

BY NANCY M. SERVIS

Ruth Rippon

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HER STORY

Ruth Rippon (b. 1927) is a ceramic artist whose active presence in Northern California spans seven decades. Her story parallels the rise of vessel-based ceramics in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, clay's evolution into sculpture, and unconventional pluralism.

Born and raised in Sacramento, Rippon began her prolific ceramic life unceremoniously in high school, but it steadfastly developed when she was

attending California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC), Oakland (now known as California College of the Arts). She was a student there from 1947 to 1951, and her college years overlapped those of Peter Voulkos, who graduated from CCAC with a MFA in 1952. She also knew Robert Arneson, who

◀ The Letter, 1994. Coil built stoneware sculpture, 22 x 7.5 x 15.5 in. Photo courtesy of ServisArts.



enrolled at CCAC a few years later and then attended Mills College, receiving his MFA in 1958. Rippon and Arneson often traveled in the same spheres, participating, for instance, in throwing demonstrations at the California State Fair. Arneson recalled, “Jack Ogden, David King, and Ruth Rippon would come out and demonstrate ceramics with us, with Tony (Prieto). It was a good time. I certainly feel good about this period.”¹

After working in some transitional positions in the Bay Area, including one as the summer assistant to artist-potter Antonio Prieto at Mills College, Oakland, in 1954 and 1956, she began teaching at California State University, Sacramento in 1956. In the thirty-one years that followed became an influential teacher there. Rippon was also active in the Creative Arts League at the E.B. Crocker Gallery—now known as the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento—where she developed exhibits and helped secure gifts to the museum.² Her accomplishments as an artist, teacher, and gallerist were celebrated by the California Arts Council in the summer of 2008 with its “Artist of the Year” award. She was also recognized as one of 100 Distinguished Women Artists by the Fresno Art Museum, with an extensive exhibition in 2002. And the Crocker Art Museum featured her work in a retrospective exhibition in 1971. From her early days growing up in Sacramento, she wanted to be an artist, and she made her living doing the very thing she set out to do as a young girl. Decades later, a vibrant Ruth Rippon will celebrate her ninetieth birthday in 2017 with a comprehensive October exhibition at the newly expanded Crocker Art Museum.

GROUNDING IN CLAY

Rippon’s ceramic work is innovative, diverse, technically accomplished, and wide in scope. She employed the vessel aesthetic, having mastered wheel throwing and coil hand-building to create works that could be classical or organic in form. She also used slab construction in her early sculpture, allegorical boxes, pop sculpture, and later, tableaux vivants. Her adeptness with these techniques facilitated figurative sculpture and nature-inspired abstractions. Rippon’s ever-present sense of humor and general optimism provided narrative content for her imagery. Her lifelong artistic production paralleled Northern California’s ceramic pluralism through the latter half of the twentieth century. Her steady career provides a stable context for the expressive ceramic work that now defines the versatile field of clay.

Rippon and her twin brother, Jack, along with her older brother, Samuel, were raised in a supportive and practical family, and her upbringing taught her that if she were to pursue an art career she needed to be able to support herself. She attended McClatchy High School, then studied at Sacramento Junior College from 1945 to 1947. Rippon received her BA and MFA degrees from CCAC in 1949 and 1951. At that time, Vernon Coykendall (1907–1995) was active in the ceramics department as the assistant to Antonio Prieto (1912–1967). As Rippon’s teacher, the charismatic Prieto strongly influenced her early efforts. His studio rigor and dedication to the vessel ideal laid the groundwork for Rippon’s lifelong commitment to the medium. Additionally,

she studied sculpture with Elah Hale Hays (1896–1986) and valued that experience for exposing her to a variety of building materials. Potter and designer Edith Heath (1911–2005), who taught an upper-division class in clay bodies, became chairperson of the CCAC ceramics department in 1955. Classmates Paul Volckening (1928–2002) and Peter Voulkos (1924–2002) were also key contributors to Rippon’s successful time at CCAC.³ Through her independent study of ceramic history, she came to favor the strong design, linearity, and technical challenges of Greek pottery. During this time she also began to explore her unique sgraffito-through-engobe technique.

EVOLUTIONARY CLAY

The mid-twentieth century in the Bay Area was a stimulating time, when many ceramic influences were percolating. Bauhaus-trained ceramist Marguerite Wildenhain (1896–1985) moved to the region from Europe in 1940. She taught briefly at CCAC, then in 1942 moved to the outskirts of the small Sonoma County town of Guerneville to co-found, with Gordon and Jane Herr, what was intended to be an artists’ colony known as Pond Farm.⁴

▼ Ruth Rippon with her bronze sculpture, *Waiting*, c. 2005. Photo courtesy of Kurt Fishback.



Prieto came to CCAC in 1946 to teach after two years at Alfred University in upstate New York. In 1950 he moved to nearby Mills College, where he remained until his death in 1967. Prieto and his wife, Eunice (1924–2015), made it their goal to stimulate the widest range of interaction among ceramicists. The Mills College Ceramics Guild, established in 1942 and cofounded by Elena Montalvo Netherby (1891–1977) and F. Carlton Ball (1911–1992), was the center of this activity. Prieto attended the International Conference of Ceramic and Textile Designers at Dartington Hall, Devon, England, in 1952, and out of that visit grew a relationship with British potter and sage Bernard Leach, as well as Shoji Hamada, who subsequently made three trips to Mills.⁵ Michael Cardew and Beatrice Wood (1893–1998) also came at the invitation of the Prietos.

Rippon recalls attending a series of lectures in 1950 by Leach as well as workshops in 1952 with Leach, Hamada, and Soetsu Yanagi at Mills. When she was Prieto's summer teaching assistant in 1954, Rippon met Kitaoji Rosanjin, the revered Japanese folk-art potter, who was an artist-in-residence at the school. His expressionistic approach was at odds with Rippon's preference for classical form, balance, and symmetry, whereas Voulkos, soon after Rosanjin's visit, started to pursue Abstract Expressionist ceramics.⁶ These international influences expanded Rippon's view of contemporary ceramics. She was determined, however, to pursue her own artistic inclinations.

CLARITY THROUGH FORM

During this early phase of her life as a practicing artist, Rippon pursued opportunities

that clarified her artistic direction. She briefly worked for San Francisco enamellist and potter, Jade Snow Wong (1922–2006), from whom she inherited an unflappable ceramic sensibility. At the San Francisco School of Fine Art on a scholarship from 1952 to 1953, she studied with Joan Jockwig Pearson (Watkins) (1924–2013). Pearson fostered Rippon's artistic development, aiding in her shift away from Prieto's larger-than-life influence. Rippon actively exhibited in San Francisco galleries, including Gump's Gallery (1953) and The Rotunda Gallery, City of Paris, the site of many Pacific Coast ceramic exhibitions in the heart of San Francisco, with Viola Frey (1933–2004), Otto Heino (1915–2009) and Vivika Heino (1910–1995), Ernie Kim (1918–2007), Jacomena Maybeck (1927–1996), Manuel Neri (b. 1930), and James Lovera (1920–2015). She maintained a friendship with Lovera until his death. In 1954 she had work in juried exhibitions at the Richmond Art Center, located in the East Bay north of Berkeley, and the California State Fair, Sacramento, considered an artistic venue for both display and demonstrations. In 1956, her platter *Five Figures* was shown at the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York.⁷

Rippon refined her aesthetic over her thirty years of teaching. Ideas and practices she discovered at CCAC and cultivated at Mills served as touchstones and counterforces for her work through the years. As a clay technician, she had the capacity to manipulate a variety of clay bodies, including porcelain, as seen with her small bottles, bowls, and still-life fruits. As with her coil-built and slab-constructed forms,

her thrown forms—especially vessels that evolved into sculpture—reveal a fluidity and virtuosity of technique. Peter VandenBerge (b. 1935) recently recalled how Rippon's skills astonished him when, as her student in the late 1950s, he watched her throw on the wheel. The valuable lessons forged by Prieto, then expanded by Pearson, strengthened her ability to move ahead with her own ideas.

ROADMAP OF IDEAS

Rippon's ease with materials enabled her to use a range of clay types, to realize pure forms, and to design expressive surfaces. At times her work takes the form of social commentary, but more often one sees—particularly in her earlier works—mythological or biblical narratives. As hosts for her ideas and stories, Rippon's works constitute a roadmap for her life while also serving as indicators of the times. Her early studies of Greek vases, combined with a Prieto-inspired disciplined work ethic, are illustrated in the bottle *Three Figures and Three Shields*, 1953. This object summarizes Rippon's enduring interests in art-historical implication and technical challenge and establishes her lifelong desire to unify figure and vessel through form. In the 1960s she produced a slab-constructed jewel box, *Fates*, 1966, with small figures mounted on the lid. This mysterious stagelike vessel foreshadows Rippon's late-in-life interests of creating narrative tableaux.

Nature was both an inspiration and design catalyst, as is shown by the competent pieces *Sea Urchin*, 1974, and *Wave Jar with Lid*, 1985. *Sea Urchin*, a covered casserole dish, was a direct result of one of her visits

to the Northern California coast, where she has a second home. This work shows the influence of Prieto, who produced large, functional casseroles that were equally engaging in their design. *Wave Jar With Lid* features surface carving that animates vessel form and reveals her admiration of the shape, surface treatment, and glazing of Chinese celadon vases. Some of her largest works from the late 1970s and 1980s are life-size, coil-built semi-abstractions, such as *Ascension (Wing)*, with another monolith titled *Waterfall* that is equally impressive in its conception and artistic presence. The rhythmic vase *Earth, Air, Sky and Water* shows her ability to marry figure with vessel form and her confidence in surface embellishment, especially through her engobe inlay technique. Rimas VisGirda, her former student, acknowledges Rippon's mastery of surface treatments, such as sgraffito and wax resist, as an enduring influence on his ceramic work.⁸

Rippon uses figuration as a design element, for narrative illustration, and overall sculptural form, with occasional autobiographical allusions. Earliest examples incorporate the figure as a design element on a vessel's surface. Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing throughout her career she used coil-built figures. Monochromatic stylized figures, such as *Lady of Spain*, c. 1980, are coil-built and serve as symbols of womanhood, as does *The Letter*, 1994. Her large-scale public commissions include the ceramic pair *Lollies* (short for "Little Old Ladies"), 1985, at the Pavilions Shopping Center, Sacramento, and the large-scale bronze version *Waiting*, c. 2000, permanently installed at the University of California Davis Medical Center, Sacramento.

Rippon's message-laden works employ mythological and biblical narratives along with phrases from jingles. An early example of this is the curious cup *Surely Goodness and Mercy Will Follow*, 1970,



► *Wave Jar with Lid*, 1985. Carved stoneware with celadon-type glaze. 17.5 x 10 in. Photo courtesy of ServisArts.

Author's Note:

Birth and death dates are given for those artists who lived and worked primarily in Northern California.

with applied letter cutouts. Lines from the Old Testament book of Psalms wrap around the carved surface in a bohemian style. In her 1970 Pop Art–inspired series *D, E, F Cubes*, Rippon ventured beyond the bohemian into the political; these incised, slab-constructed pieces, vibrant with luster glazes, are adorned with political statements and intended as mildly provocative installation sculpture.

VisGirda attributes this artistic shift to her friendship with Arneson.⁹ He was teaching at the University of California, Davis, about a 20-minute drive from California State University, Sacramento, where Rippon was on the faculty, and they visited and demonstrated techniques at each other's college studios, leading to a lively cross-pollination. Arneson hosted Tom Rippon (1954–2010), Ruth's nephew, as an auditing student at the ceramic studio TB9 on the campus of U.C. Davis from 1970 to 1974. Tom went on to become an accomplished sculptor and was a professor of ceramics at the University of Montana, Missoula, at the time of his early death.

Ruth Rippon's later work of the 1990s is comprised of two distinctly different sculptural genres. The first includes four tabletop tableaux of artists in their studios. *Que Sera Seurat* delightfully summarizes what Ruth Rippon addressed throughout her career: a preoccupation with the human form culled from an art-historical context, and a quiet narrative that provides rich details for the viewer. Diminutive in size, *Que Sera Seurat* shows an intimate setting in which Seurat is painting in his studio accompanied by nude models. What appear to be the artist's drawings on his studio wall are wonderfully

hewn ceramic tiles, which hint at Ruth's known capability as a painter. The three other tableaux are *Nitty Magritte*, *Too Loose Lautrec*, and *Enfant Terrible — Picasso Tableau*. Paralleling this narrative direction are Rippon's surrealist sculptures from this period. They combine disparate though recognizable forms and symbols with figuration that tap Rippon's private contemplations.

CONCLUSION

Rippon's artistic production is extensive and leaves an indelible mark on the artistic landscape of Northern California. As the sole female faculty member, she grew the ceramic department at California State University, Sacramento, by inviting artists such as VandenBerge to teach alongside her. She is revered by many of her students, who view her as a motivating, fair, disciplined, and informed teacher. Her teaching and friendship helped to launch many artists' own paths to success.¹⁰ Over the course of her seventy-year artistic career, Ruth Rippon has succeeded in finding and developing her own voice as part of the evolution of twentieth-century West Coast American ceramics. She anchored a center of creative inquiry, development, and growth in Sacramento, forging a model of consistency and excellence. She connected with others through her personable artistic practice, teaching presence, and civic commitments, while maintaining a lifelong engagement with clay. Ruth Rippon pursued her artistic direction in producing bodies of work that are vessel-based, figurative, and at times abstract. The breadth of her work mirrors the artist herself: technically accomplished, experimental, conceptually grounded, and quietly emotive.

ENDNOTES

1. Madie Jones oral history interview of Robert Arneson, 1981 August 14-15, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
2. Rippon collaborated with Voulkos on the 1961 California Crafts exhibition held at the Crocker Art Museum (then the E. B. Crocker Gallery). She was the exhibition designer of Voulkos's juried show that included Robert Arneson's piece *Pot Eviscerated* (see: *The Vase and Beyond*, p. 9). She also participated in the development and presentation of the 1981 exhibition *Viola Frey: A Retrospective*, originating at the Crocker, and worked for four years in evaluating, exhibiting, and securing the gift of the extensive, international ceramic collection of Hugh Arnold to the museum.
3. Rippon recalled a graduate student field trip to Pond Farm to meet Marguerite Wildenhain that Voulkos attended. When asked how that meeting between the two went, she said, "Marguerite was very complimentary of Peter on our field trip. She just liked him and respected him, which she didn't many people." Author's interview with Ruth Rippon.
4. That vision, modeled on Black Mountain College, North Carolina, failed, and the site was known exclusively as a ceramic workshop by 1949.
5. Antonio Prieto: *A Family Collection*, 2006 exhibition brochure, Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
6. Author's interview with Rippon.
7. Untracht, p. 19.
8. Jacobi.
9. Author's interview with VisGirda.
10. Students include Yoshio Taylor, Tony Natsoulas, and Richard Hotchkiss.

AUTHOR BIO

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◀ Ruth Rippon with Stephen Kaltenbach, Robert Arneson, Peter Vandenberg, and Gerald Walburg in downtown Sacramento, 1987. Photo courtesy of Michael Hough.

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"Ruth Rippon Retrospective Exhibition," *Ceramics Monthly*, vol. 19, no. 3, March 1971, pp 20-21.

Untracht, Oppl, "Sgraffito Through Glaze—Ruth Rippon Decorates a Pot," *Ceramics Monthly*, vol. 5, no. 9, September 1957, pp 18-21.