

# Turning Earth into

# ART

**From clay quarry to museum shelf:  
a century of ceramic development**

**LES GRAFF**



*Standing Figures*, 1964, stoneware, by Luke Lindoe, in the collection of the Nickle Arts Museum.

The auctioneer only mentions the word Medalta and the bidding gets serious. Medalta is synonymous with the pottery of yesteryear, storage crocks, bean pots and mixing bowls—the stuff of life. From 1912 to 1954 Medalta was the chief manufacturer of clay products. Later, Sunburst and Hycroft took over. With clay and the fuel to fire it underfoot in most parts of the province, the ceramics industry has been right for Alberta for 100 years. Medicine Hat has always been the centre and remains the source for clay, with Plainsman Clays producing 3.5 million pounds of prepared clay per year to meet the needs of clay artists across Canada. Today, however, the artist potter with a smaller, more flexible business is able to establish a studio in any community and, although involved to some degree with functional ceramics, is more concerned with personal expression.

The creative ceramic movement did not occur until after World War II. Ceramics had been viewed as a mere hobby—China painting. Potters made useful bowls and cups. Their only scope for artistic expression was in painting or glazing the finished object. Then, in 1946, Luke Lindoe became ceramic instructor at Calgary's Alberta College of Art and elevated ceramics from a common craft activity to the aesthetic level of sculpture and painting. Although he stayed for only 11 years, leaving to take on other clay-related challenges, he gave ceramics a technical and philosophical base and trained the first generation of ceramic artists that would spark creative ceramic development throughout Alberta. By the mid '60s it had outpaced all other developing craft disciplines and was competing with painting as a vehicle for self-expression.

At first Luke solved technical problems and established basic procedures for hand-made functional ceramics. Yet, in spite

*Painter Les Graff was for 31 years Director of Alberta Culture, Visual Arts. In 1998 he curated the Luke Lindoe Retrospective at the Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary.*

of his previous involvement with industrial ceramics, Luke saw clay's potential to serve artistic goals. He had the training of a sculptor. The sculptor is concerned with form, whatever his medium, and clay, being more flexible than wood, stone or marble, can be easily manipulated into any shape or form. Luke placed his faith in the medium and began a search for a clay aesthetic. Luke described good ceramic form as a vessel which could roll down a hill without breaking off protruding parts. A clay aesthetic lay in an appreciation of the inherent qualities of clay: limited colour—like the prairie, compact form, natural textures.

During this period Luke and J.C. Sproule established Ceramic Arts in Calgary, the first commercial ceramic studio, influencing the future of creative ceramic studios and the developing craft marketplace. The '60s was an exciting time for clay artists. Many Alberta-trained potters, working in stoneware, racked up national and international awards. Walter Drohan, Walter Dexter, and Ed Drahanchuk all received Outstanding Stoneware Awards. Luke Lindoe received awards in New York, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Turkey.

The Alberta Potters Association (APA) was formed in 1970, giving clay artists a collective voice. Treated like poor second cousins, the ceramists side-stepped the public gallery situation and forged their own exhibiting arena. The APA took on the challenge of hosting Ceramics International '73. Ceramic workshops, conferences, exhibitions, visiting instructors, a newsletter, and international involvement all became part of the continuing development of creative ceramics.

From its beginnings in 1974, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts gave ceramics the attention and support it was due. With over 350 works representing better than 140 clay artists, it rates as the best public collection of Alberta ceramics, giving testimony to the achievements of artists who have chosen clay as their medium of expression.

Alberta clay artists share a common heritage: ceramics is the one art form that has provincial roots and developed within the lifetime of one man—the modern who gave Alberta clay artists an advantage in the national ceramic scene—Luke Lindoe. He instinctively led his student disciples towards the idea of a clay metaphor. His best work executes sculptural concerns but with the compact solidity that can only come from clay. These we call typical Lindoes. For most sculptors, clay is just another medium; for Luke it was the essence of his art. Of late, Luke has focused on applied decoration. Using plate forms and plaques as canvas for his decorative ideas, he has produced a series of works of beauty for its own sake—his most sensitive works. Still productive in Medicine Hat as a clay artist on his 85th birthday, Luke is the grand old man of ceramics. No one has contributed so much to the Alberta clay industry and creative ceramic development.

Partly as a result of Luke's influence, art schools and community ceramic programs expanded, studios were established, and a market developed. Outsiders were attracted to Alberta. From other parts of Canada and other countries, ceramists came, settled in and contributed. The base built by Alberta potters was added to and diversified. Ceramics moved away from the limited idea of vessel metaphor. By the mid '80s the numbers of fine artists involved with clay had reached a peak. The initial clay aesthetic that set Alberta apart gave way to a greater range of influences. The range and diversity of the contemporary ceramic scene can be seen in the work of this sampling of potters:

### **Noboru Kubo (Edmonton)**

A fourth-generation Japanese potter trained in part by his father, Noboru moved to Canada in 1969, shortly after formal training in Kyoto. He brought with him pride in a Japanese tradition. He uses the wheel as the source of his ideas, his creative work born in the throwing. Flamboyantly this teacher/potter taxes both the medium and the means to the maximum, using the wheel's limitations to search for new forms. Centring brings material, mind and body together as one. Universal and timeless, the



*Town Council #2, 1979,  
stoneware, by Noboru Kubo.*



*Vase, 1991, stoneware, gold lustre, by Sam Uhlick.*

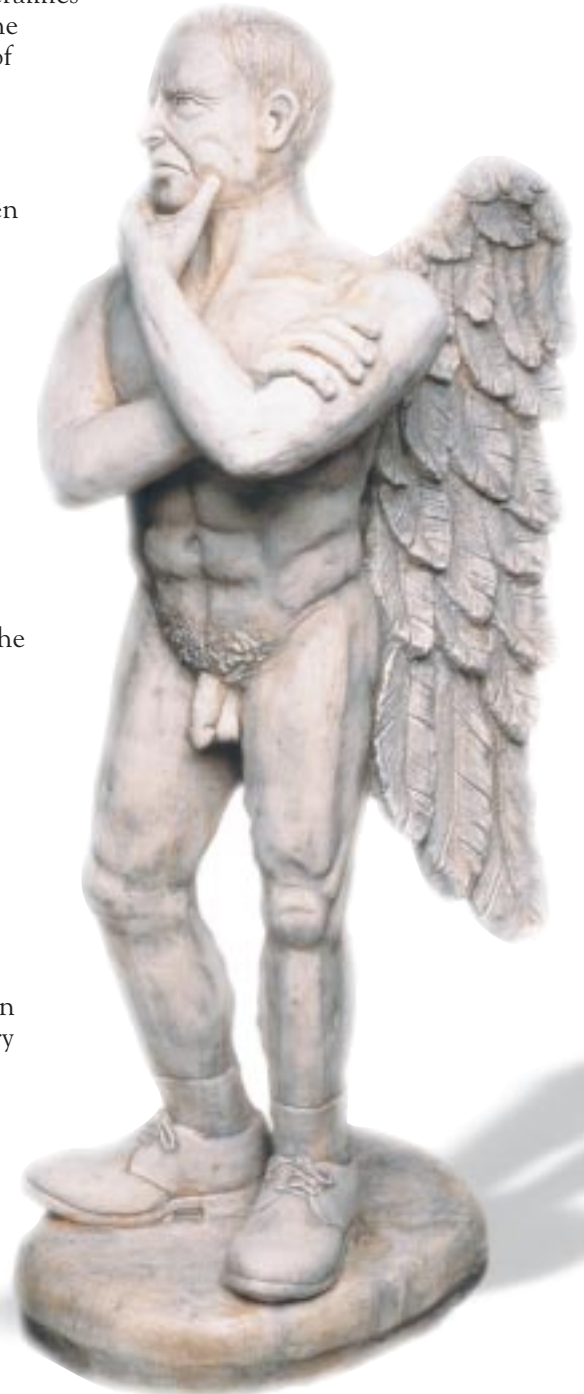
wheel-thrown object serves as metaphor for all clay artists, who see their world symbolized in the clay vessel. Like many potters, Noboru develops ideas in series, creating variations upon a theme. This allows for controlled exploration and testing relationships between form and decoration while developing a body of related works for exhibition.

### **Sam Uhlick (Ardrossan)**

In terms of functional ceramics it doesn't get any better than the work of the husband/wife partnership of Sam Uhlick and Antonia Huysman. Conceived and executed with care and attention to detail, the work is beautiful in its simplicity and consistent in its quality and design. Their pottery has been a mainstay in craft outlets in the Edmonton area for at least 25 years. Sam studied in Alberta and Nova Scotia and apprenticed in 1977 under Michael Cardew, the internationally renowned English potter. Working out of various studios, he finally established his own, first in his father's backyard, and now situated on an acreage near Ardrossan. Though he has now ventured into applied architectural design, Sam has never wavered from his original goals. Although he was inspired by the history of the Japanese tea bowl, it was the simple power of functional form that motivated his production of handmade functional pottery.

### **Garry Williams (Calgary)**

Questioning and deconstructing ideologies, the complex sculptural works of Garry Williams have their beginnings in storytelling. "Fallen Angel" was inspired by a mythic tale of war strategy. In this figure Williams parodies 18th c. porcelain tabletop figurines and at the same time satirizes contemporary male roles. Here is the corporate warrior contemplating strategies in brogues and socks. With its focus on cultural and social concerns, the allegorical aspect of his work dictates detail, scale and form, with colour playing a secondary role. Moving from sculptural pieces to installations has increased his range of materials and the complexity of the relationships among different pieces. His use of myth, complex techniques and the sheer scale of his work, make it fantastical. Clay is his chosen medium but social concern directs his purpose.



*Fallen Angel, 1998, porcelain and steel, by Garry Williams.*

### John Chalke (Calgary)

Born in England and self-taught as a ceramist, John brings to clay the sensitivity of the painter/sculptor. He arrived in Alberta in 1968 and has maintained a

consistent

international

exhibition profile,

now acknowledged as one of Alberta's leading

clay artists. Recently his work was purchased

by London's prestigious Victoria and Albert

Museum. John's work can seem quite

ordinary and unassuming, often an

understatement. There is no flash here;

rather, a measured sensitivity with the

hands-on appearance of folk pottery.



*Rhomboid Plate, 1987, glaze, by John Chalke.*



*Women's Work, 1996, clay, by Evelyn Grant.*

### Evelyn Grant (Calgary)

Not exactly your everyday functional

potter, Evelyn turns the domestic world of teapots and serving dishes into whimsical

works of art. Born in Ontario and trained in

Alberta, she has a 20-year history of exhibiting,

delighting audiences with her wonderful sense of

humour and the meticulous craftsmanship of her playful

clay constructions. Her work embraces a woman's world as

functional form serves as a base for decorative images and

narrative ideas. One is always surprised and fascinated

with her attention to detail, while being caught up with

the complexity of her clay entities.

### Barbara Tipton (Calgary)

Adding a very personal dimension to the ceramic

scene, Barbara arrived from the States in 1986 to

take her place in the Alberta ceramic community.

At the time, she was one of the very few clay

artists in Alberta with an M.F.A. in ceramics.

Casual yet weighted with purpose, her soft

clay-thrown pieces reflect the love and

respect she has for useful earthenware

pottery. At the other end of the scale, her

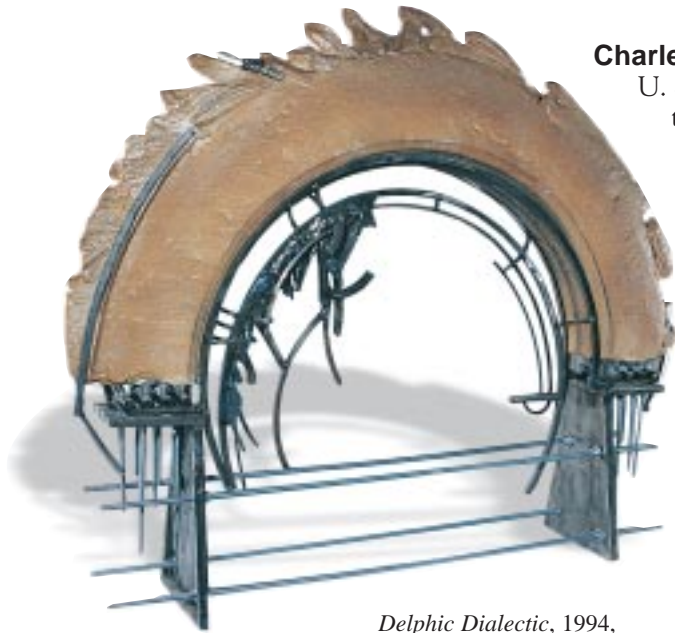
one-of-a-kind items often take the form of

wall-hanging plaques like relief sculpture. They

have expanded the vocabulary of Alberta ceramics.



*Caught Red Handed, 1996, clay, wheel-thrown, altered, by Barbara Tipton.*



### **Charles Wissinger (Red Deer)**

U. S.-born and trained, Charles Wissinger was awed by the forces of nature during his first visit to the Alberta Badlands. His work, organic in form, serves as metaphor for these experiences and reveals a passionate connection to the environment.

Charles collects materials from the remnants of life—metal from discarded farm implements, rope, hide and bone—all to be incorporated with clay for a series. His subject, man's relationship to history and nature, dictates a certain scale: a multi-media work executed as a commission in Norway ended up six metres tall. The works in progress, of varying scale, will not be completed until 2000.

*Delphic Dialectic*, 1994,  
wood-fired stoneware and steel, by Charles Wissinger.

### **Greg Payce (Calgary)**

Not suited for the typical craft outlet, Greg's work gets limited exposure in Alberta. As a teacher/clay artist moving in the circle of international symposiums and conferences, Greg exhibits in Toronto and New York. Unlike many of his ceramics colleagues, he comes to the medium with a broad formal training. Greg's conceptual work adds another dimension to contemporary Alberta ceramics. Greg uses the full range of technology although wheel throwing is still important to him. He plays with negative and positive form. For example, in "Freeze" our eyes can focus on the Grecian urns or the blue shapes formed by the "empty spaces" between them. In a reversal of expectation, the "urns" are two dimensional and the "emptiness" is given substance in three dimensional blue pottery. For Greg, idea and concept override material and process. Greg's approach to his art is pivotal for other young artists.

*Freeze*, detail, 1995,  
earthenware on wooden shelf, by Greg Payce.

