

As the potter Otto Heino regaled successive clusters of admirers with tales of his rediscovery of the secret ingredients of the lost Chinese yellow glaze, and his World War II exploits as a B-17 waist gunner, a trim man stood back and quietly smiled amid a bonanza of hand-thrown bowls, bottles, cups and plates made by Otto, now 91, and his late wife, Vivika.

The quiet man was Forrest L. Merrill, who loaned all but four of the works in the exhibition "The Art of Vivika and Otto Heino," which opened in December at the Mingei International Museum in San

Diego.* About 70 ceramic pieces, thrown and glazed mostly in southern California were on display. (Otto is still working at his pottery in picturesque Ojai, in the foothills east of Santa Barbara.) They are part of Merrill's collection of works from about 20 artists, with special focus on mid-20th-century contemporary craft thrown, forged, lathed, enameled and woven in California. Nobody, not even Merrill himself, knows how many pieces he owns; they outgrew his modest Bay Area bungalow a long time ago and reside mostly in storage when not on loan. The general belief among curators and craft artists

interviewed for this article is that Merrill's collection is one of the largest and most important of its kind in the country.

Merrill's fondness is for vessels—"My aesthetic is right here," he explains, cupping his hands together, mimicking the size and shape of many of the Heino bowls. "You can put your heart in them. The fact that they're not utilitarian doesn't mean they aren't useful, to the eye or to the heart."

Vivika Heino died in 1995, after 45 years of working collaboratively with Otto. They married in 1950, the year Merrill bought the first pieces in his collection. He was a junior

in high school in Glendale, near Los Angeles, when he purchased a five-piece, frosted slumped-glass salad set made by Glen Lukens, the University of Southern California ceramics guru. Merrill paid \$40, money he'd earned mowing lawns. "I'm very proud of the fact that I discovered the 50s in 1950, and not 1985," he remarks jovially.

At first, the young Merrill wasn't quite aware that he was witnessing the dawn of a movement in which a small group of California ceramists, wood turners, furniture makers and metalsmiths were defining their work in terms of truth to materials and honesty of form. That movement pro-

duced a well-defined California crafts aesthetic that was partly a back-to-the-earth reaction to modernism's influence on the fine arts. The West Coast ceramists stood apart in their embrace of stolid plainness of form and function, yet they still made groundbreaking advances in materials and technique. Marguerite Wildenhain, studied at the Bauhaus before World War II, was instilling her strictly disciplined throwing and firing methods in workshops at Pond Farm, her pottery north of San Francisco. Bernard Leach, the renowned English potter, returned from Japan to lecture

and write about that country's ancient tradition of producing fine crafts for everyday use. Laura Andreson's ceramics classes thrived at UCLA, and eventually both Heinos taught at the Chouinard Art Institute and USC. "It was a period that held such a lot of promise," recalls Kay Sekimachi, the weaver and widow of the wood turner Bob Stocksdale. She's a good friend of Merrill's, and he collects her work. "Things were happening, we were all emerging. A number of us were really making crafts into an art form."

By the time Merrill graduated from high school, in 1951, he had a nascent col-

FORREST MERRILL *Collecting California*



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: DAVID GILHOLLY—Figure, date unknown, ceramic, 8 inches high; JUNE SCHWARCZ—#809 Vessel, 1981, electroplated copper, patinated, 6 1/2 inches diameter; KAY SEKIMACHI—Bowl, date unknown, unspun flax, paper, gold metallic, 3 1/2 inches high. OPPOSITE PAGE: PETER VOULKOS—Plate, ca. 1956, ceramic, slip, stencil, 10 3/4 inches diameter.

lection. After majoring in economics at Occidental College in Los Angeles, he joined the army and later spent time studying in Sweden. But he has always been a son of the Golden State and settled near San Francisco in 1957. "I like the landscapes of California, and the people," he explains. "The things I'm interested in are mostly made by people I know." He has dinner with Sekimachi about once a week, mostly at a local Japanese restaurant because Merrill rarely cooks. His kitchen floor is inhabited by Albert, a 10-foot-long ceramic alligator from another of his artists, David Gilhooly. "People are

very cordial and accessible and invite me over for tea. I like to think the friendship is as important as the pieces. . . . Being close to the kiln gives you access to the work. The more you can see, the better you can choose what to have."

Choosing what to have, of course, is the essence of formulating a personal but representative collection. Merrill's intense focus centers on the sensuality of the vessel form; he isn't interested in assembling a cross section from every period of an artist's career. "It reflects the work's value to me," he reasons. "These are the pieces I want to live with. It's real-

ly not that hard to pick good pottery," he goes on. "They have a lip, a neck, a body, a belly and a foot. The form, the form, the form—that's what appeals to me."

Though Merrill may claim simple tastes, the artists he collects say he's only interested in their best pieces. From the 87-year-old enamelist June Schwarcz to the 35-year-old potter Christa Assad, they say Merrill has helped them immeasurably by buying their most imaginative, least marketable works, which also can be the most expensive. "He supported me by being the only one who bought my work for a long time," relates Schwarcz, who is



"I'm very proud of the fact that I discovered the 50s in 1950, not 1985."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: HERBERT SANDERS—Bottle, date unknown, ceramic, crystalline glaze, 7 inches high; GERTRUD and OTTO NATZLER—*L 254 Bottle*, 4 inches high, cigarette crusher, crystalline glaze, miniature ceramic bowls (B60, A43, A52) exhibited at De Young Museum in 1971—all 1961; OTTO HEINO—Table top, 1995, stoneware, glaze, stain, 20³/₄ inches diameter. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PAUL LANIER—Vase, 2005, ceramic, 10¹/₂ inches high; GLEN LUKENS—Bowl, ca. 1950, glass, slumped, 14 inches diameter; BOB STOCKSDALE—Bowl, before 1975, Brazilian rosewood, 3¹/₄ inches high.

comfortably off but needed the validation of a major collector.

"It's not very encouraging if you only buy a \$50 pot," says Merrill, who pays his artists retail. He spent \$950 for a teapot by Assad in 1999, and \$1,200 in 2003 for a large piece from another San Francisco potter, Paul Lanier, son of the sculptor Ruth Asawa. Lanier studied under Wildenhain at Pond Farm in the late 1970s, marking the kind of weblike symmetry that characterizes the connections among many of the creative souls in Merrill's trove. "It's an honor just to be part of his collection," says Lanier, "[to be] in the

company of such distinguished artists."

Kevin Wallace, the independent curator who helped organize the Heino show and knows Merrill well, observes, "Forrest has this uncanny ability to find good material. He collects historically—that's what sets him apart. He knows the history of the artist; he talked to them when they were young. He has real knowledge, even more than the dealers. He realizes he gets more access by knowing things, that knowledge is power."

Merrill, a real estate investor, drives up weekly to Calistoga to visit his 103-year-old mother. He hasn't worn a tie since

1973, at the opening of an exhibition of Natzler ceramics at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in which he had work on loan. "I don't buy many clothes," he says. Almost all his disposable income goes into expanding, maintaining or making loans from the collection. Although he keeps extensive records on all the artists, he is about to purchase his first computer to assist in formally cataloging his holdings.

This would be a first step toward determining the ultimate fate of the works, which include more than 200 of Stocksdale's wood bowls. Though they haven't

asked him directly, in interviews for this article three of his friends and favorite artists, Sekimachi, Schwarcz and Heino, voiced concerns about where the collection would end up, an issue of greater importance to the older than to the younger artists.

Merrill is circumspect about the collection's eventual home. He says he'd like it to go to a museum, but hasn't been approached yet by any institution "in a serious way." He says he wants it to remain in California, but he is keenly aware of how museums' tastes may change, and that the collection could

potentially be broken up and sold off if he doesn't make the right arrangement.

"Institutions reflect the strengths of the people there at the time," Merrill points out. "You can't guarantee the longevity of their tastes. All I can say now is that I don't know where the collection will end up, but that I feel a very important responsibility to myself, my family, the work, the artist, and the public to see that this collection is well-taken-care-of. What form that will take in the future has not been decided." ■

*The Heino exhibition premiered at the Ventura County Museum of History & Art in March 2005, coinciding with Otto's 90th birthday and featuring his work

since Vivika died. Concurrently, the Craft & Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, assembled a show of the Heinos' collaborative work, including pieces by Vivika from as far back as 1943. Part of that show went to the Oakland Museum of California; the entire exhibition, comprising the earlier two, traveled to the Mingei International Museum. *The Art of Vivika and Otto Heino*, 88 pages, paperback, is \$29 from the Ventura Museum, 805-653-0323.

Neal Matthews, a freelance writer, lives in San Diego.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: HAL RIEGGER—*Bottle*, 2001, ceramic, 16 inches high; KENNETH DIERCK—*Caryatid Head with Bowl*, mid-1970s, ceramic, luster glaze, 13³/₄ inches high; MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN—*Vase*, date unknown, ceramic, 10¹/₂ inches high. OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JUNE SCHWARCZ—*#2279 Vessel*, 2005, electroplated screening, 11 inches high; JAMES LOVERA—*Bowl*, 1992, ceramic with bark glaze, 2¹/₄ inches high; JERRY ROTHMAN—*Vessel*, 1961-62, ceramic, 10³/₄ inches high.