CLAY : PETER VOULKOS

HANDWORK Celebrating American Craft 2026

MEET Peter Voulkos. **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work.
MAKE an artwork inspired by the artist. **REFLECT** on your finished artwork.

MEET

MEET PETER VOULKOS, abstract expressionist ceramist.

"When I went to school, I studied painting. I wanted to be a painter. But I was forced into doing a clay course to get out of school. So I took that class and that completely changed my life right there. As soon as I started feeling that clay, that was a big change for me. I couldn't paint anymore. It was just gone completely."

—Peter Voulkos

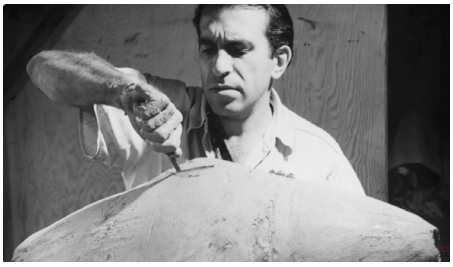
Peter Voulkos in his studio. Photo by Carol Sauvion.

THE MEDIUM OF CLAY has evolved in its form and function as a creative material since earliest times. Early vessel makers experimented with embellishment to beautify the surfaces of functional pottery. Artisans created clay bricks of customizable shapes and sizes for architectural construction. People have used clay to make musical instruments, record information, and contain and serve food and drink, among many other functions. However, when Peter Voulkos began to experiment with functional pottery as an expressive medium in the 1950's, he transformed these longstanding clay traditions into something entirely new.

Peter Voulkos pioneered a new approach to ceramics after teaching a three-week summer course in 1953 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. During this time, Voulkos was introduced to poetry, dance, and experimental music and met Josef Albers, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage. His experiences while working among these visionaries at Black Mountain shifted the direction of his creative work away from the traditional functional forms embraced by the ceramics community of the time. Initially upsetting to many who encountered his new work, he was unshaken by early negative criticism and ultimately spearheaded an approach not seen before in the craft world.

Peter Voulkos is described as an abstract expressionist—a label more broadly associated with painting. Like abstract expressionist painters, Voulkos's pottery is known for monumental-scale and non-representational composition that invites viewer attention across the entire surface of a work. Often creating wheel-thrown vessels that are distorted, cut apart, and reconstructed in ways that render the result non-functional, Peter Voulkos inspired generations of ceramists over the course of his career to lead with daring and curiosity, often pushing beyond the boundaries and limitations of tradition.

WATCH



SEE AND LISTEN TO Peter Voulkos describing his life as an abstract expressionist ceramist.

https://youtu.be/c7E_qAMZGk0

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Recall some of the different kinds of ceramic forms you saw in the video.
- What do you think? Can a ceramic object be both functional and sculptural?
- In the video, Peter Voulkos explains that he originally wanted to be a painter, until he later realized a preference for clay. How is clay different from paint, as an expressive artistic medium? Do you have a personal preference for clay or paint? Why?
- What makes Peter Voulkos an abstract expressionist ceramist? Search the internet to find out more about abstract expressionism. What does Voulkos have in common with abstract expressionist painters?
- The pottery world was initially upset with Peter Voulkos when he began to create non-functional, sculptural pottery. Why do you think they were upset?
- According to Peter Voulkos, he doesn't always expect to be understood. Why do you think he might not be understood by some audiences?

MAKE

MAKE YOUR OWN piece of non-functional pottery. Your clay pot can be hand-built using slab, pinching, or coiling methods. If you have access to a pottery wheel, you may be able to enlist someone to teach you how to use it to create a vessel. As you work, think about how you might distort and reassemble your pot to create a sculptural form.

- What kind of pot will you make, distort, and reassemble?
- Consider the kind of vessel form you hope to begin with. For example, a vase. What would a vase need for it to function as a vase? How might you change the vase so that it stops being functional? What would you need to think about if you decided to make a different kind of vessel, such as a cup, a bowl, or a plate?
- Will you use the slab, coil, or pinch method to create your non-functional object? Refer to the CLAY: MEDIUM & METHODS sheet in your packet for instructions.

Peter Voulkos, *Untitled Tea Bowl,* c.1972, stoneware with porcelain incidents, wheel-thrown and altered vessel form, Courtesy of Forrest L. Merrill, M. Lee Fatheree photograph

- Recall that Peter Voulkos's pots are thought of as expressive, suggesting moods or feelings. Will you try to suggest a mood or feeling—calm, peaceful, energized, joyful, or agitated?
- Think about how a person might interact with your piece. Will a person hold it? What do you have to think about if the answer is yes? Will your piece stand on its own? What will you need to think about in order for it to do so?
- How will you finish your pot? If possible, have it fired in a kiln. Will you decorate the surface? Will you use glaze or paint?
- If you do not have access to clay that can be fired and glazed, consider other kinds of clay—self-drying, plasticene, salt-clay, polymer clay, for example. Follow directions available with these products.

REFLECT

LOOK at your finished product. Think about the process.

- What did you make? Did you choose to distort or reassemble the pieces of your pot? Why or why not?
- Do you think your finished pot is expressive? If so, what mood or feeling do you think it suggests?
- Are you pleased with your finished pot? Why or why not?
- Would you try to make a non-functional pot again? What will you do next time?
- What else would you like to make out of clay?