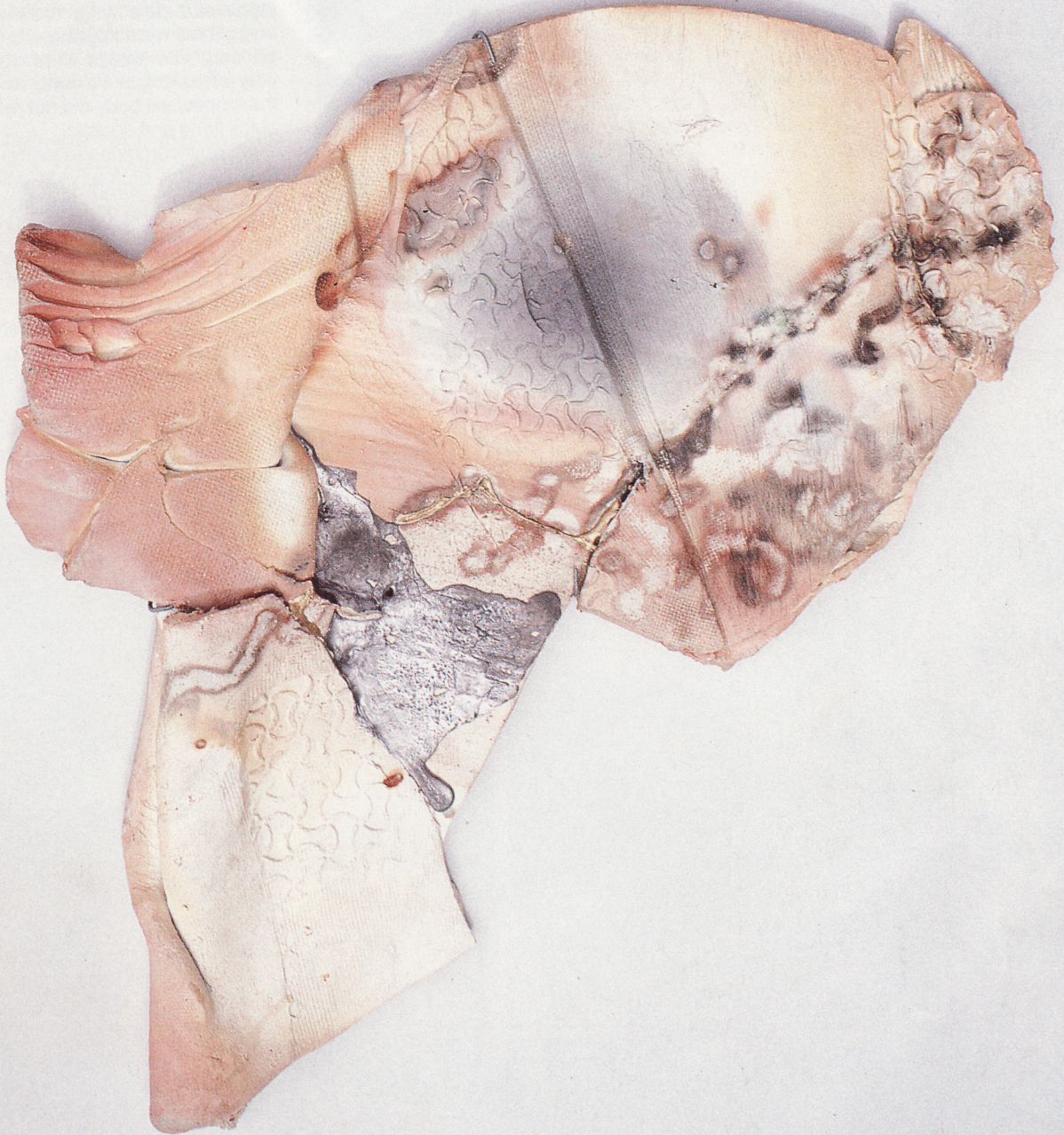


# PAUL SOLDNER



*Ceramic Series*

No. 22

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU

**ABERYSTWYTH**

ARTS CENTRE

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# PAUL SOLDNER

Ceramic

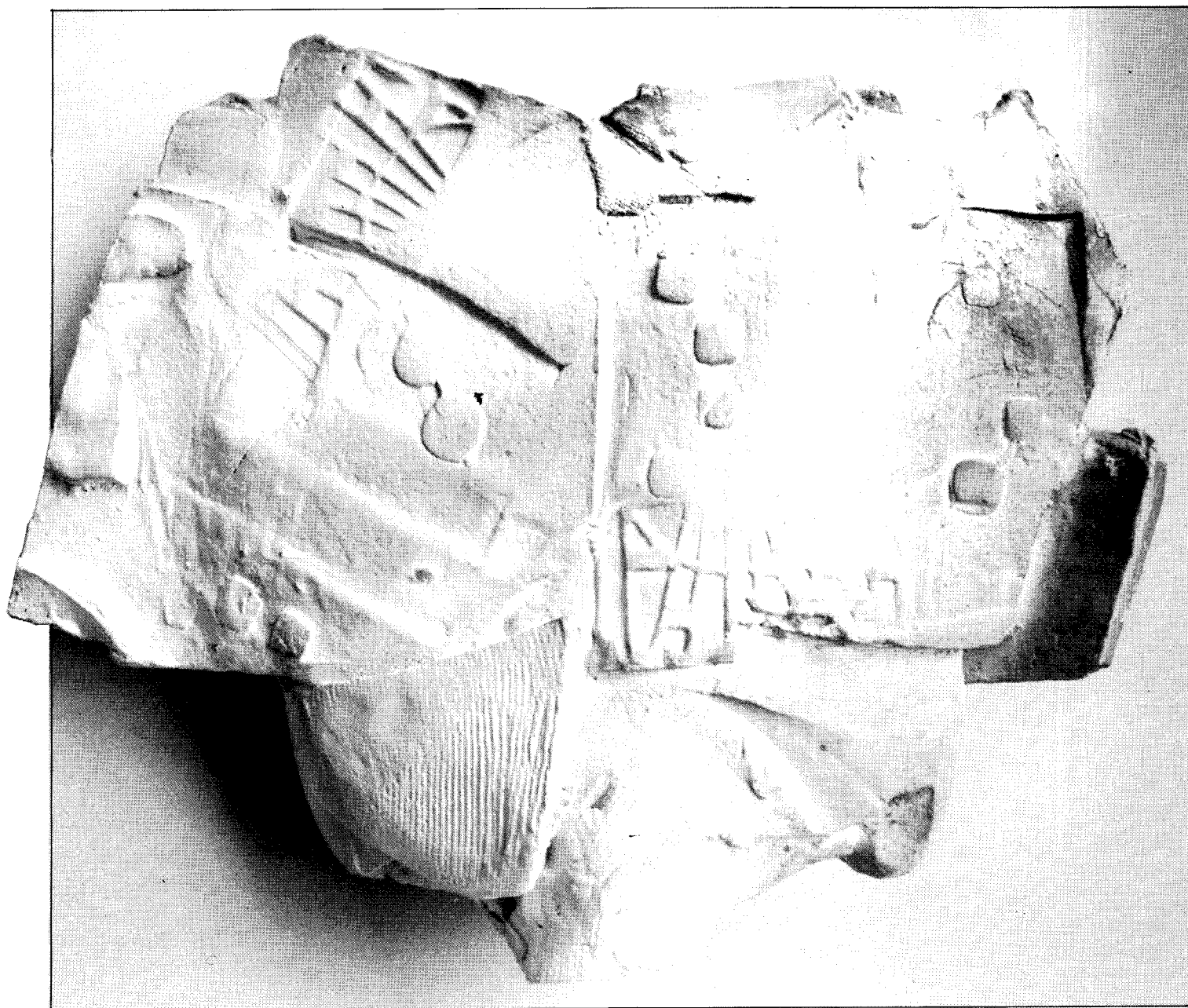
To most people in this country the name Paul Soldner is inevitably linked with that form of pottery known as raku. It was in 1960, and then only by chance, that he became involved with this medium.

He was first introduced to ceramics by Katie Horsman (Head of Ceramics, Edinburgh College of Art) when she was a visiting lecturer to the U.S.A. in 1954. That summer Paul Soldner decided to become a potter. He enrolled at the Los Angeles County Art Institute where Peter Voulkos was teaching; amongst his fellow students were John Mason, Ken Price, Jerry Rothman and Henry Takemoto. It was a period of great experiment for American ceramics

in which the function of an object was no longer considered of paramount importance. Ceramics was seen to be a medium of expression in which full rein should be given to chance and spontaneity. Accepted norms and beliefs were questioned; not only regarding the articles and objects that were made but also the ways in which clay could be used. It was against this background of experiment and freedom that his own work developed. Unlike his contemporaries however Soldner continued to make functional ceramic objects and saw the 'vessel' as an important inspiration for his work. After obtaining his Masters Degree he combined potting and teaching with designing and making kick and power wheels.

In 1960 he was asked to provide an interesting pottery demonstration for students at a Crafts Fair. So, he thought, 'why not try Raku?'. All he knew was what he had read in 'A Potter's Book' by Bernard Leach. A simple kiln was built, biscuited stoneware pots lying around were used and glazes were improvised, mainly based on lead. The results were disappointing – very shiny bright colours, and in addition the stoneware body did not respond well to quick firing and cooling.

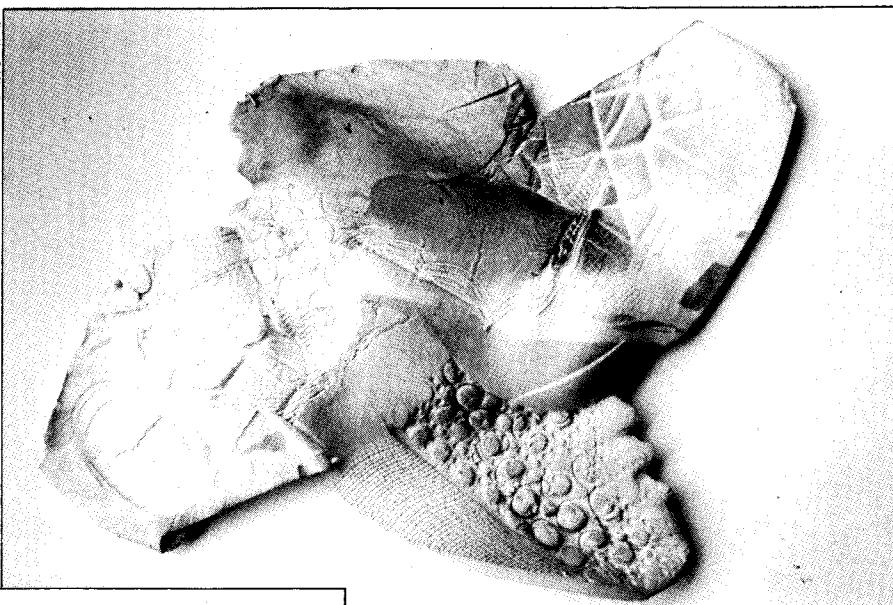
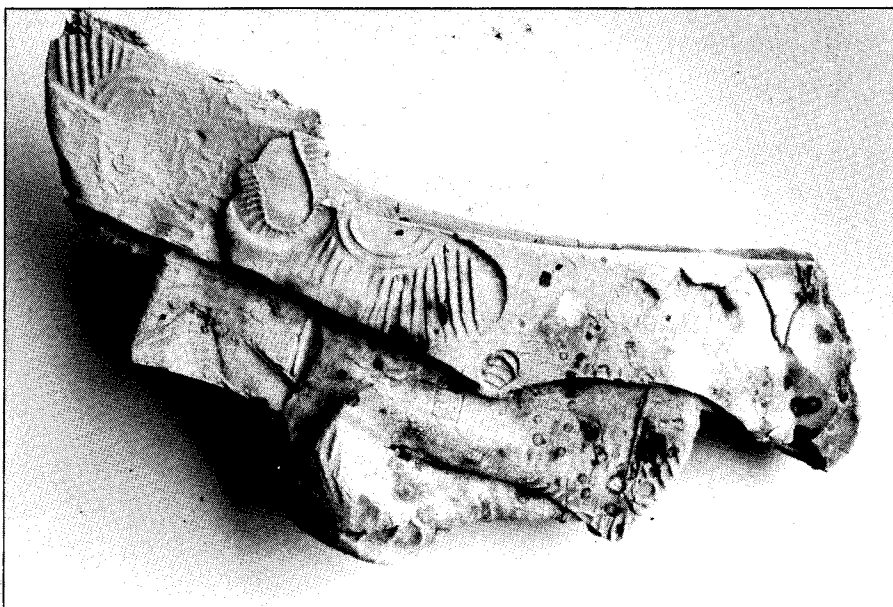
He now combines teaching in California four months of the year with living and potting the rest of the time in Aspen, Colorado. His work is included in many public collections in the U.S.A. and is illustrated in many publications.



In the past several years, I have been involved in the making of a kind of pottery which has come to be known as raku. But difficulty has arisen over this name because it means many different things to different people. It has been described as a technique, a specialised product, a state of mind and even a religious experience. For me, it has been all of these things and more. But to define raku in one word is all but impossible.

Traditional Japanese raku, and historically the first raku, incorporated a masterful command of assymetric balance in design, a highly developed tactile sensibility in appreciation of materials, and a virtuosity of decorative techniques which all combined into a unified whole. The overall effect was one of spontaneity achieved in the finished work and characterised by a feeling of an intimate, transitory, insubstantial play of shadows.

The term raku was derived from the Chinese character meaning enjoyment, pleasure, contentment, ease and was the seal used by a dynasty of potters, whose work over fourteen generations formed the central tradition of raku. The first of these potters, Chojiro, was under the patronage of Sen-no-Rikyu, a great tea master of the late 16th century, who found in the tea utensil created for him by Chojiro, the epitome of refined simplicity which lies at the heart of every element of the Zen Buddhist tea ceremony. With the death of Chojiro in 1592, his son Jokei continued the raku tradition. It was this son who received, from the warlord Hideyoshi, the raku seal. The most renowned raku potters have been: Donyu (1574-1656) third generation of the raku family; Hon'ami Koyetsu (1556-1637) one of Japan's greatest artist craftsmen and Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743).



Experiments in raku making by American potters first began after reading about it in 'A Potter's Book' by Bernard Leach. He described a garden party which he had attended in Japan. The guests were given small tea bowls to decorate with glaze. These were then dried and fired rather quickly by placing them in a small charcoal kiln. After the low fire glaze had melted, the tea bowls were removed from the kiln to be quenched in cold water. Tea was then served in the newly made vessels. Because it was the practice to make such vessels at parties and because of the accompanying climate of celebration, many potters have come to associate the word raku with a unique process of firing tea bowls quickly and in an entertaining fashion. It has even been given the name instant ceramics and unfortunately in that sense, raku making has moved from the

art of creating vessels of profound beauty by the most sensitive potters of their time, to pots common in concept made by potters interested in little more than their own amazement.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the meaning of raku has arisen from the fact that there is a tendency to classify things in technical terms rather than by feeling. Thus we have substituted the method of making pottery for the meaning it may have had. In an attempt to return to the original meaning of raku, it might be helpful to first state what it is not. It is not necessarily:

A low fire temperature technique.

The ware is not necessarily placed into a preheated kiln.

It is not necessarily cooled in cold water.

It is not necessarily smoked or reduced.

The ware does not always consist of tea bowls.

If raku is not technique alone, then it needs to be defined by other means. What remains most descriptive, I believe, is to think of its being pottery made within a mental framework of expectation, and the discovery of things not sought. With the exception of the term, 'serendipity', I know of no other single English word as suitable as 'raku'.

The implication I have tried to make has been to suggest that raku is an attitude more than a technique or process.

Raku offers Western culture insight into new concepts of beauty. Whereas we have long admired balanced symmetry, unblemished surfaces and rigid machine like control as examples of perfect craftsmanship, raku, in contrast, places emphasis upon the beauty of the accidental and spontaneous, assymetry, value of and appreciation for nature, undominated or controlled by man.

This is not to say that raku requires little control or training. Indeed, unless it is approached with respect and experience gained from prolonged involvement with its aesthetic and physical limitations, the making of raku becomes little more than an amusing parlour trick.

In the spirit of raku, there is a necessity to embrace the element of surprise. There can be no fear of losing what was once planned and there must be an urge to grow along with discovery of the unknown. In the spirit of raku: make no demands, expect nothing, follow no absolute plan, be secure in change, learn to accept another solution, and finally prefer to gamble on your intuition.

Raku offers us deeper understanding of those qualities in pottery which are of a more spiritual nature, of pots made by men willing and able to create objects which have meaning as well as function.

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*Photography by Keith Morris.*

