

# ANCIENT & MODERN

Ceramics by RANDY JOHNSTON



Pucker Gallery | Boston





ALL WORKS ARE STONEWARE.

Spoon form dish  
*nuka glaze*  
20.5 x 12 x 4.5"  
RJ516





Double spoon form dish  
*copper glaze*  
 13.25 x 11.5 x 3.25"  
 RJ513

## ANCIENT & MODERN

Ceramics by RANDY JOHNSTON

During four decades as a museum professional, I have found that the most successful works of art are those that have the power to command the viewer's attention over a period of time. With each encounter the work reveals something through its form and composition, color, materials, texture, technique or narrative. In the case of ceramics, a work's "call" to hold or use it reveals that its shape, balance, and heft in the hand are also important sensory factors. No matter the medium, each viewing of a successful work causes us to think and wonder about it more deeply.

In a similar way, a successful body of work seen together divulges the evolution of the artist's creative exploration and moments of risk-taking, which in hindsight mark seminal, artistic innovations. The progression for some artists may be linear, for others more sporadic or unexpected. There is risk in growth and change for a potter, especially for one who depends upon his work to make a living.

As a ceramic artist for more than forty years, Randy Johnson more than meets both measures of success. His work—whether simply thrown yunomi, or tea bowls, or hand-built spoon forms and figure vases—often reveals layers of interest and meaning that engage us repeatedly. Randy's yunomi, tea bowls, and large platters are steeped in Japanese folk tradition, yet they are very personal in their throwing gestures, undulating lips and brushed or trailed calligraphic marks. The evocative spoon forms and figure vases reveal his explorations of other cultures and even other media. He is bold in his exploration of new ideas.



Johnston's origins in pottery lie in the 1970's when he was a student of Warren MacKenzie at the University of Minnesota. He later apprenticed with Tatsuo Shimaoka in Mashiko Japan. Through these two influential giants, Randy became connected to Western folk pottery admired by MacKenzie's mentor British potter Bernard Leach and the Japanese Mingei tradition (folk art promoted in the West first by Shoji Hamada). During this period in Japan Johnston committed to the life of a potter—a functional potter—firing most of his work in wood-fired kilns. From this he has never wavered.

As he matured and his world view grew, so did Johnston's repertoire of pottery forms. They have become increasingly sculptural, though his work remains definitively functional. Some of this change emanates from his interests in Cycladic stone sculpture of third millennium BCE, in African art, and in twentieth-century modernist sculpture by artists including Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore.

Living in rural Wisconsin, Johnston is also intrigued by the shapes and construction of farm implements and machinery around him. Intensely curious, he examines the plants, animals and sea life wherever he travels. To some extent, consciously or unconsciously, he has embraced these disparate elements in his ceramics.

To my eye, Johnston's work is most striking at its most reductive: when a piece is simple in form, coherent in composition with no extraneous elements, and when the glaze or surface effect is fully integrated into the form. It stands strong and balanced, demanding attention.

Several of Johnston's hand-built spoon forms show his exploration of this reductive aesthetic. He has experimented with the shape over several years. The illustration of the double-lobed spoon form, which has been dipped in a copper colored glaze (RJ513), shows the slab construction of these forms. The lower concave slabs are shaped in carefully curved slump molds, then the upper convex slab is gently laid on top, and the two are sealed together at the edges. The volume created between the slabs suggests a tension, which enhances the work's three-dimensional sculptural quality. Fired in a gas kiln, the dark "shadows" created during reduction emphasize the roundness of the lobe. The green glaze gives the impression of a weathered copper vessel, slightly pitted with age.

Changes in the form, combined with a variety of glazes yields very different results. One asymmetrical spoon form (RJ516) has a raised curved edge that also bisects the tray. The surface of this piece is of paramount importance to its evocative nature, and it was developed through a series of deliberate steps.

First Johnston created the hatched surface by working the leather-hard clay with a short length of rope. He then applied a thin iron slip followed by a thicker layer of a matte nuka glaze. Traces of iron show through spaces where the white nuka has crawled. The result is a surface that resembles old porous bone, or even weathered peeling wood. The glaze appears integrated fully into the stoneware body of this piece, not just sitting on the surface. While examining this spoon form one might ask, is it an old implement of some sort? Did it once have a ritualistic association in a past civilization? The piece is a functional tray, but the sculptural quality almost makes its purpose a secondary consideration to its evocative nature. Should it be hung on the wall, or set on the table?





Round covered pot with rope impression  
*nuka glaze*  
 3.25 x 4.5 x 4.5"  
 RJ484



Round covered pot with rope impression  
*green glaze*  
 2.5 x 4 x 4"  
 RJ483



Rectangular platter form  
*natural ash glaze*  
 4.75 x 22 x 11.5"  
 RJ487





Tapered vase form  
*yellow glaze with iron slip and natural ash*  
15.25 x 6.75 x 3.5"  
RJ467



By contrast the oval spoon form (RJ474) evokes a more modern concept. Its cusped edges, the off-center line of iron wash revealed between areas where the form was dipped in a matte yellow glaze, and the diagonally opposed areas of dark slip, all give the effect of a shaped abstract canvas. The clay form has virtually become a canvas upon which Johnston has developed an abstract composition. This is not accidental as Randy has long been a student of modern art.

Using a similar strategy, he emphasized the geometry of his tapered vase form (RJ467). The application of dark slip on the plinth provides a firm base to the matte yellow body of the vase. Coupled with a thoughtful use of geometry, the serendipitous effects of wood firing are evidenced when natural wood ash created a grayish triangular patch that complements the rim of the vase. The ash also offers variety to the crisp contours of the vessel, and the precise demarcations between areas of glaze.

The wood-fired rectangular platter (RJ487) crosses the boundaries of ancient and modern. The compositional structure of the platter revolves around the three-part division of the rectangular form. It bears three “scarification” marks in the upper left section, and the vestiges of three shells within the flashed area near the center. The surface of the clay has been worked and roughened suggesting the platter is old and weathered. A ritualistic use comes to mind again, aside from the practicality of the platter’s functional purpose.

An iconic white figure vase (RJ491), another series that Johnston has explored over the last several years, underscores where sculptural and functional merge in a simplified, geometric aesthetic. The vase has a full-bodied geometry that evokes the human figure: it stands on a low base or foot; the rounded torso is gently geometric and surmounted by a long neck. The correctness of proportion among the component parts is suggested by its simplicity; the simple glazing in white highlighted only by blushes of ash on the shoulders of the vessel, all call to mind ancient Cycladic stone sculptures.

In these few pieces we can see the breadth of Randy Johnston’s inspiration from antiquities to modern art as well as natural and man-made objects from his immediate world. His need to explore and refine new shapes and vessels becomes apparent when viewing his work collectively. His mastery of throwing, hand building, and firing clay is sublimated to the visual simplicity of his work. The many decisions he makes during the creation of his vessels comes only with contemplation. It is that apparent simplicity that informs many of his pieces with a sense of mystery, strength, and even ritual making Randy Johnston’s ceramic work distinctive and extraordinary.

—Susan Strickler  
Director and CEO

Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire





Spoon form plate  
*nuka glaze with iron slip and wax resist*  
19.25 x 10.5 x 4.75"  
RJ503







Yunomi  
*nuka glaze with iron brushwork and rope impressed decoration*  
 3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
 RJ501



Yunomi  
*nuka glaze with iron brushwork*  
 3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
 RJ500



Squared vase  
*nuka glaze iron with wax resist brushwork*  
 12.5 x 4 x 4"  
 RJ325



Square vase  
copper glaze  
14.25 x 4.75 x 4.75"  
RJ508



Oval vase with skirt  
copper glaze with feldspar inclusions  
14.5 x 9 x 7"  
RJ492



Square vase  
copper glaze with handprint resist  
17.5 x 6.5 x 6.5"  
RJ507



Yunomi with rope inlay  
kaolin slip  
3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ475



Square vase  
yellow glaze with brush decoration  
9.75 x 3.25 x 3.25"  
RJ469



Oval vase with skirt  
*shino glaze with black stripes*  
18 x 10 x 6.75"  
RJ490





Square vase  
yellow glaze with iron slip and brush decoration  
13.5 x 4.75 x 4.75"  
RJ468



Yunomi  
rope inlay, glaze iron brushwork  
4 x 3.75 x 3.75"  
RJ479



Yunomi  
rope inlay glaze, iron brushwork  
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ477



Round covered box  
copper green glaze  
2.75 x 4.5 x 4.5"  
RJ462



Round covered box  
copper green glaze  
2.75 x 4.5 x 4.5"  
RJ463



Four leaf tray  
nuka glaze with iron and wax brushwork  
3.25 x 14 x 13"  
RJ319



Spoon form dish  
natural ash glaze with kaolin slip  
22 x 10.5 x 8"  
RJ517





Teabowl  
*shino glaze over iron slip*  
 3.75 x 5 x 5"  
 RJ453



Teabowl  
*shino slip with natural ash glaze*  
 3.5 x 5 x 4.75"  
 RJ455



Double spoon form  
*copper glaze*  
 2.75 x 12.75 x 8.25"  
 RJ451





Square vase  
*yellow glaze with natural ash*  
 14 x 3.75 x 3.5"  
 RJ444



Tall square vase  
*shino glaze with wax resist brushwork*  
 12.75 x 5 x 5"  
 RJ331



Squared vase  
anagama natural ash  
4 x 4 x 13"  
RJ302



Teabowl  
shino glaze over iron slip  
3.75 x 5 x 5"  
RJ452



Oval vase  
yellow and natural ash glaze with wax resist brushwork  
7.75 x 6.75 x 2.5"  
RJ496



Lobbed vase  
copper glaze  
12.5 x 8.25 x 8.25"  
RJ511



Yunomi  
nuka glaze with iron brushwork  
3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ499



Yunomi  
shino glaze with wax resist brushwork  
3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ502



Yunomi  
*inlaid rope pattern with iron brush decoration*  
 4.25 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
 RJ456

Yunomi  
*rope inlay, kaolin slip*  
 4 x 3.75 x 3.75"  
 RJ476



Vase form with five lobes  
*shino slip with natural ash glaze*  
 13 x 11.5 x 11.5"  
 RJ472



Round covered box  
copper glaze  
4.27 x 4.27 x 2.75"  
RJ514



Round covered box  
copper glaze  
4.25 x 4.25 x 2.5"  
RJ515



Oval vase form  
yellow glaze iron slip with brush decoration  
9.5 x 6.75 x 3"  
RJ470



Oval vase form  
nuka glaze iron slip with brush decoration  
10 x 6.75 x 3.25"  
RJ471



Yunomi  
inlaid rope pattern with iron brush decoration  
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ457



Yunomi  
shino glaze over iron slip with brush decoration  
4 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
RJ460



Square vase  
yellow glaze, black slip brush decoration  
13.75 x 4 x 4"  
RJ445



Step vase  
copper glaze  
12 x 5.75 x 5.25"  
RJ510



Figurative vase  
copper glaze  
12.25 x 7.5 x 3.75"  
RJ509



Spoon form  
*natural ash glaze with rope impression*  
 4.25 x 20.5 x 8"  
 RJ489



Yunomi  
*shino glaze over iron slip, brushwork*  
 3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
 RJ482



Yunomi  
*nuka glaze over iron slip, brushwork*  
 3.75 x 3.5 x 3.5"  
 RJ481





Teapot  
natural ash glaze with kaolin slip  
8.5 x 10.25 x 6.5"  
RJ495



Spoon tray form  
yellow glaze with black slip  
3.75 x 16.75 x 13"  
RJ474



Tall square vase  
*shino glaze with wax resist brushwork*  
 12.75 x 3.75 x 3.75"  
 RJ332



Square vase  
*kaolin slip with black trailing*  
 17.25 x 5.25 x 5"  
 RJ488



Large platter  
*inlaid rope pattern black trailing*  
4 x 21.25 x 21.25"  
RJ464





Spoon form  
*kaolin and iron slip with shell mark*  
4 x 16.5 x 10.5"  
RJ473



Figurative vase  
*nuka* and natural ash glaze  
17.25 x 8 x 8"  
RJ491



Yunomi  
*rope inlay, kaolin slip*  
4 x 3.75 x 3.75"  
RJ476



Squared vase  
*shino glaze with wax resist and iron decoration*  
3.5 x 3.5 x 9"  
RJ304



Round vase with rope pattern, copper glaze  
12.5 x 10.5 x 10.5"  
RJ493



Triangular covered box  
*nuka glaze*  
9 x 6 x 3.5"  
RJ498



Oblong covered box  
*nuka glaze*  
7.5 x 5.5 x 3.25"  
RJ506



Double spoon form dish  
copper glaze  
18.5 x 11.75 x 3.75"  
RJ518





Oribe form  
*nuka glaze*  
 3.25 x 16.5 x 12.5"  
 RJ448

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Picasso once commented that,  
 “In art, there is neither past nor future.”

Those who work in the ceramic arts are often asked to consider the idea of functional ceramics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We might reflect on the larger question of our role in the context of a globally blended culture, or even why we choose to make the work we do? How does the continuing expression of our conversation with the materials and process of clay fit into the complex of evolving social interactions?

Artists make things as a way to manifest ideas. The idea might be as simple as creating a nice, useful mug or as complex as engage ideas about the intersection between traditional pottery and modern art. Inviting someone to use a handmade ceramic piece is to open the possibility for a conversation, an exchange of ideas, a shared experience with that person. Pots for everyday use have always had the potential for artistic meaning and a powerful autonomous presence.

Today, people engaging in contemporary ceramics are rarely, if ever, anonymous folk artists; but rather are likely to be well educated with a focused vision, striving to reveal their own artistic sensibilities. This is a departure from historical ceramic production that often had determining expectations and obligations of particular traditions.





As an artist, I am interested in modern art and concepts of ancient and non-Western art. The relationship between these addresses the development of abstraction within the aesthetic of utilitarian objects. My work considers the relationship of architectural structure and spatial orientation. Essential to a strong representation of each form is a feeling for its overall spatial structure. Many of my pieces suggest through their framework both an internal and external boundary system. Connecting this framework and identifying the dualities and the metaphoric potential of a form's austere directness, aggressiveness, and simplicity are challenges I consider with each piece.

I love the physicality of ceramics and firing with wood, and I am also devoted to pictorial expression in surface designs. This expression reveals influences of Asian aesthetics and New York-school action painting of the 1940's to 60's, combining both deliberation and spontaneity. I am tracking down a primary moment, a moment that reveals vulnerability, emotion, intellect, the conscious and subconscious. Seeking to transform that moment into artistic creation compels me to move forward with my work. This process is a timeless effort to communicate and a constant challenge to connect the abstract and metaphoric potential of the ceramic vessel.

—Randy Johnston  
2015



Spoon Form  
*green glaze*  
3.25 x 16.5 x 12.5"  
RJ449





Ikebana vase  
 copper glaze  
 6.25 x 15 x 3.5"  
 RJ512

## BIOGRAPHY

Randy Johnston has been working in ceramics in his Wisconsin studio for more than four decades. He is internationally recognized for bringing a fresh aesthetic vision to contemporary form and for his commitment to functional expression. He has also made significant contributions to the development of kiln technology in the United States. He is currently a professor at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls, where he teaches ceramics and drawing, and served as Department Chair from 2009 to 2013. His work is exhibited internationally and he is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Bush Artist Fellowship granted by the Bush Foundation in Minnesota, and two Visual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. Johnston received his MFA from Southern Illinois University and his BFA in Studio Arts from the University of Minnesota, where he studied with Warren MacKenzie. He also studied in Mashiko, Japan, at the pottery of Tatsuzo Shimaoka, who was a Living National Treasure and a student of Shoji Hamada. Johnston has given hundreds of lectures and guest artist presentations worldwide. His ceramics are included in the permanent collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Minneapolis Art Institute; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Currier Museum of Art; Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution; and numerous other international public and private collections.





Spoon form  
green glaze  
3.25 x 16.5 x 12.5"  
RJ449



# PUCKER GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1967 BOSTON

## PUCKER GALLERY

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Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

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# ANCIENT & MODERN

Ceramics by RANDY JOHNSTON



Round vase  
*nuka glaze with wax resist brushwork*  
12.5 x 10.75 x 10.75"  
RJ494

### DATES:

5 December 2015 to 10 January 2016

### OPENING RECEPTION

5 December

3:00 to 6:00 PM

*The public is invited to attend.*

*The artist will be present.*

### COVER IMAGES:

Left: Square vase  
*crackle shino glaze over iron slip  
with brush decoration*  
15.5 x 6 x 6"  
RJ443

Middle right: Square vase  
*yellow glaze black slip with  
natural ash and brush decoration*  
17.25 x 6.75 x 6.5"  
RJ442

Top right: Square vase  
*nuka glaze over iron slip with  
brush decoration*  
16.75 x 6.5 x 6.5"  
RJ465

Bottom right: Square vase  
*shino glaze over iron slip with  
brushwork*  
17 x 6.5 x 6.5"  
RJ466

### CREDITS:

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