

Sonoma County Museum

Richard Shaw: Four Decades of Ceramics

January 29 – May 30, 2010



Educator Guide

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Biography.....	3
Context.....	4
The Ceramic Process.....	6
Vocabulary.....	7
Discussing Art with Students.....	9
Suggested Lesson: Examining Art Closely.....	10
Other Suggested Lessons & Activities.....	12
Resources/References.....	14

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the Sonoma County Museum, visit our website:

SonomaCountyMuseum.org

Or contact the Education Curator:

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Shaw is one of the most respected and collected artists in contemporary American ceramics. Shaw works by creating a kind of clay assemblage, in which he takes ordinary, everyday objects -- old books, rusted paint cans, used pencils, watercolor paints, playing cards, and so on -- and through a ceramic process that includes plaster molds, porcelain slip, screen-printed decals, and glazes, turns them into extraordinary works of art. This transformation employs the traditional method of *trompe l'oeil* (French for “fool the eye”) to create the illusion that the objects in Shaw’s sculptures are made of anything but the ceramic with which they actually are composed.¹ His work is technically astounding, and it deals with many themes: not only *trompe l'oeil*, but also humor, narrative, assemblage, and the differences between art and craft. This exhibition attests to the richness of over four decades of his work.

Shaw was born in Hollywood in 1941. His mother was an artist, and his father was a cartoonist who worked at the Walt Disney animation studios. Inspired by his childhood environment, Shaw was interested in the arts from an early age, and he decided to attend the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). He was a student at SFAI during the fertile period of the 1960s, when the rigid hierarchy of artistic practice and imagery were breaking down in favor of a more open-ended approach. During this time, Shaw turned increasingly to clay as his medium, after having largely been a painter. He went on to study at the University of California at Davis when that school’s art department was widely regarded as one of the most innovative in the country. There, he worked with Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri and William T. Wiley.

Since that time, Shaw has created a distinguished body of work. He has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and his art can be found in major collections across the country and internationally. Shaw is currently an art professor at the University of California, Berkeley. He resides in Fairfax with his wife, the painter Martha Shaw.

¹ Adapted from Michael Schwager, “Casting Illusions: The Art of Richard Shaw,” Sonoma County Museum exhibition catalog (2010).

BIOGRAPHY

Born

1941 Hollywood, CA

Education

1965 San Francisco Art Institute, BFA

1968 University of California, Davis MFA

1988 Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree, San Francisco Art Institute, CA

Significant Exhibitions

Richard Shaw: Four Decades of Ceramics, 2010. Exhibition at the Sonoma County Museum, Santa Rosa. Catalog published by the Museum.

Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw: Collaborations, 2009. Exhibition at American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC. Catalog published by Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

Richard Shaw: New Work, 2007. Exhibition at Braunstein/Quay Gallery. Catalog published by the gallery.

The Years at White Gate Ranch, Stinson Beach, California 1963-1976: Robert Hudson, Cornelia Schulz, Martha Shaw, Richard Shaw, 1995. Exhibition at the Bolinas Museum for the Art and History of Coastal Marin. Catalog published by the Bolinas Museum.

Falkirk's Sixth Annual LifeWork Award: Richard Shaw, 1995. Exhibition at the Falkirk Cultural Center, San Rafael, CA. Catalog published by the Falkirk Cultural Center.

Illusionism In Clay: 1971-1985, 1985. Traveling exhibition with several venues including the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas. Catalog published by Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

Richard Shaw/Ceramic Sculpture, 1981. Traveling exhibition with several venues including the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA. Catalog published by Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

CONTEXT

The Revolution in Clay

Shaw's ceramics fall within the rich group of ceramic artists working in the Bay Area during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, including Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, Peter Voulkos, David Gilhooly, Marilyn Levine, Ron Nagle and James Melchert. These artists all sought to elevate contemporary ceramics above the status of craft, to have it be recognized as fine art rather than utilitarian. This movement came to be known as "The Revolution in Clay." Each of these artists has taken their own unique approach to this problem: Viola Frey and Peter Voulkos, for instance, work on a very large scale; Robert Arneson uses ceramics to explore psychological themes.

Trompe l'Oeil

Shaw's use of ceramics distinguishes itself through its use of trompe l'oeil (pronounced tromp-LOY), a French art term that translates as "fool the eye." The term refers to a style of art that is extremely illusionistic or, in the case of painting, even three-dimensional in appearance. Trompe l'oeil momentarily tricks the viewer into thinking the objects depicted in an artwork are real. In provoking puzzlement or surprise, trompe l'oeil illusions are playful and teasing. But they also are meant seriously, as an impressive display of the artist's skill, and a reflection on the nature of perception.

Western art has long prized this sort of illusionism. Many examples can be found in Greek and Roman art. Trompe l'oeil painting flourished during the Renaissance, when the invention of linear perspective in fifteenth-century Italy advanced painting technique, and artists strove to produce the illusion of depth and space in their works.



One of the most famous examples of Renaissance trompe l'oeil.
Andrea Mantegna, *Oculus of the Camera degli Sposi*, 1465-74.



A trompe l'oeil curtain sits atop trompe l'oeil flowers.
Adrian van der Spelt, *Still-Life with Curtain*, c.1640.

In the seventeenth century, advances in the science of optics further aided trompe l'oeil artists. Especially in Northern Europe, tools such as the portable *camera obscura*, a camera-like box

fitted with a lens, enabled artists to render objects and spaces with eye-fooling exactitude. During this period, Dutch painters excelled in painting extraordinarily realistic still-lives, and the ceilings of churches and palaces throughout Europe were painted so they seemed open to the sky.

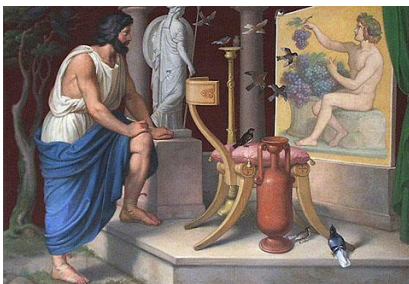
In the nineteenth century, American still-life painters such as William Harnett and John Haberle continued the trompe l'oeil tradition. And in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the uses of trompe l'oeil have been vast and varied. They range from Picasso's playing with illusion in his collages, to the Surrealist painters' unnerving tricks, to contemporary artists' experiments in both painting and sculpture.

Richard Shaw draws on many aspects of trompe l'oeil traditions in his own work. His interest in still-life draws on both seventeenth-century painting, and the nineteenth-century Americans: he uses subject matter that comes from everyday life, which he carefully selects for its illusionistic appeal. And his medium, porcelain, is especially well-suited to fooling his viewer with its realistic look. There is a long history of European porcelain artists making trompe l'oeil work. Shaw takes up this tradition but plays with it, by choosing witty juxtapositions and sometimes irreverent objects for his art.

Trompe l'Oeil in Ancient History: The Story of Zeuxis

There are many stories about art tricking its viewer. This is one of the oldest, a story that originated in ancient Greece. Zeuxis and Parrhasius were Greek painters who lived in the fifth century BC. None of their paintings survive, but they are known through ancient writings. The ancient Roman historian Pliny was the first to write about the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius.

Once there were two painters who entered into a contest. Each would try to make a perfect, foolproof picture that looked just like the real thing it depicted. The first painter, named Zeuxis [ZOOK-ziss], painted a bunch of grapes so natural that birds flew down to peck at them. Then his opponent, Parrhasius [pah-HAY-see-us], brought in his picture covered in a cloth. Reaching out to lift the curtain, Zeuxis was startled to discover he had lost the contest. What had appeared to be a cloth was in reality his rival's painting. Zeuxis admitted defeat: while his own painting had fooled birds, Parrhasius' painting had fooled an artist.



A nineteenth-century artist imagines the birds trying to eat Zeuxis' grapes.

THE CERAMIC PROCESS

Working with Porcelain

There are many different kinds of clay that a ceramic artist can work with. Richard Shaw works with **porcelain**, a clay known for its hardness, strength, and fine quality. To make a clay object for his art, Shaw will often use **porcelain slip**: this is clay mixed with water (and sometimes silica) until it forms a soupy mixture. The slip is poured into a plaster mold, and left to dry.

Once the slip has dried into a hardened object, it is carefully taken out of the mold. This dried object is called **greenware**. Now the object is ready to be **fired**: that is, ‘cooked’ in a special, very hot oven for ceramics called a **kiln**. Once the object has been fired, it becomes hard and durable. Now it is called **bisqueware**.

Finally, the clay object is ready to be decorated. Ceramic is decorated with **glaze**, special paint made especially for clay that comes in thousands of different colors and finishes. Once the object is glazed, it is fired again in the kiln. Sometimes this process is repeated several times. Now the ceramic object is finished: it is the porcelain that we see around us every day as dishes, decorative objects, and fine art.

Working With Decals

A crucial part of Richard Shaw’s artistic process is working with water-slide decals. Decals allow Shaw to add realistic and finely detailed pictures, text, and other decorations to his ceramic pieces. Book titles and text, stamps, product labels, playing cards, dollar bills – all these objects in Shaw’s works are created with decals.

Shaw designs his own water-slide decals by silk screening his chosen image onto special decal paper. The decal is then applied to a fired, glazed piece of porcelain. The decal is dampened with water, manually slid off the paper and onto the porcelain, and pressed into place. A final firing of the porcelain object seals the decal into place.

This ingenious and delicate process allows Shaw to create amazing replications of the everyday objects that surround us. The finished product is an artwork imbued with Shaw’s signature illusionism.

VOCABULARY

Assemblage

A French term literally meaning “assembled.” Refers to an artistic process in which a sculptural composition is made from putting together found objects selected by the artist.

Bisqueware (Bisque)

Clay that has been fired in a kiln, but not yet glazed.

Ceramics

Pottery, porcelain, or other objects made of baked clay.

Decal (Water-slide Decal)

Screen-printed image or text that can be adhered to a hard surface. Water-slide decals are dampened with water in order to move the decal from its backing paper onto the chosen surface.

Firing

Cooking clay at a very hot temperature until it becomes hard and durable.

Found Object

An object from the real world or everyday life that has not been designed for an artistic purpose, which an artist selects to use in her art.

Glaze

A special paint made for clay that comes in thousands of different color and finishes. Glazing gives ceramic objects their colored, shiny, translucent appearance.

Greenware

A clay object that has dried, but has not yet been fired.

Kiln

A special, very hot oven for firing clay.

Mold

A hollow form into which clay can be poured or pressed. Clay molds are usually made of plaster: the plaster helps to absorb moisture from the clay, to turn it into greenware.

Press Mold: A mold into which clay is pressed into place.

Slip Mold: A mold into which liquid clay (slip) is poured.

Porcelain

A clay known for its hardness, strength, and fine quality. Porcelain has been used for thousands of years, especially in ancient China. Porcelain is frequently used for fine china, decorative objects, and fine art.

Slip (Porcelain Slip)

Clay mixed with water (and sometimes silica) until it forms a soupy mixture that can be poured.

Still-Life

A genre of painting or sculpture, the subject matter of which is an arrangement of inanimate objects.

Trompe l'Oeil

A French term that literally means “fool the eye.” Refers to an artistic technique that creates an amazingly realistic image, as a type of optical illusion. Most often used in reference to painting, but can also be used to describe other art.

DISCUSSING ART WITH STUDENTS

The following is a list of questions often used by Museum docents. We use these questions as a starting point for discussion and interaction with the art in our galleries. (The questions will change slightly depending on the specific exhibition.)

- What's going on in this artwork?
- What do you see?
- What is this?

- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?
- What does this artwork remind you of?

- What attracted you to this particular artwork?
- How do you think it was made?
- How long do you think it took to create this?
- How does your understanding of or feeling about this artwork change if you move to another part of the room?

- What do you think of this artwork?
- What do you feel when you view it?
- Do you like it? Why? Why not?

- How does the work relate to its title?
- If you could rename it, what would you call it?
- What do you think the artist is trying to do, show, or say by creating this?
- How have your feelings about this changed now that you have a better understanding?

SUGGESTED LESSON: EXAMINING ART CLOSELY

The following is a model for extended discussion of an artwork, which could be used in whole or in part as a classroom exercise, either before or after the museum visit.

This or other images of Shaw's work are available in digital format, in color. Contact the Sonoma County Museum's education curator for information.



Richard Shaw, *Stack of Books Jar #2*, (1978). Glazed porcelain with overglaze transfers.

Basic Questions:

- * What's going on here?
- * What do you see that makes you say that?
- * What more can we find?

Art Techniques:

- * What is this object made out of? Why might the artist be interested in fooling us like this? (Discuss trompe l'oeil.)
- * What objects do we see stacked here? Why do you think the artist chose them? Are these objects 'art'? (Discuss assemblage and found object art.)
- * Compare this work to another still-life, or discuss the history of still-life painting. How is this work similar? How is it different?

Art versus Craft:

* Let's read the title of this work. Is this really a jar? (It is: the stack of objects on top of the books lifts off.) Why would the artist make a jar that doesn't look like a jar? (Discuss history of ceramics, and differences between art and craft.)

Narrative Themes:

* Let's imagine the 'person' who stacked these objects here. What clues can we find about who they are? (Brush and watercolor plate – an artist? Book titles – someone who wants to 'get away?' Someone who's feeling lazy? Skull – someone who's feeling down, worried about mortality?)

* Is this supposed to be a self-portrait?

OTHER SUGGESTED LESSONS & ACTIVITIES

Educational Objectives

This exhibit will help students obtain a basic understanding of clay and the firing process. They will gain knowledge of fundamental art techniques including trompe l'oeil, assemblage, and the distinction between art and craft. Trompe l'oeil allows for tie-ins to science curricula such as the biology of vision, optics, and depth perception. The projects suggested here allow students to make connections across the curriculum by integrating the Visual Arts, History-Social Science, Science and Language Arts.

Visual Arts

* Have students learn the basics of the ceramic process through **working with clay**. There are many air-drying clays available (see for instance <http://www.amaco.com>), or plasticine can be used. Some lesson plans are online at:

* <http://www.bigceramicstore.com/information/lessonplans.htm>

* <http://www.amaco.com/amaco-lesson-plans/>

* Have students create their own **found object assemblage**. Each student chooses 3 or more objects from everyday life: things from around the house, memorabilia, objects from the natural world. The pieces can be important or not important, share similarities or not. Have each student present their assemblage to the class, discussing their choices.

* **Art versus Craft:** Ask students to think about ceramic objects they use in their daily lives, or bring in examples to handle and examine: a plate versus a figurine, for example. Talk about differences between utilitarian or 'useful' objects, and 'art' objects. In art history, this is often termed the difference between art and craft, or between high art and low art. Ask students to create a list of 'high' and 'low' objects, and discuss. Why would Richard Shaw prefer to discuss his work simply as 'art' rather than ceramics? (*Adapted from SPARK Educator Guide.*)

* In art history, the realistic painting style that produces **trompe l'oeil** effects dominated the Western art world until the advent of modernism in the 1800s, when artists began experimenting with new ways to respond to the visual world. Consider Shaw's artwork in relation to this history. How does Shaw combine both traditional art and modern concepts in his work? This could take the form of research and a written essay, a group project, or classroom discussion. (*Adapted from SPARK Educator Guide.*) (Also: *Language Arts*)

Language Arts

* Shaw is known for the evocative narrative or ‘storytelling’ aspects of his work. Have students choose a work in the exhibit and examine it in detail. **Describe in writing** all the different parts. Then have them **create a narrative** about why or how these objects are existing together: what’s the story behind this mysterious collection of objects?

* The ancient Greek story of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius is about art tricking its viewer. Can students think of other examples of this? Can they research other stories? Or, have students **write their own stories** about an artist playing a trick with her art. (*Also: History-Social Science*)

History-Social Science

* **History of Ceramics:** Ceramics is one of the oldest crafts in human societies: it has been used for millennia to make both utilitarian objects (dishes, vessels, etc.), and also artworks. Have students study or research this rich history. This project could be incorporated with hands-on work with clay (*Also: Visual Arts*)

Science

* The development of trompe l’oeil painting in the 15th-17th centuries was due largely to advances in the science of optics. Discoveries like linear perspective and the camera obscura prompted artists to paint with eye-fooling exactitude. Projects related to this:

* Study the nature of **vision, optics, and depth perception**.

* Study how **linear perspective** was developed and works. This project could be incorporated with a hands-on drawing project using linear perspective, and/or a History unit. (*Also: Visual Arts, History-Social Science*)

* Have students make their own **camera obscura**.

RESOURCES

Educator Guides

SPARK Educator Guide on Richard Shaw:

<http://www.kqed.org/assets/pdf/arts/programs/spark/306b.pdf?trackurl=true>

Films & Videos

Richard Shaw on SPARK – See an interview and Richard Shaw at work:

<http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=4808>

Websites

Richard Shaw at the Braunstein/Quay Gallery:

<http://www.bquayartgallery.com/archive/shaw.html>

Richard Shaw at the Frank Lloyd Gallery website:

<http://www.franklloyd.com/dynamic/artist.asp?ArtistID=26>

Books & Periodicals

Plagens, Peter. Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Richard Shaw: Four Decades of Ceramics. Sonoma County Museum exhibition catalog. Santa Rosa, CA: Sonoma County Museum, 2010.

Westall, Christopher. The Trompe l'Oeil Bible. Devon, UK: David and Charles Publishers, 2003.