

lifestyle
weekend



Steeped in design

The Queen Mary and the Mona Lisa attend the
teapot exhibit at the Museum of Art

PAGE 8

Artful blend of teapots

L.B. Museum of Art exhibit a tasty brew

By Chad Greene
Staff Writer

SOMETHING'S BREWING at the Long Beach Museum of Art. The permanent collection (with the exception of the California landscape paintings in the museum's Oceanview Gallery) has been packed away.

In a second-floor gallery cluttered with customized packing crates and quilted dropcloths, museum director Hal Nelson and director of education and artistic programs Sue Ann Robinson personally arrange recently unpacked pieces created by such luminaries of the contemporary art world as Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring and Ralph Bacerra for this Sunday's opening of "The Artful Teapot: 20th-

Century Expression from the Kamm Collection."

That's right. The teapot has moved from the tea table to the museum pedestal in a big way.

"It's the largest exhibition the museum has done in its 53-year history," Nelson says of the exhibit, which includes more than 250 teapots and related items drawn exclusively from the collection of Encino residents Sonny and Gloria Kamm.

These definitely aren't your grandmother's teapots. Many of these pieces were created by contemporary artists, whose often whimsical teapots seem like those that particularly creative children might envision for their imaginary tea parties.

While the traditional teapot's round, maternal shape suggests a warmth and comfort perhaps best personified by the Angela Lansbury-voiced character Mrs. Potts in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," many of the pieces included in "The Artful Teapot" derive their power from their creators' conscious disregard for such preconceptions. Anthony Bennett's "Red Devil," for instance, mischievously exploits the spout's latent phallic symbolism.

"What astounds me is the inventiveness of the human imagination that you see in just piece after piece," says Nelson. "One of the reasons that we're doing this is to kind of reflect on something that is commonplace and, through the eyes of contemporary artists, to see that reinvented in a whole and wonderfully imaginative new way."

Cheryl Frances' anthropomorphic "I'm a Little Teapot"



'MR. TEAPOT'

So, why is everybody all steamed-up about teapots?

"When you look at ceramic vessels, one of the most challenging tests for a potter, really, is to make a great teapot," explains Garth Clark, the New York-based ceramic art historian who curated "The Artful Teapot."

He should know. After the success of his 1989 book, "The Eccentric Teapot," Clark admits that, "In a sense, I became 'Mr. Teapot.'"

"It's a matter of proportion, balance and function," says Clark. "A teapot has a number of elements: it's got a lid, it's got a handle, it's got a spout. So when you're making this, you've got to be able to produce a main form, which is your container in

which the tea is kept, and then you have to balance this against two linear elements, one is the spout, and the other is the handle. It sounds easy, but it's actually quite a difficult thing to do and even more so if you're going to do something which is really distinctive and unique."

"Distinctive" and "unique" are two adjectives that could be applied to most of the teapots included in "The Artful Teapot."

For example, in "Mona Lisa/Van Gogh," artist Noi Volkov utilizes the two sides of a head-shaped earthenware teapot to juxtapose two of the most popular images in the history of art: Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and a Vincent van Gogh self-portrait. Volkov playfully depicts Van Gogh's famously self-severed ear by painting it separately on the pot's thin, solid handle.

In "I'm a Little Teapot," Cheryl Frances gives corporeal form to the whimsical lyrics of George Harry Sanders' "Teapot Song" by attaching a doll's head and limbs to a silver teapot. The words of Sanders' ever-popular children's song, which are engraved on the pot, aren't the only pop cultural reference that Frances' makes, however. The flat metal heart attached to its breast also brings to mind the Tin Man from L. Frank Baum's "The Wizard of Oz."

The whimsically striped arches of Gail Busch's "Teapot" bring to mind the works of another paragon of children's literature: Dr. Seuss. Busch also makes excellent use of proportion by stacking three teapots of decreasing size one atop the other.

Although some of the teapots in the Kamms' collection do range pretty far afield from the traditional definition of teapot aesthetics, a number of them stay surprisingly close to home. "Part of the beauty of the teapot is that its proportions derive from the way it works," Clark explains. "So if you start becoming totally arbitrary, you're going to lose some of the classical architecture of the teapot."

Coincidentally, artist Arman (Armand Fernandez) uses a common architectural angle, the elevation, to play with classical teapot profiles in his "Pellerinage." Arman arranges 30 "fillets" of teapots into marching ranks that suggest the platoons of terra cotta soldiers unearthed in the mausoleum of the first emperor of China's Qin dynasty. (The custom of drinking tea, of course, originated in China.) As a viewer moves around the piece, the teapots almost seem to lock spouts and handles and move in unison.

It's not just the teapots in Sonny and Gloria Kamm's collection that Clark admires, however. "Sonny and Gloria are one of the most charming couples I've ever encountered," Clark says. "You know, they are very serious collectors, but they don't have difficult egos. They're extremely generous."

"Their roles in the collection are different," explains Clark. "I describe Sonny as the accelerator and Gloria as the brake. And so, if Sonny had his way, the collection would probably be 25,000 teapots by now, but Gloria is the one who keeps the foot on the brake and keeps a certain sanity to the process."

'TPOTMAN' AND WIFE

Sonny and Gloria Kamm, the accelerator and the brake, sit at a table in the Long Beach Museum of Art's cafe, sipping, appropriately enough, freshly brewed iced tea from clear plastic cups. They've just finished introducing the museum's docents to their collection. Perched on top of Sonny's tote bag of presentation materials is a maroon baseball cap with the nickname "The



Midwinter of Burslem's "Queen Mary." Garth Clark, curator of "The Artful Teapot," says, "I don't know if it was used on the ship to actually serve tea, but I believe that it was sold on the ship." The teapot was made in 1938, "a time when souvenir teapots of this kind were really the rage."

"THE ARTFUL TEAPOT: 20TH-CENTURY EXPRESSIONS FROM THE KAMM COLLECTION"

Where: Long Beach Museum of Art, 2300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach

When: Opening reception: 2 p.m.-4 p.m.
Sunday/regular hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; through Sept. 14

Admission: Opening reception free; regular museum admission is \$5 adults, \$4 students/seniors, free for children under the age of 12 and for everyone on the first Friday of every month

Information: (562) 439-2119 or www.lbma.org

Teapot Kid" — a reference to one of Gary Larsen's absurdist "Far Side" cartoons — embroidered on it with gold thread. His personalized license plate, Sonny reveals, reads "TPOTMAN."

"Garth Clark immediately thought of us, I think, because he knew that it would be 'one-stop shopping,'" says Gloria, a docent at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "He knew that we had a big collection."

That's a bit of an understatement. Even the Kamms aren't exactly sure how many teapots they own, although Clark estimates that their collection is approaching the neighborhood of 11,000 pieces.

"We stopped counting at 6,000, because we think that anything more than that sounds obnoxious," says Sonny, a successful corporate attorney.

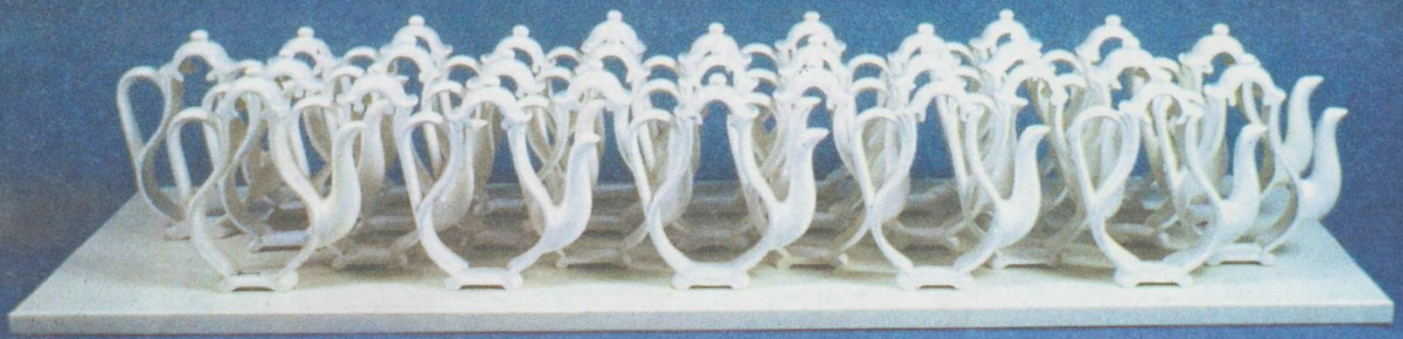
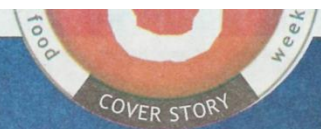
In the beginning, they were only looking for five.

"In 1985, we bought a new home after our kids had all escaped home and started their own lives," explains Sonny. "This house had some narrow shelves near the bar area, and I asked Gloria innocently, 'Well, these are kind of narrow, only nine or 10 inches. What do we do with them?'"

The Kamms had started collecting contemporary art, glass sculpture and ceramics in the 1970s, and, along the way, had acquired several artist-made teapots, which were just the right size to fit on the narrow shelves.

"The teapots had come into our lives because we liked the artists' work and they made different

Arman's "Pellerinage"



Teapot collectors Sonny and Gloria Kamm

things, and some them had made teapots. We hadn't focused on the form, but more on the work of the artist, but when we pulled them together, all of a sudden we realized how they played off of one another," says Gloria.

Indeed, one of the main strengths of "The Artful Teapot" is the synergistic interaction of the pieces in the exhibit, which resembles the tea-brewing process itself, in which the individual leaves are not so important as the caffeinated pick-me-up created by putting them all in an enclosed space and applying heat.

"They really looked good on the shelves there, but we had room for 25 and we only had 20, and that was an 'art void' that had to be filled," says Gloria. "And that started the quest."

"What started out as just a small thing, we realized could be a lot of fun," she says. "When you collect, I think part of the fun of it is learning about it and part of the fun is the hunt, the search, and it was something that, miraculously, we really enjoyed doing together."

"A lot of collectors, because they're unhappy with either their marriage or their kids or their career, use collecting as an outlet for their ego satisfaction," Sonny says. "We have a good marriage, great kids and I have a great career, so

the collecting is kind of the fun thing."

What started out as a fun way to spend weekends soon blossomed into a consuming passion for Sonny. Not even two hip-replacement surgeries and an operation on his knee could curb his prodigious acquisition rate.

"When he was home recuperating from all these surgeries this past year on his hips and his knee, I discovered, to my amazement, that we were still buying all these teapots," Gloria says, laughing. "UPS and FedEx didn't stop their visits."

The Kamms no longer just buy existing teapots, however. They also commission contemporary artists to create either unique teapots, or teapot-inspired works of art based on a definition of form that's as loose as the tea leaves functional teapots are designed to brew.

"We like it to have a somewhat recognizable handle and spout, function is not necessary, and everything else is up to the creativity of the artist," explains Gloria.

"It's a jumping-off point for almost anything, as you can see in the exhibit," Sonny says. "You can do an animal, you can do a vegetable, you can do a vehicle or you can do something that's purely conceptual."

"Their roles in the collection are different. I describe Sonny as the accelerator and Gloria as the brake. And so, if Sonny had his way, the collection would probably be 25,000 teapots by now, but Gloria is the one who keeps the foot on the brake and keeps a certain sanity to the process."

— Garth Clark

The Kamms see their artist-made teapots as an easily accessible entree to the world of contemporary ceramics and sculpture.

"Why do people have trouble with contemporary art?" Sonny asks rhetorically. "Because they don't get it. They see a painting, and it's a big white canvas with two blue dots, or it's something else that's totally mysterious, but here, you have contemporary art that's disguised as a familiar object."

"You come to it with an open mind, thinking that you know about it and you can understand it," says Gloria, hitching a ride on her husband's train of thought.

"So it becomes accessible," Sonny says, providing the caboose.

Pressed to name their favorite pots, the consummate collectors merely shrug and smile.

"I think Sonny's favorite is always the next one," Gloria says, laughing.

"I'm the hunter, and I do like the quest, and once they're acquired, I don't dwell on them," Sonny admits.

"I like living with them more," says Gloria.

Asked if they share their home with anything besides teapots, the Kamms share a conspiratorial smile.

"We actually have a wonderful rubber ducky collection," confides Gloria. "We've got over 200 as we speak."

While a rubber ducky exhibit might one day prove a draw for those of us that grew up singing "Rubber Ducky, you're the one" along with Ernie on "Sesame Street," all of the time and effort that have gone into brewing up "The Artful Teapot" ensures that, for now, at least, the focus will remain on the Kamms' teapot collection.

Don't miss this exhibit, not even for all the tea in China.

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