

## Examining the First Women Potters in America and their Influence on Contemporary Ceramic Art

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**Abstract.** The goal of this research is to demonstrate artistic lineage and the intertwined history of early American women potters. This history shows how a technical process, pot or teacher has affected and created a lineage of artists and how they have continued to develop throughout the decades of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

During the early 1900's women in America were becoming artists, teachers and business owners. The roles of these women potters have been noted individually in biographies and historical overviews but many of their professional relationships overlapped and their particular achievements continued through students or associates. The method of this research involves historical research much like a family tree of professional and artistic developments. In this case the research starts with the individual and continues forward showing the propagation of development to the present. It is the combined history of these women that show the depth of their impact on American pottery in the twentieth century and the interrelationships between these women who taught and influenced each other and new generations of ceramic artists.

This research will show detailed graphs and pictorial representations of the first women potters including their achievements and interrelationships. The presentation will demonstrate artistic lineage and the diverse achievements that influence contemporary ceramics.

**Introduction.** After receiving an honorary life member award from the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, Frances Senska showed a film that some students made of her working with clay. Later in an interview Frances tells this anecdote about talking to people after the film, "... [a] guy came up to me and said, 'You know, you hold your hands just the way I hold my hands, and I learned from Peter Voulkos.' And I said, 'Yeah, and Peter Voulkos learned from me. So this is what education in the ceramic arts is all about. You learn from each other.'" [1] This simple anecdote is a relevant example of how ceramic artists share processes and techniques that continue to be

passed along through generations of ceramic artists. Historical research shows how the effect of technical processes, pots or educators helped create a lineage of artists that demonstrate diverse achievements, which influence contemporary ceramics.

**Experiment.** The method for this research involves several steps of historical research. First identifying the first women in America to become professional ceramic artists before 1950. Only listing women who embodied a dedication to ceramics narrowed the list down. Second, classify each woman into one of three groups: educator/artists, studio artists, and ceramic industry artists. Although all of the women were educators at some point in their lives the criteria for each group is based on the years spent in each discipline. Third, distinguish professional accomplishments for each woman tracing the impact of these achievements on contemporary ceramic practice. Finally, reveal the intertwined professional relationships shared by many of these individuals.

**Results.** There are twelve influential women separated into three groups: five educator/artists, four studio artists, and three artists involved in the ceramic industry. Educator and former Rookwood potter, Laura Anne Fry served as the First Chair of Industrial Art at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana and in 1909 founded the Lafayette Art Association now called Art Museum of Greater Lafayette. [2,3] Maija Grotell taught ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan for twenty-eight years and was head of the department of ceramics until 1966. [4,5,6] An educator for twenty-seven years, Frances Senska founded the ceramics department at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana. [7,8] Bauhaus-trained ceramic artist Marguerite Wildenhain founded the Pond Farm where she taught intense summer-long workshops. [9,10] Laura Andreson founded the ceramics department at UCLA where she taught for thirty-eight years instructing over 5000 students. [11]

The studio artists, Adelaide Alsop Robineau, Mary Louise McLaughlin, Vivika Heino and Gertrud Natzler exhibit diverse accomplishments. In 1899 Adelaide Alsop Robineau founded *Keramic Studio* the first educational ceramic magazine. [12,13,14,15,16] Mary Louise McLaughlin was the first person in American to discover the secret of decorative under-glazing in 1877 and founded, The Cincinnati Pottery Club in 1879. [17,18,19,20] Vivika Heino participated in more than 200 national and international exhibitions and was technical advisor to Twentieth Century Fox for the movie *The Egyptian* in 1953; making 751 pots and 16 glaze tests to get the right turquoise for Technicolor. [21] Gertrud Amon Natzler and her husband Otto Natzler established themselves as one of the leading couples in American ceramics winning awards and having solo shows at numerous museums. Natzler collections are held by: Everson Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche; MoMA and many others. [22,23]

The women in the ceramic industry group were the first to found their own companies. Maria Longworth Nichols Storer founded Rookwood Pottery in 1880 by 1960 production ceased. [24,25] Pewabic Pottery founded by Mary Chase Perry Stratton in 1906 continued production until her death in 1961. Architects used her tiles in buildings and public installations such as the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Detroit's Guardian Building, and the Herald Square installation commissioned by the New York Metro Transit Authority among others. [26] Edith Kiertzner Heath founded Heath Ceramics in 1948 which is still in operation today. Edith passed away in 2006 but is best known for her avant-garde tableware, and innovative glaze and clay body formulations. Distinguished as the first non-architect to win an American Institute of Architects Gold Medal. Her architectural tiles are used in the exteriors of the Norton Simon Museum and the Yoruba Buena Center in San Francisco. [27,28,29]

**Discussion.** Pertinent information including; names, dates, professional interrelationships of these artists which had specific influences on contemporary ceramics are documented in the poster material that will accompany this paper. This research discusses a select group of women who have made specific impacts and have a perceptible historical lineage of professional achievements sustained through their students and research.

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