

PRESS RELEASE

Paul Bonifas
Ceramist of Purism
Musée Ariana, Geneva
12th June - 22nd September 1997

Paul Ami Bonifas (born in Geneva in 1893 - died in Seattle in 1967), a true pioneer of contemporary Swiss ceramics, certainly ranks among the most outstanding creative artists of the European interwar years.

As from 1914, he ran his first ceramic art workshop, set up in Versoix, which was destroyed by fire at the end of 1919. From this period he is particularly known for the production of artistic stoneware which belong to the final period of the art nouveau movement, with their "flambé" or crystalline glazes, their colour effects and their painted decorations. Parallel to this basic production, Bonifas showed a rare polyvalency, experimenting with practically all aspects of ceramic technique: terracotta, earthenware and porcelain.

After the destruction of his Versoix establishment, the ceramist stayed in Paris from 1920 to 1922. Alongside Le Corbusier and the painter Amédée Ozenfant, he contributed to the writing of the review *L'Esprit nouveau*, the organ of the purism movement. This immersion in one of the laboratories of ideas of the European avant-garde fundamentally modified his approach to ceramic creation.

Having returned to practice, in his second workshop in Ferney-Voltaire, he created, between 1922 and 1940, an oeuvre of astonishing modernity, in which the conceptual phase of a project from then on took on as much importance as its final realisation. This last stage, moreover, was entrusted to craftsmen working to Bonifas' orders (his enterprise numbered up to twenty-seven associates in the 1920's), the artist devoting himself fully to the conception of his forms and to the development of new materials. The originality of Bonifas shows through both the formal research of great richness and the invention of completely new ceramic materials, like his famous earthenware with a black lustre glaze.

Owing to a subtle balance between a formal rigour obeying the principles of purism and ensuing from the application of industrial working methods and the preciousness of the materials used, Bonifas' receptacles tend towards a serene monumentality, whatever their dimensions.

In 1940, the war compelled Bonifas to put an end to his ceramic activities and to take refuge in Geneva. Five years later, he emigrated to the United States, more precisely to Seattle, where the Washington State University gave him the responsibility of creating and running a ceramic workshop. Parallel to this new task, Bonifas took up his atelier work again to create essentially unique pieces.

Although the present exhibition retraces the different aspects and the different stages of Paul Bonifas' career, it nevertheless highlights the works of the Ferney-Voltaire period, those which best express the modernity and the originality of the renowned Genevan ceramist.

Among the 210 or so objects presented, 160 come from seventeen private collections. Most of these works have not been shown to the public since the 1930's.

The exhibition presented by the Musée Ariana is the first showing on this scale devoted to a major artist, still largely unknown to the public.

Musée Ariana
10, avenue de la Paix
CH-1202 Geneva
Tel. 4122 / 418 54 50
Fax 4122 / 418 54 51

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Director - Musées d'art et d'histoire: Cäsar Menz
Exhibition commissioner and Curator: Roland Blaettler
Secretariat and exhibition press service: Danielle Carbonatto

Guided tours by request at the reception desk
Tel. 4122 / 310 70 25
Fax 4122 / 312 18 58