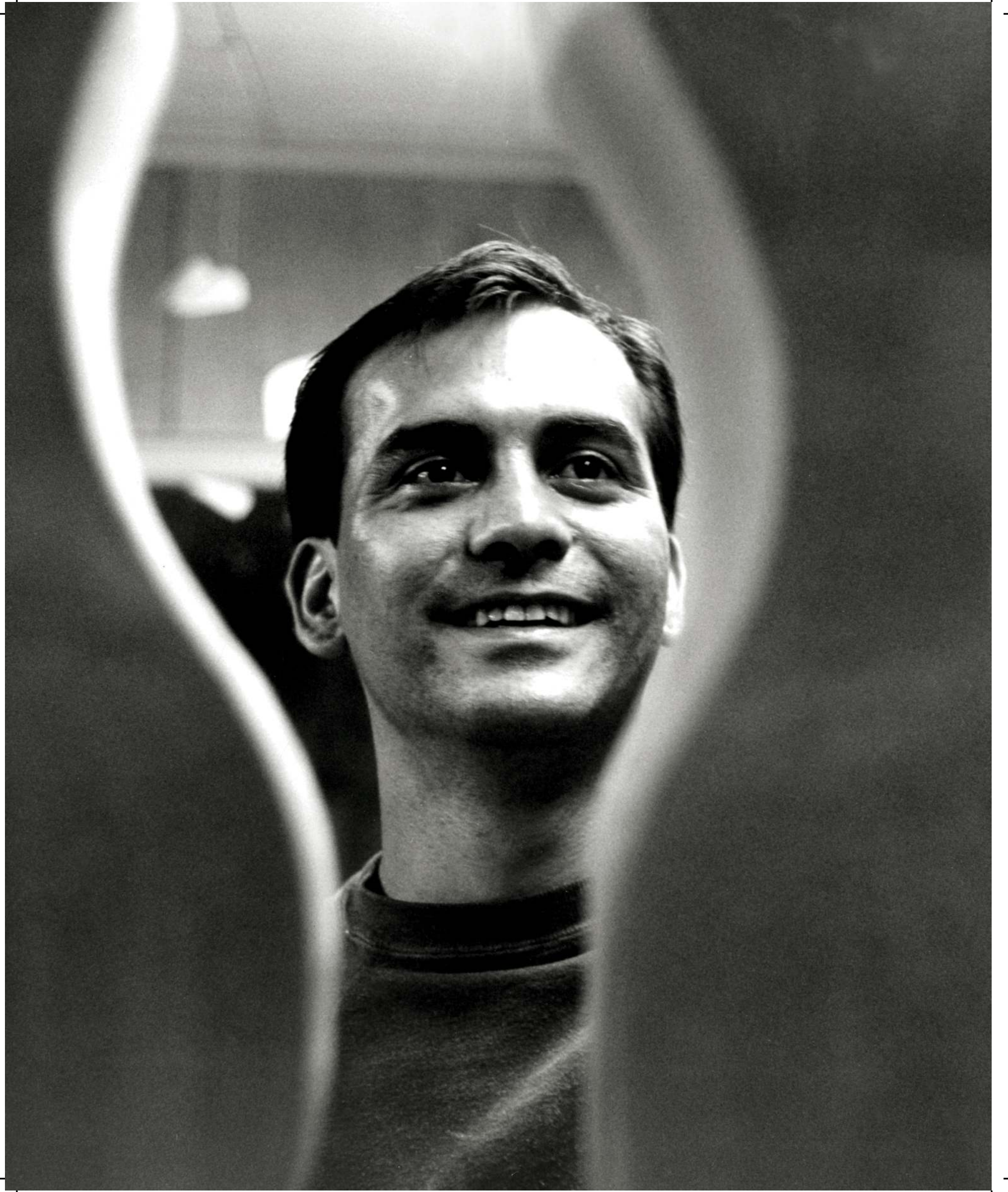


RALPH BACERRA



I AM COMMITTED MORE TO THE IDEA OF PURE BEAUTY.
WHEN IT IS FINISHED, THE PIECE SHOULD BE LIKE AN ORNAMENT, EXQUISITELY BEAUTIFUL.





RALPH BACERRA

Exquisite Beauty

JO LAURIA

ESSAYS BY

Jeannine Falino

Hollis Goodall

Christy Johnson

OTIS | BEN MALTZ GALLERY

Otis College of Art and Design

LOS ANGELES

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition *Ralph Bacerra: Exquisite Beauty*, organized by and presented at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, September 26–December 6, 2015.

The exhibition and publication are funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pasadena Art Alliance, and The Boardman Family Foundation. Additional funding has been provided by Friends of Contemporary Ceramics and Japan Art Foundation, Los Angeles.



PUBLISHED BY

Ben Maltz Gallery
Otis College of Art and Design
9045 Lincoln Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90045
www.otis.edu/benmaltzgallery
galleryinfo@otis.edu
310.665.6905

© 2015 Otis College of Art and Design. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photography, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-930209-41-4

PROJECT MANAGER

Jo Lauria

EDITOR

Karen Jacobson

DESIGNER

Amy McFarland, clean{slate}design

PRINTER

Typecraft, Inc., Pasadena, California

This book is printed on #100 text and #130 cover McCoy silk book papers. The text is set in Quadraat, Gotham, and Didot typefaces.

FRONT COVER

Untitled Platter, 2007 (detail). Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

FRONT FLAP

Untitled Wall Mural, 1983 (detail). Ceramic. 27 ½ × 29 ½ × 3 in. (69.9 × 74.9 × 7.6 cm). Collection of Karen Smits.

BACK COVER

Cloud Vessel, 2000 (detail). Porcelain. 22 × 14 ½ × 6 in. (55.9 × 36.8 × 15.2 cm). Collection of Paul and Sharon Dauer.

BACK FLAP

Untitled Platter, 2005 (detail). Ceramic. 3 ½ × 24 ½ × 20 ½ in. (8.9 × 62.2 × 52.1 cm). Collection of Alan Mandell.

PAGE 1

Cup and saucer, from *Untitled Dinnerware*, 1999–2000. Ceramic. Cup: 3 ¾ × 4 ¾ × 5 ¾ in. (9.5 × 12.1 × 13.3 cm); saucer: height: ¾ in. (1.9 cm); diameter: 6 ¼ in. (15.9 cm).

PAGES 2-3

Untitled, 1998 (detail and full view). Porcelain. 15 ½ × 19 ½ × 17 ⅝ in. (39.4 × 49.5 × 44.8 cm). Collection of Forrest L. Merrill.

Unless otherwise noted, works by Ralph Bacerra are from the collection of Peter and Cindy Bass/Cindy Lee Bass, Executor of the Ralph Bacerra Estate, and are reproduced courtesy of the estate.

PAGE 4

Ralph Bacerra in the Chouinard ceramics studio shortly after his appointment as head of ceramics, c. 1968.

PAGE 6

Ralph Bacerra's signature from the underside of the *Dragon Platter* (c. 1975; p. 33).

PAGE 7

Ralph Bacerra applying china paint to a large platter at his Eagle Rock studio, 1974.

PAGE 8

Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

PAGE 9

Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm). Collection of David and Julianne Armstrong.

PAGE 10

Untitled Platter, 2007. Ceramic. Height: 4 in. (10.2 cm); diameter: 28 ¼ in. (71.8 cm).

REPRODUCTION CREDITS

All works by Ralph Bacerra are © the Ralph Bacerra Estate. Other works are © the respective artists. Works by Ralph Bacerra were photographed by David Peters, except as noted below. Photographs in the chronology, other than those of artworks in the exhibition, are from the Ralph Bacerra Archives, except as noted below. Photographs generally appear courtesy of the creators, owners, or lenders of the materials depicted. The following list applies to those for which additional acknowledgments are due.

Courtesy American Museum of Ceramic Art: 30, 97

Photo © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco: 31

Courtesy George and Connie Bacerra: 90 (figs. 1–3), 108 (fig. 49)

Courtesy bpk, Berlin / Aegyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung / Margarete Buesing / Art Resource, NY: 46

© Judy Chicago, 1964. Photo © Donald Woodman: 36 (bottom)

Photo by Jim Cohen; courtesy of Lin Werner: 71, 94 (fig. 20)

Photo by Anthony Cuñha: 10, 50, 61, 62, 68, 69, 86, 96 (fig. 26)

Photo by Ron Cunningham: 108 (fig. 52)

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree: 2, 3, 40, 41, 59, 67
Photo by Richard Gross: 94 (fig. 21), 95 (fig. 23)

Photo by Eva Heyd: 35 (left), 36 (top)

Photo by Marjorie Illig: 105 (fig. 42)

Photo by Wayne Kuwada: 105 (fig. 43)

Photo by Marlea McKinstry: 106 (fig. 45)

Photo © Museum Associates / LACMA: 34 (bottom), 51, 52, 55 (top and bottom), 60, 66 (top)

Photo © Fredrik Nilsen: 34 (top)

Photo by Mac L. Olds: 7

Photo by Sam Parsons: 107 (fig. 47)

Photo by David Peters: 93 (fig. 17)

Courtesy Ralph Bacerra Archives: 4, 7, 14, 22, 66 (bottom), 72

Photo by and courtesy of Porntip

Sangvanich: 24 (bottom middle), 112–13

Photo by Gene Sasse: 18

Photo by Gabriel Seri: 1

Unknown photographer: 49, 56, 97 (fig. 28), 101 (fig. 34)

Photo by Ed Watkins: 35 (right)

Photo by John White: 103





Introduction

JO LAURIA

Ralph Bacerra: Exquisite Beauty is the first retrospective and publication to document the eye-dazzling ceramics created by Ralph Bacerra (1938–2008), a Los Angeles–based artist known for his innovative approach to surface embellishment. The exhibition features more than ninety of the artist’s finest pieces—dramatic, highly decorated vessels and sculptures that have never before been the focus of a major exhibition or publication.

Bacerra’s career in ceramics spanned five decades, over the course of which his work moved stylistically from traditionalism to pattern and decoration to “post-baroque.” He was part of the group of second-generation post–World War II California artists who followed the boundary-expanding lead of Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, John Mason, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos. These visionary artists sought to use clay in a way that responded to their time and place. Collectively they broadened the possibilities of the medium and brought recognition to the field.

Like those before him, Bacerra regularly challenged ceramic conventions, resolutely experimenting with unfamiliar materials and

techniques in his studio. His unique contribution was the creation of a new “grammar of ornament” through the complex layering of aggregated design motifs, achieved primarily through multiple applications of underglazes and overglazes combined with metallic lusters. The resultant interweave generated a language rich in cross-cultural inflection and design schemes fluent in optically inventive patterns that played with perception and teased the eye.

Ralph Bacerra was born on January 23, 1938, in Garden Grove, California; his father was from the Philippines, his mother from Montana. He attended what is now Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, and in 1957 enrolled at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he initially studied graphic design. An elective class in ceramics, however, altered Bacerra’s life: after one semester of study with Vivika Heino, a pioneering studio potter and celebrated educator, he veered away from commercial art.

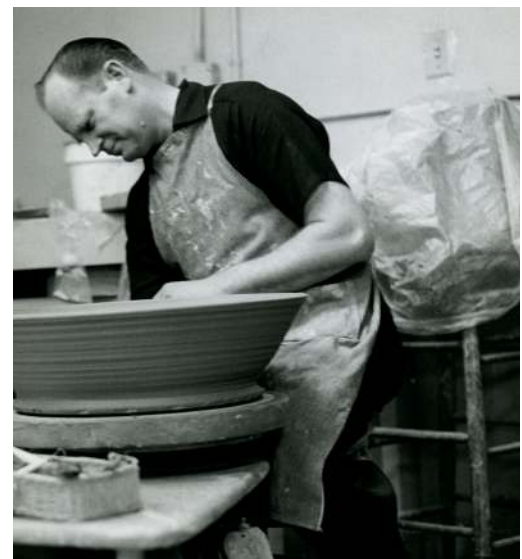


Bacerra had taken a studio class in pottery at Orange Coast College but hadn't realized or considered that ceramics could be a vocation. Heino and her husband, Otto, worked together at the Chouinard ceramics studio, although only Vivika was formally engaged as an instructor. They collaborated on the making, glazing, and firing of their pieces, extending this practice to their home studio, where they also displayed and sold their pottery (left). This opened Bacerra's eyes to the possibilities of a profession in ceramics, and the Heinos became his lifelong mentors. In an interview the artist recalled his early experience with Vivika Heino in the Chouinard ceramics studio: "And once she started to talk, demonstrate, and the environment in the classroom, and I started to get more serious of working with the wheel and the clay and the glazes. I said this is for me. This is where I want to be, and I dropped everything and switched my major to ceramics."¹

When Vivika Heino accepted a teaching position at Rhode Island School of Design in 1963, she recommended Bacerra as her replacement. He served as the head of ceramics at Chouinard from 1964 through 1971, when the school was formally absorbed into California Institute of the Arts and the ceramics major was eliminated from the curriculum.



Vivika Heino, head of the ceramics department, working in the studio, Chouinard Art Institute, 1959.



Otto Heino throwing a large platter on the potter's wheel in the Chouinard ceramics studio, 1959.

Ralph Bacerra, drawing from sketchbook, 1957-58. Graphite, ink, and pen on paper. 11 × 8 in. (27.9 × 20.3 cm).



Chouinard was a proving ground for Bacerra both as a student and as a teacher. As he matured in the classroom—he was only twenty-six years old when he became department head—his ceramics also became more sophisticated and refined. His elegant Asian-inspired porcelain vases and bottles caught the attention of Ken Deavers, founder of the American Hand gallery in Washington, DC. In 1967 Deavers invited Bacerra to join the gallery’s roster of artists. This relationship, which continued until 1997, provided Bacerra with representation on the East Coast and increased visibility as a ceramist.

Bacerra’s recognition was furthered in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when his work became identified with the art movement “variously known as ‘Finish Fetish’ or ‘Fetish Finish’ depending on whether the emphasis was on the obsessive preciousness of the art object or on its pristine surface.”² In ceramics, this style demanded that the work be flawlessly executed and deliberately seductive in both shape and surface. *Orange Form* (1968; left), with its sensuous contours and enticing glaze treatment, is emblematic of this aesthetic direction. Although Bacerra felt that too much was made of his association with this style, it is clear that he believed in its underlying principles: “Technique is a high priority. The skill has to be evident in each piece. That is to say that the form should be pleasing, the glaze and the colors are right and the design is completely worked-out.”³

After his teaching job at Chouinard was eliminated, Bacerra spent the next decade as a full-time studio artist. This was a time of intense experimentation. Dating from this period are the handsome covered stoneware jars (p. 18) and the intriguing mythical animal sculptures

Ralph Bacerra, *Orange Form*, 1968. Earthenware, metallic (chrome, lead) overglaze; wheel-thrown. 9½ × 9 × 8¾ in. (24.1 × 22.9 × 22.2 cm). Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Gift of the Johnson Wax Company, through the American Craft Council, 1977 (1977.2.6).

This sensuous sculpture was selected by curator Lee Nordness for *Objects: USA*. The exhibition opened at the Smithsonian Institution in 1969 before beginning an extensive US tour, eventually crossing the Atlantic and traveling to European venues.



that illustrate his curiosity and whimsicality (see pp. 66–67). The animal sculptures mark an important development in his work. They were perhaps the first series in which he blended his exceptional craftsmanship with the ability to express narrative: each sculpture evokes a sense of place, story, and attitude.

Bacerra also took advantage of his more open schedule to travel to Asia, visiting Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. On return trips to Japan he had the opportunity to closely examine historical Japanese ceramics, specifically Imari, Kutani, and Nabeshima wares. In Taiwan, he sought out ceramics from China's Song, Tang, and Ming dynasties in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, with a special focus on the extensive selection of celadon-glazed vessels and on the shapes and glaze variations in the blue-and-white porcelains of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. His gaze



Above: **Ralph Bacerra**, *Green Casserole*, c. 1973. Stoneware. Lid: height: 3 in. (7.6 cm); diameter: 11 in. (27.9 cm). Base: height: 5¼ in. (14.6 cm); diameter: 11 in. (27.9 cm). Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA, Gift of Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio.

Above, right: **Ralph Bacerra**, *Covered Vessel with Handles*, 1975. Porcelain. Height: 15 in. (38.1 cm); diameter: 9½ in. (24.1 cm). Collection of Ken Deavers.



was also aroused by the rich colors, abstract designs, and repeating patterns of Japanese textiles and the boldly graphic woodblock prints of nineteenth-century Japanese ukiyo-e masters such as Katsushika Hokusai. This exploration of historical Asian ceramics, textiles, and prints informed his work, and he began to create original pieces that drew inspiration from them (above). Other sources that influenced Bacerra's design vocabulary were the pottery traditions of Ottoman Turkey, especially Iznik ceramics; Persian miniatures; the drawings of the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher; and the geometric patterns that pervaded early modernism. Bacerra's particular delight in the sensuously decorative late "gold paintings" of the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt is reflected in his densely patterned ceramics (p. 20).

The second phase of Bacerra's teaching career began in 1982 at the invitation of Otis Art Institute. The first year he taught part-time, leading classes in surface design and glaze technology. The following year he was appointed chair of ceramics with oversight of all aspects of the ceramics studio. He held the position for thirteen years, teaching a new generation of students the skills necessary to become successful studio artists and educators. All who spent time in his classroom benefited from his technical expertise and keen design sensibility. Many of his former students from both Chouinard and Otis have ascended to prominence in the ceramics field and have contributed to its vitality. Bacerra retired from teaching in 1996, when Otis relocated and discontinued ceramics as a core discipline.

Above: **Ralph Bacerra**, *Untitled Platter*, 1982. Porcelain. Height: 3 in. (7.6 cm); diameter: 19 in. (48.3 cm). Collection of Ted Rowland.

The finely delineated design of the blue-and-white drawing on this platter clearly demonstrates Bacerra's skill at executing this traditional Chinese technique of underglaze blue-and-white painting, which is achieved through the application of cobalt oxide.



While he was still at Otis, Bacerra's work took a new direction with a series of platters and sculptural bowls. Essentially the artist permitted the volumetric dimensions of the piece and its profile to dictate the design treatment. "Surface follows form" was one of his teaching mantras and a guiding principle of his work. The rims of platters were cut in geometric shapes, and double-walled vessels and chargers were embellished

with protrusions that were aligned with the geometry of the surface design (below). These extensions created a constant interplay between three-dimensional volume and two-dimensional surface design. The overall effect is one of visual stimulation and excitement. As Bacerra himself commented: "There is playfulness in this work. Shapes jump out and recede. They move forward and go back. They intertwine with



Opposite, left: **Ralph Bacerra**, *Untitled Teapot*, 1998. Earthenware. 17 × 13 × 10 in. (43.2 × 33 × 25.4 cm). Collection of Ken Deavers.

The multiple patterns covering this teapot pay homage to several design sources, which Bacerra adeptly combined and refined to arrive at an exuberant personal style of decoration.

Above: **Ralph Bacerra**, *Untitled Portrait Charger*, 1993. Ceramic. 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 25 in. (19.4 × 65.4 × 63.5 cm). Collection of Anne Cohen Ruderman and David Ruderman.

one another. Seemingly flat surfaces become dimensional. Straight lines become curved. Most people don't understand this unless they become involved in the work."⁴

Liberated from full-time teaching in 1996, Bacerra was able to return to his studio and concentrate wholly on his art practice. From the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, he focused on creating new series of artworks for annual exhibitions at Garth Clark Gallery in New York and Frank Lloyd Gallery in Santa Monica, California. Collectors and curators responded enthusiastically to his solo exhibitions, and as a result, work was placed in important private and public collections in the United States and abroad, enhancing his international reputation. Additionally, critics frequently reviewed these shows, and their assessments validated his work and helped to affirm his standing in the art community. During this period of intense focus, Bacerra also executed several private and public art commissions. *Kaloseidos (Beauty and Form)*—a ceramic mural commissioned by Maguire Partners for Western Asset Plaza in Pasadena, California—is a tour de force of design and engineering: more than three thousand individual tiles create an intricate pattern of colorful, animated geometric forms that optically project and retreat in a lively interchange with viewer perception (p. 111).

Bacerra's virtuosic works demonstrated a mastery of materials, consummate craftsmanship, and an innate understanding of the holistic unity of form and surface decoration. He became the undisputed master of the ornamental in ceramics, distinguishing himself, in the words of the historian of ceramics Garth Clark, as the "most extraordinary decorative



potter of the last fifty years."⁵ Regrettably, a major survey or retrospective at a public institution eluded Bacerra during his lifetime, and until now there was no monograph devoted to his prodigious output.

In addition to presenting work from throughout Bacerra's career, this volume examines his accomplishments from varied perspectives. Jeannine Falino frames his innovative use of overglaze enamels within the context of the history of American china painting and the pattern and decoration movement of the 1970s. Hollis Goodall assesses the cross-cultural influences in the artist's work, focusing on his engagement with the ceramic traditions of Asia, especially his adaptation of the patterns and palette of Japanese ceramics. Christy Johnson examines his influence as a teacher and highlights the accomplishments of his students. In the illustrated chronology, Bacerra's life is chronicled through photographs of the artist and his family and associates, images of significant works, and documentation of his professional

Ralph Bacerra, *Rendering for Kaloseidos (Beauty and Form)*, 2003. Watercolor on paper. 40 × 28 in. (101.6 × 71.1 cm) framed.

Bacerra created this original rendering as part of a proposal for a commissioned ceramic mural for Western Asset Plaza, Pasadena, California. He received the commission and executed the tile mural (p. 111). The finished mural, spanning twelve by sixteen feet, is installed on the east-facing wall of the plaza.

achievements, offering the reader an intimate view of an extraordinary career, decade by decade. “Remembering Ralph Bacerra” presents recollections and reflections by Bacerra’s friends and colleagues.

Bacerra had an artistic direction and vision that were constant. His aesthetic compass was always pointed toward beauty as he saw it: manifested in nature; expressed through organic, abstract, and geometric forms; and mediated through the harmony of composition, pattern, and color. When the notion of beauty came under fire and was out of fashion in art, he clung to his inspiration, and his work remained unabashedly decorative. His lifelong pursuit was the creation of eloquent, highly refined objects with resplendent surfaces, which he hoped would bring pleasure to all who engaged with them. In this pursuit the artist was sublimely successful: to gaze intently on a Bacerra artwork is to be rewarded with an exquisite visual experience.

NOTES

1. Ralph Bacerra, oral history interview conducted by Frank Lloyd, April 7–19, 2004, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
2. Frances Colpitt, “The Optimistic Object: L.A. Art in the 1960s,” in *Finish Fetish: LA’s Cool School* (Los Angeles: Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, 1991), 6.
3. Ralph Bacerra, in Jo Lauria, “Ralph Bacerra—Ceramic Artist,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 15 (1994): 15.
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. Garth Clark, “Ralph Bacerra, 1938–2008,” *Ceramics Monthly* 56 (February 2008): 48.



Ralph Bacerra, *Untitled Stacking Covered Vessel*, 1977. Porcelain. Height: 13 in. (33 cm); diameter: 6½ in. (16.5 cm). Collection of Susan Steinhauser and Dan Greenberg.

The repeating pattern of birds in flight against dotted clouds rendered in bold yellow, red, blue, and gold metallic luster shows the influence of historical Japanese Imari designs and the characteristic palette of overglaze enamels.