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The Marks Project: serving America's ceramics art community.

by Ulysses Grant Dietz, Chief Curator Emeritus, the Newark Museum of Art

To mark its seventh anniversary online, The Marks Project – www.themarksproject.org – is creating a new, fully revamped website set to launch in February 2024. TMP offers something unique for the curious.

In Jennifer Eagan's best-selling novel *Candy House*, one of her characters thinks back on the moment when he threw away the set of his childhood encyclopedias. During my own childhood, my family's 1950s set of the red-and-blue World Book Encyclopedia was the source of many school reports and satisfied endless bouts of curiosity. This is where the concept of "research" first entered and began to percolate in my mind.

How the world has changed.

I remember the first conversation I had with Martha Vida in 2007 about a new concept: a book called *The Marks Project: a marks encyclopedia of American studio potters*. This volume would assemble images and information about American studio potters and their marks. Two years later, Martha and I met at the New York Ceramics Fair. At that time, I made two suggestions: the first suggestion was to make *The Marks Project* a website rather than a book. This dynamic format would allow for the continual addition of new makers to the list and would allow each individual maker's page to be updated as additional information and photography became available. The second suggestion was to have a starting date for listing artists of 1945, the end of World War II. It was a natural, marking the beginning of a vibrant moment that was to change ceramics in the USA.



Vase, 1945, by Maija Grotell (1899-1973). Everson Museum of Art Purchase Prize 11th Ceramic National, gift of Encyclopedia Britannica, 1947 47.509
Photo: John Polak.

Having never been the most tech-savvy person myself, I remember that the museum world I was immersed in was far from cutting edge when it came to embracing emerging computer technology. Yet, today in 2023 I cannot imagine my life without a computer, a mobile phone, and the endless possibilities of the Internet. What Martha Vida's original idea evolved into is the result of young minds and enthusiasm for documenting American potters and ceramic artists. Donald Clark, Ali Baldenebro-Danker, Carolyn Herrera-Perez and Donna McGee are the original team who implemented and expanded Vida's vision of The Marks Project and gave life to www.themarksproject.org.

The Marks Project's goal from the start was to create, develop and maintain a searchable online database that was indefinitely expandable. It fulfills its original encyclopedic purpose by gathering information on the careers, work and marks of American studio potters, ceramic artists, and artists working in clay from the mid-20th century onward. Each artist is documented by a unique webpage: TMP's Artist Page. Each page, once established, is a living document and can be enhanced as new data, images, and marks become available.

TMP's timeframe acknowledges the influence of the G.I. Bill in the expansion of art education after World War II, as well as those ceramic artists who, like Henry Varnum Poor and Glenn Lukens, bridged the transition from the pre-war to the post-war period. Many of these makers played an active role in the Arts & Crafts Movement of the early 20th century and in what came to be called the Contemporary Craft Movement¹.

TMP's new website expands on the existing website's Search functions. There is a SEARCH MARK page and SEARCH ARTIST/KEYWORD page. The Artist Search function includes Keyword Search, and lets the researcher use partial information to locate a maker by including single names, studio names, clay body, letters, and even form. The new website will also enable the user to search both public and private collections with documented objects on the website via a COLLECTION SEARCH.

For a known artist's name, a quick search tool is the Artist Index, an alphabetical listing of every maker with an Artist Page in TMP's database.

¹ Elaine Levin, *The History of American Ceramics from Pipkins and bean pots to contemporary forms 1607 to present* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 163-167,171-173.

To illustrate, I'd like to offer three "case studies" that apply The Marks Project's online database, suggesting both what TMP offers and where it has the potential to go further when the new website is launched later this year (2024).

Example 1: in 1987, I purchased a lidded cookie jar by legendary California potter Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) for the Newark Museum of Art, Newark, New Jersey. The museum had nothing by Voulkos, in spite of having collected modern pottery literally from the year it was founded (1909). The piece I focused on was dated by the dealer to 1952, made early in Voulkos's career while he was in Helena, Montana. The jar had an interesting provenance, having once been owned by the painter Wayne Thiebaud (1920-2021). It was signed on the bottom with the incised



Covered Jar and mark, 1951, by Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) with mark image. Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, purchase 1951 51.598.2 Photos: John Polak.

signature “Voulkos.”

Because this piece came to Newark in pre-Internet years with no documentation other than the dealer’s assurance; I consulted The Marks Project database. Searching for works by Peter Voulkos, I found twenty-eight objects and their marks. Two looked similar to the piece I’d purchased for the Newark Art Museum. Both were from his years at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana. One, a covered cookie jar dated to 1950, is in the Everson Museum collection in Syracuse, NY, purchased by the museum in 1951. The other, a lidded jar variant form, had wax-resist decoration akin to that on Newark’s example. It was dated 1952-54 by the auction house that provided the images to The Marks Project. Both jars had similar incised signatures to Newark’s jar.

Thus, a simple bit of research affirmed what I had been told long ago and simply taken on faith when I purchased the piece. TMP helped me, as a curator, place Newark’s cookie jar in the context of Peter Voulkos’s early career.

Example 2: In my personal collection are two colorful and virtuosic small pieces by Bill Clark, who with his wife Pam runs the Clark House Pottery in Greenville, South Carolina. Bill’s specialty is evoking the folded and crumpled wares of George Ohr from the early years of the twentieth century. During my years in Newark, I acquired two pieces of this Ohr-inspired work for Newark’s collection, because I felt that Bill Clark’s pots transcended mere imitation.

More recently, Clark has produced a line of pottery incorporating marbled, multicolored clay bodies, evoking another Arts & Crafts Movement potter named Charles Hyten. Hyten’s Benton, Arkansas, pottery was called Niloak (kaolin backwards), and featured multi-colored marbled bodies using native clays. Clark calls his hybrid line “Ohr-Loak.”

Each of Bill Clark’s pieces has an incised script signature “Clark,” which can be tricky to read. In addition, on the new marbled wares, there’s a printed ink-stamp mark: CLARK HOUSE / POTTERY LLC. On this particular line, is a second ink-stamp mark, “Ohr-loak TM.” In addition is a small, impressed cipher “CHP.”

The problem is that there’s nothing by Bill Clark anywhere in TMP’s database. This is where the Artist Page submission form on the new website will benefit both the artist and the broader ceramic community. As a collector, I have the possibility of

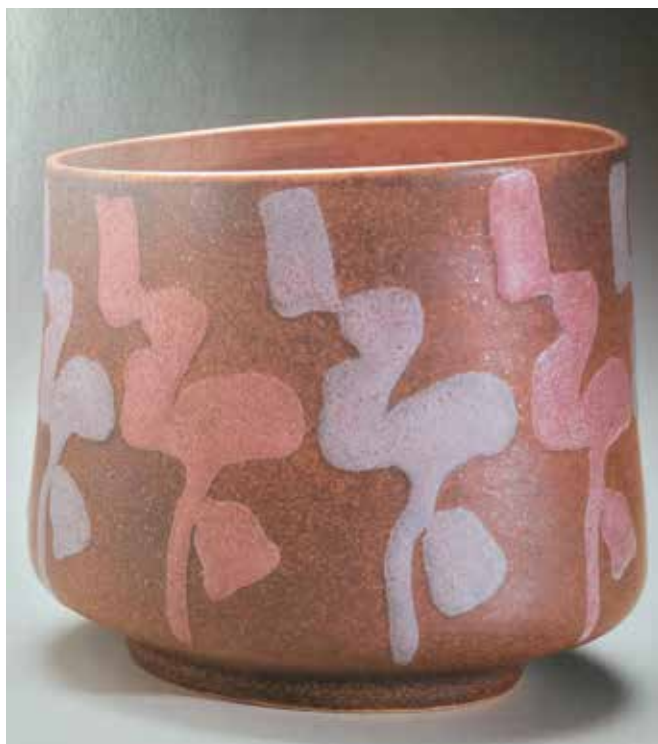
submitting information on potters not represented in TMP’s database. The images and data will be vetted as any submission would be. However, in this case, I would urge Bill and Pam Clark to submit their own work according to TMP guidelines. Ceramic artists of all ages need to add their work to TMP’s database. An artist’s personal website is only useful if everyone knows their name and can search for it. TMP is a centralized ever-expanding database of American ceramic artists and their marks. Once an Artist Page is established it is a living document and can be enhanced as new information or images become available.

Example 3: In 2003 I published a book called Great Pots, Contemporary Ceramics from Function to Fan-



Vessel by Bill Clark (1949-) and Pam Clark (1962-), Clark House Pottery, Newark Museum of Art, Gift of the Artists, 2021 2012.27

tasy. In my introduction, I highlighted an exquisite small stoneware bowl that the Newark Museum had purchased for twelve dollars from a craft festival held at the museum in 1959. I called this modest piece a great pot and honored it with a full-page illustration. According to the museum files, the calligraphic slip decoration on the outside of the bowl was inspired by marks left by the potter's dog on the window of her car. The potter's name was Ruth Kenly of Short Hills, New Jersey. The rest of her life and career as a potter are shrouded in mystery. The only reference to her work I can find on the Internet is a reference to my exhibition and that same little pot.



Bowl ca 1959, by Ruth Kenly, Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 1959 59.74

If I were not retired from Newark Art Museum, I would make sure that photographs of this beautiful pot and its incised script signature, was registered on TMP. I think Ruth Kenly's great pot deserves to be known. But like many ceramic artists who have strong regional or historical reputations, Kenly is no longer known or searchable. Like many potters who produced beautiful ceramics with great skill and creativity, she is utterly unknown to the general ceramic community today. Getting an unknown potter onto TMP will ensure these forgotten artists become part of the story. The history of ceramic art is not just the history of famous potters.

Thus, it's clear that TMP's mission is twofold: to document and celebrate, but also to inspire research and learning. The Marks Project encourages makers, curators, and collectors to be curious as well as proactive. The germ of the original idea remains in that each ceramic artist has a unique web page: TMP's Artist Page. Unlike the printed encyclopedia version, an Artist Page is not meant to be static. Careers evolve and styles change. The Artist Page can be continuously updated as new information, new work images and new marks appear. The ultimate goal is to fully document a ceramic artist's career and influence with as much flexibility as possible. This offers the artist an endlessly updatable online curriculum vitae that can both inform TMP users and steer them to the artist's website. Over time the Artist Page becomes a Legacy Page, an enriched tool for the researchers and collectors among us.

The central tool in creating an Artist Page on The Marks Project's new website will be the self-documentation submission tab. A detailed checklist of essential information is available. The check list helps the artist gather data and organize work and mark images before beginning the self-document process online. The list includes the maker's professional biographical information, educational history, training, apprenticeships, and studio practice. All are part of the artist's profile. TMP prefers Images of works from different bodies of work or periods of a career. Each object is represented in three views including a full view, underside or bottom view and a close up of the mark (including the date if present).

The great challenge for The Marks Project is a never-ending two-pronged quest for resources: finding human resources to expand the database. Two hugely important pools of information for the database lie in public and private collections across the country, and documenting such collections has been at the center of TMP's mission since its founding.

Currently, the most strongly represented private collections in The Marks Project archive are those of the Forrest L. Merrill Collection and its Dane Cloutier Archive; the E. John Bullard Collection and the Louise Rosenfield Collection.

Some of the substantial private collections included in TMP's searchable database represent examples of works by important regional artists, while others demonstrate a deeper sampling of wide-ranging collections of studio ceramics – such as the collections of Judith and Martin Schwartz, Rebecca Sive, June



Top: Sculptural Vessel, 1960s, by Viola Frey (1933-2004), with mark image. Forrest L. Merrill Collection.

Middle: Two-Handled Lidded Jar on Base, ca 1995, by Anne Hirondele (1944-), with mark image. E. John Bullard Collection.

Bottom: Frog and Fish with Bowl, undated, by Ron Meyer (1934 -), unmarked. Louise Rosenfield Collection.

Sakata, Candace B. Groot, Robert L. Pfannebecker, Margaret Pennington, etc. The incorporation of these private holdings makes available a wealth of visual and written information on makers and their marks. In many cases, these makers and their marks cannot be found elsewhere. Ceramic works submitted by galleries and auction houses add yet another dimension to TMP's database. Considered collectively, the listing of private collections and those from auction houses provides information about significant work and assists in the development of provenance for the ceramic arts.

Museum collections of ceramics logically should be the most readily available resources for a searchable database like TMP. Unlike private collections, museum holdings are (theoretically) accessible to the general public, and some museums have made great strides in putting their collections online. However, these encyclopedic institutional online databases have two significant drawback: First the studio and contemporary ceramics of the USA are embedded in searchable online collections as diverse and complex as the institutions acting as their steward; and second few institutional online databases are complete, and for many museums, such online “eMuseum” features are still rudimentary and difficult to search.

The Marks Project has succeeded in incorporating the largest of its public collection resources from the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) Pomona, California, and its American Ceramic Society collection that was documented with the assistance of a Center for Craft 2020 Craft Research Fund Project Grant. Another major resource is the Scripps College Collection in neighboring Claremont, California, with its uniquely important Mr. and Mrs. Fred Marer Collection. This collection was developed by the late

Fred Marer who purchased most works directly from the artists between 1952 and 1992. When documentation of this collection is completed, it will add 1130 works by 288 mid-century ceramists. Phase 1 Photography of this collection was completed with the assistance of an American Ceramic Circle Grant. Combined, the Scripps College Collection and AMOCA will be the largest museum resources in TMP’s database, offering a rich mine of new information and images for the researchers curious to answer questions about the mid-century, modern, and contemporary ceramics movements in the United States.

The Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, has shared eighty-two works from its extensive ceramics collection. Significantly, these are, twentieth and twenty first-century work of Southwestern Native American artists representing part of the Gift of Loren G. Lipson.

Another extensive regional holding comes from the



Left: Platter, 1980, by John Parker Glick (1938-2017). Impressed mark upper underside; signature with chop lower underside rim. American Museum of Ceramic Art, ACerS Collection 2004.2.148
Right: Moontan Plate (1957) by Billy Al Bengston (1934-2022), with signature image. The Mr. and Mrs. Fred Marer Collection at Scripps College Photo: TMP.

Southern Highland Craft Guild Collection, Asheville, North Carolina. Documented with the assistance of a Center for Craft 2017 Craft Research Fund Project Grant, this collection has special importance. It documents many regional potters of great skill, particularly from the states of the Southeastern Appalachians. Many of these potters are well known in their state but not widely known outside their region.

Other important regional resources have come from the Elaine Levin Archive at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California; Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, California; the Clay Studio of Missoula, Montana; The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Clay Art Center, Port Chester, New York.

The Marks Project seeks to document the work of America's ceramic artists, but also to document the location of significant examples of the work of these potters. Important collecting institutions include the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, the Newark



Museum of Art in New Jersey, Arizona State University Art Museum (Ceramic Research Center at the Brickyard), and the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina. These are all institutions with important historical collections of studio work from the post-World-War-II period forward. Both Newark and the Everson have been collecting modern American ceramics since before the first World War and are actively collecting today.



It goes without saying that the “big” museums in the United States generally have significant collections of studio ceramics. Many of these are searchable on TMP's database via its COLLECTION SEARCH.

Left: Vase, 2014, by Debbie Clashin (1969-), Hopi-Tewa, with signature and date. Crocker Art Museum, Gift of Loren G. Lipson. Photo: Crocker Art Museum.

Above: Pitcher, 1987, by Christopher Rumme (1952-) with signature image. Collection of the Southern Highland Craft Guild. Photo: SHCG.

Opposite:
Top: Platter with Nude (1931) by Henry Varnum Poor (1887-1970), 8th Ceramic National, 1939, gift of Ferro Enamel Corp. Mark images on front and reverse. Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, P.C.40.348. Photo: The Marks Project. John Polak.

Bottom: Behind Quiet Veils of the Blue Willow, 2001, by Red Weldon Sandlin (1958-). Newark Museum of Art, Newark, New Jersey, gift of Susan Thayer, 2001, 2001.74 Photo: Newark Museum of Art.





Sculpture with Bone, 1986, Ruth Duckworth (1919-2009) unglazed porcelain, with mark image². The Marks Project. Photo: Loren Maron.

The challenge in documenting museum collections is that the key ingredients are time and labor, which inevitably involve money. Even in the largest museums (I speak from decades of experience), curatorial and registrar staff are overworked and underfunded. This creates resistance from institutions that would otherwise be interested in sharing their collections through a unique open resource such as TMP. The resistance is largely logistical and resource-based, and TMP is constantly seeking financial support, both public and private, to assist museums in making their collections accessible to the public via TMP.

In the long run, nothing will replace in-depth work in libraries and in-person visits to museums; but the truth is, not everyone can do that. The future of research is increasingly going to be online. The Marks Project is a starting point for researchers looking at new artists

² Typical Marks Ruth Duckworth seldom signed her pieces, however occasionally she would carve an "R" into the foot. The important identifier for her work is the five-digit number added to the piece post firing. These numbers came into use in 1984 and contain the code for when the piece was made. ... 19886 the last 2 digits indicate the piece was made in 1986. The first three identify it as the 198th piece made that year. Six- or seven-digit numbers were put into use with the fourth and fifth digits indicating the month therefore 198289 would have been the 198th piece made in February, 1989. ... (Phone conversation with Thea Burger, December 2014.)

or answering questions for the curious. TMP offers a unique resource used worldwide by a far-flung community of interested collectors and curators. It has become a teaching tool in high school and colleges and is now used by scholars across the country and around the world who begin their work searching TMP, www.themarksproject.org.

TMP is launching a FINDERS program asking ceramics enthusiasts from around the USA to introduce TMP to local or regional museums with mid-century and contemporary American potters and sculptor's works collected. Adding post 1945 regional ceramists to the record by capturing their works and marks is essential to telling the full story of American Decorative Arts.

Founded in 2013, TMP's website has, over the last seven years online, become the established search platform for artists working in the medium of clay, in the USA, from 1945 onward. In fall 2023, TMP's database offers in excess of seven thousand searchable marks on www.themarksproject.org. The Marks Project is a 501(c)(3) educational not-for-profit organization that relies on public support to do its work.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ulysses Grant Dietz was Curator of Decorative Arts and Chief Curator at The Newark Museum for 37 years. He received his bachelor of arts degree from Yale in 1977, and his master of arts in American Material Culture from the University of Delaware's Winterthur Program in 1980.

The curator of 114 exhibitions during his tenure, Mr. Dietz is particularly proud of his work on The Newark Museum's 1885 Ballantine House, which was re-interpreted and restored in 1994. His first ceramics exhibition was *The Newark Museum Collection of American Art Pottery of 1984*. A quarter-century later he produced *Masterpieces of Art Pottery, 1880-1930* for the museum's centennial. In 1997, Mr. Dietz was the project director for *The Glitter & The Gold: Fashioning America's Jewelry*, the first-ever exhibition and book on Newark's once-vast jewelry industry. In 2003, Mr. Dietz published *Great Pots: Contemporary Ceramics from Function to Fantasy*, the first catalogue of the Museum's studio pottery collection, which accompanied an exhibition of the same title. Additionally, Mr. Dietz has published numerous articles on decorative arts, as well as books on the Museum's ceramics, 19th-century furniture, and jewelry collections.