

PETER SHIRE – (1947 -)

Peter Shire's playful, colorful art reflects his native southern California. Born and raised in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles, where he still lives and works, he is noted for his bright geometric teapots, sculptures, and furniture. Shire was one of the few Americans invited to join noted Italian Ettore Sottsass and his Memphis Group, working in Milan in the 1980's producing furniture, glass, ceramics, and fabrics that reflected the popular culture rather than the academic one. In Italy Shire was exposed to a variety of new media and he has continued to embrace and incorporate both the materials and the processes in his work. While his work pushes the limits of both ideas and execution, he is devoted to craftsmanship and is firm in his belief that everyday objects must be appealing to the eye as well as useful. Shire has worked primarily as a studio artist since his graduation from Chouinard Art Institute. In addition to work produced for galleries and widely collected by both private and public collectors, he has received a number of public commissions for both tile murals and large sculptures. Lesser known, but more personal and poignant, Shire has, since 1970, been making an artistic memory of his native Echo Park: a series of clay slabs painted with ceramic glazes which are primarily portraits of the people who have lived and worked in this small pocket of the world.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT – PETER SHIRE

"Pottery is the love of my life. I like the way it smells."¹

1. Quoted in: Peterson, Susan. *Contemporary Ceramics*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000.

RESUME – PETER SHIRE

1947	Born, Los Angeles, CA
1970	Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA BFA
1972	Established the Soap Plant, Los Angeles, with family members
1972-present	Studio Artist, Los Angeles, CA
1979-198_	Memphis Group, Milan, Italy
1984	Contributor, XXIII Olympiad Los Angeles Award
1985	The Esquire Register, <i>Esquire Magazine</i>

BIOGRAPHY – PETER SHIRE

Peter Shire is a native of California, born and raised in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles where he still lives. His mother was a fourth generation Californian and his father a gifted

illustrator who also worked as a carpenter. His parents were very involved in political movements at the time, particularly the trade union movement. However, while Shire describes himself as a “red-diaper baby”, referring to his parents’ Communist opinions, and recalls being aware that there was some secrecy associated with it, the political influence is not obvious in his work. What is obvious is the influence of his southern California heritage, particularly the Echo Park region, and his parents’ commitment to good, functional, honest design and craft.

Shire recalls knowing he wanted to be an artist very early. He was not interested in traditional school subjects and until he was diagnosed as dyslexic, he struggled, but initially he also struggled in school with his art as it did not conform. “...as a dyslexic person, as a left-handed person, as a person who didn’t function within the format, there was a point where I said, I am worth something.”¹ Chouinard Art Institute, like many art schools, offered programs for school children to introduce them to art, and it was there that Shire began formal instruction in addition to art classes in high school. Following high school Shire made a commitment to pursue art as a career and enrolled first at Los Angeles City College and then in Chouinard, earning a B.F.A. in 1970. His plan was to make functional pottery, to earn a living as a potter in the traditional sense. “I can draw well, but I am not a natural draftsman or a painter,” he says. “I am a maker of things, a hand-skills guy. So ceramics was my romantic vision. I wanted to be a potter wearing funky sandals and an apron.”²

When he graduated, however, the Vietnam War was going on. He applied for and was given conscientious objector status so avoided the military. He spent a year working in Adrian Saxe’s studio and then Shire, his brother Billy and his parents founded the Soap Plant, an off-shoot of a store called the Body Shop in Berkeley founded by his aunts. In addition to biodegradable soap products, the store carried Shire’s pottery and other art work done by local artists. Shire was involved in the design and outfitting of the store, including making furniture for it, and learning purchasing and merchandising. His ceramic work at this time consisted of elegant functional work with rich glazes although his love of strong color was also becoming apparent, primarily in furniture which he constructed. He was also influenced by New Wave pop music and its expression in clothes and popular culture. The magazine *Wet* embodied this culture and Shire’s work was often included.

Italian designer Ettore Sottsass was working in Los Angeles at the time and had seen some of Shire’s pieces in *Wet*. Sottsass was the founder of Memphis, a group of artists who came together in the late 1970’s to produce furniture, ceramics, and fabrics that drew from popular culture rather than academic tradition. Sottsass invited Shire to Italy to work with the group – one of the only American members - to design furniture, ceramics, and also glass. For Shire the Italian experience was exhilarating. He was drawn into the historical buildings and art and the artists who worked on restoration. He found a strong rapport between the artist and designers, what he calls the applied arts, and worked in a variety of media in addition to ceramics, something he continues to do. When asked to describe himself – an artist, a craftsperson, a designer, a painter – Shire responded, “Well the obvious answer is, it depends on what I’m doing.”³ The Memphis style was based on contemporary design, with an overlay of popular culture, and was intended to be the design for the ordinary population. Its high cost, however, and the level of sophistication necessary to appreciate it made it primarily popular with the well-to-do, and by the beginning of the 1990’s, it had mostly faded out.

The construction of Shire’s functional pieces harkens back to the carpentry skills learned from his father. He uses slab construction, preassembling parts before joining them together. It is the teapot form that particularly draws him, both for what it represents as an icon of domestic life and for the ease with which it can be manipulated to blur the line between the functional and the

decorative. Craftsmanship is paramount: "...what I strive for in my work – and this is an ongoing thing, and that is the key element of making a pot is, A, volume. In short, the space that's contained or what isn't there, you know, the void inside the pot that creates it. And the other is that it, you know, it lifts, right? You don't want it sagging on the table."⁴ From there, he incorporates the range of media and architectural influences to push the edge of what a teapot can be. The exuberant colors of his furniture carry over into the glazes used on his creations, a homage to the colorful surroundings of his neighborhood and his own playful approach to his art. Another side of Shire's ceramic art is seen in the less-often exhibited portraits of the people who comprise his world. These portraits, painted in glaze on slabs of clay, reflect the lives and history of Echo Park since the 1970's when he began. They number nearly 500 now, a unique record of the people and events that have shaped this section of Los Angeles.

In addition to ceramics Shire continues to combine craft, art, and industrial design work in furniture design and metal work, in particular large sculptures. Like his teapots, the furniture and sculptures consist of geometric forms, brightly colored, and assembled in often fanciful ways. His site specific sculptures are in a number of civic collections and include tile murals and large scale metal sculptures in such cities as Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Perhaps one of the best examples of the breadth of Shire's creative gifts is his own home in Echo Park, a wildly colorful reinvention of his 1937 California bungalow which Shire's younger brother, gallery owner Billy Shire, describes as a design laboratory. "Peter has mastered so many materials and industrial processes and used them in his home in a way that feels warm and organic," Billy says. "It strikes a balance between looking crazy and being functional."⁵ Shire himself says that the house reflects his and his wife's belief that there should be "...no separation between art and craft...They are all one, and a daily living experience is worthy of aesthetic consideration."⁶

Shire's work is included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; the Los Angeles county Museum of Art; the San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem among others. He has received an award for his contribution to the XXIII Olympiad held in Los Angeles in 1984 as well as an award from *Esquire Magazine* in 1985.

Ultimately for Shire it is important that his work connect with the audience. "I've got a great sense of not only what art is and can be and what I want it to be, but also what can cross over and, hopefully, bring it to people. And that's – of course, that's the classic gambit of the functional work and including sculptural... that we really do build our lives and our ways of thinking and our feelings with the ephemeral – with thoughts and with objects and visions and visuals and metaphors that we continue. And hopefully...we're very much hopeful that we'll add something. You know, leave more than we took...And I want to take a lot."⁷

1. Jo Lauria. "Interview with Peter Shire." Echo Park, Los Angeles, CA (September 18 and 19 2007). <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shire07.htm>

2. David A. Keeps. "Power of the Palette." *Los Angeles Times*, Home & Garden, F-1 (November 8 2007)

3. Lauria. op. cit.

4. Ibid.

5. Keeps. op. cit.

6. Ibid.

7. Lauria. op. cit.

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GALLERY REPRESENTATION – PETER SHIRE

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Frank Lloyd Gallery, Inc. 2525 Michigan Avenue, B5b, Santa Monica, CA 90404

WEB SITES – PETER SHIRE

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