

Los Angeles Times

Ceramic artist John Mason, who 'forever changed the landscape for clay,' dies at 91

By DEBORAH VANKIN JAN 24, 2019 | 2:55 PM



John Mason photographed in his downtown L.A. studio in 1997. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

John Mason, a California sculptor known for groundbreaking, large-scale, ceramic abstractions, died Sunday at his home in Carlsbad at age 91, said his wife, Vernita Mason.

Mason was known for a quiet, gentle demeanor that belied a grand, daring and tenacious creative vision that detonated the conventions of ceramic art. He was a central figure in a major Southern California shift in the 1950s and '60s, when ceramics turned away from traditional craft, decorative objects and functionality and moved toward abstraction, monumentality and human emotion.

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“John Mason was one of a small group of artists, and that included Peter Voulkos and Ken Price, who made Southern California the epicenter of the clay revolution,” said Suzanne Isken, executive director of the Los Angeles museum Craft Contemporary. “They forever changed the landscape for clay.” Gallerist Thorsten Albertz, whose New York-based Albertz Benda gallery has represented Mason since 2016, said the artist “really pushed ceramics into a new realm.”

“He worked with the material of clay to create sculptures, objects, art — nothing that could be of *use*,” Albertz said. “They were powerful and energetic works. He took the clay and literally smashed it into the floor. And he just created abstract fields of clay that he construed as sculptural objects or wall relief.”

Early on, Mason drew attention for his massive walls, towers and monolithic rectangles. In the early '70s, he began creating more conceptual installations of firebrick before turning back to clay a decade later with his geometric vessels and sculptures.

One of Mason’s best-known works is the sprawling, abstract expressionist “Blue Wall”(1959), considered a landmark in ceramic art. It was exhibited, among other places, at the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair. Another key work is “Red X” (1966), a nearly 5-square-foot, 1½-foot-thick crimson sculpture that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art owns.

“Combining the X-marks-the-spot finality of treasure maps with the stubborn solidity of fire hydrants,” David Pagel wrote in a 2000 Times review, “this snub-nosed sculpture boldly declares: ‘This is it! Ceramics is an art form on par with any other.’ ”

Other Mason works are in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, among many others.

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John Mason's sculptures, from left, "Blue Spear" (2000), "Black Figure" (1998) and "Charcoal Figure" (2002). (David Kordansky Gallery)

Mason was born in 1927 in Madrid, Neb., and lived in North Platte when he was very young, the only son of Alva John Henry, who worked in construction, and Florence Mason. After his parents separated when he was 10, Mason moved to Hazen, Nev., with his mother. She married Albert Mason, a farmer who adopted Mason and a younger sister. Mason learned about construction from his biological father and farming from his adoptive father, but he knew he wanted to be an artist.

"I knew early that was the thing I preferred to do over everything else," he told *The Times* in 1997.

When he was 22, Mason ventured to Los Angeles to study at what later became the Otis College of Art and Design. A few years later he transferred to the Chouinard Art Institute, where he met Price and studied with the potter

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Susan Peterson. He returned to Otis in 1954, focused on clay and studied with Voulkos, a mentor and friend.

In the late 1950s and early '60s, along with friends Price, Ed Moses and Billy Al Bengston, Mason showed at the influential Ferus Gallery, a hub for artists who shaped the burgeoning Los Angeles contemporary art scene. Mason had three solo shows there, paving the way for a solo exhibition at LACMA in 1966. "To me, as a young ceramicist at the time and later, his work just left me in awe," Bengston said. "He was one of the greatest — and possibly most creative — ceramicists of all time."

Mason taught sculpture at Pomona College — James Turrell was among his students — and at UC Irvine, where he founded the sculpture department. He was a visiting professor at UCLA and USC.



Remembering John Mason, the L.A. artist who helped to lead a revolution in clay

In 1974, Mason left for New York, where he taught at Hunter College and, in 1978, produced his ambitious "The Hudson River Series," organized by the Hudson River Museum. The project's 10 site-specific firebrick installations appeared in six museums. Mason returned to L.A. — and to fired clay works — in 1984.

Mason continued to make art until he was 90. He showed in the Getty's 2011 "Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970," as well as in the Whitney Biennial in 2014 and at Yale University Art Gallery in 2015.

"John moved clay off the wheel and onto the wall, onto the floor, building sculptures that might span 30 feet, might stand 5, 6, 7 feet tall," said Kirk

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Delman, collections manager at the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery at Scripps College, which presented Mason's last exhibition, "Meditation on Material," in fall 2018. "These were true sculptures. They just happen to be made of clay."

Delman called Mason's central work in "Meditation on Material" — a diamond-shaped sculpture composed of 5,000 firebricks — "quiet, powerful, meditative. It was a golden tan. The bricks weren't manipulated, painted, glazed or fired; they were just stacked, and they formed a quiet landscape in the gallery."

Mason's connection to the raw material of clay was profound.

"It was more than just liking it," he told *The Times*. "I knew I had found something important and that I would be able to realize something. It was not just sensual pleasure. It was, 'This is a material that has meaning for me, for a long time.' That insight was important, and it's what really maintained my interest."

Mason's sister, Barbara Ann Machado, died in 1987. He is survived by his wife and their children, Jairlyn Mason and Stuart Mason.

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