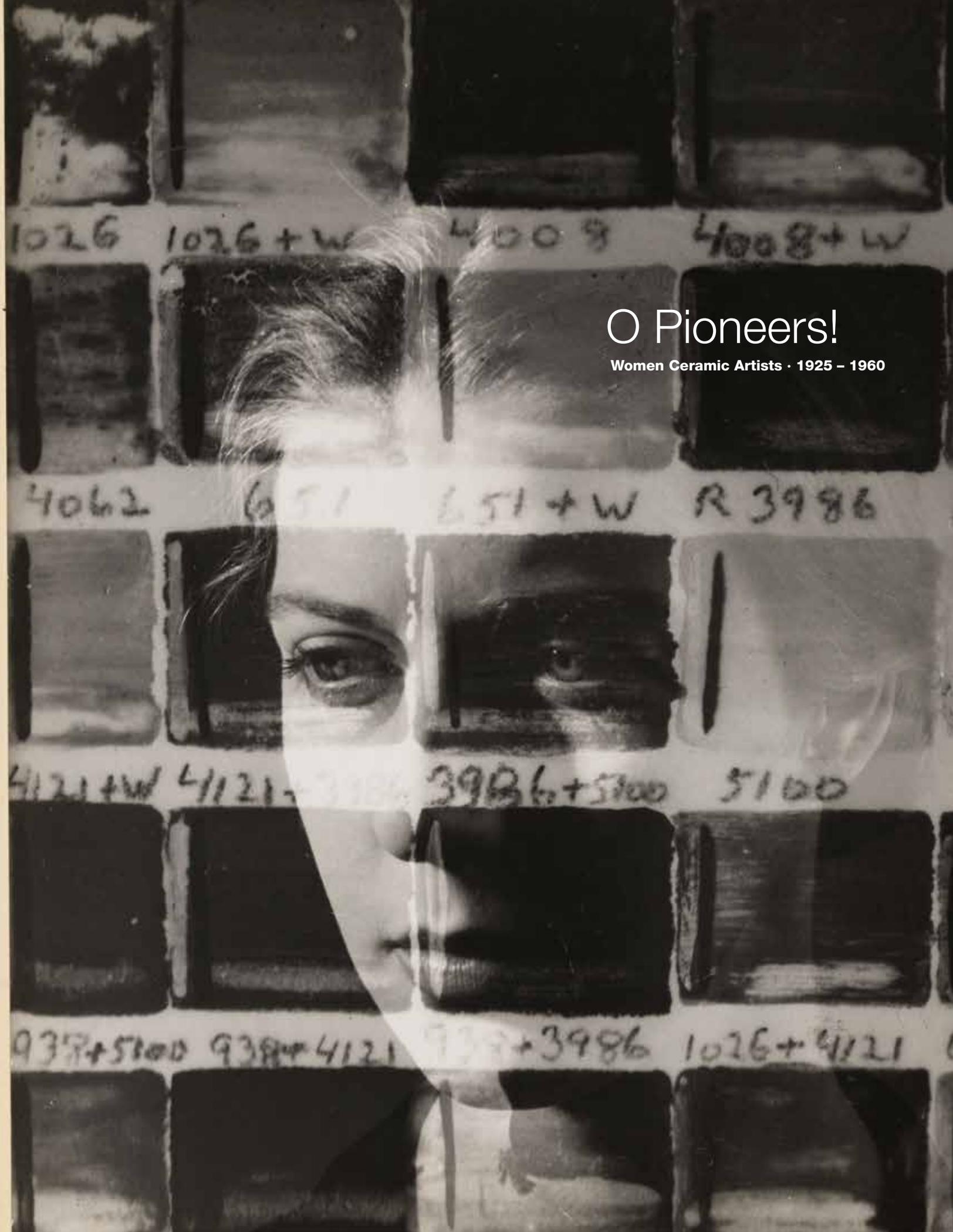


O Pioneers!

Women Ceramic Artists · 1925 - 1960



1026

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Nancy Wickham: From Greenwich Village to Woodstock Village

Mark Shapiro

In a 1948 cover photo in New York's *Sunday News*, Nancy Wickham (1923–1987) decorates pots in her Greenwich Village back garden, looking perhaps like one of the artists whose lives unfold through the peeping lens of James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) (fig.). But Wickham avoided the impecunious fate of Hitchcock's hapless artists by moving to the postcard-perfect Vermont village of Woodstock. (By strange coincidence, in his next act, Hitchcock also turned to Vermont in the glorious Technicolor fall foliage landscape of his *Trouble with Harry*.) There she established the Vermont Workshop, selling alongside Scandinavian housewares her signature work, with its textured, rough dark clay with matte-glazed and slipped patterns of stylized natural motifs and figures. Over time, Wickham cultivated many customers. As she put it, "Vermont is a magical world, almost everybody in New York dreams ideally of getting to the country." Wickham's work served well that idealized sense of nature, also giving what Willa Cather called "the irregular and intimate quality of things made entirely by the human hand."

Yet, Wickham was not content to be the village potter. She was worldly and trained in glaze chemistry and industrial methods. She lived on her own from an early age and later attended Alfred University as a special student in 1943. In 1946, her breakfast set made in connection with the firm Design Technics was displayed in

the Ceramic National Exhibition, the competitive arena of the era sponsored by the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts (later renamed the Everson Museum). When she settled in Vermont she maintained that ambition, showing regularly up to 1958. In Woodstock, she moved decisively into production techniques, including casting and jiggering, focusing increasingly on the lamps she had begun in New York. "We were in the building era then, and everyone was furnishing rooms and in need of lamps. No other material with equally lasting qualities can furnish as much natural warmth and humanness. So I decided to turn my pottery making into lamps."

Her approach was squarely that of a designer: she surveyed trending mid-century interior design, measured its austere furniture, and shaped her bases to maximize kiln space. While her forms were generally produced from molds, the work retained a handmade feel and the surfaces treatments were done freely by hand. She balanced her surface work between simple and more intricate treatments for a workflow that addressed both her creative interest and her bank account, maintaining control over which and how many examples she made. She refused orders for specific motifs or colors. An undated brochure instructs customers, in a frank stance that speaks to her formidable character, "You can only decide on what size you want: then write and ask what is in stock and go from there. Better yet—make some notes when you see what you want and don't wait too long to buy it."

The lamp in this exhibition is one of several basic shapes that Wickham produced; a similar example is shown without a shade in the cover page of her 1952 *Craft Horizon* feature (fig. ?). Her shapes are reductive and Modernist, eschewing complex curves, line breaks within their profile, or separate turned feet or necks. A vertical, tessellating, stylized leaf pattern wraps the form and is infilled with white slip that contrasts with the textured dark brown body. The leaves are carved with an unselfconscious variation within the pattern that expresses

New York 17, Sunday, September 12, 1948



Nancy wedges clay to give even consistency.



Her hands shape vase as it revolves on wheel.



Pitcher is taken from kiln after firing at 2,000 degrees.



Nancy decorates pottery in the doorway to her studio garden.



Making deadlines means constant checking with schedule.

Her Hands Turn Clay To Career

A few years ago, Nancy Wickham was just a small-town Vermont girl struggling with odd jobs so that she could practice her pottery. Today, at 24, she's a nationally known potter with her own studio in Greenwich Village and unable to keep up with the demand for her original pieces. Here's how she creates artistic works.

LIFE NEWS from the studios



Customer takes note on pottery as Nancy serves tea.

Nancy Wickham in the Sunday edition of the Daily News (September 12, 1948): cover of section two.

the “naturalness and freedom” that she sought. These qualities are amplified by the reed-textured shade (produced to her specification by a small factory in Connecticut) that echoes the earthy color of the body and the off-white leaves.

Wickham’s decorative approach fits with traditions of patterning and abstracting natural phenomena (including animal and human figures) that are central to pottery from paleolithic jars to Mimbres

bowls to Michael Simon’s altered forms. The challenges of marrying decorative imagery and pattern with three-dimensional surfaces have held a fascination for potters almost since pots were first fired. Rhythmic and geometric decorative motifs have long added complexity, formal interest, and cultural meaning to ceramic objects. The primordial pleasures of objects that embody individual imagination and mastery of material, fulfill their intended purpose, and evoke our connection to nature are alive in Wickham’s lamps.



Nancy Wickham Boyd, Sgraffito Lamp with Reed Shade, 1957, h: 15-3/4", stoneware, Carved Oval Dish, 1948, stoneware, h: 4", Bowl with Brushwork, 1948, stoneware, h: 4-1/2", Collection of Lizi Boyd, photo by Brian Oglesbee

washes across the surface of the cylinder, illuminating the room and the object itself. Interactive and useful like a pot, but not a pot; stationary and presented on the “pedestal” of a side table or night stand like a sculpture, but not a sculpture, Wickham’s lamp is a kind of interstitial ceramic object. It is one that enabled Wickham to earn more than the “meager day-to-day existence” her pots provided while offering a vehicle for the fulfillment of her aspiration to embody the ideal of creativity she held throughout her career: to “transpose life into her material.”

Lamps, unlike pots that move among contexts during quotidian usage, are stationary in their domestic environment. Like a sculpture, Wickham’s table lamp stays in a designated place chosen by its owner. Though spatially static, it is transformed—and transforms the space around it—when it is turned on and off. (This act has its own diurnal rhythm, like using a favorite cup.) The texture and relief of the carved pattern is thrown into sharper contrast as the light from above