

# Karen Johnson Boyd and the Art of Stealth Philanthropy

This unassuming but steadfast benefactor has promoted a broader perspective of art by assembling museum-quality examples of contemporary craft and exhibiting them in the larger context of painting and sculpture.

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Over the past 40 years, Karen Johnson Boyd has refined a whole systems approach to American craft. She has supported the arts in general and craft in particular as a collector, a donor, a board member, a publisher, a sponsor of museums and exhibitions, and as the owner and president of Chicago's Perimeter Gallery. She has focused on emerging artists—actively collecting their work and documenting their careers. She has promoted a broader perspective of art by assembling museum-quality examples of contemporary craft and exhibiting them in the larger context of painting and sculpture. And she has endeavored to draw attention to artists from the Midwest and from her home state, Wisconsin, where she was born and continues to live.

Boyd's exposure to art began early, both at home and in elementary school. By the time she reached high school, she was attending art history and studio classes. She was particularly influenced, however, by her grandfather, Olaf Brauner, a post-Impressionist painter and head of the art faculty at Cornell University. Each summer, from the time Boyd and her brother, Sam, were schoolchildren, Brauner welcomed them to sit in on life drawing and plein-air painting classes at the university.

During the school year, Boyd lived in Wisconsin, in a home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. By all accounts, her experiences with Wright—first as a child, and then as a young woman commissioning him to design her own home—were influential. Brad Lynch, a Chicago-based architect who grew up in Racine and has worked with Boyd on one museum and two galleries over the years, cites Wright's thoughts on craftsmanship as helping to shape the foundation of Boyd's own aesthetic sensibilities. Boyd would agree, stating quietly in a thoughtful tone spiked

occasionally with wry asides, "I enjoyed knowing him. The only thing I didn't particularly like was when he came for lunch and moved all the furniture around. He took a picture off the wall—he did not like contemporary American art—but he didn't take them *all* off the wall the way he did at my father and step-mother's house. He'd come for dinner and to spend the night—about 1:30 in the morning, he got up, took down all the art and put it in a closet. Then he sat down at the piano and played Chopin, which woke them up."

Taking Wright's influence with her, Boyd enrolled at Bennington College in Vermont, where she studied ceramics and photography, as well as dance with Martha Graham. She married and spent the next 10 years focusing on raising her four children. In 1962, she met and befriended the New York art dealer Lee Nordness. Nordness was visiting Wisconsin regularly, as he was curating "Art USA Now" for Boyd's father, Herbert Fiske Johnson, and the S. C. Johnson Company. The traveling exhibition introduced national and international audiences to some of the best American painters of the mid-20th century, among them Richard Diebenkorn, Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell and Robert Rauschenberg. Although Boyd didn't work on the exhibition in an official capacity, she conferred with her father frequently. "Everyone thought he was nutty," Boyd says. "Putting together a corporate art collection simply wasn't something that was done. Corporations bought art, but they kept it sort of low key. It was just used for decorating their offices."

Seven years after "Art USA Now," the Johnson Company sponsored "Objects : USA," the seminal American craft exhibition that introduced audiences to many of the artists who would stretch ▶



Opposite: Boyd's home in Racine, Wisconsin, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, a family friend.

Above: The collection Boyd has amassed over the years includes work by Jan Hopkins and Beverly Mayeri.

“Boyd has an incredibly accurate eye for locating the highest quality, most innovative concepts and the most challenging new ideas in artworks.”—Bruce Pepich



Above: When Wright visited Boyd in the home he'd designed, he would rearrange the furniture and remove contemporary artwork from the walls.

**Karen Johnson Boyd has supported the arts in general and craft in particular as a collector, donor, board member, publisher, sponsor of museums and exhibitions, and gallery owner.**

and shape the countenance of craft over the next decade, including Peter Voulkos, Wendell Castle, Lenore Tawney, James Melchert, Harvey Littleton and Sheila Hicks. With ongoing assistance from Paul Smith, then the director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Arts and Design), Nordness spent eight months traversing the country, selecting 300 objects ranging from conceptual to functional, and narratives to installations. “Art USA Now” was an all around success, Boyd says, but “Objects: USA” was something else altogether.

“It came as a revelation to people,” says Kenneth R. Trapp, retired curator-in-charge of the Smithsonian’s Renwick Gallery. “People were unaware of this [craft] subculture. They might go to a department store or specialty store to buy a bowl or a cheeseboard but were completely unaware that there were people actually *making* these kind of objects, only they were one-of-a-kind.” In 1969, “Objects: USA” was presented as the inaugural exhibition of the newly reopened National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum).

The 1970s found Boyd and Nordness working together curating an art collection for the S. C. Johnson Company Council House, a conference-sized guest residence on the shores of Lake Michigan. In the next two years, they traveled to 49 countries—most of the places where S. C. Johnson had companies—looking for work that would represent the collective face of the company. Boyd and Nordness assembled a notably diverse collection, ranging from stand-alone works such as a Gerhard Richter painting and a portrait of South Africa’s Stephen Biko to site-specific installations such as inlaid floors and carved wood entrance doors. Boyd has “an incredibly accurate eye,” says Bruce Pepich, director of the Racine Art Museum (RAM), who has known Boyd for 32 years, “for locating the highest quality, most innovative concepts and the most challenging new ideas in artworks.”

A few years later, in 1982, Boyd opened Perimeter Gallery in Chicago’s River North neighborhood. She continued searching for interesting emerging artists and new work worthy of encouragement and sponsorship. “My idea was not to have it all craft but to have it a mixture of art that I thought was good—the craftsman, the painter, the sculptor, the photographer—everybody together,” she says. “Everybody was supposed to be segregated, and I didn’t think that was fair. If they were all artists—and as long as they’re good enough—they deserved to be together, indiscriminately.”

“Karen has always tried to blur that line between what’s art and what’s craft,” gallery director Frank Paluch says. He recalls walking outside the gallery a few years back and overhearing two passersby, “This is Perimeter. You never know what’s going to be in there, but it’s always really interesting.” Perimeter began exhibiting artists such as Edward Eberle, Dona Look, Ken Loeber and Eleanor Moty early in their careers. The gallery has continued to show their work and that of many others—Toshiko Takaezu, Kiyomi Iwata, Peter Voulkos and Beverly Mayeri—for 15 years or longer.

Boyd’s support for artists and their careers has extended naturally to museum collections, exhibitions and educational programs. The Cooper-Hewitt, the Milwaukee Art Museum and, of course, the Racine Art Museum benefited from Boyd’s whole systems philosophy. In all over the past 25 years, Boyd has donated nearly a thousand works to RAM’s permanent collection. And, by all



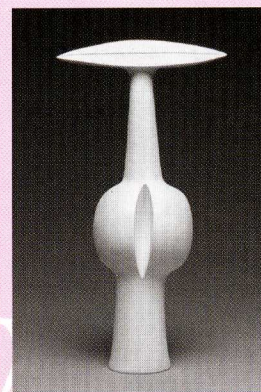
**Objects and Artists:  
The Past Through  
the Present**  
In the fall of 1969, “Objects: USA,” a touring exhibition sponsored by the S. C. Johnson Company, run by Karen Johnson Boyd’s family, premiered at the Smithsonian Institution, igniting interest in the burgeoning craft movement. Out of this exhibition, Lee Nordness published a cross section of over 300 examples from various crafts media. We’ve compiled a then-and-now synopsis of 11 artists featured there and affiliated with the Midwest.



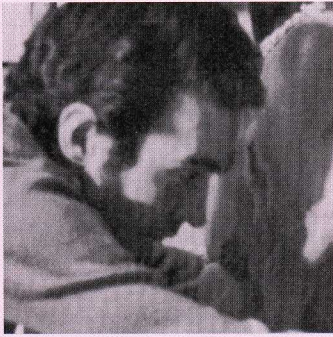
**Ruth Duckworth**  
A modernist ceramic sculptor, Duckworth emigrated to England from Germany before coming to the United States in 1964. Her remarkable life and work in all media have been celebrated in several retrospective exhibitions. She currently resides in Chicago.



*Four Goblets (detail),  
1968, porcelain.*

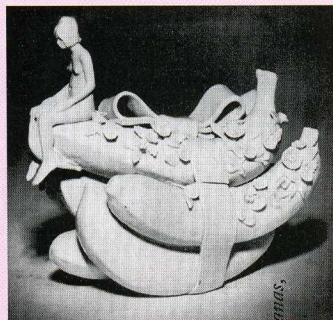


*Untitled, 2007,  
porcelain.*



### Jack Earl

One of the nation's most respected ceramists, Earl earned his M.A. from Ohio State University in 1964. Influential in bringing figurative ceramics to the forefront, Earl satirizes the rural culture he knows so well.



*Figure with Bananas*, 1968, porcelain

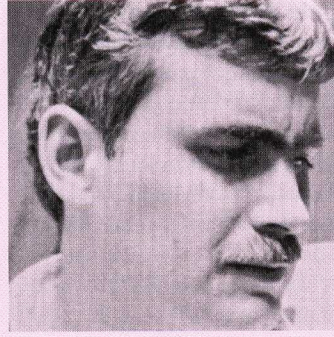


### Sheila Hicks

A fiber artist born in Nebraska, Hicks now lives and works in Paris. Expanding weaving's vocabulary and our appreciation of what yarn is, Hicks transforms textiles into an experience situated between sculpture and performance.



*The Principal Wife*, ca. 1962, mixed fibers

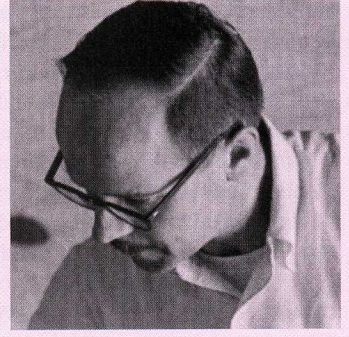


### Michael John Jerry

Both teacher and craftsman, Jerry, born in Racine, Wisconsin, headed the metals department at Syracuse University for 30 years before retiring in 2000. He lives in New Mexico, where he continues to make jewelry.



*Brooch*, 1967, 14k gold with opal



### Harvey Littleton

Now living in North Carolina, Littleton grew up in the world of glassmaking, the son of a Corning Glass Works physicist. A founding father of the studio glass movement, Littleton established the hot glass program at the University of Wisconsin in 1962.



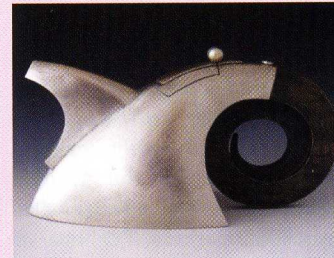
*Falling Blue*, 1969, blown and cut glass



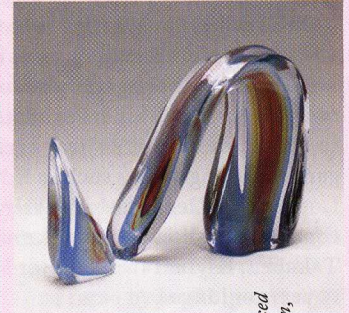
*Archie*, 2008, low-fire white clay, oil paint



*Phare d'Acier*, 2003, woven, linen, cotton, stainless steel



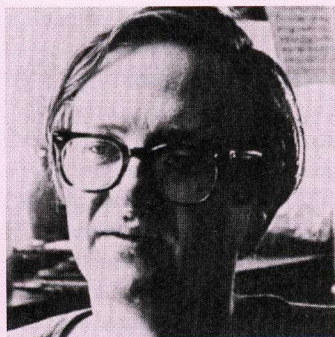
*Double Curl*, 2008, pewter, ebony, maple handle



*Powder Blue Sliced Descending Form*, 1985, glass

Early Works

Recent Works



### James Melchert

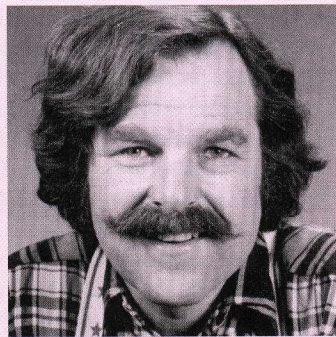
Born in Ohio, Melchert discovered his passion for clay through teaching. Currently living in Oakland, California, he has been pivotal in the Bay Area's artistic growth in a variety of media.



*Leg Pot I*, 1962, stoneware, lead and cloth inlay, slab and thrown forms.



*Park Forest*, 2007, broken and glazed porcelain.



### Joel Philip Myers

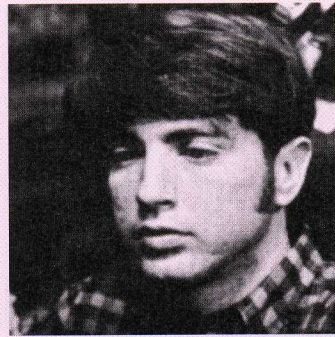
Introduced to glass while director of design at Blenko Glass, Myers left to establish a glass-blowing program at Illinois State University, where he taught for nearly 30 years while running his own studio. He now lives in Pennsylvania and Denmark.



*Decanter with Coblets*, 1968, free-blown glass.

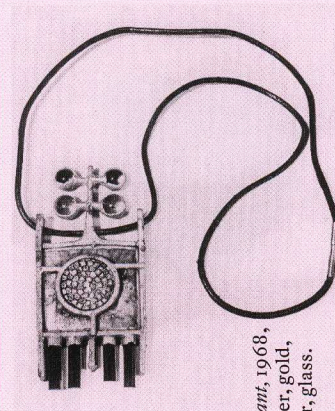


*Untitled*, 1990, blown glass with applied elements.



### Lee Barnes Peck

A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Peck was professor of jewelry/metal-smithing at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, from 1970 until his retirement several years ago. He is relocating from Illinois to Michigan.



*Pendant*, 1968, copper, gold, silver, glass.

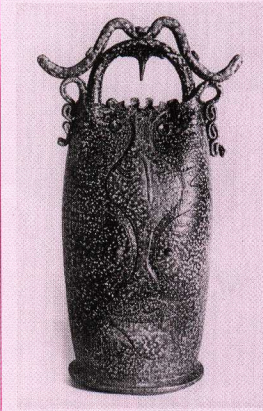


*Making Wave*, 2000, copper, electroinlaid black nickel, white nickel and 24k gold.



### Donald L. Reitz

Explorations in salt glazing, and virtuosity with clay distinguish Reitz's work. Considered among the most important living ceramists, Reitz taught at the University of Wisconsin from 1962 to 1988 and now resides in Arizona.



*EX-1070 #1*, 1969, stoneware, salt glaze.



*#140*, 2007, wood fired.





### Cynthia Schira

Schira, fascinated by the expressive potential of textiles, was one of the first fiber artists represented in museum collections. Now professor emerita, she began teaching at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, in 1976. She works in Westport, New York.



*Weft Twined Ikat 1*, 1968, wool, ikat warp-weft twined.

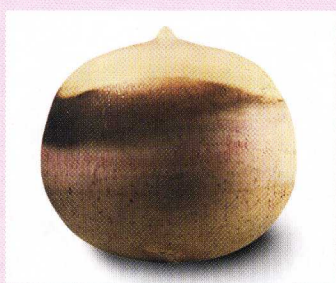


*Row Upon Row*, 2006, jaquard-woven cotton.



### Toshiko Takaezu

A foremost ceramist of our time, Takaezu studied at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. She taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art and then at Princeton University. Takaezu continues to live and make pottery in New Jersey.



*Form A*, 1968, porcelain.



*Untitled (Ocean Edge)*, ca. 2006, porcelain.

accounts, she hasn't asked for anything in return. "Most people would say, 'I need my name somewhere,'" Paluch comments. In fact, because so many of Boyd's donations take place so quietly, Pepich has referred to Boyd as the "stealth contributor... often [operating] under the radar of public recognition."

Among the 200 works that Boyd donated to RAM in 1991 ("A-grade pieces," Paluch says, "which really created the core collection") was a major Voukos stack, which she had de-installed from her courtyard. It was one of her favorite objects, and the gesture exemplifies one of Boyd's more striking traits, which Pepich describes most succinctly: "She's non-acquisitive." Boyd isn't intent on amassing a collection for its own sake but on promoting good art. "Karen Johnson Boyd," Pepich says, "is a pure spirit dedicated to supporting artists and the development of new work." (This may, in part, explain why she has been so unfailingly accommodating to the many Wright connoisseurs, students and tourists who arrive, unannounced, on her front step—sometimes by the busload—asking if they might step inside and look around her home.)

In the foyer of Boyd's residence, three white vessels by Richard DeVore cluster below a deep blue print by Diebenkorn, across the hall from two pre-Columbian terra-cotta figures, a vibrant red portrait by David Hockney and a plate by Robert Arneson. A painting by John Wilde (a recently deceased professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) hangs beside the fireplace, above a Dango by Jun Kaneko, whom Boyd regards as "one of the great ones. The forms and the geometry—whatever he did, it seemed just right, no questions left."

Boyd has spent decades challenging assumptions about craft's place in the larger context of art. Many questions—the value of one-of-a-kind objects versus production work; the relationship between concept, craft and fabrication; the distinction between industrial designers, production designers and studio object makers—have been raised on multiple fronts, through exhibitions at Perimeter Gallery, through "Objects: USA" and through Boyd's foundational sponsorship of RAM. And there has been progress. If one wished to curate "Objects: USA" today, Boyd says, it wouldn't require eight months of cross-country research. A dozen different publications and art fairs ranging from regional to international have increased knowledge of the field and communication among artists, collectors and curators. Craft is now supported by auction houses, and a number of thought leader conferences have contributed to increasing levels of sophistication. And RAM has become a destination for anyone interested in craft, while simultaneously—in accordance with Boyd's whole systems methodology—making a significant contribution to revitalizing downtown Racine.

At 84, Boyd herself is still engaged (she apologized for cutting an interview short in order to get to a RAM acquisitions meeting). As she was leaving, she pointed to recent objects that have captured her attention: a bark and lotus pod torso by Jan Hopkins and a new series of waxed-linen vessels by Ferne Jacobs. Paluch describes walking with Boyd last year through the Whitney Biennial: "She's always open to new ideas. She's always open to new art, even if it's something way out there. She's inquisitive and open-minded. That has served her well, and it has certainly served the art world well." +



Above: Among the objects grouped harmoniously in the foyer of Boyd's residence are three white ceramic vessels by Richard DeVore and a deep blue print by Richard Diebenkorn.

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