

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING: A CERAMIC ARTS STUDIO OVERVIEW

by Donald-Brian Johnson

Those appealing families of little pottery dogs and cats fashioned with tails that hang over the edge of the whatnot shelf are as distinctive in their manufacture as in their design. From their very beginnings they are different from other little animal figures sought and bought by collectors. They come not from famous potteries in California or Ohio, where much of the pottery sold in local stores is made, but from a little known firm in Madison, Wisconsin. They are made, not in a streamlined factory filled with the most modern of equipment, but in what was once a garage and a candy store, with the simplest kind of homemade machinery.



Ceramic Arts Studio, 8-12 N. Blount St., Madison, WI

Their producers are not artisans long skilled in the pottery-making craft directing experienced workers, but a man who started out to be a lawyer, and a young woman who never studied art beyond ordinary high school classes, working with a small group of housewives who never wielded a paint brush or handled clay before.



A gathering of Studio Staff (Reuben Sand is center; Betty Harrington, is fourth from left)

That they have achieved a successful ceramics business is almost as much a surprise to Reuben Sand, president of the company, and Betty Harrington, designer, as it is to a stranger hearing about their trials and tribulations, their failures and successes.

The Milwaukee Journal

December 13, 1944

For a time during the 1940s and early '50s, it seemed as if almost every "name" in the manufacture of ceramic figurines hailed from California. Hedi Schoop, Kay Finch, Kaye of Hollywood, Yona, Dorothy Kindell, and many more were based on the west coast; for collectors, the words "California" and "ceramics" are almost indelibly linked. But the best-selling ceramics designer of the '40s and 50's wasn't Hedi, Dorothy, or Yona. And it wasn't Kay, (or Kaye) either.

To find the top seller in decorative ceramics, it's necessary to move much further inland--to the Midwest, in fact. The city was Madison, Wisconsin. The company was Ceramic Arts Studio. The designer was Betty Harrington. And for 15 years, the product created by the Studio was the prime choice of giftware buyers. During its peak production period in the late 1940s, the Studio turned out in excess of 500,000 pieces per year.

The Road to Success

The reasons for the overwhelming popularity of Ceramic Arts are simple. To begin with, World War II had virtually closed off the import of giftware from overseas, greatly increasing the demand for domestic product. Then there was the CAS attention to detail. Ceramic Arts Studio figurines combine uniquely imaginative design with a high degree of skill in execution. Many studios relied on the shape or stance of a figure, coupled with broad decorating strokes, to suggest an attitude or theme. Ceramic Arts figures achieve their impact through artistically heightened realism. The CAS decorating technique focused on finely-depicted features and intricate nuances of costume. Vivid colors, as well as a characteristic high gloss glaze, add to the effect. And, there are the poses: each Ceramic Arts Studio figure seems captured while in motion, a three-dimensional snapshot preserving a very specific action and moment in time. One can easily imagine a Ceramic Arts figure springing to life; it's a bit more difficult imagining an equally lovely, but more abstractly realized, Hedi Schoop figure doing the same.



Heidi Schoop Bouquet Girl



Mary & Lamb

Most importantly, Ceramic Arts Studio owes its success, and ongoing popularity with collectors, to the artistry of its primary designer Betty Harrington. Prior to her arrival in 1942, CAS was a small, but promising pottery firm. Afterward, it was a force to be reckoned with.

Ceramic Arts Studio had been founded in 1940 as a collaboration between entrepreneur Reuben Sand and potter Lawrence Rabbitt. Following limited initial success with hand-thrown pots by Rabbitt, Sand began looking for other opportunities to increase the firm's share of a market left open by the curtailment of overseas imports. Luckily for all concerned, Betty Harrington became that opportunity. She was the right person, at the right time, in exactly the right place.



CAS Founder Lawrence Rabbitt



Studio Owner/ Co-Founder Reuben Sand

An Artist Emerges

Mrs. Harrington was, by her own description, a self-taught artist with only brief formal training. Since childhood, she had kept a scrapbook filled with her sketches, as well as illustrations that inspired her. Betty said that her interest in art was "just always there, like your nose or your eyes. It was just second nature".

A full time secretarial employee for the state of Wisconsin, Harrington happened upon the Ceramic Arts Studio while searching for a source to fire a figurine made for her own enjoyment. That first figurine, the *Blue Nude Incense Burner* was sculpted on impulse, from blue clay excavated during a well installation at the Harrington home. Impressed with the quality of the piece, Sand asked Harrington if she would be willing to make other figures, bring them in, and have molds made of them. The answer was an enthusiastic "yes"! In Betty's words, "I was surprised and a little flattered, I think, and ready and willing—I mean, it was such fun to try!"



Betty Harrington modeling for "Wisconsin State Employee Magazine" September, 1939

Juggling two jobs along with an active home life was strenuous, but Betty never regretted the frantic pace. After a year, she began a full-time association with Ceramic Arts Studio. Her pleasure in finding this ideal outlet for her creative energies still remained evident years after the Studio's close. She explained her rationale in trading an established career for a brand-new one as "oh, the fascination--it was so tempting--I just couldn't wait to get my hands on that stuff. It was just a mad desire is I guess what it was."



Betty Harrington at work in “Betty’s Corner” at the Studio

Onward and Upward

Reuben Sand's business acumen quickly came into play, successfully marketing Betty's rapidly expanding parade of ceramic creations to major retailers. Soon, the shelves of such giftware-starved giants as Marshall Field's were bursting with CAS pieces. Thanks to frequent gift-show exposure, Ceramic Arts proved particularly popular in major metropolitan areas, including Chicago and New York, as well as in California, despite stiff competition from the local product.



A T.A. Chapman Co. ad for the “Children’s Orchestra”, circa 1948

CAS retailers were assiduously cultivated; both Sand and Harrington took note of their comments and interests in planning additions to the line. When Dutch or dancer couples, for instance, proved strong sellers, variations with a similar theme were introduced (in the case of Asian figures, enough were added to populate a small village!) An extended "skunk family" was the result of one prominent store's desire for figurines which would appropriately accent its perfume displays.



The "Square Dance Couple"

Betty firmly believed that "any little novelty thing is good in decorative pieces; people always want something to talk about, you know". One such innovation was the CAS shelf-sitter. These were figurines designed to perch on a shelf with their legs (or, in the case of animals, their tails or paws), dangling over the edge. Another innovation occurred much later in the Studio's history. Betty's interest in the costume designs of modern dance pioneer Martha Graham led to a series of arts-inspired draped figures, with arms and legs fully, or partially, concealed under flowing garments. This simple and modern styling elevated CAS design to a new level. Not only did the body draping result in what Betty called "beautiful, graceful forms", it also had a more practical result: exquisite detail was realized with a minimum of time and labor. In the cost-conscious later years of CAS, this proved important.

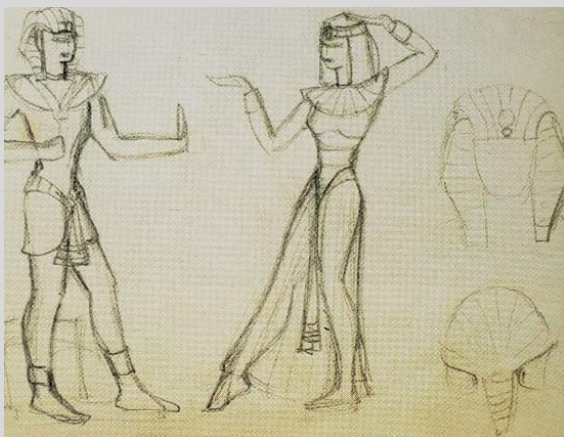


"Farmer Boy & Girl"



"St. Francis," on a Metal Stand by Reuben Sand's Jon-San Creations

Betty Harrington had "sketched since the beginning of time, it seems like", and many of the sketches and ideas kept in her scrapbook over the years now came to life at Ceramic Arts. Her work embraced themes popular with buyers of the time--animals (one top seller, "Frisky Lamb" sold over 100,000 units), birds, children (some modeled after her own daughters), and figures in ethnic or period attire, as well as arts-related, nursery story, and fantasy figures. Some CAS pieces also had practical applications: banks, bells, candleholders, salt-and-pepper shakers, and head vases. A few were featured on lamps by 1950s icon Moss Manufacturing. Others were available with accent pieces, such as thematic metal stands and shadow boxes.



Betty Harrington's Sketches for the Egyptians



Completed Egyptians



'Becky' Head Vase

With every new design, extensive research went into making certain each detail of attire and pose was authentic and suitable. Research and authenticity, however, would have been nothing without the added ingredient of Harrington's creative spark. It often took the designer to new and uncharted realms of the imagination. "You took a piece of clay", she recalled, "and you formed it into whatever was in your mind. Sometimes along the way, the clay would sort of take over and do its own thing, and you'd get something into it that you hadn't intended in the beginning. Especially on people figurines--they took on their own personality--a tilt of a head, a position of an arm, making it look different. And it wasn't intentional in my mind, but I'd see it there when I was doing it, and it looked good, so I'd do it that way."



Detail "Maurice & Michelle"

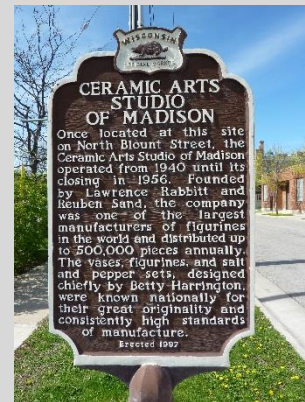
End of An Era

The heady success enjoyed by Ceramic Arts Studio went into a gradual, but irreversible decline, with the end of World War II, and the resumption of overseas imports. Lower operating costs, cheaper materials, and inexpensive labor meant overseas manufacturers could supply giftware at a fraction of the CAS cost. While the quality was, in almost every case, inferior, stores with an eye on the bottom line began stocking imported pieces, rather than those by Ceramic Arts and other domestic firms. By 1955, the 500,000 pieces produced annually by CAS in the late 1940s had dwindled to a low of 10,000.

Ceramic Arts Studio closed its doors in 1955. Some of its molds found their way to Japan, where pieces of CAS design, but now in lurid hues, were marketed. Eventually, all molds were destroyed, and the Madison, Wisconsin site once occupied by Ceramic Arts Studio became a parking lot, its only identifier today a State Historical Marker.



*CAS Persian Cat Mother (Left)
& Import Version (Right)*



*State Historical Marker at the Ceramic
Arts Studio Site*

The Legacy Lives On

Fortunately, the unique talent of Betty Harrington and her CAS associates lives on, in the 800-plus designs created under the Ceramic Arts banner, as well as in the individual works Harrington created before, after, and concurrent with the Studio years. The Ceramic Arts Studio heritage has received ongoing exposure through the Ceramic Arts Collectors Association, and its successor, the *CAS Collectors*. Additionally, the book *Ceramic Arts Studio: The Legacy of Betty Harrington* by Donald-Brian Johnson, Timothy J. Holthaus, and James E. Petzold, explores the CAS phenomenon in full, giving the stories behind the creation of each piece. Sketches from

Harrington's personal scrapbook, vintage promotional materials, personal reminiscences, and photos of the objects themselves, evoke both the era, and the aura, of the Ceramic Arts Studio.

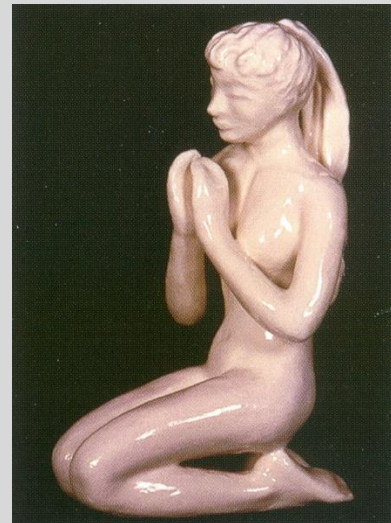
After many years of relative obscurity, the rediscovery of her work, and subsequent acclaim by collectors and critics, caught Betty Harrington by surprise. Her response was completely in character:

"I'm sort of amazed--I don't quite understand it. Although for the first time in my life--and it's taken me this long--I think I did good work. I always felt my work was amateurish and unacceptable because I hadn't had any training in the arts at all--it was just a natural thing that was in my mind without having to think about it. But I'm mighty proud that so many people like it."

Betty Harrington's creative impulse remained strong, and long-lived. She died on March 29, 1997, at the age of 83; her last work, *M'amselle*, debuted in 1996.



Betty Harrington at work on "M'amselle"



A Completed "M'amselle"

What accounts for the ongoing, and irresistible appeal of Ceramic Arts pieces? In addition to their obvious high quality of execution, there's also an underlying sense of joy that permeates and enlivens every piece. It's the simple joy found when artistic expression is given free, unfettered rein. It's a joy that can be directly traced to the designer. Of her years at Ceramic Arts Studio, Betty Harrington once said "I just loved every minute of it." It shows



"Adonis & Aphrodite"

The pieces you see here are originals, not copies. Most are by Betty Harrington, one of the Country's most versatile and gifted designers of ceramics. Painstaking, oftentimes laborious handwork gives fine detail and deep, lustrous glaze effects, resulting in a Studio piece of considerable individuality. In its price range, our line is of the finest. You may order with confidence.

Ceramic Arts Studio catalog, 1954

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