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New Exhibition “Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years” Opens April 7 at the Renwick Gallery

Exhibition Examines Transformative Early Years of Iconic and Iconoclastic Artist’s Career

Peter Voulkos (1924–2002) was one of the most influential American ceramicists of the 20th century, celebrated for a radical approach that fundamentally transformed the field in a single decade. He defied mid-century craft dictums and reinvented his medium, combining wheel throwing with slab-building, traditional glazes with epoxy paint, figuration with abstraction and building large-scale ceramic structures with complex internal engineering. “Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years” is the first exhibition to examine his early career from 1953 to 1968, when he developed his avant-garde forms and techniques.

“Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years” is on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum April 7 through Aug. 20. The exhibition was initially presented at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York and is curated by guest curators Glenn Adamson, senior scholar at the Yale Center for British Art; Andrew Perchuk, deputy director of the Getty Research Institute; and Barbara Paris Gifford, assistant curator at MAD. Robyn Kennedy, chief administrator at the Renwick Gallery, coordinated the presentation in Washington, D.C.

The exhibition will feature 31 examples from this crucial body of early work, most of which have not been exhibited on the East Coast for four decades. Also included will be three of the artist's rarely seen works in oil on canvas, which help to demonstrate how Voulkos developed his ideas concurrently in pottery, painting and sculpture.

“We are starting 2017 at the Renwick with exhibitions exploring the work of Peter Voulkos and June Schwarcz, two mid-century artists who utterly transformed their disciplines, and in turn, modern craft,” said Abraham Thomas, The Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator-in-Charge at the Renwick Gallery. “Both of them exuded a spirit of creative disruption through their groundbreaking experimentation with materials and process and by challenging what a handmade object could be.”

Voulkos began his career as a traditional potter, establishing himself as one of the country’s leading post-war functional ceramicists. In 1955, he began to experiment with increasingly

unconventional works inspired by a variety of influences, including Abstract Expressionism, Japanese pottery and the artworks of Franz Kline and Pablo Picasso. Voulkos soon rejected the orthodoxy of technique, utility and form, instead pursuing a range of ideas that were entirely new to the medium. He reimagined utilitarian form, breaking down their component parts and reconfiguring them into a new visual language. He used color and contrast to disrupt the visual integrity of his objects and built monumental sculptures. His works, sometimes created as part of live demonstrations, reflected an intense physicality as well as a sense of immediacy and improvisation. Voulkos explored other media and developed distinctive bodies of work in painting and bronze sculpture, but continually returned to pottery forms to demonstrate their endless potential for experimentation.

“Peter Voulkos expanded the possibilities of the medium in such a profound way that we continue to feel his influence decades later,” said Kennedy. “This exhibition enables us to appreciate the ingenuity of the years that would define both his career and modern ceramics.”

The objects on display include several of Voulkos’ seminal early works, including the museum’s “Rocking Pot” (1956), “Sitting Bull” (1959) from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and “Red River” (about 1960) from the Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as four of his 1968 monumental blackware pots. The exhibition will also include an archival video of Voulkos at work and photographs of the artist in his studio.

Catalog

The exhibition catalog includes essays by the exhibition curators and others, and is the first monograph on Voulkos in more than 20 years. The catalog is published by the Museum of Arts and Design in collaboration with Black Dog Publishing and will be for sale in the museum’s store and through the museum’s website (\$34.95).

Credit

“Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years” was organized by the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City by Andrew Perchuk, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute, and Guest Curator Glenn Adamson, with Assistant Curator Barbara Paris Gifford. Major funding for “Voulkos: The Breakthrough Years” is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation. This research was supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Inc.

The presentation at the Renwick Gallery is made possible by the Elizabeth Broun Curatorial Endowment, the Jack and Marjorie Rachlin Curatorial Endowment, and the James Renwick Alliance.

About the Renwick Gallery

The Renwick Gallery is the Smithsonian American Art Museum's branch for contemporary craft and decorative arts. The Renwick is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission is free. Follow the museum on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Tumblr](#), [Pinterest](#), [Flickr](#), [iTunes U](#) and [ArtBabble](#). Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Website: americanart.si.edu.

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