



Selected Works – Recent Acquisitions at the Musée Ariana

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The works acquired over the last few years by the Musée Ariana are evidence of a thriving and diverse ceramic scene. “Selected Works” is an opportunity to highlight the Musée Ariana’s regular and ongoing connections with artists. The institution’s dual mission is to empower contemporary creation and ensure the conservation of an expanding heritage. However, in the absence of a municipal acquisitions budget, this task is only possible with the support of patrons or donors, whether private or institutional, who allow the Musée Ariana to pursue a coherent acquisitions policy.

Partners and acquisition policy: on the art of building a museum collection

The Musée Ariana is dedicated to the conservation, study and dissemination of its collections of ceramics, glass and stained glass. With around 27,000 pieces, the Ariana is one of the most important institutions in Europe in its field today and the only one on such a scale that is not connected with a factory (such as the Sèvres — Cité de la Céramique in France). In addition, one of its missions is to promote new developments in ceramics in a consistent and coherent manner.

Contemporary ceramics are regularly presented at the Ariana in the form of temporary exhibitions. These provide opportunities to explore and showcase artistic currents and artists’ varying approaches. The rich and constantly evolving body of work produced within this discipline is indeed better represented through fresh displays than by a permanent presentation.

The encyclopaedic nature of the museum requires that it must also reflect today’s ceramics. While the acquisition of major historical pieces indisputably enhances our historic collections, that of contemporary pieces is equally indispensable to avoid creating gaps in the history of this heritage, which must be representative of local, national and international artistic activity. Although the institution’s position is more subjective in this context - lacking the hindsight of time - it still plays a critical role in the writing of the history of taste throughout the ages. The latter is specifically protected by the notion of the inalienability of museum collections included in the International Council of Museums’ code of ethics.

Our aim is therefore to assemble works by artists that illustrate important milestones and social and cultural changes in our daily lives. The museum seeks to unite elements that are representative of the oeuvre of a

ceramist and of his or her career. The quality of the work is measured by the intrinsic expressive force of the objects and by the harmony that exists between their significance, form and technique. Although their value in the current art market is an indicator, it is not seen as a deciding factor. This body of ceramics lives and grows in tune with artistic trends, but must also respect the cohesion of a historical collection.

In order to create a collective heritage, museum collections also develop in association with other local and national institutions: it is through the action of institutional groups - such as the network of six Lake Geneva museums linked with ceramics - that the managements of the Swiss museums can cooperate and enrich their respective collections. In this way, precedence for the purchase of an object can sometimes be waived if it might be more relevant in another museum context. All these institutions share information about their acquisition and exhibition policies, advise each other on their choices and the means available to them, or consider other possible synergies.

In the absence of an acquisitions budget, the Musée Ariana succeeds in developing its collections in various ways, particularly with the aid of special funds that allow it to make direct, free and informed choices. More specifically, a purchase can actually fill a gap in a series while at the same time facilitating the verification of the object's own provenance and documentation. Purchasing is generally, therefore, the most appropriate method of acquisition. It is not uncommon to buy an item directly from artists, after a temporary exhibition at the museum, in order to keep a tangible reminder of it; or better still, the ceramists themselves choose to donate one of their pieces to the institution, as a token of their recognition. Otherwise, visits to galleries, exhibitions (such as the Carouge Ceramic Trail) and other, mainly European, art fairs (Collect London, etc.), give the Musée Ariana management the opportunity to keep up with the art market.

Fortunately, the museum receives support from patrons and partners with whom it maintains loyal and long-lasting relationships. Contributions can take the form of gifts from private individuals, through whose unfailing commitment important pieces or sets of works (such as those of the collectors Csaba Gaspar and Etienne Dumont) come to enhance the museum's collections. Institutional organizations, such as the International Academy of Ceramics until 2014, and subsequently through its members, or the Association of Friends of the Musée Ariana (AAA) also supplement the collections through the donation of artworks. In addition, close cooperation with galleries specializing in the fields that concern us (that is, the Marianne Brand Gallery in Carouge, Lionel Latham in Geneva and Kunstforum in Solothurn), which sometimes inspires exhibition projects, can also generate donations.

However, not all gifts and legacies can be accepted. The museum reserves the right to refuse a donation that is not an appropriate addition to its collections. What's more, it can only accept donations that are free of conditions. Refusing gifts is always difficult and can meet with incomprehension on the part of the donor, especially because, in the vast majority of cases, such gestures are acts of true generosity motivated by a concern for the conservation of a precious heritage.

Patronage is the type of encouragement that gives the museum management maximum freedom. As mentioned previously, these funds are used to acquire works in full awareness of the merits of new input to the Ariana. An example is the support provided by Gisèle de Marignac, now perpetuated by her daughter Loraine Etienne-de Marignac, who not only gave our institution magnificent opportunities but also renewed energy. Without the generosity of such persons, the future of our collections might be called into question.

The support of our patrons and donors creates productive and enriching friendships, together with well-established and lasting relationships of trust towards a historic institution dedicated to the preservation of a heritage for future generations.

Heart-stoppers – a selection of contemporary pieces

The Musée Ariana's contemporary ceramics have been created by Swiss and international ceramists of the 20th and 21st centuries, and feature regularly in its exhibition programme. This facet of its collections plays an important role in the positioning of the institution, both in terms of the expansion of its holdings and of its programming.

This role has been strengthened only very recently through the donation of Frank Nievergelt's exceptional collection to the Ariana in 2016, comprising nearly two hundred artworks covering all areas of modern ceramics and displayed in the exhibition "A Passion for Ceramics – the Frank Nievergelt Collection" (8 April – 25 September 2016).

"Selected Works" spotlights a selection of the 278 objects acquired between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2017. These items have been chosen according to specific criteria (see earlier) and above all for their scientific and aesthetic qualities.

The museum closely follows the creative evolution of artists of whose work it has already acquired some examples. New pieces by them are gradually added to this representative collection whenever possible. This continuity must occasionally be suspended for a while in the hope of discovering a piece that is evidence of a stylistic renewal. It is not uncommon for the museum to support very young ceramists who offer fresh and innovative proposals. What is then interesting is to allow these artists time to establish their approach and style before looking again at their work.

It is vital to illustrate major turning points in artistic production. These include innovative proposals in terms of artistic language or unique creative techniques. The current trend among contemporary artists to move away from their area of specialisation – experimenting with all kinds of technologies or exploring other artistic disciplines – can therefore incite the Musée Ariana to acquire the work of a visual artist whose first discipline is not ceramics or glass. Nevertheless, the result must be meaningful for the study and dissemination of knowledge in these fields.

Paul March (England, 1961) is a good illustration of this. A neuropsychologist by training, his early works include paintings, drawings and installations. In recent years, he has devoted himself to ceramics, adopting a sculptural approach. He creates elegant volumes that are strangely archaic in character and defy categorization. The series *Substantia innominata* (2014), of which the two pieces displayed here form part, deals more particularly with the connections that form between the brain and the clay material in the creative act. This visual artist thus seeks to produce an abstract and unrecognisable three-dimensional form; highly-structured and perfected objects which nevertheless elude classification.

There are certain recurrent themes in contemporary ceramics. The recipient - in other words, the container – with its age-old origins, is one of these. The near primitive lines of the works of **Paul Philp** (Wales, 1941) for example, refer back to ancient Greek and Asian civilizations. Their simple but refined coating in greyish-beige

tones certainly contributes to their singular character. On the other hand, the deep striations, red tones and the impressive dimensions of *Jarre* (2014) by **Emmanuel Peccatte** (France, 1974-2015) recall the hues of sub-Saharan Africa's smoke fired terracotta.

Used to preserve, present and serve food, the container has been improved over time, to the extent that it sometimes even loses its functionality, with materials and decoration being pushed to their very limits, and comes to resemble sculpture. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, ceramists have continued to develop this typology in an ever more personal way. **Johannes Nagel** (Germany, 1979) uses a variety of techniques that are related to archaeology through his sand cast volumes, gouged out using continuous rotating gestures. The artist consequently has little control over their form. The outcome is sculptural ensembles that are both resolutely contemporary and retain classical shapes with flared or, conversely, high, narrow necks, further enhanced with rounded bellies. The works of **Maurizio Ferrari** (Switzerland, 1970) belong more to the field of design. His cast earthenware series, to which *Vase Sculpture* (2015) belongs, is characterised by highly-refined profiles that vibrate like a sound wave.

Still on the theme of the container, the works in porcelain by **Henk Wolvers** (Holland, 1953) and **Karin Bablok** (Germany, 1964) have great finesse. Whether slab-built or turned, the fine and capricious porcelain paste yields to their expert hands and lets itself be challenged and pared down to extremes. The painterly designs on Bablok's vase are reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionists or the bold and controlled gestures of Chinese calligraphers; Wolvers achieves his decoration by combining contrasting coloured clays, as in agateware (*neriage*), highlighted with gold glaze. **David Roberts** (Great Britain, 1947), who also plays with a graphic black and white palette, is represented here by a large vase whose aesthetics oscillate between the spontaneity of smoke firing and the sophisticated curves of his highly precise geometric decoration.

Breaking the mould still further, **Ruth Borgenicht** (United States, 1967) has created a paradoxical body of work whose chain mail structure produces stoneware pieces of astonishing and unparalleled flexibility: *Kimono Vase* (2008) changes shape, in fact, when handled. Talking about her pieces, the ceramist uses terms with woven textile connotations. In practice, she does indeed interweave her ceramic rings to form a mesh through successive firings.

The impression of flexibility is equally present in the works of two other artists, but is obtained in these instances by the treatment of the material before and during its firing. The organic appearance of the creations of **Zsuzsa Füzesi Heierli** (Hungary, 1953) and **Anne-Marie Laureys** (Belgium, 1962) suggest softness and gentleness. However, *Double 4* (2015) by the former also evokes the hardness of underwater creatures, while the sensual and carnal aspects, genuine "metaphors for feeling", of Laureys' *Unidentified Spotless Body* (2011-2014) are counterbalanced by an extremely rough surface treatment that is almost aggressive to the touch. The deformations to which Zsuzsa Füzesi Heierli's sculpture is subjected occur under the impact of heat, when the shaped and perforated porcelain twists at the melting point.

Several artists regard their kiln as a genuine associate. This group of works, unlikely aggregates of materials of all kinds that can withstand heat to varying degrees, are to some extent the result of a challenge that the ceramists have taken on: the chemical and physical evolution of the different materials depends on the effect of heat during their firing. This is particularly the case for **Anne Mercedes** (France, 1965)' *Escorté des hippocampes noirs* (2013), a container, components and support in one bristling with broken shards and

fragments of all kinds. Artistic research into materials and the physicochemical exploration of clay emerged in the mid-20th century. **Imre Schrammel** (Hungary, 1933) is a worthy representative of this: in the 1980s, he provided a reflection on clay masses deformed by bullet holes.

The combinations achieved by the Spanish ceramists **Joan Serra** (1962) and **Rafa Pérez** (1957) are more controlled and calculated. Rafa Pérez fashions layers of slab-mounted white porcelain and black earthenware clay. Firing the piece at a high temperature causes the black earthenware to expand, deforming in the process the other elements that make up *Untitled No. 7* (2014). It is by reaching the limits of the material that what interests these artists happens: "I don't shape the pieces, I work to create the conditions necessary for the emergence of forms" (Joan Serra). At the construction stage, diverse elements are incorporated, ranging from glass granules to corn kernels, from sponges to pieces of paper soaked in slip. This creates the core of the sculpture. The initial body is then coated with liquid clays or wrapped in slabs to give it surfaces and textures. The materials and how they are combined determine the behaviour of the piece on drying and during firing. Consequently, the inevitable and even induced firing accidents become an integral part of these artistic creations.

The relationship of volumes to space also interests ceramists, and has done so for around the last fifty years, either through the creation of actual installations in space, or by the search for lines that interact with each other and form the sculpture itself. This is the case for the set of works donated to the Musée Ariana by the ceramist **Klaus Lehmann** (Germany, 1927-2016). These slab-built geometries of different clays bring to mind Cartesian coordinates given material form. The constructions with sober and monochrome surfaces created by **Marie-Noëlle Leppens** (France, 1958) belong to the very essence of ceramics. They evoke tools, forms and the earliest containers. In addition, *Bibioberis* (2016) has a special characteristic: the sculpture is made up of interchangeable modules, so the profile of the piece changes depending on how it is arranged.

Research into materials and surfaces is central to the work of **Toshio Matsui** (Japan, 1955) and **Sangwoo Kim** (Korea, 1980), both of whom explore simple volumes while heightening their surfaces through the use of advanced and complex techniques. Toshio Matsui succeeds in combining terracotta and Japanese lacquer (*urushi*) applied in layers of beige and red on the inside of a bowl and meticulously polished. The smooth perfection of the lacquer contrasts strongly with the abrupt, uneven and smoke fired outer surface of the piece. In his reinterpretation of traditional Korean techniques, Sangwoo Kim superimposes coloured porcelain slips on his sculptures which, after firing, are diamond polished. This treatment reveals the different colours, making the surface vibrate with reflections. The Swiss ceramist **Margareta Daepp** (1959), for her part, has built an ongoing relationship with Japan and its culture. For *The Seto Project* (2013), she was accompanied by a Japanese lacquer master in Kyoto to create a series of objects inspired by the savoir-faire of Seto. With their simple shapes, floral motifs and zones of colour, the ceramics from this region have unique aesthetic value.

Some artists strive to give a new lease of life to ceramics that have lost their function or their raison d'être. In his workshop, the Dutch conservator **Bouke de Vries** (Holland, 1960) has countless pieces of old porcelain into which he breathes new life through his artistic practice. Combined as a three-dimensional collage, mixing contradictory identities and discourses, these fragments gain new forms and meanings. In a similar approach, **Caroline Slotte** (Finland, 1975) reworks second-hand plates found at flea markets. She modifies their decoration, reinterpreting it by sanding it down and carving into it. This process enables her to construct her

artistic discourse on the themes of the ordinary and the unexpected, memory, associations of ideas, and the stories inherent in found objects. In this way, the artist recreates new landscapes and histories to focus our attention on elements that might otherwise perhaps be overlooked. The porcelain figurines that inspire **Christine Aschwanden** (Switzerland, 1975), also the discarded remnants of mass production, gain an unexpected role in a fairy tale through the work of the ceramist. She renews their decoration and personality through clay additions and shaped porcelain masks.

Homage to Akio Takamori (1950-2017)

Saddened by the recent death of the Japanese American ceramist **Akio Takamori** (1950-2017), the Musée Ariana wishes to pay tribute to him by presenting a small selection of figures by him which it recently acquired. As part of a joint venture with the Kunstforum Gallery in Solothurn, directed by Hanspeter Dähler, the museum had the opportunity to present his works in the exhibition "Akio Takamori. Ordinary Portraits" (30 August – 3 November 2013) and to welcome him in person for a much-appreciated lecture.

His coil mounted and slip-decorated forms constantly oscillate between the two-dimensionality of drawing and the plasticity of volumes - between Japanese and Western cultures. Despite appearing reserved and displaying a certain restraint, his figures inspire tenderness and emotion. "[...] by his sculptures and throughout his artistic career, Takamori brings us face-to-face with our human condition, with our ephemeral passage on earth between birth and death, with our place in the universe and in history, and this with an increasingly refined and sensitive perspicacity. How can we not be deeply moved by them?" (Anne-Claire Schumacher)

The works acquired in recent years by the Musée Ariana are evidence of a rich, dynamic and thriving ceramic scene. The diversity and complexity of the research conducted in the medium of clay, the multitude of forms and themes addressed, the sources of inspiration as plentiful as they are original, create pieces in tune with our raw, colourful and emotionally rich world.

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