the show takes vessel form (plates, bowls, vases), but these come in a range of shapes, sizes, decoration and glazes. There are also figurative works, such as Dora De Larios' lively figures made of

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wheel-thrown clay — people on horseback, posing as if in a circus act; a seated woman, arms and legs propped wide like a warrior queen.

De Larios studied at USC, first with Vivika and Otto Heino, then with Susan Peterson (all in the show). After graduating, she set up her own studio and then, with Peterson's recommendation, got a job designing architectural tiles at Interpace, in Glendale. "We were given free rein," she recalls. As long as they kept to the standard square sizes, "everything we wanted to do was great."

This is AMOCA's inaugural show at its new, greatly expanded space in Pomona. Appropriately enough, it's in a former bank decorated with a 77-foot wide mural, "Panorama of the Pomona Valley," by Sheets. The bank is gone, but the mural remains.

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