

Works Sought For National John Foster Retrospective

John Foster, founder of our organization will be honored in a show of his work tentatively scheduled for appearances in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Detroit. Cork Marcheschi, an artist and art historian in San Francisco, is organizing a show and book about the pottery of John Foster. The show and catalog are already funded. He is trying to find people who have work by John Foster and who are interested in loaning it for a show or selling it for a collection. He is also interested in pictures of the man and his work. Marcheschi is trying to salvage this man's career before all traces of his limited work is scattered and any focus is lost. He writes the following account of his search:

While in search of a Glen Lukens piece in 2004, I was pointed in the direction of Dane Cloutier, a dealer in high-end, mid-century studio ceramics. Cloutier didn't have a website but there was a reference to him on Clayton Bailey's home page. Clayton gave me a number and recommended I contact his friend George King, who also sold mid-century ceramics. Though George didn't have any Lukens, he mentioned I might like John Foster, of whom I'd never heard. He sent me a color image of three Foster pieces and I was knocked out! I couldn't believe how beautiful these things were and I arranged to go to George's place and see them in person. Each of the three pieces was unique and complete. It didn't feel as if they were part of a series or an investigation of some narrow area. These thoughtful pieces seemed to be more aligned with the tenets of fine art than the crafts issues of the time. I picked up a copy of John Foster: Ceramics Form and Meaning, a 1990 book published by Wayne State University Press. Written by Gordon and Elizabeth O'rear, former students and friends of John Foster, the publication presents a nice overview of Foster's work and life but doesn't give him historical context. This book, along with the three pieces I saw at George's, left me wondering why I didn't know Foster's work. It was of equal value to other mid-century potters and in many ways took the step into a more thoughtful place. I decided it was necessary for me to organize a show with a catalog of his work and try to establish a collection of his work.

I started by using the electronic white pages and finding all the collectors' addresses listed in the O'rears' book. I sent them letters with a return postcard asking if they had work by John Foster, if it was for sale or available for loan to a show. I made a connection with the O'rears and with Robert Diebold, a major holder of Foster's works and a good friend and student of his. Then the letters I sent started coming back unopened neighbors sent back cards letting me know that the recipients were deceased (about 50 percent). I ran ads in the Detroit Free Press, the Birmingham Enquirer and Bloomfield Hills Eccentric, and contacted all of the mid-century antique dealers I could find in Michigan. Out of all this, I have found a total of eight pieces for a John Foster collection. I have been promised six major pieces for loan to a show and made friends with Phyllis Irhman, a student and dear friend of John Foster's in the 1960s. Phyllis has become my most active cheerleader in this process and a great source for photos, letters and interviews. She is a wonderful direct connection to the subject.

With every new piece of Foster's work that I encounter, I become more impressed and inspired. I am sorry that I will never meet the man who touched so many people as a teacher and artist. I hope that I can help to raise John Foster's profile so he can be considered along side the other mid-century artists.

MCAA members who have been with our organization for a number of years will recognize John Foster as the founder of the Michigan Potters' Association (our name until recently) as well as the founder of the ceramics programs at Wayne State University and the Center For Creative Studies in Detroit. John had a long career as a ceramic engineer for Ford Motor Company and was also instrumental in establishing the pottery shop at Greenfield Village. Though clay had been extensively used as a tool in art education, Foster was one of a growing body of teachers who recognized that clay had its own unique and ancient tradition as an art form. In establishing the Michigan Potters Association, Foster hoped to provide inspiration and stimulation for those working in the ceramic arts, as well as education and improvement of the standards of our art. MCAA applauds Mr. Marcheschi's efforts to bring long overdue recognition to our founder John Foster.

If you have work by John Foster and are interested in loaning or selling it, please contact: Cork Marcheschi - 192 Connecticut St., San Francisco, CA 94107.

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