

# Their Feats of Clay

## Return to Earth: Ceramic Sculpture Of Fontana, Melotti, Miró, Noguchi, And Picasso

Nasher Sculpture Center  
Through Jan. 19

BY TOM L. FREUDENHEIM

*Dallas*

If sensational exhibition titles (such as “Treasures of...”) are meant to lure us into museums, unassuming ones may also occasionally keep us at bay. I hope that’s not the case with an astonishingly beautiful exhibition now on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center here. “Return to Earth: Ceramic Sculpture of Fontana, Melotti, Miró, Noguchi, and Picasso, 1943-1963” consists of five miniature retrospectives of artists who worked in a variety of mediums, focusing on their work in ceramics. It’s a powerful reminder of the restlessness, skill and virtuosity that often drive artists to work with many kinds of materials.

People have used clay since prehistoric times in many ancient cultures around the world, perhaps most familiar to us in a range of utilitarian artifacts; but its decorative possibilities appear to have been universally recognized as well. The artificial designation that has pigeonholed ceramics as a “craft medium” (and thus largely outside the world of high art) isn’t examined in this exhibition. And yet craft remains the art that dare not speak its name—saved here from art-museum ostracism by virtue of its high-profile and extraordinarily accomplished practitioners.

Ironically the 11 ceramics here by the 20th century’s ultimate art prodigy, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), turn out to be the most facile of the five groups on view. The figurative sculptures pretend at some sort of cultic meaning, although they are more like young Mike, in “A Chorus Line,” assuring us that “I can do

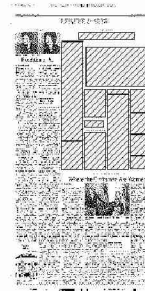
that!” The ceramics Picasso produced at the Madoura Pottery in Vallauris in the late 1940s, and later at one of his homes, La California, form a substantial body of work and are also familiar to us in photographs of the artist in his studio and even as objects in his paintings. In this exhibition, however, they tend to accentuate the originality and breadth of the other four artists.

Joan Miró (1893-1983) is also a much-loved master of 20th-century modernism, and he produced 441 ceramic works over 40 years, most of them in collaboration with members of the Artigas family. The variety represented in the 19 works on view here seems to take into account the diverse opportunities presented by the different kinds of fired clay being used. In “Stone” (1955), the earthenware arrow (or phallic) shape serves as a canvas on which Miró paints his characteristic celestial pictographs—although here it is glazed. Elsewhere he uses conventional vessel shapes as the ground for his surreal imagery. Mixing colors and shapes, Miró’s sculpted ceramics project the sense of found objects—thus heightening our confusion as to their potential meaning, as in his whimsical seascape “The Sailboat” (“Le voilier,” 1956).

In the exhibition catalog, with essays by the Nasher’s organizing curator, Jed Morse, and others, we read that Miró hoped that his sculptures might be “confused with elements of nature, trees, rocks, roots, mountains, plants, flowers,” and it is precisely in this visual uncertainty that these works have such a commanding power. The openness of Renzo Piano’s building enables us to view the heft and stability of Miró’s large, surreal bronze sculptures in the Nasher’s garden while contemplating similar clay forms inside. Yet the ceramics feel no less majestic than the monumental works.

To view the ceramics of Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) in this context heightens our awareness of yet another artist who ranged widely in his work and who resists easy categorization. More than any of the other works in this striking exhibition, Noguchi’s appear firmly rooted in Japanese ceramics practices to which he has added an important inventiveness that enlarges the scope of that tradition. The son of an American mother and Japanese father, Noguchi enables us to see the merging of both European and Asian visual worlds—not so much bridging disparities as creating an entirely new visual vocabulary out of them, presaging more recent contemporary Japanese ceramics. The small figurative stoneware cloak, “Big Boy,” and the line of abstract shapes in the tall and imposing “Even the Centipede” (both 1952) share a totemic quality that insists on contemplation. That’s also conveyed in several works that appear superficially anecdotal at first glance, positioned in the gallery between Picasso and Miró, the 15 Noguchi works create a mood of reflection that’s in keeping with their origins in a venerable Japanese-ceramics tradition.

If there weren’t such a felicitous conversation between the two Italian artists in this exhibition, it might be disconcerting to have them in a separate gallery downstairs. But Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) and Fausto Melotti (1901-1986) express wholly different interests in ceramic as a medium for sculpture, shown here by 19 and 14 works respectively. Because Fontana is today best known for his nihilistic, if elegant, monochromatic slashed canvases (or “spatial concepts,” as he called them), it is refreshing to be reminded of his small glazed-ceramic sculptures, expressionistic and baroque, of which his “Assumption” (“Assunzione,” 1947) is among the most dramatic. Clearly influenced both



Page 1 of 2

by the grandly expressive figures of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and by the refined miniatures of Johann Joachim Kändler for the Meissen porcelain works, Fontana's religious-themed sculptures are among the most moving of the past century. Melotti, on the other hand, may be the most important discovery for viewers of this exhibition, since works such as "Theater" ("Teatrino," 1950) create complete worlds of their

own with powerful, not always subtle, suggestions of World War II's devastating impact on Italian life and culture.

In this carefully focused exhibition, the Nasher wisely calls attention to ceramic sculpture in a manner that is much more thoughtful than what might have been a superficial survey of works in fired clay. While it is regrettable that the exhibition won't (or can't) travel, this show

is well worth a trip to Dallas, especially for lovers of this medium.

*Mr. Freudenheim, a former art-museum director, served as the assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian.*

**The work of five high-profile and accomplished artists.**



'Pumpkin (Courge)' (1956), by Joan Miró and Josep Llorens Artigas.

Acquavella Galleries