

# *Rudy Autio: Spheres of Influence*

By Peter Held

## **Preface**

As a former artist turned curator, I've spent three decades surrounded by talented people, admiring those with demonstrated ability, a disciplined work ethic, unbridled energy and intellectual prowess coupled with a curiosity to cross borders. These artists approach life with enthusiasm, fully engaged in a world of subtle nuances and catastrophic events. From our first encounter in the 1970s, I considered Rudy Autio to be one of the most innovative artists of his generation, whose career path followed a steady progression of artistic excellence, both in the realm of ceramics and fine arts.

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, I was privileged to have the opportunity to conduct the last recorded interview with Rudy Autio at his home and studio in Missoula, Montana. The following essay is based on the artist's reflections on his life and art. It is not meant to be a chronology of his life, but an attempt to capture the spirit of the man and his work. Italicized quotes are from this interview.



Rudy Autio, *Horse Pot*, ceramic, ca. 1995, 20 x 12 x 13". Gilbert Millikan Art Collection, co-owned by the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, Holter Museum of Art, Missoula Art Museum and Montana Museum of Art & Culture. Photo courtesy of the Archie Bray Foundation.

*Let's say I've always considered myself an artist with a special knowledge of ceramics.*

## **Overview**

Rudy Autio, a pioneer in the contemporary ceramics movement, passed away on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007 after a short illness. With a career spanning fifty-years, he was recognized worldwide for his many artistic contributions in ceramics, printmaking, and sculpture. He was called the "Matisse of Ceramics" for his vivid color palette and masterful designs.

Born in the shadows of the Depression in the rough and tumble mining town of Butte, Montana, Autio drew inspiration from his immigrant Finnish heritage, working class background and drew widely from universal mythological themes. He spent the majority of his career in Montana and had a deep sense of place about the open western environment. Teaching at the University of Montana from 1957 to 1984, he influenced two generations of artists with his selfless enthusiasm and high professional standards.

Prior to his appointment at the University of Montana, Autio was the first resident artist, along with former classmate Peter Voukos, at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. In tandem, they set a standard of high artistic achievement, helping the Bray establish the international reputation it currently enjoys.



Autio working in Shigaraki, Japan, 1995.  
Photographer unknown.

His lifelong talents were recognized by numerous awards, honors and grants including a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation grant, National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1981, Rudy became the first recipient of the Governor's Award as outstanding visual artist in the state of Montana. He is a Fellow of the American Crafts Council, honorary member of the National Council of Education in the Ceramic Arts, honorary member of Ornamo, Finland's Designers organization and recipient of an Honorary Doctorate of Art from the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore.

Although diminutive in size, Rudy Autio was larger than life, a humble man of mythic proportions that provided inspiration for all whom he encountered through hundreds of classrooms, workshops, lectures and world travels. He leaves behind a vast and cohesive body of work that has become a hallmark in world ceramics.

### **Origins: Butte, the Bray, and Beyond**

Butte, Montana is the home to the “richest hill on earth”, a vast copper mine that lured immigrants worldwide to work its riches while starting a new life in America. Rudy Autio’s parents followed this path, moving from their native Finland to make Butte their new home. His father was a miner; his mother a cook and maid at a boarding house. Rudy, the youngest of three children, was born in 1926. For the generation born under the shadow of the Great Depression of 1929, life was a constant confrontation with harsh realities. Although Roosevelt's New Deal sought to revitalize the nation's economy through government programs and subsidies, many resisted assistance, determined to make it on their own through frugality, fortitude, and personal strength. Autio acknowledges the significance of growing up in a “melting pot” community, and how his childhood experiences informed his art.

*I grew up on East Broadway, which was Finn Town, and I knew how to speak the language; it was spoken on the streets. I worked in the grocery store, partly because I was fluent in the language, and it was its own community. The Irish lived across the street. They had their own community. The Italians were further east in Meaderville. It was a very rich culture in a lot of ways.*

*Living in Butte was an experience in itself, like living in Brooklyn. There were people on the streets, street cars, crowds of people running around, rushing at each other, stores were busy; there were so many ethnic groups that it was just a lot of fun.*

*It was a society of ethnic mixes that was very interesting. We got to know the Irish, Yugoslavians and the Italians quite well, and we had no problems with that. In the early days they did, labor problems, because the Irish didn't want to hire the Finns at certain points because they were Wobblies\* and many of them, like my aunt, was a socialist. So there were tensions.*

\*Butte's labor issues were turbulent at times. Industrial Workers of the World or Wobblies was a radical labor movement, founded in 1905, that tried to organize all workers into one all-encompassing union. Butte had a following in mining and lumber camps but never captured control of all unionized labor.

Rudy was known as a skilled draftsman, whether drawing on clay or creating prints. He demonstrated a talent for drawing while attending Grant Elementary School. He noted the impact of the Works Progress Administration artists he took classes from, which further ignited his interest in art. Although his childhood was spent during lean economic times, Rudy came to class with a sense of discovery and adventure.

The Works Progress Administration created by Presidential Order in 1935, and later renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939, was the largest New Deal agency, employing millions of people throughout the United States during a period of economic depression. The WPA provided jobs and income to artists desperately in need of income during this turbulent time, both in cities and rural areas. The WPA coordinated visual arts, drama and literary projects, including the Federal Arts Project, which gave unemployed artists the opportunity to decorate hundreds of post offices, schools, and other public buildings with murals, canvases, and sculptures.

The Federal Art Project also maintained over one hundred community art centers across the United States, managing art programs and staging art exhibitions by children and adults. These programs created broad participation and a greater appreciation for American art. World War II proved the demise of this effort as the nation prepared for war. At its conclusion, the Federal Arts Project created over 5,000 jobs for artists producing over 225,000 works for the American public.

*When I was about nine years old, the Works Progress Administration had artists coming into the schools to teach; that was my first experience in art. They'd teach us how to draw from magazines; they would take a magazine and say, copy that. So they taught us elements of copying. Then they would move to three-dimensional objects like a vase of flowers. They'd say, copy that, but you'd use those same rules of line to cross section it and see it. I got to be a pretty good copyist and some of those tricks were things that I retained.*

*Later, they had art exhibitions at the Simons Department Store; they brought in a whole bunch of paintings from New York and elsewhere. That was the first time I had ever seen paintings like that. They were impressionistic globs of paint and I thought, well, after Charlie Russell, this was something.*

The western art of Charles Marion Russell reigned supreme in Montana during this time. While the national arts program brought more diverse forms of expression to the public, Montana was still isolated geographically and culturally. It would be several decades until contemporary art quietly permeated the Montana arts scene.

### **Finding Clay**

After graduating from high school and serving in the Navy, Rudy, like many other veterans, took advantage of the G.I. Bill, finding his way to the classroom of Frances Senska at Montana State College. Senska's training in ceramics mirrored the field at the time. European émigrés, escaping the harsh political realities during the war, came to the United States with their technical knowledge and design sensibilities, becoming important role models to the aspiring American students. Senska studied with several influential figures of that era including Maija Grotell at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Marguerite Wildenhain at her Pond Farm studio, the California ceramic designer Edith Heath, and former Bauhaus teacher Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at the Illinois Institute of Design. Fellow art student, Peter Voulkos, also attended Senska's pottery class after initially starting as a painting student.

Rudy was an aspiring young artist when he joined Peter Voulkos in the Bray brickyard in 1951. Joined at the hip during Frances Senska's ceramic class at Montana State College, the Montana natives became lifelong friends and co-conspirators in a clay revolution distinguishing them from the commonly accepted. Unpredictable at the time, they would eventually change the course of American ceramics, creating a legacy spanning five decades of innovation, in which they reshaped the landscape of American ceramic art.



Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1949. Photo: Lela Autio.

During his residency at the Bray, Autio started creating large-scale clay murals, in part at the urging of the brickyard's owner Archie Bray. After Bray sold a large order of bricks to construct a number of Montana public

buildings (churches, hospitals, and schools), he would “throw in” one of Rudy’s murals to sweeten the deal. His first commission was in 1952 for the Liberal Arts Hall at the University of Montana.

One of the influences on the early artistic life of Rudy Autio were the artists of the Mexican Muralist Movement, especially artists Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, whose works were shaped during a period of political upheaval in Mexico. Following in the tradition of earlier Mexican indigenous people, including the Mayans and Aztecs, who painted temples and palaces with scenes of everyday life, these artists were acutely sensitive to the social and political conditions of their fellow citizens. By taking their art out of the studio and into the streets, they entered into a visual dialogue with the very people they hoped to reach.

Word of the Mexican Muralists was spread throughout the United States by their travels in the 1930s. Rivera became a household name when he did battle with Nelson Rockefeller, who insisted Rivera paint out the figure of Lenin in the mural, “Man at the Crossroads,” installed at Rockefeller Center in 1933. Siqueiros traveled to New York in 1936 to conduct a political art workshop, attended by a young Jackson Pollack. Together, the Mexican Muralists believed that art should be public, educational and ideological, at once social and universal.

Autio completed six more murals during the 1950s, and during our interview, remembered some controversy after the completion of *Early Days in Last Chance Gulch*, 1959, commissioned by the former Union Bank and Trust, located in Helena. I asked if the problem might have been his raising the status of the common man.

*I even got hate letters after I did that mural for the Union Bank in Helena. Oh, yes, this was Communist-type stuff; miners with axes, shovels and things like that marching in a group. I got hate mail from Hamilton from the John Birchers, I suspect, unsigned. They told me that if I didn't repudiate my interest in Communism they would get me fired from the University. I didn't know what to think. I just designed something and made it.*

I asked if his approach to making murals was inspired-in part- by growing up in Butte with the socio- political makeup of the community.

*It might be a bit of a stretch. I wasn't too concerned about political matters then. I didn't vote for Henry Wallace, who was a socialist. But that was in my college days, he would have been a disaster if we got him in. Truman was some guy I admired. Then later, Eisenhower I admired so what the hell, you know, I'm very ambivalent in some ways that way.*

After his time at the Bray, Rudy left for California to seek job opportunities. Returning to Helena after two months, he was fortunate to befriend the acclaimed historian K. Ross Toole, who was then director of the Montana Historical Society. Rudy’s talents as a draftsman and modeler developed at a time when the museum was installing their permanent collections, and he was duly proud of the diorama he created depicting the Lewis & Clark Expedition.

*Ross Toole and I had a unique relationship; he was sort of like a big brother to me. I was like the kid down the block who worked for him. He was very influential for me in his early 30s; he was a wonderful speaker and could talk the shirt off your back. So I worked at the museum with Bob Morgan and Jack Weaver.*

When Rudy followed Toole to the University of Montana to start the ceramics program in 1957, he would periodically invite the historian to lecture to his clay students; thinking they also would harvest fresh perspectives on their present and future states.

### **Expanded Worldview with Study Travels**

Rudy had an opportunity to travel at various times throughout his career. He took his family to Italy in 1963 and worked several times in Finland. The Finnish people have been characterized –in part-as silent and melancholy. The Finnish term “sisu” denotes a grim determination, doing what must be done regardless of circumstances.

*If you look at the Finnish character, it's somewhat reserved and stoic because of the long harsh winters, and so it takes a certain amount of persistence to survive in that culture. They have what they call the Kaamos Aika, which means the long dreaded gloomy winter, and I experienced that. It is very dark and the nights are long.*

*Traveling to Finland was great for me because I got to know some accomplished professionals; I was amazed, I don't know why I should have been but they were very sophisticated in ceramics. They were knowledgeable about American ceramics. For example, Kyllikki Salmenhaara, who had been a visiting artist at both Alfred and Los Angeles schools, was familiar with American culture; she knew many of the potters over here and was quite an*

*influence on the direction that some of the designers at the Arabia Porcelain factory.*



Rudy Autio (design), Anneli Hartikainen (weaving), *Montana Horses*, Rya tapestry, wool, 1986, 16 x 30'. Collection of the Montana Museum of Art & Culture, The University of Montana, Missoula.

*There was also a mixture of people who had been at the Helsinki art schools, for example, the people who were behind the Marimekko designs in textiles and there was also the Finnish Handicraft Society, the weaving of ryas. Those aspects of the culture were integrated amongst all of the professionals.*



## Rudy Autio: Myth-maker

Greek mythology has been used to explain the world as physical phenomena or to use the gods as moral signifiers and continues to be an important source of raw material for cultural historians, writers and artists. An attempt to explain the origins of the world and to tell the story of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, mythological accounts have survived through oral tradition, literature and through representation on ceramic vessels. Geometric designs on pottery from the 8th century BC depict scenes from the Trojan cycle. In Autio's latter ceramic works, classical subjects inspire central themes: the power of horses, cavorting women, and the joyful, yet complex interplay of the animal and human worlds.

There are several schools of thought concerning the origins of mythology. One holds that the sources of mythology were once real human beings. Another supposes that ancient myths were allegorical and symbolical, with other scholars contending that physical elements, such as air, water and fire, initially the objects of veneration, were personified by the gods.



Autio in studio with *Acanthus* mural in background, Missoula, Montana, 1997.

Artists and poets, past and present have been inspired by Greek culture; the richness of its narrative resonating across the ages. The significance of its symbolism is constantly reexamined, reflecting the appeal and relevance of the subject matter to contemporary society, while at the same time, measuring our current perspective on questions that have perplexed men since ancient times.

Many of Autio's words bear reference to Greek mythology including

*Acanthus*, a Spartan athlete, *Electra*, the subject of plays by Sophocles and Euripides, *Andromeda*, the wife of Perseus, *Marathon* and *Argos*, both Greek cities, and *Aurora*, the subject of works by Virgil, Shakespeare and Lord Alfred Tennyson.

## Legacy

Informed by his childhood experiences, his love of Montana's rich history, and full engagement in the arts, Rudy Autio created a unique body of work that captured the artist's personal worldview. A committed educator and artist, Autio's contribution to the ceramic arts is unquestioned, as is his influence on successive generations of ceramists.

Towards the end of my interview with Rudy, I asked him a difficult question, given his battle with leukemia. But I bravely expounded, “When your name comes up, the quick label that’s put on you is the ‘Matisse of Ceramics’’. How would you like your legacy written or how would you like to be remembered?”



Matisse, Henri (1869-1954) © Dance (I). Paris, Hotel Biron, early 1909. Oil on canvas, 8'6½" x 12'9½". Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (201.1963). © Succession H. Matisse, Paris / ARS, NY. May have restrictions. Contact Art Resource for details. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY, MoMA, New York, NY, U.S.A.

*Well, that's not a bad one; I thought Matisse's work was a lot like mine. I've seen very few bad Matisses so that's not a bad label, if you want to look at it that way. The fact that he was interested in the figure and color, as I am, is a remarkable coincidence. I don't know, I feel very fortunate doing what I've done, but then I can't think of what else I would have been doing. It would have been a grim thing to become a copper miner and get my lungs filled with copper dust.*



Rudy Autio, *Mime*, ceramic, 2002, 31 x 31 x 5" Missoula Art Museum Collection, purchased with a gift from Miriam Sample.

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