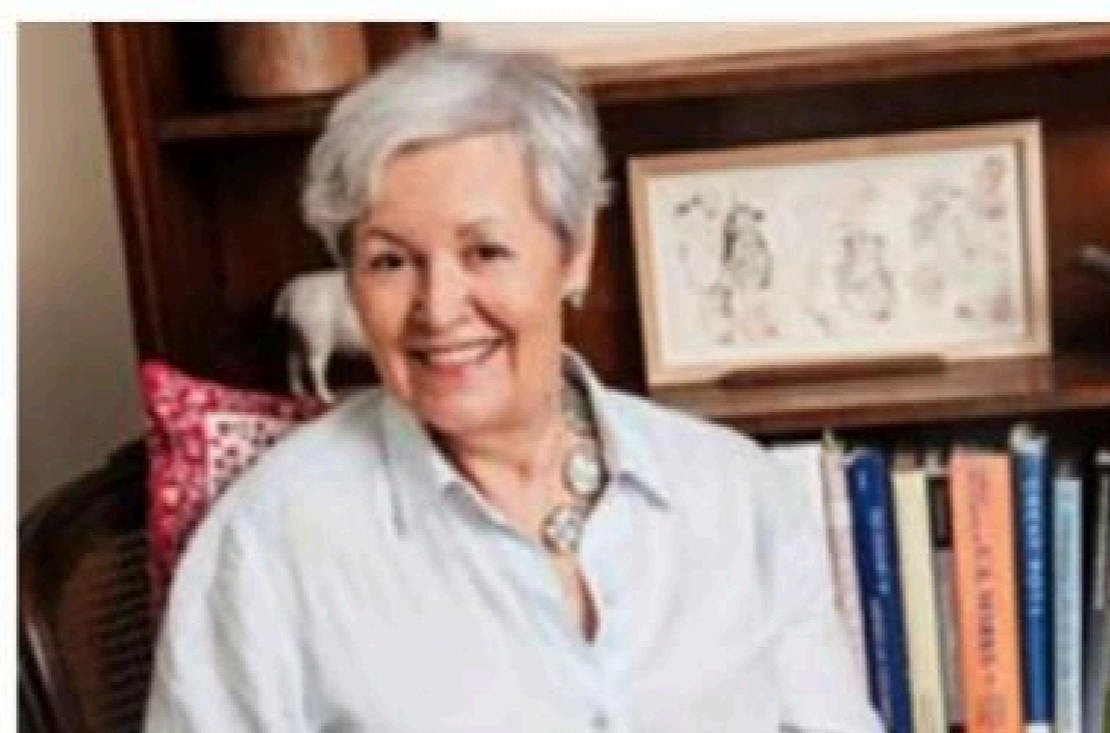


The Marks Project Documents American Ceramic Artists

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More than a few decades into the digital revolution, the expectation for instant information is pervasive. At workplace water coolers, dinner tables, and social gatherings, cell phones and tablets are called into service to provide answers to questions ranging from the mundane to the obscure. The 21st-century native wants answers now and answers fast. The availability and accessibility of all these answers depends on extensive and accurate databases. Scientific fields have relied on data for centuries; the arts are newcomers to the party. A Connecticut collector of ceramics is working toward changing that, at least regarding American ceramic artists. **Martha Vida**, with a small team headed by **Donald Clark** as Research Coordinator launched www.themarksproject.org in 2015. **The Marks Project** is an online research hub and compendium of ceramic artists – sculptors, conceptual artists, and studio potters – working in the United States from 1946 to the present and into the future.

A book designer-turned interior designer, Ms. Vida began to expand her own collection of ceramic art when she and her husband traveled in the United Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s. She was self-taught, primarily through the availability of excellent documentation of English 20th-century pottery. Upon returning to the United States, she says, “I was appalled by the lack of information about American artists. In the UK, I could walk into any thrift shop, pick up an item, hold it in my hand, and find out who made it. In the US, I found so many pieces at auction marked “anonymous,” or “mid-century, while the artists were still alive and working. I needed to change that.” She found the existing encyclopedias good, but incomplete. Lois Lerner’s 1988 publication *Lehner’s Encyclopedia of US Marks on Pottery, Porcelain & Clay* lists over 8,000 marks but focuses heavily on factory makers. Lehner said that the sheer number of individual potters was too large to catalogue in book form. Vida turned to her many contacts in the art world and to the digital revolution to solve this problem.

Ulysses Grant Dietz, the curator of the Newark Museum, talked with Vida about her project. The Newark Museum has a century-long history of collecting modern ceramics, with inter-departmental ceramics holdings numbering in the thousands. Vida recalls discussing the concept of The Marks Project with Dietz. “Ulysses said that we needed a starting date or we would never get up to the present,” she laughs. “He said that the beginning must be finite, but the end will be infinite.” They settled on 1946, the end of the second World War, because those eminent figures from the 1930s would still be working and thus included. Vida cites the end of the war and the GI bill as strong catalysts for the growth of educational programs in ceramics. Many ex-soldiers enrolled in teaching programs and were required to take a course in one of the crafts. For many, this was the first and pivotal exposure to clay. Universities responded with the expansion of their art programs, giving rise to a whole new generation of makers.

With a small committed team, Vida began to assemble information about these ceramic artists, organized it into a highly searchable database, and made it available online for users at no cost. In March of 2015, The Marks Project was unveiled at the NCECA convention in Providence, RI. To date, the site hosts close to 1,500 Artists’ Pages. Only a minimum amount of information is required to set up a basic Artist’s Page: the artist’s name and three images of one piece of work. One image shows the artist’s “mark,” the stamp, chop, or signature used to identify the maker. Most pages contain much more extensive information about the artist and his or her work. Searchers can learn who taught and mentored the artist. In time, tracing the provenance back multiple “generations” will be possible. In the Public Collections list, visitors can see which museum hold works by the artist. In many cases, museum links are provided to view an artist’s work in digitized collections. Each artist can submit information to update his or her Artist’s Page, introducing new bodies of work with images of the works and marks, and adding to their professional chronology. Most importantly for the artists, links are provided from the Artist’s Page to the artist’s website.

As a research tool, the site offers many search functions. If a user has a piece with an unknown mark, the mark can be identified by text, letters, and shape. Artists can be searched by name, studio, keyword, collection, and alphabetically by artist’s name in the Artist Index. The integrity of the project has been greatly enhanced by **Ali Baldenebro**, Special Projects Coordinator, who has added academic rigor to the content and handles outreach to museums and collections.

Vida says that museum curators are very excited about the project. “Meredith Chilton, Chief Curator, the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada, Toronto, wrote, “...it is truly an extraordinary working tool ...”

Elizabeth Argo Nancy M. McNeil Curator of American Modern and Contemporary Crafts and Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art visits the site to help identify unrecognized marks in the museum’s storage collection. Museums have also been helpful in completing Artists’ Pages. The site is a living document that will continue to develop through the interest and input of artists, curators, museum directors, educators, and family members. Several pages have been established for deceased artists by their families. The daughter of mid-century potter Rupert Deese, who died in 2010, was working on an archive of her father’s work and gladly established a page for him on The Marks Project website. Only a minimum amount of information is required to set up a page, but the potential to fill out the page is endless. Users are invited to submit material to the pages, which is then edited and checked by Marks Project staff.

Vida says the site primarily serves two groups: makers and collector/researchers. “For ceramic artists,” she says, “it is a place to document their work and marks, update their progress, show their accomplishments, build their professional legacy and have an increased reach via links to their websites from their Artist’s Page.” For collectors, it is a comprehensive, searchable treasure-trove of makers and information. It is free to the collector and ceramic artist alike.

www.themarksproject.org is being used. There were more than 350,000 page views from June 2016 to June 2017. An average of 1,300 artists had a searchable Artist’s page on the website during that period. “As we move forward,” Vida says, “we need to focus on funding to continue our research and publish new Artists’ Pages to the site, support website and database development. We also need working artists to document their own work using the website questionnaire, at <http://www.themarksproject.org/questionnaire>.

How can we predict the questions of future collector and researcher? Who will be considered America’s seminal ceramic makers of the Post War period in 2050? Thanks to The Marks Project and the work of Martha Vida, Donald Clark, and Ali Baldenebro, a curator in the future will be able to learn about that artist and locate his or her works.