

From



Your Window  
Into the West

**For Immediate Release**

Contact: Jay Aldrich 323.667.2000, ext. 329

[jaldrich@autry-museum.org](mailto:jaldrich@autry-museum.org)

## **CALIFORNIA POTTERY: From Missions to Modernism Opens at the Autry Museum**

*July 4, 2003 through January 25, 2004*

LOS ANGELES – *California Pottery: From Missions to Modernism* will be on view in the George Montgomery Gallery.

This exhibition of the art of the everyday will present an unprecedented survey of aesthetically inventive and historically significant commercially produced tiles, tableware, gardenware, and accessories that were made between 1900 and 1955 by more than forty-five of the hundreds of commercial potteries that once flourished in California. The designs range from color-splashed interpretations of traditional forms to radical innovations that changed the way we live. Bill Stern, executive director of the Museum of California Design, curated the exhibition, which was drawn from forty-four California collections.

Practical pottery was first made in California by indigenous peoples, but the first pottery multiples were formed from local red clay at Spanish colonial missions and military outposts toward the end of the eighteenth century. This same type of clay was used by the commercial pottery industry that burgeoned—along with the state's population—in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was then that California pottery producers began freeing themselves from the European ceramic traditions that had dominated American taste since the founding of the republic. Their fresh contributions to American design were strongly influenced by the cultures with which only California has had the most interaction: Mexican, Spanish-Moorish, Chinese, and Japanese.

By the 1930s, when California pottery's solid-color revolution swept America from west to east, the state already enjoyed an unparalleled reputation for innovation. California's commercial potteries would be renowned for remarkable shapes and decorations designed by such recognized figures as tile maker Ernest Batchelder, painter/illustrator Rockwell Kent, and ceramic designers Edith Heath and Beatrice Wood. They are, of course, represented in this exhibition, but also on view are designs created by numerous heretofore-unheralded talents, among them Daniel Gale Turnbull, Jane Bennison, Frank Irwin, Barbara Willis, George James, Malcolm Leland, and LaGardo Tackett.

**(more)**

Between 1941 and 1945, some of California's large commercial potteries focused on the defense effort, while hundreds of smaller producers imitated the English and Japanese dinnerware and decorative items no longer available on the American market.

The immediate post–World War II decade, however, was a time of extraordinary innovation, out of which came much of the subsequent good design in commercial American ceramics. During this period J. A. Bauer; Gladding, McBean/Franciscan; Metlox; Vernon Kilns; and other California potteries added modernist designs to their lines. But even before this development, the new era was heralded by two young ceramists—Barbara Willis and Edith Heath—who would make lasting contributions to the quality of commercial ceramic design in America. Their work, as shown in this exhibition, is notable for its unprecedented introduction of studio pottery techniques and aesthetic standards into commercial pottery production.

This overwhelmingly colorful exhibition ends with some eye-catching color-free work by a company whose fifty-year-old designs seem remarkably modern even today. Ever since Architectural Pottery was established in Los Angeles in 1950, its white cylindrical planters and other ceramic forms—and their imitators—have greeted us in office buildings, banks, and other public places, as well as in private homes. And, unlike other commercial California potteries, Architectural Pottery was honored right from the beginning: products from its very first catalog were selected for inclusion in the 1951 Good Design exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Although the production of some of the pieces in this exhibition involved varying degrees of hand finishing, they were all made as multiples for commercial distribution and are not artworks in the conventional sense of the term. It is no surprise, however, that even when the creator of an individual commercial piece cannot be identified, his or her mark is inherent in its design. What is astonishing is that many of these works had never been exhibited publicly before their inclusion in this exhibition.

*California Pottery: From Missions to Modernism* was organized by the Museum of California Design, based on the exhibition originally designed and presented by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in collaboration with the Museum of California Design.

### **About the Autry Museum**

The Autry Museum of Western Heritage provides rich learning opportunities for all people by exploring the myths and realities of the American West and its diverse populations. The museum enhances our understanding of the present by collecting, preserving, and interpreting objects and art, making connections between people today and those who have shaped the past.

The Autry Museum receives approximately 330,000 visitors annually and each year provides free guided tours and educational activities for more than 40,000 area school-children. It is located in Griffith Park at 4700 Western Heritage Way, across from the Los Angeles Zoo, where the 5 and 134 freeways meet. Admission is \$7.50 for adults, \$5.00 for seniors and students, and \$3.00 for children. The Autry Museum is open from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, and on major holidays except Thanksgiving and Christmas. On Thursdays, the museum is open from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Find out more about *California Pottery: From Missions to Modernism* by visiting the Autry Museum's Web site at [www.autry-museum.org](http://www.autry-museum.org).

**NOTE:** COLOR IMAGES ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

Call 323.667.2000, ext. 329, or e-mail: [jaldrich@autry-museum.org](mailto:jaldrich@autry-museum.org).

Or visit the Press Room at [www.autry-museum.org](http://www.autry-museum.org) for downloadable images.