

**Robert Turner:
A Remembrance**

By Helen W. Drutt English



A.

In 1755, Samuel Johnson said, "If a man does not make new acquaintances, as he advances through life, he will find himself alone." We are not alone, we belong to a community of individuals who have enriched our existence by giving form to our life through their creative work. Among them was Robert Turner. When I reflect on Bob, I remember a favorite book, *Van Loon's Lives*, by Hendrik van Loon, which established a concept of social and professional dialogue that became an important part of my thinking. The notion of bringing together great minds from different disciplines and periods in history for dinner and conversation was intriguing. Just imagine Spinoza, Mozart, Joan of Arc, and Robert Turner at dinner exchanging ideas. Bob Turner would sit quietly at the table discussing who we are as human beings – his presence always brought back to us an awareness and sensitivity of being one with the natural world. As he wrote in *Studio Potter* in 1982, "Our identity with the universe is as close as I can get to what we are talking about. What we are, what we can discover from exposing our sensibilities, from being vulnerable, from being quiet and letting things speak back to us. It is not identity in the isolated sense, but identity in its joining sense. One hopes that one doesn't miss entirely the natural world and its order..." We can only imagine the responses from Spinoza, Mozart, and Joan of Arc, and now, perhaps, there is an opportunity for that to actually occur.

I first met Robert Turner in the early 1970s, on the opening of my eponymous gallery, in Philadelphia. My immediate response to his work was slow, for the dynamics of his ceramics were internal and I was still in a period of extensive learning. Robert Turner devoted himself to the medium of stoneware; his monochromatic surfaces were sandblasted and incised with subtle alterations in essential symmetry of their wheel-thrown forms.¹ They looked ancient but were contemporary and serene and contemplative, reflecting the peaceful continence of the Robert Turner we all came to know. I remember both Bill Daley and Wayne Higby instructing me as to how I should observe as well as absorb Turner's pots. They weren't high and they weren't low, they weren't soft and they weren't hard – but just right. I was advised to look at simple forms that expressed the reductive spirit of complex thinking. Turner was undergoing a gradual transition from functional work to more

esoteric forms that related to his extensive journeys; works entitled *the life*, the *Ashanti*, the *Canyon de Chelly* were coming into their own, and referred to primordial cultures and the geography of western Africa and the American Southwest. I came to understand the Canyon de Chelly form when I visited the actual site with its shaved terra cotta walls that inspired Turner's pots. Growing with the work of an artist is a great privilege in life.

Clay and gold are materials central to the craftsman's world. When I think of Bob Turner, I remember Isaiah's cry: "We are the clay, oh Lord, and thou, our potter," – Robert Turner embraced that sense of being in his work with Sue Turner, his wife, beside him for sixty-seven years. It was always Bob and Sue. She was the gold that comes from the dust metaphorically buried in the body for a lifetime on earth; in this sense, gold is a symbol of the soul.² Their joint commitment to liberal causes in politics and social justice, their dedication to Quaker beliefs, the delight they took in their family, and friends, and their reserved philanthropic spirit were emblematic of them. As a couple, they shared an extraordinary lifetime.

Robert was a gentle and profound intellectual, a visionary whose mystic presence was sometimes masked with humor. Tall, graceful, and quiet, his hands gently stroked the clay when at the wheel, or, when dancing, reached into the air like a magic wand. He honored his peers and took delight in their successes and recognition; he also enjoyed his own successes and savored his recognition. In my role as a go-between, I have been trusted by artists to bring their work into the public forum. The trust bestowed upon me by Robert Turner took me on a journey to places both spiritual and physical that I had never previously known. His artistic legacy as well as his soul will continue to live in his work.

Helen W. Drutt English
Founder/Director, Helen Drutt: Philadelphia
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¹ News release, Helen Drutt Gallery, 1989.

² Haviva Pedaya, *Beaten Gold*, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, 2005, p. 22.



B.



C.



D.

A.
Robert Turner
Ceremonial Tureen, 1975-76
Glazed and sandblasted
stoneware
12 x 16
private collection
Photo: Steve Myers

B.
Robert Turner
Owerri, 1994
Glazed and sandblasted
stoneware 11 x 11
Photo: Brian Oglesbee

C.
Robert Turner
Vase, 1993
Glazed and sandblasted
stoneware
19 x 18
Photo: Brian Oglesbee

D.
Robert Turner
Canyon, 1995
Glazed and sandblasted
stoneware 10.25h
Photo: Brian Oglesbee

Recalling Bob Turner: Finding the Words

By Wayne Higby

We meet
to part again.
I have no words
to respond
to this double
Inspiration.

Wen Chao
10th century, China

In 1970 Viking Press published the book that accompanied the benchmark exhibition, *Objects USA*. In his introduction, Lee Nordness traces the tradition of the handmade emphasizing twentieth century American contributions. Nordness concentrates, as does the exhibition, on art and artists of major influence during the Post World War II period. He mentions a 1966 interview with Bob Turner and quotes him as follows: "When I got involved, we weren't so much concerned with the object as with a way of life – a result, I think of the War period. We were looking for – the word used then was *integration*."

Integration is a good word. The dictionary states: integration – unified; the state of being whole. Bob Turner exemplified this definition. He projected a gentle confidence that was always reassuring. When I first met him, I thought – does he know something I don't know? Well, of course, he was older, but it was more than that. Eventually Bob and I became colleagues. I learned that this sureness came from his basic spiritual nature and his belief in the good unqualified by corporal constraint. He intuited and believed that he was mind and body part of a meaningful, universal whole. That inspired his courage to create.

Bob said of his work in ceramics: "I do what the clay accepts." Certainly, all ceramic artists must do that, but what he meant was that he didn't need to be in control. He was "OK" to let it be. He was open to discovering the zone where he and the clay became one. I watched him work.

He often found that place. He had great skill and knew when not to use it. His pots are never intentionally impressive. They assert only the agreement he and the clay have come to. I wrote for the dust jacket of Bob's biography, *Shaping Silence*: "Bob Turner is an artist of commanding, gentle presence. His ceramic work offers an inspired, improvisational mapping of the secret rhythms of human awareness." Turner's work always seems to be searching. This is, no doubt, a reflection of the collaborative investigation of meaning undertaken between the material, the process and Bob. "Idea" arrives, generates from his contact with the phenomena of making. There is never a "wow;" that is it. The drama is internal. It manifests. Its intensity is gradual, but firm. It ebbs and reaffirms. Once someone asked me, with doubt in their voice, to point out exactly why Robert Turner's pots were so important. As we looked carefully at a group of them, I said, "You see, they aren't that, nor are they this. You can't box them in. They are certain in their uncertainty. They point to nature, time, change. They are and are becoming. Isn't that the experience of life itself?"

Bob Turner received numerous awards for the excellence of his work as an artist. In 2000 the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University presented him with the Charles Fergus Binns Medal of Excellence in Ceramic Art. He received the Gold Medal for Artistic Excellence from the American Craft Council in 1993, as well as an Honorary Doctor of Fine Art from Swarthmore College, 1987. As if to point out that these honors were sure to come, Turner received the Silver Medal from the International Ceramics Exposition at Cannes, France in 1955.

During his distinguished career as a ceramic artist, which began in the late 1940's, Bob Turner made an indelible contribution to education. He initiated the ceramic program at the now legendary Black Mountain College and taught, with distinction, from 1958 until 1979 as a faculty member of the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University – serving twice as Chairman of the School of Art and Design. In 1974 he was given the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, State University of New York.

In the midst of the late 1950's-1960's East Coast – West Coast discussion/clash/antagonism regarding ceramic art, one ceramic artist at Alfred represented the voice of poetic reason: Robert Turner was an artist who absorbed the tenor of the time. He was able to produce work in touch with the movement, and completely true to his own forceful vision. Early on, perhaps he alone at Alfred



E.



F.

understood Voulkos and the achievement of West Coast ceramics. He was not afraid to appropriate what was revealed to him. The "Alfred Vessel" in his hands took on a vital, sensitive quality of speculation and mystery. Tradition wed the unknown. Voulkos was admirably aware of Bob Turner's work. They became friends. In 1998, Alfred University presented an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts to Pete Voulkos. At that time, Bob and Pete worked side by side for a week inspiring and entertaining students. They embraced each other as artists, as friends and visionaries revisiting in nostalgic memory days of their youthful, artistic passion. For that glorious week Alfred became an ark riding above the waves, set free from time, held safe and transfixed by an abiding energy that was ceramic history.

Bob Turner was instrumental in convincing me to join the Alfred University faculty in 1973. We taught together at Alfred until his retirement. I learned a great deal about myself and about teaching. For several years, Bob and I were together working as board members of the

Haystack Mountain School of Crafts as well. Bob was always able to bring accord to conflict. He had a gift for quietly empowering individuals he had confidence in. As a teacher, Bob could bring a touch of harmony, often just by his presence, to a studio full of youthful artistic angst. He had an uncanny ability to encourage the necessary journey of imagination. A few words with Bob would secure an embrace of doubt that permitted one to travel to a place of personal reflection beyond common assumptions. Bob's teaching was all a part of the integration theme – art, life, teaching. In the best sense, Bob Turner was a classic representative of teaching by example. His students respected and admired him. In fact, they were fond of him. Sometime in 1973, Robert Turner acquired a nickname from a student. John Gill, today a Professor of Ceramic Art at Alfred University, conferred the title "Rocket Bob" on a favorite teacher. The name stuck; it seemed right. When I think about Bob Turner, I often see "Rocket Bob." Why, "Rocket?" Well, he was long and lean, but most especially because Bob had an unusual ability to go "out there" – up and away – where few can travel. He brought things back and shared them often in eloquent, poetic words. He told stories that would at first seem a bit unclear but ultimately made a resounding connection. How did he do it? He was "out there" and also so present "here" as well. "Rocket Bob" brought us powerful art, remarkable teaching and rich friendship to those fortunate to know him. Robert Turner stands as a sentinel of excellence beckoning us to recognize in ourselves, in our work and in the everlasting endeavor we call Ceramic Art, all that is remarkable and of great value.

In the end, of course, there are no words to express the deep meaning of another's life and work. However, the effort to do so brings one close. Trying to find the words is a meditation that serves as a vehicle for dwelling in the inspiration that is Bob Turner. Fortunately, we can also simply sit in silence with his pots.

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Alfred University, Alfred, NY

*The Robert C. Turner Chair of Ceramic Art at Alfred University was established in 2005 by Marlin and Ginger Miller.



G.

E.
Bob Turner, Wayne Higby,
Pete Voulkos at Alfred
University, 1998

F.
Robert C. Turner
Chair Naming Event,
Alfred University,
April, 2005
(left to right) Sue Turner,
Bob Turner, Wayne Higby,
Ginger Miller, Marlin Miller

G.
Robert Turner and Sam
Malool, 1996
Photo courtesy of Rosalind
and Howard Zuses

August 2, 2005

Sue Turner and the entire Turner Family...

Bob's passing is just plain bad news.

What first came to my mind, when we heard of this, was a memory of Bob and Pete Voulkos holding hands.

The day after the honorary degree convocation for Pete (at which Bob spoke with his passion and calm merged uniquely together), Kymberli and I, along with several others including Wayne Higby, went to Sue and Bob's place for dinner. Bob and Sue were leaving their Alfred home and studio within a few days to move to Maryland, and most of the house was packed. Despite the pressure of the move, they were gracious hosts, and we all gathered around a ping-pong table for good food and fellowship.

After the meal, Bob took Pete through the studio. Along the way, Pete studied Bob's work and from time to time he smiled and nodded approval or familiarity. He seemed calmed by Bob's world and by being together again with his two old friends.

Having circled the studio, the two men stood face to face and Pete reached out and took Bob's hand. He held his hand to Bob's, fingers to fingers, palms to palms and he seemed to be feeling for the shared history in the fingers, touching the hand of a friend and colleague and companion. They stood together gently holding hand seemingly relaxed and refreshed

at the same time. These two men standing for that moment became in my mind a gentle mirror image of parallel forces working through clay to create significant lasting art. As they stood together, each man's hand cupped by the other, I saw these two men as key parts of a whole history.

The moment passed, the conversations in the studio came back into focus, and the party continued.

With Bob's passing, one more primary element of contemporary creative ceramic art is now our memory. All of us have been enriched by knowing Bob's great creative energy, by sharing his calm and solid presence, by sensing what complex life decisions were required of Bob and Sue in keeping to the path of their choice, and what treasures Bob left behind as inspirations for us all.

As Dean, I always thought that the first endowed chair in the School of Art and Design should be in the Ceramics Division. That that chair will always carry Bob's name is so wonderful.

Sue, we surely will miss him.

Richard Thompson, professor, School of Art and Design at Alfred University, NY.

Robert Turner's work is represented at SOFA CHICAGO 2005 by Helen Drutt: Philadelphia/Hurong Lou Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.