
Frans Wildenhain 1950-75: Creative and Commercial American Ceramics at Mid-Century was published alongside a major retrospective exhibition of the ceramist’s work presented at the Bevier Gallery and Dyer Arts Center, both at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), in fall of 2012. Going well beyond the traditional biography of the artist and his works, the catalog contextualizes the cultural, academic, and economic factors of the mid-twentieth century that influenced not only Wildenhain’s career, but also the state of contemporary American craft.

Wildenhain and his first wife, Marguerite, were products of the Bauhaus pottery school in Germany in the 1920s. After immigrating to the United States in the 1940s, Marguerite’s ceramics career overshadowed that of her husband, causing tension in the relationship, which author Bruce Austin, a professor in RIT’s College of Liberal Arts and organizer of the exhibition, comprehensively documents in his biography of the artist. Reaching a breaking point, Frans left Marguerite and in 1950 came to RIT as one of the founding professors of the School of American Craftsmen (SAC). Through firsthand access to unpublished notebooks from the RIT archives and interviews with students, Austin records the artist’s boisterous, often challenging disposition, as well as his brilliant achievements as a leader in the post-World War II studio pottery movement. It is a commendable job cataloging information on the life of an artist not collectively documented in other publications.

The four chapters after the artist’s biography include a scholarly orientation to the history of the SAC by RIT archivist Becky Simmons, followed by a tidy introduction to post-World War II studio pottery by Jonathan Clancy of Sotheby’s. Austin rounds out the last two chapters with an essay on Shop One, a retail outlet that Wildenhain and three colleagues initiated in the 1950s to sell handcrafted objects in Rochester, as well as an enlightening interview with Robert Bradley Johnson, the donor of Wildenhain works who made the exhibition possible.

Exhaustively researched and stunningly presented, this book is illustrated with a compendium of photographs of Wildenhain’s sculptures, earthenware pots, and ceramic murals, alongside essential archival images of the artist, the SAC, and Shop One. Although the bibliographic notes are extensive, the text lacks an index, which is unfortunate given the depth of information provided. Also absent are sufficient images of works by contemporaries illuminated so comprehensively in the later essays. Nonetheless, this catalog is highly recommended for any library collecting materials on ceramics, mid-century decorative arts and design, and the post-WWII arts marketplace.

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