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CRITIC'S PICK

The Met Museum Sees More Clay in Its Future

An abstract painter found his place as a great collector of American ceramics. His latest gift ushers the Metropolitan Museum of Art into the 21st century.

By **Roberta Smith**
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John Gill's "Ewer No. 50," from 1990. Eric Helgas for The New York Times

Ceramics has come a remarkably long, raucous way since the early 1950s. That's when Peter Voukos, inspired by Abstract Expressionist painting, upended the medium with an increased scale, ambition and an improvisatory energy that mixed wheel-thrown with hand built forms. Since then, some ceramists — Ken Price to Betty Woodman to Kathy Butterly — have simply assumed their work was part of the mainstream. They and others have appeared regularly in big exhibitions like the Whitney Biennial and they've been taken on by major galleries.

But the mainstream art world is always narrower than it thinks; plenty of ceramists continue to work beyond its borders. Lucky for them, they've had a discerning champion whose devotion can be measured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a robust, riveting exhibition titled "[Shapes From Out of Nowhere: Ceramics From the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection.](#)" It celebrates this eminent collector's third game-changing gift of clay vessels and objects to the Met — this one honoring the museum's 150th anniversary. A visit can be humbling, but to be humbled is to be enlightened: I knew less than half of the 49 artists in the show.

The show's nearly 80 objects — from the gift's total of 127 — come at you from all sides, what with the unexpected contributions from new makers, unusual examples by known ones and, generally, the aggressive, often bulbous, rough-surfaced works that Ellison seems drawn to. More than a few of the objects verge on grotesque and maybe ugly and will push at the limits of your taste, which is always healthy. All told, the show expands the art historical narrative while also distinctly representing the impassioned vision of one person.

In this presentation — expertly selected and installed by Adrienne Spinozzi, an American Wing curator — more than half of the artists are entering the Met's collection for the first time. An example is the formidable John Gill, whose hand-building technique results in geometric planes that almost seem chopped from wood.