

# Nordic Ode

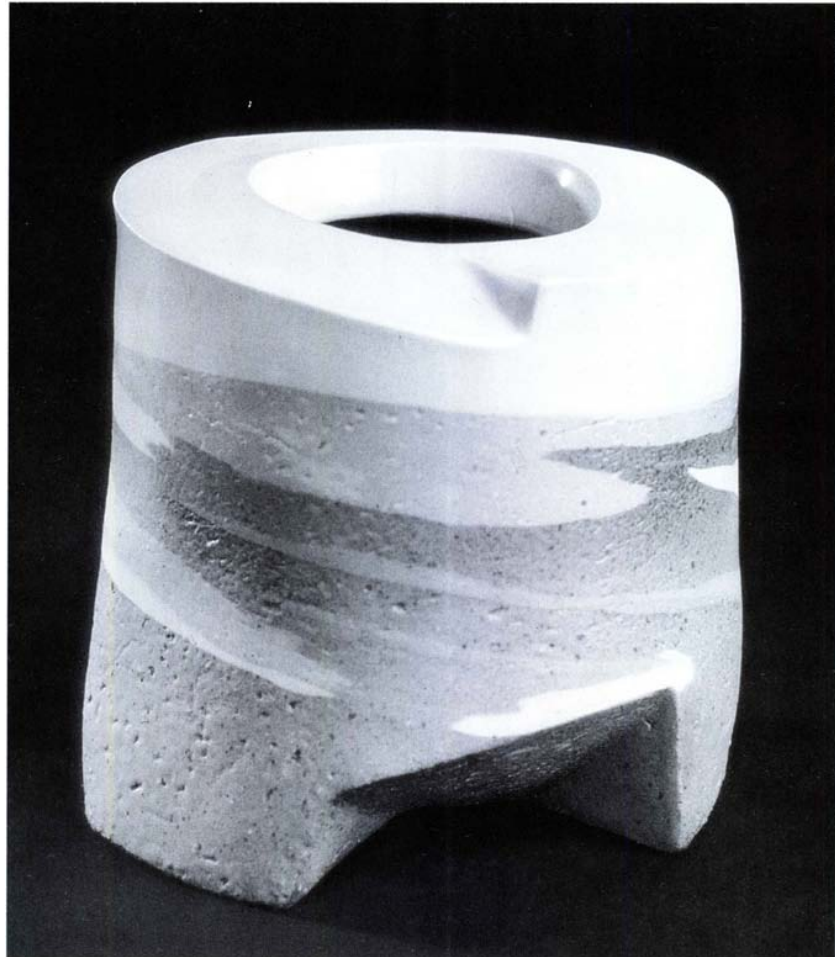
## New Works by Les Manning

by Allan J. Koester

Les Mannings physical and spiritual grounding in the mountainscape was clearly reflected in an exhibition sponsored by the Walter Phillips Gallery of Banff, Alberta, at an off-site exhibition in Calgary as part of the annual "Art-walk" festival. On display were 22 pieces (20 bowls and vessels up to 12 inches in height and 2 plates approximately 14 inches wide). Each incorporated at least three types of clay as well as porcelain layered, then thrown on a potter's wheel, manipulated and finally glazed with a traditional celadon.

A former artist-in-residence at the Banff School for the Arts, Manning headed the schools ceramics department from 1974 to 1994. Now residing in Ontario, he was born and raised in rural central Alberta, and lived and worked in the Rocky Mountains throughout his tenure at the Banff Centre. He describes himself as a winter person, who grew up with snow and came to know the mountains not only as vast breathtaking expanses and rock but also as spiritual monoliths. Through his clay-work, Manning has captured the essence, the spirit of this landscape. Under the spell of his reductionism, the Rocky Mountains (the "Stonehenge of the gods") are brought to the viewer, not as mythologized antagonists, but as spiritual brethren.

Using traditional form (plate or vessel) as an anchor or foundation, Manning constructed his "clayscapes" almost as involuntary expressions, as extensions of self and mountain, the distinction between the two blurring. The foreground is made of coarser, dark clays layered intuitively in a diagonal orientation invariably topped with porcelain, finely finished to indicate snowy atmospherics. The forms are quite literally bent out of shape. Portions are cut away to suggest mountain mass, or moved out of symmetry as metaphors of wind-blown snowscapes. As a result, shadow moves in and out of the form, changing with the direction of the lighting and the position of the viewer.



PHOTOS: DONALD LEE

"Grotto," approximately 8 inches in height, laminated stoneware and porcelain, thrown and altered, sandblasted postfire, by Les Manning, Ontario, Canada.

Glazed in celadon to hint at the gray-ing blues and greens reminiscent of mountain vistas, they do not portray the mountains' angularity and rigidity, but are strangely organic, undulating shapes. One is reminded of the lifelike Inuit "Inukshuk" figures standing on Canada's northern shores as directional markers or perhaps messengers from the spirit world. Inukshuk (pronounced in-ook-shook and meaning "in the image of man") are lifelike rock piles, suggestive of the ancient dolmens of Europe.

Within the technical and aesthetic confines of ceramic tradition, Manning's works are clearly "ugly pots." But he did not set out to make pots. His intent was

to move beyond technique to a kinship with the clay. He had three goals in mind when setting out to produce these works: 1. to create a body of work that was uniquely personal; 2. to express a kind of "Canadianism"; and 3. to move beyond traditional ceramic forms to a new level of aesthetic expression.

Manning achieved a distinct personal style technically through a reduction in the influence of the potter's wheel and aesthetically by presenting the mountain range (one of the most popular images in Canadian artistic expression) in the round. The massiveness of the mountain landscape has been sliced in space and time. Through a kind of chi-



"Ice Cold," approximately 10 inches in height, laminated stoneware and porcelain, thrown and altered, celadon glazed, sandblasted postfire.



"Winter Delight," approximately 9 inches high, stoneware and porcelain, celadon glazed, sandblasted, by Les Manning.

merical alchemy, Manning delivers the essence of the place, a flash of the high country, sliced into the clay and intimately manipulated into its final shape. The mountains truth emanates from all sides and is never constant. Vistas change as shadows lighten and new ones

appear. Manning does not deliver a literal reading but an open-ended one that will surely resonate with any "Nordic" viewer.

It is clear that Manning sees "Canadianism" as rooted in the vastness and geographic awesomeness of Canadas

physical space. The Canadian landscape is very often portrayed as antagonist in Canadian artist expression, as a willful, untamed, icy snowscape. There is much about this view that captures the imagination of Canadians. To be Canadian is to know snow and freezing temperatures, to know winter's contrariness and to act accordingly. Surely, snowcapped mountains, a kind of permanent winter, represent this view most vividly.

Canadian mythology contains many stories of winters upper hand in the battle to possess the land. Man has learned to respect its willfulness or perish. Canadians see the land as a free spirit. It can be measured, territorialized, but not possessed. Unpossessed, it is unknowable. Manning chooses not to present us with this archaic view, suggesting instead that the land need not be possessed to be understood, that it need not be tamed to be befriended. He has learned to drink in the spirit of his mountainous surroundings and is not haunted by the natural world. Rather than a sense of foreboding, he offers a sense of kinship.

Finally, Manning has taken his craft to a new plane of personal expression. Form does not follow function. In fact, function is no more than reminiscent and "vessel" has become "figure" in his work. It should be noted, though, that Manning has not abandoned his craft, and continues to see himself as a vessel maker. He is simply using his traditional and well-honed potter sensibilities in new ways that suit his artistic search for personal expression. At the same time, Manning is conscious of not allowing the potter's wheel to dominate the art making. For him, the artist and the wheel must work together in an aesthetic as well as a technical synergy. The result is a more intuitive, visceral container—not in the traditional sense, but as containers of spiritual vistas, points of contact between our everyday, perhaps less than satisfactory, conscious reality and the world of the spirit; the "other" side. ▲