National College of Art and Design.
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Smoking Pot: Paul Soldners Contribution to Ceramics.

by

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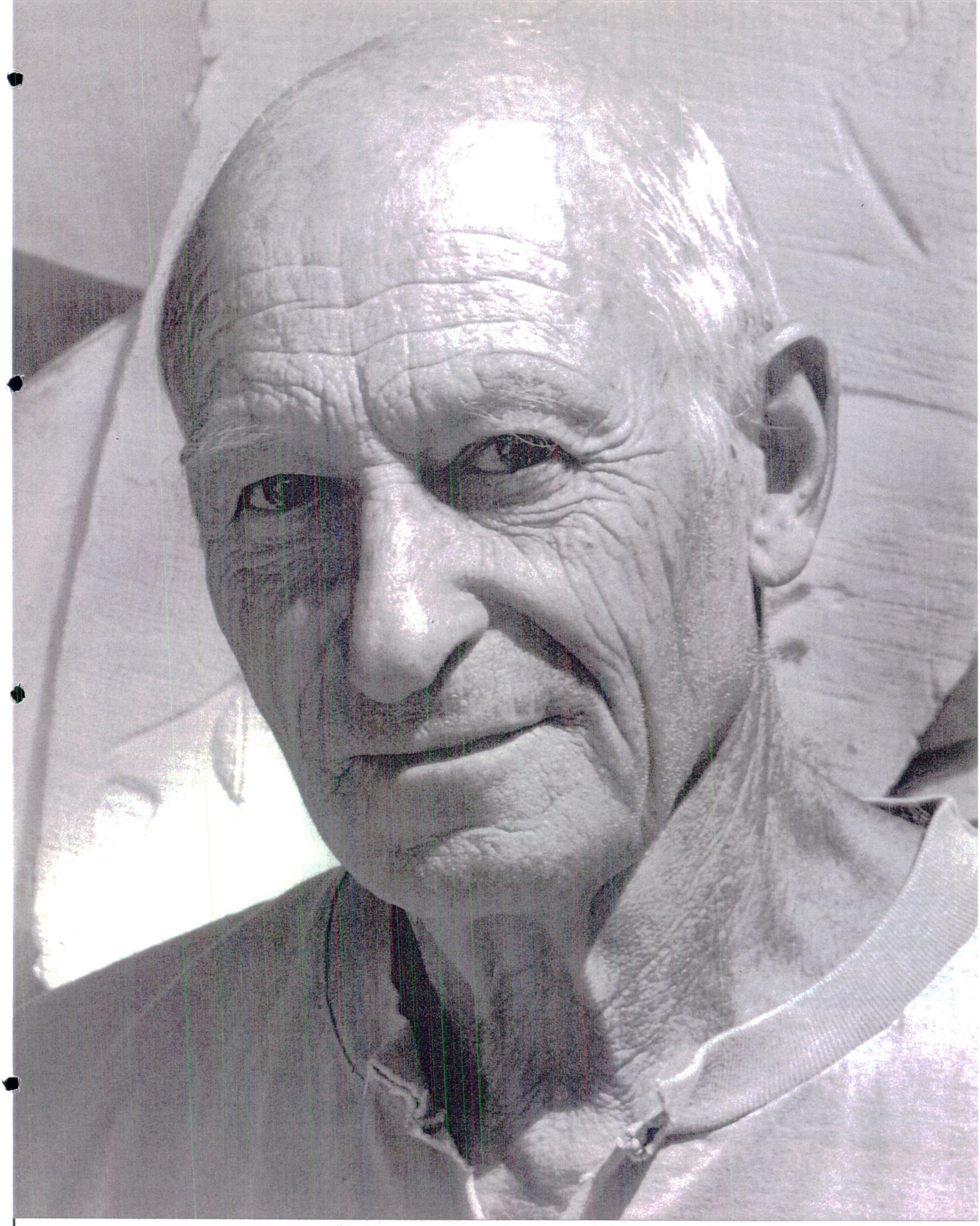


Paul Soldner, 1995.

Chapter 1
An Introduction to Paul Soldner.

From the beginning of the twentieth Century radical changes were developing on the ceramic scene. After the industrial revolution in Britain, many artists and designers felt a need to reinstate the handmade aspect of their work. William Morris was one such person who tirelessly worked to hand print his designs. Ceramics, like most crafts at that time, were still almost exclusively functional and rarely thought of as 'high' art, although Josiah Wedgwood had managed to stretch the boundaries, from the 1740's, to some extent.

In 1909 Bernard Leach returned to Japan from London to teach etching. Leach was soon accepted into a community of artists known as the Shirakaba Society. It was here that he was introduced to Zen by Soetsu Yanagi. It was with this group that Leach attended a traditional Japanese raku ceremony. The guests were given unglazed bowls to decorate with oxides. The bowls were then glazed, fired and returned to their creators within an hour. this fast fire technique was known as 'raku'. After spending some time in Japan Leach returned to England where he set up a pottery studio at St. Ives in Cornwall. Leach and his team produced mainly functional work with natural ash glazes. The pieces were then wood fired in a Japanese style kiln. His work was not raku fired, probably because the technique had only ever been employed for tea ceremony purposes, which had been passed down from generation to generation. But Leach did not discard raku altogether. He wrote about the method and its history in A Potters Book in 1941. Some years later, these writings were to inspire the American ceramist, Paul Soldner, to experiment with fast-fired clay and to achieve some fascinating results.

In the early 1950's, Bernard Leach, along with Shoji Hamada, toured the United States giving workshops and lectures. Along the way they met one of America's most outstanding potters Peter Voulkos, winner of many awards. It was Voulkos who was to become the controversial teacher of an eager and talented group in the newly formed ceramics department at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. His very first student, who was regularly called the most influential of the group, was Paul Soldner.

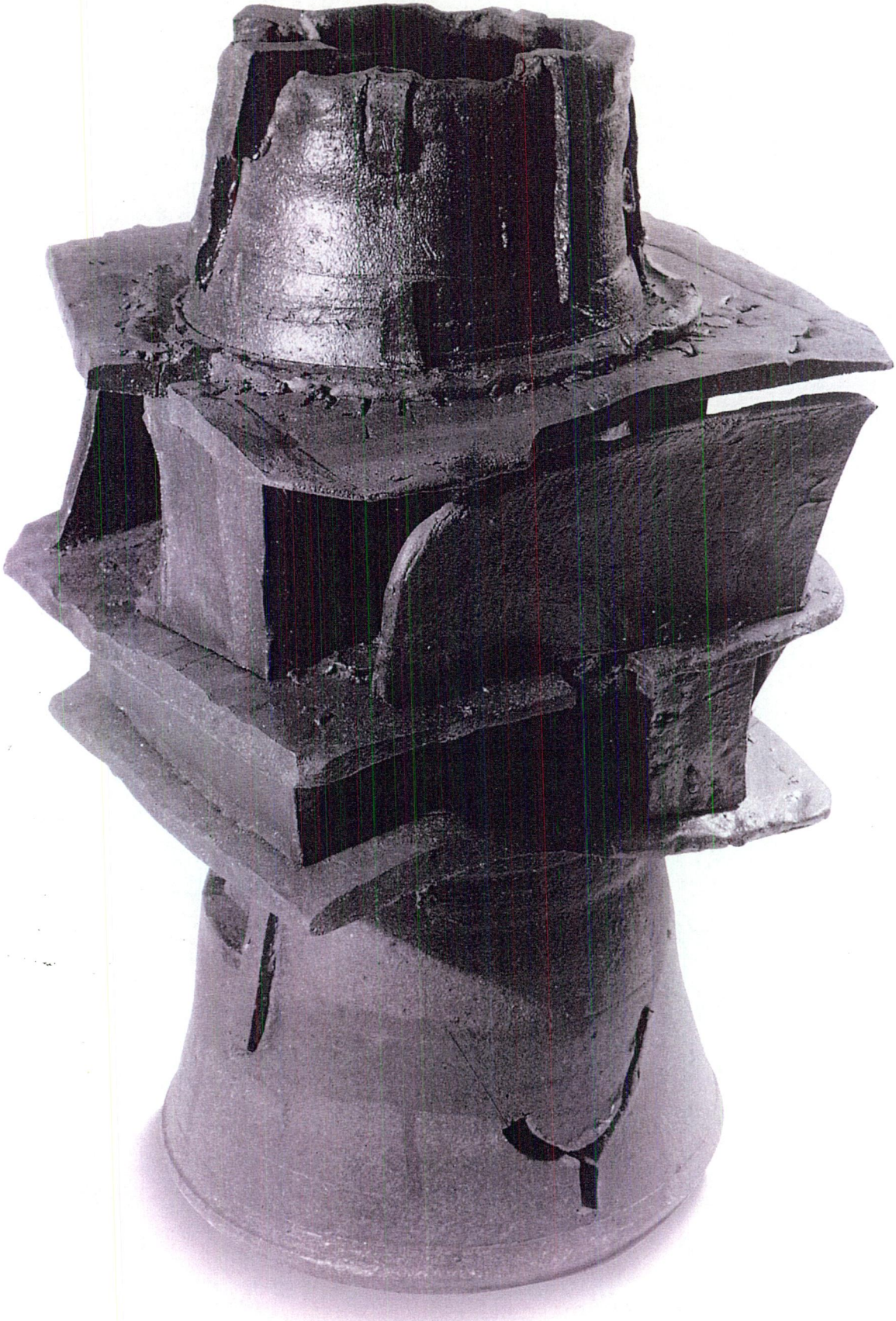
In relative terms, Soldner was a latecomer to ceramics. Born in 1921 in Summerfield, Illinois, he had studied at Bluffton College, in Ohio, where he majored in Pre-Med and minored in art and also discovered photography. It was here that he discovered clay for the first time. Early signs of his ingenuity surfaced when he constructed a potters wheel by using the parts from a 'Model A' Ford and by following instructions given in Popular Mechanics magazine. Soldner now had nobody to show him how to use his wheel so he used it as a wood turner would, by carving out the inside of a lump of clay and turning the outside on the wheel. When Soldner was at Bluffton College, he watched the American studio potter Charles Lakofsky demonstrating the conventional way of throwing at Bowling Green State University.

In 1942 Soldner was drafted into the war and, because of his college background, he was assigned to a noncombat medical detachment. The war took him to

Belgium, Germany and Austria, and also persuaded him to change his major to art. After the war Soldner decided to do a M.A. in art education. He spent the next four summers, from 1950 to 1954, at the University of Colorado. Soldner was able to afford this extra education because of the G.I. Bill, which made money available for these reasons. During his third summer there, Soldner began working with clay again. He enrolled in a ceramics class under the tuition of Katie Horsman, a talented potter from Edinburgh in Scotland. Horsman proved to be an inspirational teacher for her pupils. It was from these classes that Soldner got the courage to change his mind about his M.A. in art education. Instead, he decided to pursue a career as a potter. But, for this, he needed more skills than the casual summer ceramic classes could give him.

It was to Nan and Jim McKinnel, two highly respected and well known potters in Colorado, that Soldner went to for advice in what steps to take next. From the McKinnel's, and other information that Soldner had gathered Himself, all arrows seemed to point in the direction of Peter Voulkos.

Voulkos' own career had been going from strength to strength. Since working at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Voulkos had established his name on the ceramic scene for winning numerous awards and also for his competent throwing skills. His recent appointment of Head of Department at the new ceramics department (established in 1954) at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now Otis Art Institute/Parsons School of Design) had come as no major surprise. News of his new position spread quickly around the ceramic community as Voulkos' reputation favourably preceded him. This was enough to convince Soldner that this was the course for him. Along with his wife, Ginny, and their young daughter, Soldner packed up his belongings and headed west to start a new life and career. Unknown to himself or anyone else involved, Soldner was about to become part of a significant group of potters who over the next few years would help to revolutionise clay.



Peter Voulkos,
Untitled, 1956,
Stoneware with slip and glaze, gas fired.
20X14X15 in.
Collection of Ross and Paula Turk.

Peter Voulkos.
Untitled. 1956.
Stoneware with slip and glaze, gas fired.
20X14X15 in.
Collection of Ross and Paula Turk.

Chapter 2
Soldner and Voulkos at Otis.

Millard Sheets hired Peter Voulkos to set up and run the basement floor ceramic department at Otis. He was expecting Voulkos' students to produce utilitarian objects similar to those being made at Alfred college in New York on the East coast of America. There the main emphasis was placed on industrial design.

Voulkos was given a generous budget to buy the equipment and materials that he needed. He was also given the freedom to have his studio open twenty four hours a day - which was unheard of in the 1950's. Paul Soldner was his first and only student in the first term. The two men clicked immediately and soon became firm friends. During the first few months they set about looking for the new equipment they needed and setting up the studio. Kick wheels were heavy and awkward at this time. Searching the industrial supply firms in Los Angeles, the newly formed duo found parts and fittings which Soldner later applied to make a new and improved kick wheel. This technical achievement was low cost, using easily found parts and could be changed to suit the size and shape of the individual potter. Voulkos put in an order for eight of these wheels and Soldner soon began getting orders from other ceramic instructors. This, eventually, led to the set-up of Soldner Pottery Equipment, which has since expanded to become a major supplier for today's potters.

It wasn't long before word got around about the new department and, in the second term, Soldner and Voulkos were joined by Joel Edwards, John Mason, Malcolm McClain and Janice Roosevelt. The group's work was mostly functional and consisted largely of vessel forms until Voulkos began cutting up slabs of clay and attaching them to the sides of his pots. He assembled separate thrown elements and hit his pots so that they were no longer symmetrical. In an article in American Ceramics, where Michael McTwiggan interviewed Paul Soldner and Val Cushing, Soldner,when referring to Voulkos, stated that:

"I went out there expecting to find a good solid production potter-and that's exactly what I did find, but it only lasted four months."1

Soon afterwards the students were encouraged to shed their inhibitions, just as Voulkos had done, and to break away from the type of ceramics that society had come to accept and expect. They were given the freedom and facilities to express themselves through clay - although newsprint and paint were always available for anyone wishing to use an alternative medium. Voulkos treated his students as his equals - working alongside them by using the classroom as his workshop. Even though there were never any formal lessons or critiques, the group, including Voulkos, was constantly learning from each other, and from their own individual mistakes:

> "As a student at the Los Angeles Art Institute, I was fortunate to have Peter Voulkos as my mentor. In the two years I was there I cannot remember having an official critique by Pete.Yet we students gained self-confidence to critique

Paul Soldner,
Lidded Jar, 1954,
Wheel-thrown stoneneware.
c.18X12 in.
Private Collection.

our own work without feeling defensive or the need to please him."[2]

The basement studio became a hive of experimentation during the first year and soon the Otis ceramics department was attracting attention from other departments within the college, as well as outsiders. In the Spring of 1956, a young maths teacher from Los Angeles began dropping into the ceramics department quite often. As this young teacher, Fred Marer, was on a low budget the students considered it a great honour if he would offer to buy a piece of their work or even if he complimented them on it. It encouraged them, and as everyone was living on such a low budget themselves, the money was very welcome. Fred Marer was to become the owner of a unique collection of pottery which he later donated to Scripps college in Los Angeles.

Soldner was in his early thirties, a few years older than Voulkos, at the time of the Otis 'revolution'. He was more mature than some of the other students in the group. Soldner was also slightly reluctant to divert from his vessels which were often six foot tall or over.To make this possible, he had to adapt the foot control for his wheel so that he could still throw his pots while standing on a stool. The elongated shapes of his pots drew the viewer's eye up and down the surface of the piece. The glazes, which were applied in a way that accentuated the height, were sparse and exposed a lot of the raw clay. He extended the height by adding a ring of clay to the top of the pot and joining it to the rest of the clay whilst throwing.

"I began by taking a clay doughnut off the wheel and setting it onto a previously, semi-hard pot, and throwing the section further. Thus I began to work with a whole new clay vocabulary,one that came intuitively and unconsciously."[3]

It was with one of these unconventional pots that Soldner won a 'Best of Show' award in 1957 at the Lowes Gallery in Coral Gables, Florida.Unfortunately, the director of the gallery refused to accept the winning pot as part of the gallery's permanent collection and called it:

"poorly fashioned, badly glazed and meaningless in form."[4]

The whole group had greatly expanded the possibilities of clay and were successfully breaking down the barriers which separated the craft world from the fine art world.

Voulkos' radical way of teaching was not confined to the basement. He would often bring his students to exhibitions,galleries,interesting buildings or to hear a good jazz band. Late in the evening they would drive to a restaurant while waiting for a kiln to cool down. Back in the workshop there was always some type of music playing on an old record player. Voulkos himself learned the flamenco guitar at night. But music was just one element which was part of the whole Otis scene. In an essay in Paul Soldner:A Retrospective,1991, the book that was published in conjunction with Soldner's retirement from Scripps college and the travelling exhibition which followed,Malcolm McClain, one of the Los Angeles Institute group, explained what it was like:

"In the late 1950's the life of the ceramic student at Otis consisted of baseball

Paul Soldner using extended throwing technique, Scripps College, 1958.

and Zen, clay formulas and music, looking at art, going to shows..."[5]

This easy-going atmosphere that Voulkos had created helped the students to relax and be at ease with their work and with clay. They were encouraged to learn from their mistakes, to take chances and to be revolutionary in their work. Most of the students were influenced by Zen philosophy and were readily prepared to make asymmetrical pots, to expect the unexpected and to look favourably on accidents, accepting the work for its spontaneous qualities. Paul Soldner, however, was one student who was slightly more reluctant to submit to these Zen aesthetics, although he was quite happy to make it up as he went along. Soldner's tall, thrown vessels held more subtle traits of Zen such as patience and simplicity. The brush work on his pots often showed signs of Japanese influence.

The students worked hard to maintain their own individuality through their work. The department created a healthy, competitive atmosphere where everyone communicated well,both towards each other and through the clay. The twenty four hour studio was a difficult place to leave as the students thought they might miss something if they weren't there. They often worked late into the night. By 1956 Soldner's dream of becoming a simple rural potter had become just a distant memory. The time had come to leave the Los Angeles Institute, with his M.F.A., and part from his influential teacher Voulkos, the man who began, pursued and encouraged others to follow in what is now known as the Otis clay revolution.

After his graduation in 1956 Soldner was asked to stand in for the ceramics instructor, Richard Peterson, who was taking leave of absence from Scripps college in Claremont, Los Angeles County. As he had done at Otis, Soldner soon began modifying the college's equipment. This enabled his new students to produce larger work than they had been making. These new facilities, including kilns, wheels and clay mixers were part of the Soldner Pottery Equipment range which was expanding in popularity and technical achievement. For three years he continued improving the equipment in the ceramic department at Scripps. Soldner's interest in kiln construction was a major factor of importance in his teaching methods. Students often had to build their own kilns, specifically designed to their needs, for each new project. Together, students and teacher, built a gas-fired, round bottle kiln and also a long, low, narrow, groundhog-style kiln which could only be entered by crouching.

Soldner's ingenuity was tested at Puerto Rico in 1963 when he accepted an invitation from the Peace Corps to teach its volunteers to build high-fire kilns. The volunteers would in turn teach local potters, whose traditional ware was quite easily broken, which made it uneconomical as new work was constantly required. Soldner discovered that empty ships threw out fire bricks used as ballast before they reloaded. It was these bricks and the availability of kerosene that once again proved his flexibility in problem-solving.

In 1956 the American Crafts Council asked Soldner to write a booklet on kiln building. Soldner's broad and unique knowledge of the subject was greatly sought after

by students and teachers all over the country. He was also responsible for experimenting with, and developing the use of oil and, more environmentally friendly, solar powered kilns.

END NOTES - CHAPTER 2

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4. White, Cheryl,
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5. McClain, Malcolm,
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Chapter 3
The Raku Story.

Paul Soldner is well known in the ceramics world for his developments and improvements in clay, kilns and various other ceramic equipment, but it is for raku that he is best known. Before Soldner began using raku techniques, there were a few other potters in America, during the forties and fifties, who were trying Japanese-style raku. These included Warren Gilbertson, who had studied raku in Japan in the 1940's; Carlton Ball at Mills College in Oakland; Jean Griffith in Seattle; and Hal Riegger in Northern California, amongst others. Unlike Soldner, these artists limited their ideas to the Japanese process of tea bowl making.

Even by Japanese ceramic standards, raku is often looked upon as being conservative. The same methods of carving the bowl from a lump of clay, glazing and quick-firing, have been used for over four hundred years by Japanese masters. Simple in form and seemingly roughly glazed, these small, lumpy bowls could be mistaken for the work of a beginner to the uneducated eye. But these precious bowls continue to be treated with a lot of care and respect by the Japanese.

Japan underwent a lot of cultural and political change before the twelfth century, due to increased influences from China and Eastern Asia. The newly introduced Buddhist Priests ruled Japan for more than two centuries. During the rule of the Samurai Warriors, from the twelfth century, there was a rise in interest in Zen Buddhism. The Zen religion helped to introduce and establish many elements in Japan's culture, including the tea ceremony. The Samurai people, with their interest in Zen, encouraged the tea ceremony because of its philosophical and religious connections. In the beginning, Chinese and Korean rice bowls were used, but these had not been specially made for tea ceremony purposes.

Japanese raku remains essentially unchanged since it originated in the sixteenth century. The bowls are usually either black or red. The more favoured red ware (because it creates such a contrast with the bright green tea), is obtained from ochre slip, a lead glaze and a fast firing in a charcoal kiln. Subtle variations in colour on the red raku bowls are highly appreciated and sought after. The black raku ware is achieved by glazing the pots with a pulverised rock found in the Kamo River which flows through Kyoto. This is high in metal oxides such a copper, iron and manganese. The bowls are fired to a high temperature and then cooled slowly. The tea bowls are formed from a sheet of clay which is carved, using specialised bamboo and metal tools. The individuality and character of the maker is captured by this laborious carving technique.

There is still quite a bit of confusion about the origin of the 'raku' technique, which means 'comfort' and 'pleasure'. Most sources agree that a sixteenth century Korean potter named Ameya settled in Kyoto, then the capital of Japan, and began making roof tiles. He made a reasonable living supplying these low fired, lead glazed tiles for the many new temples and palaces. There was a tile by Ameya's son Chojiro, made in 1574, that is thought to be the first raku ware to be made. This means that Chojiro was the first in a long generation of raku potters.

One of Japan's most famous war lords during the sixteenth century was the influential Hideyoshi. He had a love for pottery and was responsible for capturing many Korean potters, probably including Ameya, and bringing them to Japan where they could demonstrate their methods of glazing and firing. Hideyoshi encouraged his tea master Sen-No-Rikyo to constantly keep an eye out for something specific to mirror the beauty and simplicity of the ritualistic tea ceremony or cha-no-yu. When Sen-No-Rikyo saw Chojiro's low fired tiles with their soft natural surface, he persuaded Chojiro to convert from tile making to tea bowl making.

During the tea ceremony the tea bowl is cupped in the hands while the tea is being drunken. The whole tea drinking ceremony is a highly regarded tradition, where the process is as important as the tea. The bowls are treasured and there is a certain intimacy with them during the ritual. Chojiro began working for Hideyoshi and Sen-No-Rikyo around 1579-80, when he began developing a simple transparent glaze.

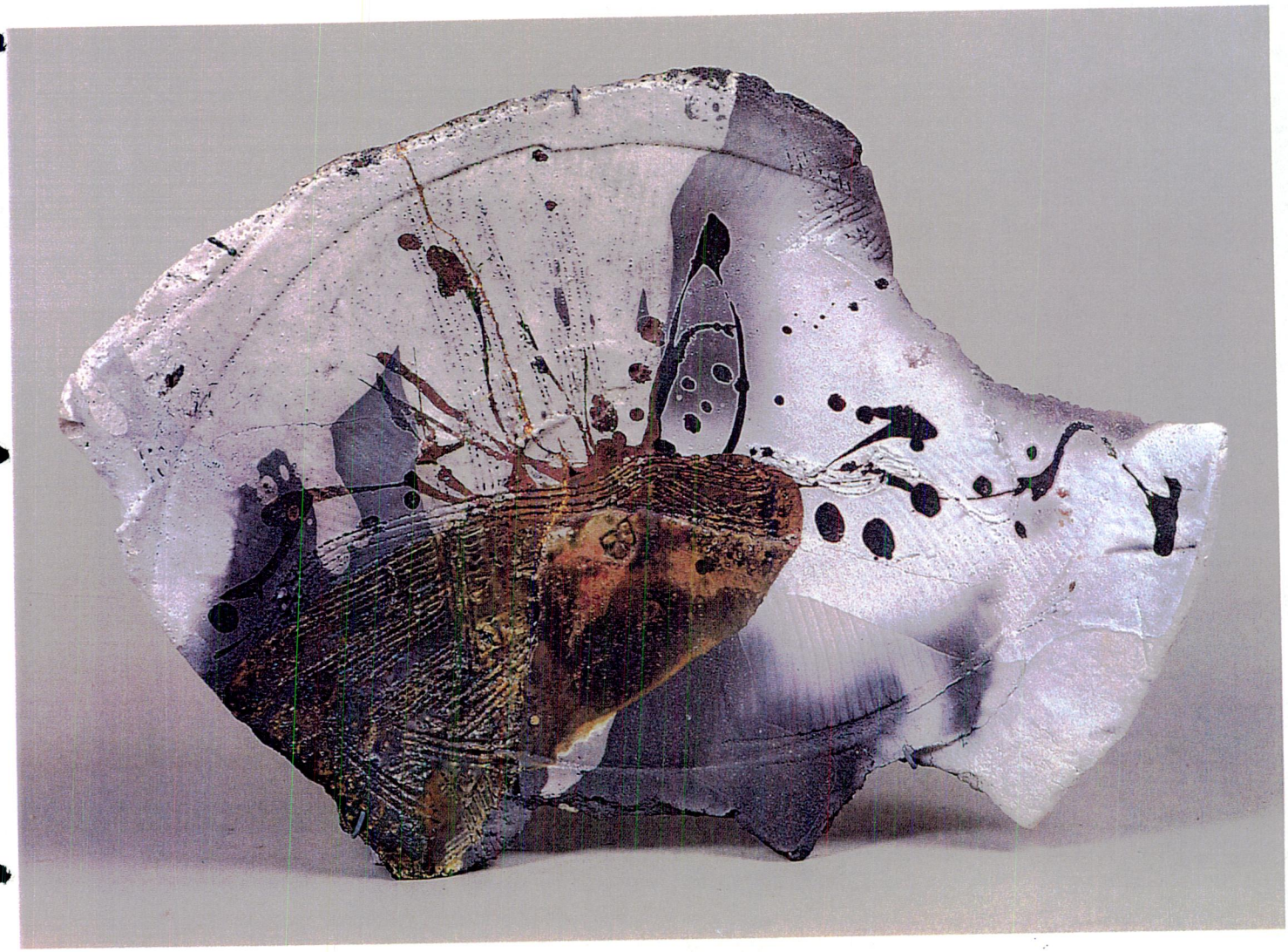
Some of the most treasured surviving tea bowls emanated from the Chojiro/Rikyo partnership. The bowls were highly regarded within Japan's tea world by the higher classes including Samurai Warriors and political leaders, such as Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi was so pleased with Chojiro's bowls that he presented Chojiro and his family with a seal that carried their name. The ideogram on the seal, which is carved from gold, represented joy, simplicity and peacefulness which all relate back to raku. Chojiro's ancestors would be known as the Raku family as the practice of raku firing was limited to his successors, namely his sons and their children. Since 1574 the raku family name has been passed down for fourteen generations to the present day Kichizaemon. It was respect from the hierarchy of sixteenth century Japan for the Raku family that made the evolution of a simple craft into an essential part of the cha-no-yu so unusual and raised the status of such a humble craft as pottery.

In 1960 Paul Soldner knew very little of the history of raku. In 1990 in an article entitled 'The American Way of Raku' in Ceramic Review, Soldner stated:

> ".....at the time, in 1960, we did not know much about Japanese raku. Of course I heard of it from reading ' The Book of Tea', and the near proximity of Japanese town near the Los Angeles art institute also provided a source of pottery for our examination and learning. But perhaps Bernard Leach's description of his first encounter with raku was the most appealing".1

While preparing to stage a demonstration at the Lively Arts Festival in Claremont in the same year, Soldner read an extract from Leach's 'A Potter's Book' describing the raku process. He was looking for something different to show the public, but he needed to be able to do it there and then. Raku was the perfect solution- or so Soldner thought. He built a small, portable gas kiln and heated the pots up until they were red hot for about an hour. When Soldner removed the pots, he was disappointed with the results.

> ".....the results were far from as subtle as I had been led to expect. On the contrary, they were ugly, the clay was a non-descript yellow. The glaze was harsh, the oxides of cobalt, iron and chrome were obscenely bright and garish.
>
> Had it not been for a serendipitous hunch, I doubt if I would have



Paul Soldner,
Wall Piece (69-1), 1969,
Handbuilt, raku clay, white slip iron and copper brushwork, glassy red glaze, post fire smoking.
19X24 in.
Bernard and Joan Bloom, Boulder.

ever again tried to make raku".2

This "serendipitous hunch" happened later on that day, when Soldner rolled some red hot pots in nearby pepper tree leaves. This was the result he had been hoping for. This intuitive act distinguished American raku from its Japanese original heritage because the Japanese had never 'smoked' their pots in combustible materials such as leaves. It was also to change Paul Soldner's life:

"It changed my life. It also changed my work. I developed an appreciation of the imperfect, the beauty of asymmetry, and the value of an organic aesthetic".3

He quickly began preparing a clay body which would withstand a thermal shock which raku ceramics are subjected to during firing. He played around with the firing temperatures and melting points of the glazes. This radical new firing method was unlike any other ceramics produced in the 1950's and 1960's in America. The work was generally smaller, due to the fragile nature of raku which results from thermal shock, especially in larger pieces. Each piece of raku could be fired differently because the potter had complete control over each firing- having the option of smoking the pot, cooling it in water or leaving it to cool in the open air. The high loss rate, often suffered in raku firings, was all part of the Zen philosophy of accepting accidents and all the unexpected results of each new firing. Many other cultures, including pre-Columbian, Egyptian, Native American and Greek had used low firing techniques for thousands of years. Soldner continued primarily experimenting with raku, using different temperatures, combustible materials, slips and glazes. He then met Kirasawa Kanishiga when he paid a surprise visit to Scripps College. Kanishiga threw beautiful asymmetrical pots which had a lot of impact on Soldner. He was a well respected potter in Japan and had been given a Living National Treasure Award by the Japanese government. Kanishiga greatly influenced Soldner, who is committed to stressing the organic qualities of clay in a spontaneous way.

In 1964, Soldner entered three raku-style pots into the national ceramic exhibition at the Everson Museum in Syracuse. Surprisingly all of the three vessels were accepted and one of them even won a first prize. With this new lease of life and his confident and alternative approach to clay, Soldner began concentrating on raku in a more serious manner.

After he had thrown the initial shape, which usually started off as a cylinder, which was then increased in height and width by opening up the form from the inside, Soldner then softly paddled the pot and added a ring of clay as a neck and sometimes a foot. He applied colour and decoration by loosely brushing on slips and oxides. The marks and patterns from the firing were also accepted as part of the overall pot decoration. The end results of his pots were asymmetrical, free flowing and organic. This tied the Zen philosophies, which Soldner had been exposed to at the Otis Arts Institute, into his work- things were beginning to make sense.

At first, when Soldner began doing workshops based on raku, he designed a

portable kiln and burner which he could easily transport from college to college. But as time went by and raku became more popular, the equipment was on hand and 'raku parties' were being held all over the country. As Soldner himself explains:

> "Raku event at the beach, in the mountains, and in the schools all added momentum to the movement".[4]

However, he was uncomfortable with calling his work "raku' because there was no tea ceremony involved and it was not part of American tradition. He saw the word raku as meaning 'a happy accident', while the Japanese defined it as:

> 'free' or 'comfortable'.[5]

It was not until 1971 that Soldner went to Japan and gave a workshop. It was here that he realised that smoking the pots after they were fired was totally of his own invention. He also learned that 'raku'' was the name given to the family who began making tea ceremony utensils for Hideyoshi back in the sixteenth century and that this family was still making the wares for these purposes today.

In my opinion, the main differences between Japanese and American-style raku are:

* The Japanese have been producing raku ware for over four hundred years while the Americans first began in the late 1940's.
* Raku ware was made specifically in Japan for the tea ceremony, while the Americans have valued it for its spontaneous and aesthetic qualities.
* Anyone in America can produce raku, where as in Japan, only the Raku family can do so.
* Initiated by Paul Soldner, American raku is either plunged into water or into a combustible material such as sawdust after the firing, while the Japanese raku is left to cool slowly.
* Japanese raku is traditionally red or black whereas American raku can be any colour.

Soldner is often referred to as the inventor of American raku or 'The Raku of America', as he prefers to call it. He successfully expanded the number of ceramic techniques by doing so, and also created an accepted niche in the ceramics world for low-fired clay.

In 1965, while preparing work for an exhibition, Soldner fired some work in a salt kiln. It was not until 1970 that he took note of the orange flashes which had appeared on the surface of these pots which he had fired five years earlier. He had stumbled on the technique while looking for an alternative to raku. Soon after rediscovering these pots, Soldner began experimenting by putting salt directly in front of the flame of the burners or on the vessels themselves. He applied slips and stains containing iron or copper (as these both react to salt) by brushing them onto the surface. These created smudges of pinks and oranges.

Soldner used his new techniques on bowls, vases and plaques throughout the seventies up to the early eighties. He was constantly trying to improve and push the

Paul Soldner,
Vessel, c.1980,
Wheel-thrown and altered, raku clay, white and copper slips,stencil figures, clear glaze,post fire smoking.
20X13 in.
Bernard and Joan Bloom, Boulder.

boundaries of low-fired salt bisque.

In an article written in April 1995 for Ceramics Monthly, Soldner explains the method and technique of his low-fire fuming. As with most ceramic advancements, he admits that he has learned to do it:

"Mostly through trial and error".6

He has found that soda can also be fumed in the same way as salt. Different effects can be achieved by using different clays. For example, for orange flashes there should be some iron oxide in the clay, and stoneware is suitable for applying slips and stains to. Because the salt must react in the actual burner flame, kilns with a horizontal burner must be used. Soldner also finds that by applying one or two coats of wax to the surface of the pots after they have been fired, they become sealed and can be more easily looked after.

In 1979 Paul Soldner returned to Japan and held a series of demonstrations and a panel discussion along with Rick Hirsh, who is one of the leading American ceramists responsible for experimenting with raku. While Soldner and Hirsh were demonstrating their American style raku, the head of the Raku family, Mr. Raku, was also demonstrating Japanese style. The event was part of the world craft council meeting which was being held in Kyoto that year. The meeting had been set up by Mitsu Yanigahara, one of the organisers of the event. At first, Mr. Raku was reluctant to display his process as it had been held as a family secret for fourteen generations. But when Yanigahara successfully invited Japan's Prince and Princess, he agreed to go ahead with the demonstration.

On the last day of the conference the 'Kichizaeman' or head of the Raku family, along with other Japanese guests, held a debate on whether anyone other than the Raku family could make raku with their American guests. The debate concluded with Mr. Raku steadfastly maintaining that only he could make it, with the Americans defending themselves through their developments in firing techniques, such as smoking their pots after firing. The Americans also claimed knowledge of the philosophical understanding of the process and the state of mind which accompanied this.

The new American method of raku confused Kichizaeman because the Americans actually called their process 'Raku'. When they asked him what would be a better name for it, he quickly replied:

"Do like I do, call it by your name. Call it Hamada ware, Hirsh ware or Soldner ware".7

A leading Japanese art historian who happened to be at the debate also refused to recognise the American process as being raku. At this stage, Soldner decided that the argument was going nowhere and he attempted to lighten the atmosphere by renaming American raku in a seemingly appropriate way. He renamed it 'Ukar'.

"We will never again call our work raku, rather we will call it the opposite, Ukar".8

Soldner arrived at this unusual name by observing the opposites in which the Japanese

and American cultures do things, for example, the side of the road they drive on, the direction the pottery wheel turns and the American way of removing stones and rock from their gardens while the Japanese put them back.

Raku is a very appropriate method of firing modern day ceramics. As the old age argument of 'is craft art'? comes up time and time again. maybe it is time for people to step back and release themselves from tying their work to either discipline. Raku offers an expressive use of clay which demands skill and patience, but also denies the potter total control over the end result. Traditionally, Japanese raku has been used functionally in tea ceremonies. Some of the earlier tea bowls have been placed in glass cases in museums where they cannot be touched. This goes against the spirit of raku.

> "The tea bowls, however precious, die in museum cases and should therefore be used.Raku bowls, because they are completely hand-carved, are really a kind of hand sculpture, made to be touched and held. It is impossible to understand the beauty of a tea bowl just by looking- the feel of the shape, the size of the foot, the surface of the glaze and even the warmth of the tea are all so important in the appreciation of a good tea bowl. Without occasional use, tea bowls lose an essential part of their character".[9]

With modern day raku outside Japan, how do ceramics compare to these majestic, purposeful tea bowls? Raku ware is generally non-functional, mostly sculptural and, the work is usually bigger. Clay artists raku fire their pots because they enjoy it. The thrill of not being in control and not knowing is enough to lure most of us to try the process at least once. But this hands-on approach stirs the potter into wanting to know more. The history of the method as well as the spiritual connections raise raku above most of the conventional ceramic firing processes. A lot of Western artists who use the raku firing technique which Soldner helped establish in the States, in turn apply the same principles to their daily lives. The word is often described as being a feeling and not a process. It can be a state of mind, being comfortable.

In Western society, balance, symmetry and perfection are accepted as being 'right', and are admired. Raku shuns these concepts of beauty and looks to a more organic element in the clay. But how can you tell if the quality is good or not if the pot is deliberately thrown off centre and if the glaze was only applied to small areas of the pot? Why should it need to be judged? If the potter honestly 'felt' that the pot was right when he was making it, surely that is enough. But there is still a belief in Western society that being in complete control of the clay and the kiln surely provides the skill and craftsmanship of the potter.

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Chapter 4
Evolution in Clay.

By 1965 Soldner had been working at Scripps College for almost ten years. He decided that a change was needed so he moved to Aspen, Colorado, to live and work. In the spring of 1967 Soldner taught at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Again his work was continually changing and he began making flatter work in the form of hand built plaques. He used this surface for imprinting and stencilling images. Soldner would use any found object, including tyres, ropes and nails to press into the fresh clay. Sometimes he would use the footprint from his shoe.

Soldner received an invitation to work at the University of Iowa in 1967, which he accepted in 1968/69, where his art class gathered every week for life drawing class. This greatly influenced Soldner and also boosted his confidence. Soon after these classes began the figure started appearing in his work. He would stencil, draw or smoke them on to his pots, often cutting out pictures from magazines as guides. He embraced social issues with his use of the figure, including the 'Black is Beautiful' movement and silhouettes of The Beatles and John Lennon. His images of women were almost classical in pose and recall the works of Picasso and Matisse. These figures brought a sense of history to Soldner's work at a time when society was letting go of old ideas and values and looking forward to the future. Another American ceramist, Michael Frimkess, was also using his work and vessels to re-introduce figurative expression. He was also interested in using clay as a canvas to confront ideas on both political and social grounds. Frimkess' work had a more serious edge to it than Soldner's light-hearted, innocent figures. William Morris, the contemporary American glass sculptor, is another artist who began using the figure in his work in the 1980's. His vessels are similarly used as canvasses to create three dimensional stories, using the figure to capture the magical, mystical traditions of the Native American Indians.

By now, the Soldners were permanently living in Aspen. They had spent the majority of their summers, since 1955, establishing their home there. They began by buying a sage covered field where they could set up camp while they set about building their home. Soldner had gained some experience as a student by helping a friend of his father's to supervise the building of apartment complexes. First, they built their studio and then their living quarters. Being environmentally friendly and aware of the growing problems of pollution and exhaustion of natural resources, Soldner made good use of wood and stone, found locally, for the building materials. The building itself was also one of the first in the area to harness the sun's energy for heating.

In 1969 Soldner was contacted by Scripps College again. They were offering him the chance to return, this time as a full professor. The proposal was very tempting for Soldner, but he had settled in Aspen and was working hard on his Pottery Equipment Company which had bloomed. Even still, he missed teaching, especially following the development of his students. Soldner, instead, proposed a plan that would suit both the college and himself. He would select a different artist/teacher for the

Paul Soldner,
Vessel (72-1), 1972,
Wheel-thrown and altered, raku clay, polychrome slip decoration, unglazed, stencil design, post fired smoking.
14X10X8.5 in.
Marcia Cowee, Aspen.

first semester and he would teach the second- thus giving the students a varied, fresh view of ceramics as seen through different people's attitudes. From the on, Soldner split his year between Aspen and Claremont, by spending six months in each, along with his wife Ginny, who began painting.

By the late 1960's, Aspen had been developed as a skiing resort. The developers wanted to introduce new alternative activities at the nearby Snowmass Village complex, as Aspen was known for its popular music festival. Soldner was asked to choose one of the ranches that had been made available for development to create a ceramic cooperative. The Anderson Ranch Arts Centre was formed and in 1966 a potters' cooperative was established. Soldner returned to Snowmass in 1972 to direct a ceramic programme there. However in recent times Soldner has had less input into the centre, but he returns each summer to teach for one week and remains a valued consultant.

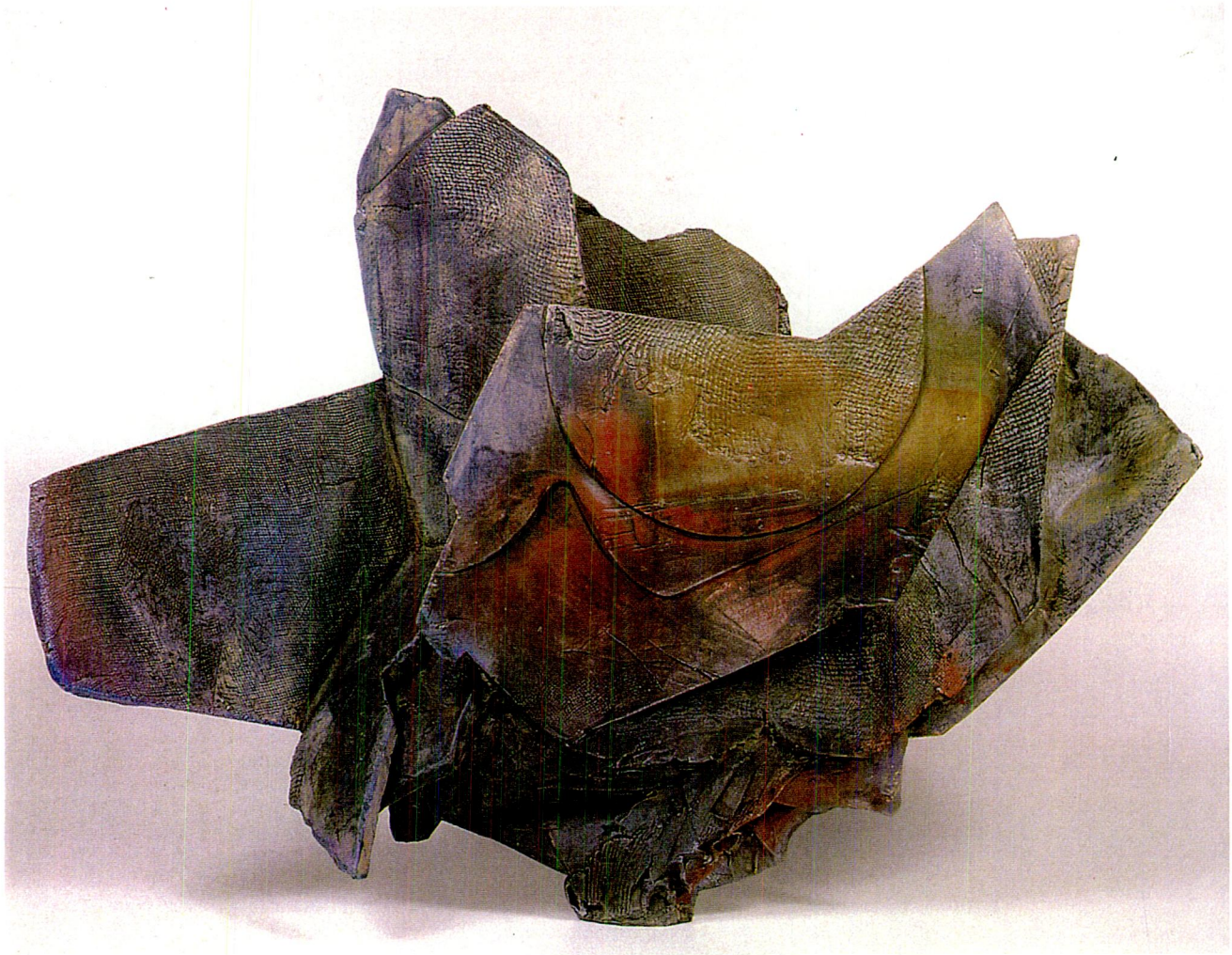
For over forty years, Soldner's ceramics have constantly evolved and changed along with his personal style and life. The earliest known piece of Soldner's work is a modest stoneware bottle which he made at Bluffton College back in 1941. From this deceptive, humble beginning, he studied at Otis and progressed to teach at Scripps during the late 1950's. Throwing was his first ceramic love and he proved his ability by throwing huge floor pots which were often in excess of six feet tall. His use of glazes varied; sometimes they were plentiful, using slips and stains which were applied with calligraphic brush work. But Soldner is also known for his lack of glaze. He loves the natural look of raw clay and often leaves large areas of his work unglazed.

Satisfied with his achievements, Soldner drifted away from his huge pots in the early 1960's but has remained true to throwing. Throughout his career the vessel has always been of utmost importance to him. Where other artists have believed that the vessel was constricting in form, Soldner has valued its simplistic qualities and gently altered the symmetry characteristic of thrown clay. Perhaps this was a feature he acquired from Voulkos. After unloading a kiln at Otis in the 1950's, which held some overdecorated pots, and being obviously disappointed with the results, Voulkos simply told Soldner:

"Never decorate if it isn't needed".1

The exposure of raw clay has become part of the decoration in many of Soldner's more recent pots. During the 1960's he placed the figurative imagery of modern day pop stars and social issues in a more historical context by contrasting glazes and smoked surfaces.These celebrities were removed from their usual glamorous surroundings where the public was accustomed to seeing them, and placed on an earthy pot which was smoked in natural materials. By doing this, Soldner stressed the impact that the media has on our lives as well as that of our natural surroundings. He continued making figurative works throughout the '70's. These resembled ancient sculptures from Greece and Rome and had a more delicate, fragile appearance about them.

Soldner continued using the figure right through to the '80's where he



Paul Soldner,
Pedestal Piece (88-24), 1988,
Wheel-thrown and altered, raku clay, copper slip, unglazed, surface textured, low-temperature salt-vapour fired.
29.5X41X8 in.
Charles and Beverly Diamond, Newport Beach, Ca.

abstracted both the body of the vessel and the female body itself. For these pots, salt-glazed clay was used with the resulting pink and orange colours decorating it. They were initially thrown, extended with clay slabs, then randomly impressed with found objects:

> "In my work, I use any technique I can think of: smoke, manganese,wheel thrown, off wheel, slips and glazes, no slips and glazes, a welding torch,- anything and everything."[2]

It was in this decade that Soldner began making his 'Pedestal Pieces'. For these, he would initially throw a shape - cone, sphere, cylinder, - and lay it on the ground. Then he would begin to impress the clay, score it and cut it into slabs. These slabs were then reassembled into sculptures which defied gravity. The heavy slabs of clay which are mostly unglazed and salt-vapour fired, look as if they are going to take flight as they precariously balance on their pedestals. The random appearance of the slabs, combined with the subtle use of slip and colour, creates a unique composition that is exclusive to each pot that Soldner makes.

One of Soldner's more recent exhibitions took place at Galerie Besson in London in 1996. Even though Soldner is now in his seventies, his work is still bursting with energy and creativity. He captures the spontaneous qualities characteristic of clay. He has stretched the term 'vessel' to the limit. Included in this exhibition was a mixture of vases and bowls, pedestal pieces, small sculptures, and some wall pieces. His simple vase forms show a clear Japanese influence, especially in their brush work. Unlike Oriental tradition, he uses his work to express his own individuality. Thrown slightly off-centre, Soldner harnesses the clay's organic nature.

In contrast to these simple, quiet vases are the pedestal pieces. Their liveliness and apparent lack of balance are enhanced by the pieces being placed off-centre on their plinths. these winged clay constructions, that are heavily textured, were wood fired and salt fumed. The resulting soft blushes of colour and splattered dark stains and oxides compliment Soldner's choice and use of clay.

Paul Soldner,
Vase, 1980,
Wheel-thrown and altered, raku clay, iron and copper brushwok,unglazed, low-temperature, salt-vapour fired.
18X5X6.5 in.
Howard and Gwen Laurie Smits, Montecito, Ca.

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Chapter 5
Soldner the Teacher.

When the Soldners were setting up in Aspen, they moved their small equipment manufacturing company to Colorado. They were aiming to be self-sustained and to make a career out of selling their equipment which they were constantly striving to upgrade. They worked around the clock researching equipment, making and exporting work for exhibitions and completing the buildings. Ginny, Paul's wife, managed the administrative side of the company while Paul himself concentrated on modifying his older designs to suit his own needs and those of his customers. He began by updating the wheel and clay mixer. Due to an increase in competition, the Soldners decided that it was necessary to start advertising their products in magazines. These adverts had a more unusual style than most. They often featured bizarre poses with wheels, clay mixers and other equipment, or included naked or semi-naked bodies. When questioned about his strange methods of publicity and advertising, Soldner answered:

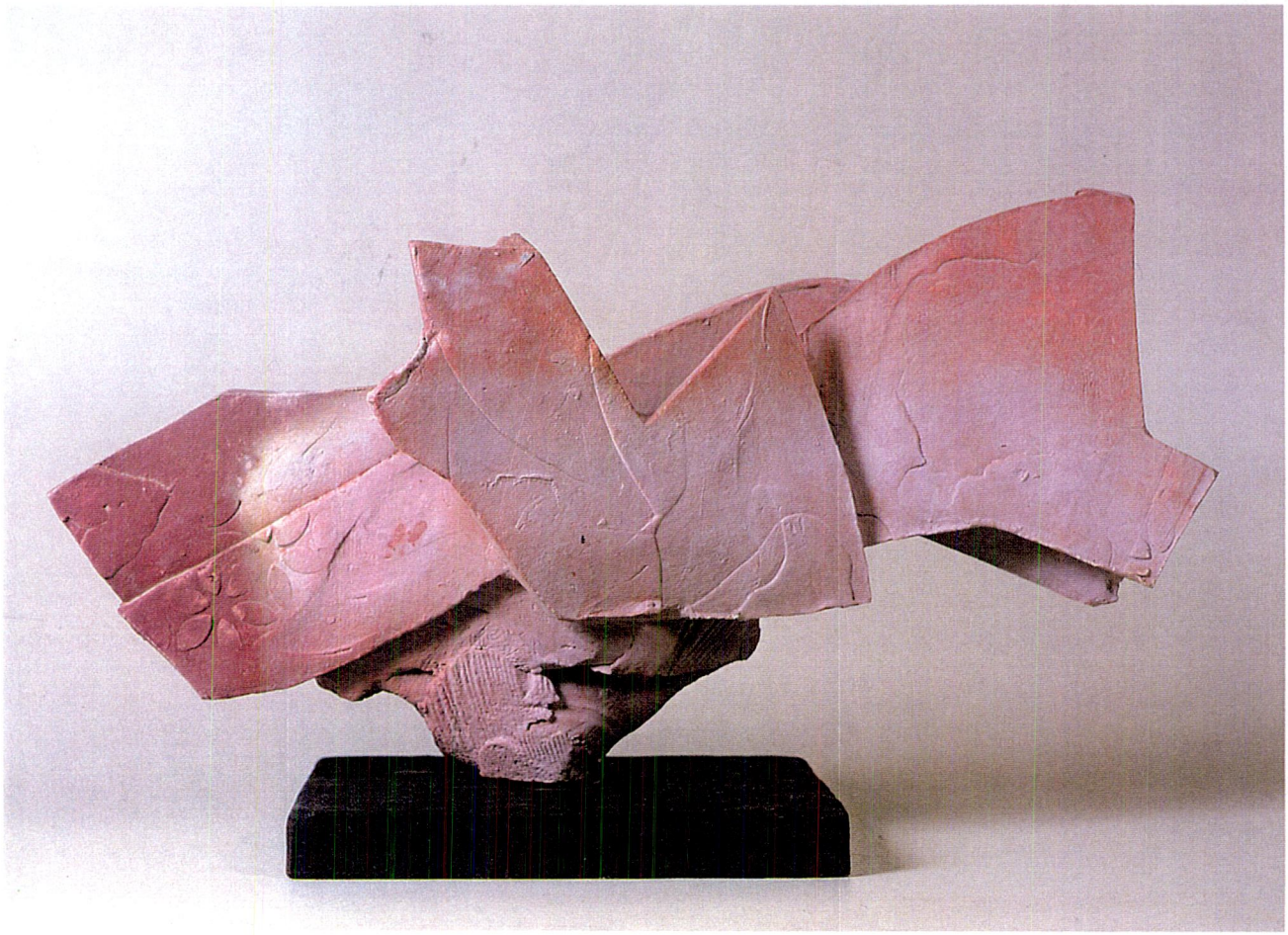
"As a culture, we are so uptight and lacking in humour. Maybe it is a protest".1

Whether it was their unusual approach to advertising or simply their low-tech, uncomplicated solutions to problems,the Soldner Pottery Equipment Co. has expanded to become one of the best known and most reliable suppliers for today's market.

Throughout his career, Soldner has been known as an inventor, a designer of equipment, an innovator of ceramic sculpture, and for the Americanisation of raku. But perhaps some of his most influential work has been in the classroom. Studying under the guidance of Peter Voulkos at Otis definitely left an impression on Soldner and his teaching methods. Like Voulkos, Soldner was reluctant to criticise his students' work. He encouraged experimentation and curiosity.

> "Probably the most important thing you can give a student is their curiosity, help them develop that. The next most important thing is to have the strength to act on it".2

Since he started teaching at Scripps College over thirty years ago, many well known ceramic artists and sculptors have received their tuition and varied education from Soldner, including Jun Kaneko and Jim Romberg. Soldner did not teach his students to follow his example, but to use their initiative and imagination. This resulted with each student having a unique and distinctive style. Soldner worked alongside his students, helping them overcome technical problems by demonstrating. Students were given responsibility by being asked to make their own glazes, mix their own clay and sometimes build their own kilns. Even though Soldner was a well-known artist, he was able to communicate to his students in a down-to-earth way and was always approachable. He would teach his students the value of art history and the relevance it had on their work. They were given the freedom to use their instinct, to leave caution behind them and to explore the unlimited possibilities of clay for themselves. These risks often ended in accidents or disasters but Soldner thought of it all as being part of



Paul Soldner,
Pedestal Piece (90-12), 1990,
Wheel-thrown and altered, raku clay, unglazed, low-temperature, salt-vapour fired.
18X37X8 in.
Louis Newman Galleries, Beverly Hills.

the learning process. Two students attempted to fire a kiln in an alternative way. Unfortunately when they opened the kiln, they were faced with one of the worst disasters Soldner had ever seen. Both women became very upset as they were hoping for 'A's but assumed they had failed. But Soldner was proud of his students:

> "You did this on tour own, you were curios, you tried something, did you learn anything from it?"[3]

But Soldner does not want his students to work for grades, he wants them to be content with their own work and to be undaunted by other peoples opinions. Referring to teachers, art historians, art critics, reviewers, museum directors, gallery owners, even collectors as artistic experts, he believes that as artists:

> "...we long to be told what is good and what is bad. Given this desire, it is easy to become dependent on, even addicted to their opinion and even easier to offer an opinion. Thus we elevate their role..."[4]

Because Soldner is not only a teacher but also an artist himself, he can sympathise with and understand his students' feelings. As a child in the eighth grade, his teacher mistook his painting of a sunset for a fried egg! This apparently crushed his confidence and is why he has been:

> "Unable to critique work ever since".[5]

Many of Soldner's students have also become teachers. He has successfully passed on his enthusiasm to another generation of students. But Soldner did not restrict his teaching to the classroom at Scripps, where he taught for thirty years. He has given hundreds of lectures and workshops all over the world, since the 1960's. Unlike some artists who discover a unique technique, he has not kept his findings to himself. Soldner has shared his methods and techniques with the students he has lectured. He has demonstrated through a variety of ways over the years and has developed a slide show which shows two slides at the same time. One slide would usually be of a ceramic piece and the corresponding slide would be of landscape, another artist or objects which had influenced a particular piece. He would often throw pots for his audience in a fun, dramatic way by hiding objects in the clay and removing them as he threw. He also demonstrated his approach to raku and, later on, his use of salt-vapour-firing. During his workshops, Soldner constantly involved the students by getting them to help him or asking them to supply some objects to press into the clay slabs that he uses in his work. He has helped to stretch their imagination and expand their knowledge of clay and the equipment. Soldner loves to perform and put on a show. He constantly challenges conventional methods of both handling clay and teaching. Although Soldner has been responsible for spreading information about many new and exciting firing techniques, recipes and simple solutions for problems to grateful students who were hungry for such valuable information, not everyone on the critical front has been so impressed. After the sixth International Ceramics Symposium in New

York, in 1989, which was based on the Japanese influence on American ceramics, Sherry Chayat wrote an article for American Ceramics:

> "Paul Soldner, ...led the audience through a rather self-indulgent tour of his Americanisation of raku...ending with a pretentious slide show conducted in reverent silence".[6]

But Soldner disregards most of what the critics say:

> "I think as artists we become dependent on what the critics think, too much so, we should not pay too much attention to it, after all most of them are not artists."[7]

But regardless of what Soldner or the critics say, people make up their own minds, and most agree that Soldner's teaching has been an invaluable addition to the growth of understanding ceramics.

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Chapter 6
Conclusion.

For over three decades, Paul Soldner had been sharing his love of clay with the world. Now in his late seventies his work can be found in galleries everywhere. From an early age he displayed qualities that expressed a willingness to learn and accept new ways. He revealed a number of talents, ranging from mechanics and medicine to creativity and invention. Soldner could easily have remained working with his first choice career as a medic, but his instinct drew him to tap into his creative side. It was this instinct that encouraged some of the most successful elements of Soldner's career and work to surface.

As a student, Soldner showed great enthusiasm, not only as a clay artist but also as an inventor. Many of his ideas and designs were the first of their kind, yet they were simple and effective. Through this skill, he quickly established contacts with other colleges by supplying them with new equipment.

But Soldner continued to be innovative and expressive in clay, even though he used more traditional methods than most of his colleagues at Otis. Perhaps Soldner's big break came when he discovered raku. Again, thanks to his instinct, he unearthed a whole new firing technique and expressive way of using clay and glaze. This story of Soldner's discovery of raku is now part of American ceramic folklore. But he was constantly looking for new means of handling clay. He exhausted a whole range of different techniques and explored every possibility that he could think of. He would throw the clay on the wheel, drop it onto the ground, stand on it, push objects into it, slice it up, join it back together again, apply slips and glazes and then fire it a few times- and the man still claims that he loves clay!!

His revolutionary approach has encouraged generations of new students to expand their views on what making ceramics is supposed to consist of. Soldner has proved his ingenuity and versatility many times, adjusting to any situation and adapting his process to suit his surroundings.

With his easy-going attitude and eagerness to teach, Soldner has attracted the attention of ceramic students all over the world. Through them Paul Soldners many contributions to the craft of ceramics remain as a continuing tribute to his life's achievements as an artist, technician and mostly as a teacher.

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