

MOCA-NY: The Metamorphosis of a Museum

Written by **Judith S Schwartz**

Twenty-five years ago, when the Museum of Ceramic Art of New York (MOCA/NY) was incorporated, it became the first museum in New York City dedicated “to preserve the history of ceramics and to further its study.” The idea of starting a museum exclusively for ceramic art was the brainchild of New York ceramics collector Arthur Williams, a longtime friend and collecting cohort. With a passion for all things clay, Williams, a successful entrepreneur, had amassed a collection of American art pottery, Pennsylvania red ware, and Chinese export ware and had started collecting contemporary ceramic art. His upper west side Manhattan apartment was so laden with objects, there was not a chair to sit on, nor a table to eat from nor a floor space through which to maneuver. The same was equally true for his home in upstate New York.

It was therefore a given that when MoCA-NY announced, in a press release in 2001, that it would open a space “dedicated to host ceramic art from renowned traditions to the most avant-garde”, it was planned to feature the Williams Collection as its first exhibition. The climate was ripe in NYC for ceramics as more galleries and art fairs were expanding the notion that stellar art could be created using materials that might have formerly been called craft media.

Arthur and I had been friends for years, sharing a common interest in clay. During that time, I was working on my book, *Confrontational Ceramics*, a compendium of international artists who used the medium of clay to make confrontational statements about the foibles of society. Arthur and I traveled yearly to NCECA conferences, and abroad, to the International Academy of Ceramics

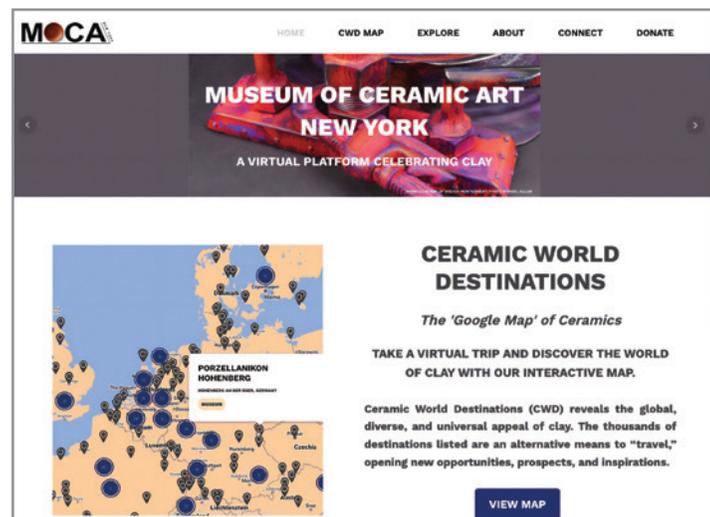
congresses. I had long been a member of the Academy and felt strongly that Williams should broaden his exposure to contemporary ceramic art outside the US. This, I felt, would widen his collection and deepen his commitment – and so I nominated him to the “collector” category of membership within the Academy. This simple act of acknowledgement ignited his desire to bring the wider world of clay into his own collection and the museum concept, as I had envisaged it, took hold.

We lamented that the US lagged far behind Europe and Japan in its recognition of the importance of ceramics in world history, with no museum to rival institutions such as the Het Princeshof in the Netherlands, the Keramion in Germany or the Raku Museum in Japan.

Collectors and museums have symbiotic relationships. Collectors donate or bequeath their collections, enabling institutions to grow, thereby sharing their personal visions with the

Below:
MoCA-NY HOME page

Opposite:
MoCA EXPLORE page



public. More often, however, new museums are established when it is felt that existing institutions are not willing to give the space required for large personal collections. The Getty, The Frick and the Barnes are notable examples of this approach to creating museums for housing single private collections.

Arthur and I were not novices in the not-for-profit world, having worked for years at the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts. I had served a term as President and he as Vice President. Thus, with the enlightenment that travel abroad affords coupled with opportunities to meet artists and see exhibitions at NCECA, IAC, and Watershed, it was not difficult to persuade like-minded individuals with similar passions to provide the funds necessary to start a museum which represented our vision.

It is important to note that, at that time, a network of dedicated gallerists had established high-end galleries in NYC that included

fair and critical venue for building a collection. SOFA was a major event attracting galleries, collectors, and artists from around the globe and did much to encourage, nourish and establish a coterie of collectors and collecting fervor.

Within this flurry of activity, it was not difficult for MOCA/NY to find and enlist individuals to join the board. Ed Roberts, Arthur Goldberg, Bruce Sherman and Igal Silber joined as collectors. Ron Kuchta, then editor of *American Ceramics* magazine, represented pre-internet media, John Driscoll, owner of the Babcock gallery represented gallerists, and me as a ceramic educator, constituted the makeup of the initial board.

In the first two years, MOCA/NY made substantial progress getting organized, establishing governance procedures, developing a consistent visual identity for the organization, and initiating public relations and outreach. However, we were struck a blow when Arthur's

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ceramics. Noteworthy among these were galleries owned by Alan Frumkin, Nancy Hoffman, Nancy Margolis, and Franklin Parrasch. It was, however, the Garth Clark Gallery (which was exclusive to ceramics) that advocated for, and succeeded in, elevating the medium into the world of fine art – producing scholarly catalogs and placing works into museum collections.

In addition to galleries, SOFA (Sculpture Objects Functional Art and Design), a design show that started in Chicago and later migrated to NY, became a celebrated international art

business failed, and he had to put his energies elsewhere and, as a consequence, he decided to resign from the board. The result was that MOCA/NY's desire to go forward as a brick-and-mortar space was put on hold.

I was voted the role of Board president and with a skeleton team decided the best course of action was to function as a ‘virtual museum’ until we could identify a permanent home. In the meanwhile, we decided to initiate, promote and sponsor a variety of educational and public awareness programs, as well as begin to design an informative and educational website. We suspended monthly meetings of the full Board and established a smaller, more flexible one that would continue to meet periodically, and which was empowered to investigate real estate opportunities that could be provided by the City or by private developers. While former Board members drifted away, I continued to volunteer time on behalf of the organization along with a skeleton team which included Arthur Goldberg and Ron Kuchta

We developed a brochure and a newsletter, *Ceramics Insights*, which was published twice, with a third issue in development. The first issue discussed figuration in clay, and the second issue highlighted a recent gift of works by Henry Varnum Poor to MOCA/NY. Our small team worked and continued to be active collectively and individually as ambassadors for MOCA/NY.



In the decade while MOCA-NY was on hold, I turned my attention to the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC)

Board member Arthur Goldberg lectured on ‘High Points in the Evolution of American Stoneware’, at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware in April 2004 and published an article *Highlights in the Development of the Rockingham and Yellow Ware Industry in the United States* in *Ceramics in America*. I published *Enlightened Clay: The Abstractions of Shida Kuo* in the December 2004 issue of *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. We also co-hosted a lecture at Dai Ichi Arts, Ltd. by noted Japanese artist Shigemasa Higashida, and co-hosted a screening at New York University of the new documentary: *The Life of M.C. Richards*. M.C. Richards noted potter, poet, philosopher and teacher whose books, among them *Centering*, have influenced a generation of ceramic artists. MOCA/NY also worked collaboratively with an independent curator, Atsumi Fujita (now owner of the Soko Gallery in Kyoto and London) to mount *New Talent 2005* which opened January 20, 2005 at the Weiss Pollack Gallery. We felt these activities were part of MOCA/NY’s mission to identify emerging artists and bring their work to the attention of established galleries, collectors and connoisseurs.

During this hiatus, I put energy into promoting my book and curating exhibitions for Exhibits USA — all the while teaching and administering the sculpture/craft area at New York University. In the next few years, there was some flurry of activity with an encouraging discussion with a private developer who offered the prospect of providing a building for the museum in Long Island City – but the financial crisis of 2008 ended that reality.

In the decade while MOCA-NY was on hold, I turned my attention to the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC) and became a Council representative and then Vice President. I initiated a proposal to create a world map for its website with geographical markers indicating members’ locations in the world as well as galleries, museums, residencies and institutions. I felt a dynamic visual presentation would not only increase visibility for the IAC’s vetted coterie of international ceramic luminaries but would create a unique “go to” experience for those looking to locate ceramic destinations that could be used and appreciated by teachers, makers, enthusiasts and sponsors.

In the years of development, I worked with a gifted programmer and together began the

meticulous process of gathering destinations, creating criteria for inclusion, and developing the digital footprint for what we now called Ceramic World Destinations (CWD). It was presented to the IAC and posted on their site, but it became apparent that their part-time staff could not provide its ongoing maintenance: the updates, emails, and URLs of new destinations to keep the map vital.

In addition, changes had to be made in a timely manner and a dedicated IT person had to be on hand to keep the site active. CWD, as a dynamic interchange, would wither if left alone and rather than see it languish, I decided to rethink MOCA/NY as a potential home for Ceramic World Destinations. Over the next decade CWD became an integral part of MOCA-NY, a website that has now morphed into a blend of ceramic culture, history, practice, destinations, happenings and so much more yet to come.

We are thus now at the stage where MOCA-NY must look to the future. Museums have undergone profound transformations in the past 25 years, and while nothing surpasses the thrill

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Opposite top:
MoCA-NY
CLAY+TECH page

Opposite bottom:
MoCA-NY IN THE
STUDIO page

Below left:
MoCA-NY 36
HOURS page

Below right:
Arthur Williams + Judy
Schwartz Watershed
Fund Raiser, NYC, 1998

His upper west side Manhattan apartment was so laden with objects, there was not a chair to sit on

of being in a physical space where one is moved by an object’s scale, texture, color and details, there is, nevertheless, still much to be said for the new technologies that have given rise to enable us to reimagine museums of the future.

With virtual reality, for example, users will be able to take guided tours of exhibitions from anywhere in the world, experiencing objects as if they were physically present. An object could be highlighted to animate and reveal hidden layers of information about its history, method of fabrication, and contextual relevance. Exhibitions could be realized with chatbots or live docents, where visitors could ask questions and receive instant answers about the works they’re viewing. We see MOCA-NY acting as a hub for these experiences, interacting with the world’s museums, galleries, studios, and artists – all focused on ceramics in unimaginable ways.

Currently, MOCA-NY brings cutting-edge creative, culturally sensitive storytelling as a digital museum platform that breaks free from the constraints of a physical space while at the same time democratizing access to ceramic art, its history, and culture. It accomplishes this by offering a truly global and transformative museum experience with fresh content areas of exploration and discovery reimagined in a globalized, interconnected world. Rather than relying on a physical location, MOCA-NY has explored ways to redefine itself by expanding a digital realm that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries, facilitating broader access to the culture and community of clay. This digital virtual space fosters dynamic, global dialogues between artists, curators, institutions, galleries, universities and their unique audiences.

Some of MoCA-NY’s “departments” of engagement are the CWD Map (<https://map.moca-ny.org/>) an interactive and visually appealing tool that allows users to explore various ceramic destinations around the world. With its easy-to-navigate interface and the ability to filter locations by region, or type, the CWD Map is a valuable resource for anyone interested in discovering new ceramic art centers, museums, galleries, residencies and studios.

The Explore page (<https://moca-ny.org/explore/>) is a blog-style section of the website that features articles, interviews, and reviews related to the world of ceramics. With a wide range of topics, from the latest ceramic exhibitions, cultural history, to various ceramic techniques, the Explore page is a treasure trove of informative and engaging content. Our other “departments” – ‘In the Studio’, ‘36 hours’, ‘Technology’, ‘Book Talks’, ‘Cultural Heritage Sites’, ‘Exhibitions’ and ‘Current Events’ are updated regularly ensuring that there is always fresh material for ‘visitors’ to enjoy.

Since we are community driven, the Connect page (<https://moca-ny.org/connect/>) features numerous ways for readers to interact with the museum. The visitor is invited to participate in virtual events, and contribute their stories and experiences related to the world of ceramics.

We are proud of what we have accomplished so far. But we feel there is much more to be done and we look forward to sharing these new realities with the world. Thus, allow me to invite you to visit MOCA-NY (<https://moca-ny.org/>) and to share its unique approach to the global realities of ceramics. ■

