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The revival of interest in midcentury modernism has conferred almost iconic status on Architectural Pottery, a fifties brand of garden wares timeless in its appeal

pots

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This page: A tall Architectural Pottery lantern by Malcolm Leland is matched with bisque and flame-glazed AP planters. Opposite: A massive "wok" by LaGardo Tackett planted with a graceful epidendrum orchid hybrid.



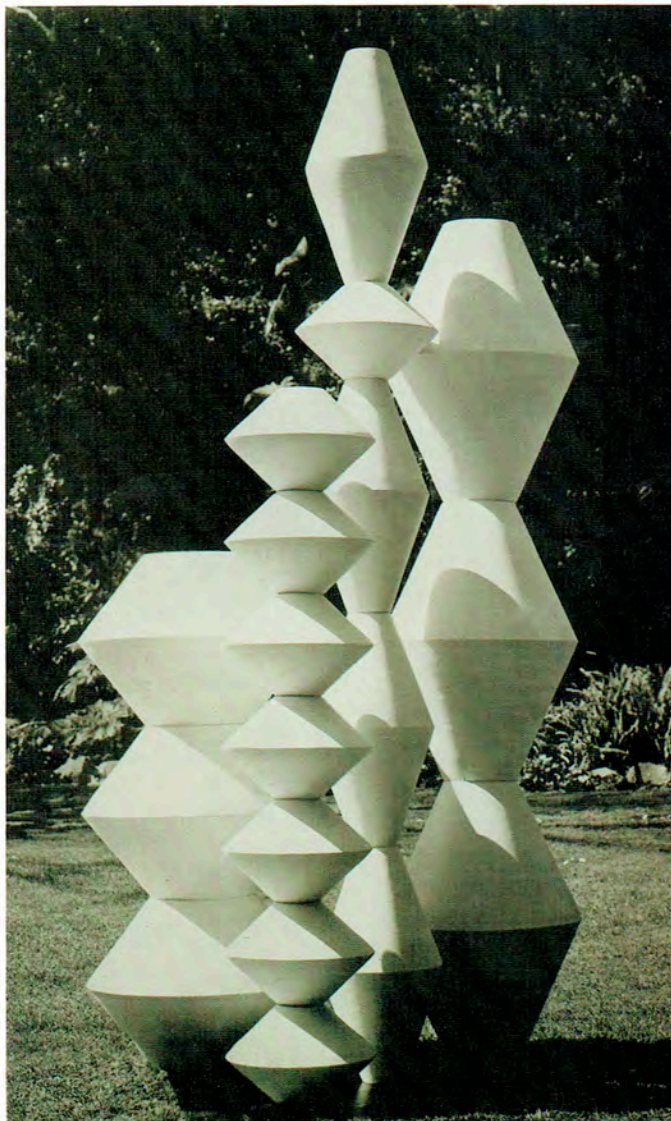
ONE DAY IN 1949, LAGARDO TACKETT CAME UP WITH AN IDEA. AN instructor at the California School of Art in Pasadena (now Art Center College of Design), he decided to assign his 10 advanced students the task of designing and executing a collection of large-scale garden pottery. So he took them to a Los Angeles terra-cotta factory where they formed and fired the planters on the premises. From there, the pots were made available for sale at a local nursery.

The assignment eventually gave birth to Architectural Pottery. Functional yet sculptural, for indoors and out, these modern garden containers were designed in simple geometric shapes—cylinders, ovoids, hourglasses, troughs—that were nicknamed after their look-alikes, the wok, the doughnut, the egg, the peanut, the avocado. To accentuate their shapes, the pots were simply finished in bisque and matte or glossy glazes.

Architectural Pottery's unique marriage of good design and practical horticulture took up the challenge of modernism in every way. If modernist California architects like Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler were redefining the walls between the indoors and out, then outdoor furniture and accessories had to take up the same banner. After all, what was outside could be seen from inside, and what could be used outdoors could make its way indoors, too. Swagged French jardinières just wouldn't do in the modernist California climate. The mood of the times demanded a seamless, unified look, which meant that the exterior had to offer the same sense of panache one would find in the interior of a house.

"Modernism was not just about architecture. It was a period that grew out of a confluence of similar ideals, a holistic approach to architecture and design," explains Andy Hackman, an expert on modern exterior furnishings, whose Los Angeles shop, California Living, helped revive an interest in Architectural Pottery.

With contemporary design now fueled by a re-examination of modernism, Architectural Pottery has undergone a renaissance. "I've been collecting midcentury French and American furniture for a while, but Architectural Pottery literally brought me outside," says Alex Hedison, an L.A.-based fine arts photographer. "You can live outside with these pots. They really dictate the sculptural, desert plants that go with them," she says. Hedison asked her friend designer Cliff Fong to assemble a collection of Architectural Pottery, part of which, with pieces from



From top: Architectural Pottery photos from about 1955 showing columns made from fused "woks" to be used as garden sculptures or fountains. The same form set on metal spikes could serve as cigarette receptacles or planters. Opposite: A group of small pieces by David Cressey work seamlessly with a contemporary black pot.



Top: The covered deck takes the shape of an outdoor room accented with Architectural Pottery pieces. Above, from left to right: The textured "Phoenix" Pro-Artisan planter and a "Sombbrero" fire pit with other AP pieces. Pots are used as seating, planters and to hold firewood around a sunken conversation pit. A collection of early AP and late Pro-Artisan pieces. Opposite: A hallmark of AP was that it was designed for indoors and out. Here, two Pro-Artisan pieces accentuate a group dominated by a vintage Hans Wegner Flag Line chair in the den.





Top: Architectural Pottery was intentionally created to coordinate with the outdoor furnishings made during the period, like Richard Schultz's "1966" petal table and the "Triad Chair" through California Living. Above: A sculptural AP piece, "Polar Bear" by Gordon Newell. Opposite: Alex Hedison with some of her AP collection.

"I've been collecting midcentury French and American furniture for a while, but Architectural Pottery literally brought me outside. Now I'm always looking for outdoor furniture to pair with the pottery"

—ALEX HEDISON

the collection of Alvin Lee, are pictured on these pages.

In 1950 Max and Rita Lawrence discovered the pottery and successfully took it under their wing. Until its doors closed in the early 1980s, Architectural Pottery was almost always paired with the great outdoor furniture of the age—Van Keppel Green and Walter Lamb in California, Richard Schultz and Harry Bertioia on the East Coast, Russell Woodard in the Midwest. It was such a hit that New York's Museum of Modern Art selected pieces for its 1951 *Good Design* exhibition. Soon enough, showrooms were opened across the country; the leading architectural firms were custom ordering; and according to Max Lawrence, now 94, virtually every new skyscraper built in the country specified Architectural Pottery for its entrances or halls.

Much of the credit belongs to Rita Lawrence, whose "gentle genius," as the *Los Angeles Times* once put it, had the best young designers flocking to her door. The Lawrences not only gave a percentage of sales to each designer, but also credited the work of each artist in their catalogs. Artists included LaGardo Taggett, whose "hourglass" was the company's best-seller, along with John Follis, Rex Goode, Malcolm Leland and Mary Kay Austin.

In the early '60s, the Lawrences hired the sculptor David Cressey. His most notable contribution was the development of a new line of stoneware, which became part of the Pro-Artisan line. While Architectural Pottery in general is highly collectible today, "the stoneware of David Cressey is particularly sought after because he textured and glazed his pieces by hand, making each one unique," says Bill Stern, director of the Museum of California Design and author of *California Pottery: From Missions to Modernism* (Chronicle Books, 2001).

But the revival of Architectural Pottery is not just part of the revival of modernism. "It's about owning a piece of history. It's about owning a work of art," says Cliff Fong. "It has a quiet sensibility that allows people to think, to contemplate the purity of form, which, if you think about it, is a very nice way to spend time in the garden."

■ The Museum of California Design is currently organizing an exhibition of Architectural Pottery; see www.mocad.org. For more information on plants shown here, call *The Tropics*, a specialist nursery in Hollywood, California, at 323-469-1682.

where to buy Today, Architectural Pottery is most readily available on the West Coast not only because the factories were originally based in the L.A. area, but also because terra-cotta can be damaged by freeze/thaw cycles and cannot overwinter outdoors in cold climates. Pro-Artisan pieces produced later are less porous and therefore more durable and resistant to temperature fluctuations.

Says Andy Hackman of California Living, "Because connoisseurship is still in its infancy, collecting is still a frontier, and no comprehensive catalog exists. Pieces generally range from \$500 to \$1,500, but the closer to the artist's hand, the greater the value. Cressey's work tends to range from \$3,500 to \$5,000, while esoteric pieces set their own limit." For a look at what is available in the marketplace, try these shops, auction houses and Web sites:

■ **California Living** 601 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90036; 323-930-2601; www.californialivingusa.com.

■ **Inner Gardens** 6050 W. Jefferson Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90016; 310-838-8378; www.innergardens.com.

■ **Los Angeles Modern Auctions (LAMA)** 323-904-1950; www.lamodern.com. Auctions held regularly at the Pacific Design Center; see a Web site for upcoming dates. \$800 to \$5,000.

■ **R 20th Century** 82 Franklin St., NYC 10013; www.r20thcentury.com. Tends to focus on esoteric pieces, so prices range from \$4,500 to \$10,000.

■ **Vessel USA** 858-385-1960; www.architecturalpottery.com. Reissues original Architectural Pottery. Designs to original specifications. \$130 to \$1,695.

■ **Wright** 1140 W. Fulton, Chicago, IL 60607; 312-563-0020; www.wright20.com. See Web site for auction dates and direct sales.

