

Architectural POTTERY

Immersed in postwar optimism, this innovative ceramic company reimaged planter and garden sculpture, radically embracing the future of design.

By **Brenda Klug and Jackie Torres**
Photos courtesy of **Phaidon**

THE ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY SHOW-ROOM ON ROBERTSON BOULEVARD IN THE MID 1960S. PHOTO CREDIT: MAX AND RITA LAWRENCE, ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY RECORDS (COLLECTION 1587). UCLA LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, CHARLES E. YOUNG RESEARCH LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES.

(RIGHT) A PAGE FROM THE ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY ISSUE 64 SHOWS A SELECTION OF PLANTERS IN VARIOUS MATTE GLAZES WITH A "MUTED LUSTRE." COLORED GLAZES WERE INTRODUCED BY DAVID CRESSEY. PRIOR TO HIS WORK, MOST OF THE ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY'S PLANTERS CAME ONLY IN BLACK, WHITE AND UNGLAZED BISQUE. PHOTO CREDIT: PRIVATE COLLECTION



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| <p>T-101 unglazed off-white glazed matte white or glazed matte black</p> <p>10.30 13.50</p> | <p>T-22 unglazed off-white glazed matte white or glazed matte black</p> <p>15.50 19.50</p> | <p>23 L with 3 long-burning candles in glass holders</p> <p>natural red terra-cotta 24.50 unglazed off-white 24.50 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 34.50 special order: additional lantern sections natural red terra-cotta or unglazed off-white 5.00 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 7.00</p> |
| <p>TH-01 unglazed off-white glazed matte white or glazed matte black</p> <p>10.30 13.50</p> | <p>U-6 unglazed off-white 38.00 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 54.00 special order: 12\"/> <p>9.50</p> </p> | <p>TRIENNALE Suggested totem sculptures to mount on your metal pipe. See "11\"/> </p> |
| <p>T-102 unglazed off-white 15.00 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 19.50</p> | <p>U-9 unglazed off-white 43.50 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 63.50 special order: 12\"/> <p>9.50</p> </p> | <p>CORK MATS Imported Danish cork mats 9 3/4\"/> <p>cork mats in metal pans 12\"/> </p></p> |
| <p>TH-02 unglazed off-white 15.00 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 19.50</p> | <p>U-12 unglazed off-white 80.00 glazed matte white or glazed matte black 105.00 special order: 12\"/> <p>9.50</p> </p> | <p>SAND SIFTER black expanded metal for use with sand urns 2.20</p> |

(LEFT) MAX AND RITA LAWRENCE, C. 1959. PHOTO CREDIT: BOB LOPEZ; LAWRENCE FAMILY ARCHIVE

Inspired Beginnings

Thanks in part to Entenza and his now-iconic publication *Art & Architecture*, Los Angeles was a hotbed of Modern design. It was the LA-based California School of Art where the transformation away from the typical Spanish- and Italian style of pottery began—a class assignment to be exact. “Cerapist LaGardo Tackett, an instructor [at the school] initiated the class assignment for a group of nine industrial design students ... to design and produce a line of large-scale ceramic gardenware” that was to be marketable and nationally available, the authors write.

The students, who were taken to a local manufacturer in East Los Angeles, started assessing, evaluating and manipulating the many existing molds at the factory. They started scraping off the grapes and classical adornments from the pottery molds and experimented with combining molds or cutting them in half. “The results were geometric and biomorphic pots devoid of ornament that expressed a new direction in the postwar, modernist aesthetic,” the authors write.

Those students would later put on an exhibition of their new radical work, and while they struggled to sell any, two of them, Rex Goode and John Follis, decided to open up their own studio and pottery shop just a few doors away from Max Lawrence. Lawrence, an experienced entrepreneur and patron of the modern arts, was enamored and drawn to the young men’s passion and commitment to daring and different design. Incidentally, Max’s wife, Rita, who shared similar passions and interests as all three men in the modern arts, was yearning to start her own venture. It was decided that Goode and Follis would partner with the Lawrences, with Max funding operations and Rita as president, to form Architectural Pottery.

Architectural Pottery found success in its functional, pared-down approach to garden vessels—a radical design concept at the time. With Rita at the helm, the company expanded its production of planters and garden urns to include trash cans, ashtrays, stoneware lamps, tiles and even fiberglass benches and seating.



IN 1945, JOHN ENTENZA LAUNCHED the groundbreaking Case Study House project, which aimed to inspire, influence and convince the world at large of a new modern way of living. Five years later, his friends Max and Rita Lawrence launched their company Architectural Pottery. Born out of Los Angeles, where many of the Case Study houses were concentrated, they aimed to produce pots and planters that looked like they belonged in these homes. The company, responsible for some of the era’s most striking and iconic planters and ceramics, spanned three decades. *Architectural Pottery, Ceramics for a Modern Landscape* by Dan Chavkin, Jeffrey Head and Jo Lauria is the first book to document the history, evolution and lasting impact of this groundbreaking studio.

THE RETAIL PRICE LIST PAGE FROM ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY 1961 RETAIL PRICE LIST. PHOTO CREDIT: LAWRENCE FAMILY ARCHIVE

By 1965, the product line swelled to 200 pieces. Architectural Pottery's products flooded both the residential and commercial markets, became highly coveted in the design world and even forayed into pop culture with the Leland lantern appearing in an episode of *Star Trek*.

Modernistic Style

Dan Chavkin, one of the book's authors (and frequent photographer for *Atomic Ranch*) describes the first time he encountered a piece of Architectural Pottery at a mid-century home in Palm Springs. "At that moment, upon seeing it, I understood that this and the geometric shapes of the other planters were radically different from the decorative Spanish-influenced, terra-cotta planters I grew up seeing," he says.

Architectural Pottery was marketed to the art and design crowd and garnered plenty of press for their eye-catching and bold work. Their showroom became a nexus for artists, designers and critics. The couple was always on the lookout for new talent. Whether a designer's piece of pottery was on display at a prominent art event or a studio space filled with unique hand-thrown vessels turned their heads, Max and Rita were eager to onboard hardworking visionaries. In some cases, as with Paul McCobb, the attraction was mutual.

David Cressey was one such artist who joined in the 1960s and left an indelible mark on the Architectural Pottery brand. Credited for bringing the company into the technicolor era, Cressey developed original glaze formulas and reduction-fired stoneware designs in a variety of earthy hues. Prior to this development, Architectural Pottery had offered its planters in black and white with a matte finish. Under Cressey's design stewardship, the company evolved from clean-lined, unadorned bowl shapes to "organic, rough-hewn, earthy and expressionistic" forms. Rita and her team worked tirelessly to be on the forefront of Mid Century Modern design in all its forms.

In addition to providing the full history of Architectural Pottery, the convening events that spawned the creation of the company as well as a full detail of the company's reach in the design world, the authors overview 10 other prominent designers and how each one brought a unique perspective, passion and vision to the company. From perfecting the goblet shape to introducing more intricate hanging and standing lanterns, each designer had a crucial role in the formation of Architectural Pottery's style.

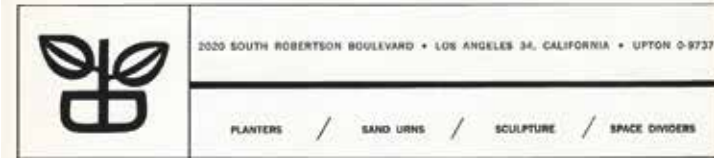
A BISQUE GROUPING OF ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY, INCLUDING LA GARDO TACKETT'S K-50, MARYLYN KAY AUSTIN'S AT-3, TACKETT'S CS-27 AND PAUL MCCOBB'S M-1. PHOTO CREDIT: DAN CHAVKIN, 2023



The Impact

Architectural Pottery enjoyed a wide level of appeal in America during the 1950s, '60s and '70s. From designers to architects and from commercial spaces to homes, there seemed to be a visceral need for bits of earth molded with a modern edge. The company's pieces were hot items in the interior design community and collections were used in houses by Richard Neutra, John Lautner and the historic Case Study Houses. At one point, Architectural Pottery's products were so heavily used in the commercial market that Max Lawrence once quipped, "Wilshire Boulevard is almost an embarrassment to us. The plants growing in front of every major building are in our pots." In addition, this innovative company could be found in such publications as *House Beautiful* and was on the receiving end of a slew of prestigious awards.

ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY



March 1961

COVER, ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY CATALOG, 1961.
PHOTO CREDIT: PRIVATE COLLECTION

With more than 250 unique shapes coming in various glazes and surface textures, Architectural Pottery pieces have been collectible from the start. The book is a treasure trove of historical photos and imagery, with some products that most modernists would know by name (such as the Bullet, Cone and Egg planters) and others that are just as recognizable yet take on new meaning when you realize they were born out of this famous company. Dan and Jo explain some of the reasoning behind their collectability, saying, "The overall spirit of collecting them feels like acquiring studio pottery: collecting one-off, unique pieces even though they were made from molds." With the reemergence of MCM design in contemporary America, Architectural Pottery pieces can greatly add to the mid mod design concept.

Rita had an exceptional eye for design and the drive to create a company with lasting impact on the MCM design world. "We wanted to produce the classics of the future. We would decline to produce something just innovative, new for new. There always had to be a real need to provide something that no one else was providing and to be true in design," she says. 🌱



THE BACK COVER FROM THE 1961 ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY CATALOG PROVIDES A QUICK LOOK AT THE COMPANY'S MANY FAMOUS SILHOUETTES. PHOTO CREDIT: PRIVATE COLLECTION

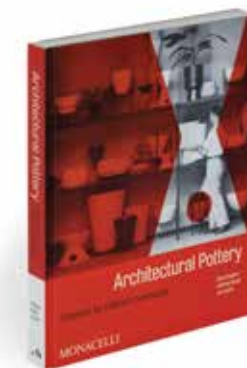
Famous & Fabulous

ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY WAS KNOWN FOR ITS UNIQUE AND HIGHLY CURATED DESIGNS DURING THE HEIGHT OF THE MCM MOVEMENT. BELOW ARE SOME OF THE MOST FAMOUS DESIGNS THEY PRODUCED.

F-507 Follis "Peanut" planter - John Follis designed the F-507 planter as part of that first assignment and it's endured since. The Lawrence purchased the planter and it became one of the seven original pieces used to launch AP in 1950. This planter is shaped like a peanut shell cut in half and it is now one of the most famous Architectural Pottery designs.

Leland lanterns - Malcolm Leland was a prominent designer who focused on fine art and sculptural forms. His lanterns in particular have become a favorite among designers and collectors. In fact, in Dan Chavkin's book *Star Trek: Designing the Final Frontier: How Midcentury Modernism Shaped Our View of the Future*, he describes how a Leland lantern was painted black, filled with multicolored lights and used in a *Star Trek* episode.

The David Cressey planter with flame glaze - David Cressey was an innovative studio artist and teacher who brought color, texture and sizable planters to Architectural Pottery designs. He is known for developing glazes that when exposed to very high temperatures create fascinating colors. Dan and Jo explain: "With the David Cressey planters/sculptures, the overall spirit of collecting them feels like acquiring studio pottery: collecting one-off, unique pieces even though they were made from molds."



ARCHITECTURAL POTTERY, CERAMICS FOR A MODERN LANDSCAPE BY DAN CHAVKIN, JEFFREY HEAD AND JO LAURIA, PUBLISHED BY MONACELLI © 2024; MONACELLI.COM.