

## **ROBERT ARNESON – (1930-1992)**

Robert Arneson is among the group of California ceramic artists who established a new direction for the art during the 1960's and helped move ceramics from a functional craft to an art form. As part of the Bay Area Funk Art movement, he took commonplace objects and transformed them into art, art that spoke sharply and often irreverently of political and social events. He is perhaps best known for his sculptural portraits, some of artists he admired, others self-portraits that were satiric, funny, but still making a statement. In the latter part of his life the sculptures took a darker turn, reflecting both his ongoing battle with serious illnesses and his concerns for the direction in which the world seemed to be moving. Arneson's legacy also includes his long teaching career in the iconic TB9 at the University of California, Davis, and a noted body of work that includes drawings and paintings as well as the sculptures.

### **ARTIST'S STATEMENT – ROBERT ARNESON**

"I want to make high art that is funny, outrageous, and also reveals the human condition, which is not always high."<sup>1</sup>

"I call myself a sculptor. I was trained as a ceramist and still prefer to exploit various techniques of this craft in my work. My forms are figurative with an occasional heavy-handed layer of irreverent content...Should I call myself a pop-funk realist or PFR?."<sup>2</sup>

1. [http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth\\_search.php?authid=3080](http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=3080)
2. <http://www.magnoliaeditions.com/Content/Arneson/F00001.html>

### **RESUME – ROBERT ARNESON**

1930	Born, Benicia, CA
1949-1951	College of Marin, Kentfield, CA
1949-1952	Sports Cartoonist, <i>Benicia Herald</i>
1952-1954	B.A., California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA.
1954-1957	Art Teacher, Menlo-Atherton High School , CA
1958	M.F.A., Mills College, Oakland, CA
1958-1959	Instructor, Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, CA
1959-1960	Instructor, Fremont High School, CA
1960-1962	Assistant to Tony Prieto, Mills College, Oakland, CA
1962-1991	Faculty, University of California, Davis, CA

1985	Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
1987	Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
1991	Academy-Institute Award in Art, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters
1992	Fellowship, American Craft Council
1992	Died, Benicia, CA

## ***BIOGRAPHY – ROBERT ARNESON***

Robert Arneson was born in Benicia, CA, in a home across the street from where his father had been born. His father, a machinist, was the son of Norwegian immigrants, and his mother was Portuguese. As a child, Arneson enjoyed drawing, particularly comics, which he taught himself to draw by carefully studying comic strips. While in high school he drew sports cartoons for the *Benicia Herald* and continued as a cartoonist when he entered College of Marin in Kentfield, CA. Arneson was encouraged by his teachers who took examples of his work to the California College of Arts and Crafts and the Art Institute. The California College of Arts and Crafts responded by awarding him a partial scholarship where he focused on studying watercolor painting and art education.

Following his graduation in 1954 he was offered a position at Menlo-Atherton High School, a job which required teaching ceramics. Up to that time, Arneson had taken only one course in ceramics which he rarely attended, so he spent his evenings and spare time reading and learning about clay. Initially he struggled, but as time went on he became very interested in ceramics and started formal classes, first with Herbert Saunders at San Jose State and later with Edith Heath at California College of Arts and Crafts.

Arneson pursued graduate studies with Antonio Prieto at Mills College in Oakland, CA. He was aware of the revolution in ceramics lead by Peter Voulkos but he was not interested in it at that time; instead, he was concentrating on perfecting the skills of traditional functional ceramics. He was very much interested, however, in the prevailing view of ceramics as a craft rather than an art, and that aspect of the revolution in American art soon changed his approach to his work.

After earning his M.F.A. in 1958 he first taught at Santa Rosa Junior College and then at Fremont High School, continuing as well to do his own work and explore the direction he wanted to take. Voulkos was now teaching at Berkeley and when time permitted, Arneson spent time in his studio. In 1961, while doing a demonstration at the California State Fair, instead of the expected vase he threw a bottle, sealed it with a clay cap, and finished it with the molded phrase "No Return." The functional potter had taken a huge step, and he would never turn back.

From 1960-1962 Arneson taught Design and Basic Crafts at Mills College and worked on his own pieces as he could. He began making large sculptures, very organic, utilizing Voulkos's

system of a columnar structure with pieces attached, which were featured in a show at the Oakland Museum.

In 1962 Arneson got the break he needed when he was hired by University of California, Davis to start up a program in ceramics. According to Arneson, "For me, being picked up by the University of California at Davis was, in a way, like the Medici's deciding that they were going to sponsor me as an artist."<sup>1</sup> The new department was housed in a temporary structure called TB9, a site that would become legendary in the history of contemporary American ceramics. Starting from scratch and doing much of the labor himself, Arneson designed and built his facility, at the same time recruiting students.

Soon after, Arneson was invited to participate in an in-depth exhibition of California sculptors, one of the first shows in which he would appear with his peers. In addition to the pieces selected by the curator, Arneson submitted an installation, a stoneware toilet, "Funk John," which featured the artist in both the bowl and the tank, ceramic excrement - a forerunner to what would later be called Pop Art. "I had finally," said Arneson, "made Bob Arneson."<sup>2</sup> It was to define the direction his work would take. The piece caused a sensation and was removed from the exhibit, but Arneson had introduced concept into ceramic art and he would continue to expand it. Throughout the 1960's he continued to make everyday objects but made in such a way that they gave voice to his antiestablishment beliefs.

Under Arneson's direction, the ceramics program at Davis took off. In 1966 the show "Ceramics from Davis" featured Arneson and some of his students, including David Gilhooly, Richard Shaw, Jim Adamson, and Margaret Dodd, among others. Unlike traditional ceramics instruction, Arneson approached ceramics as an art dealing with ideas and content more than forms and processes. Reviews praised the students and panned the teacher, a result that did not bother Arneson at all. His next series, the "Alice Street" series, featured small houses which, as the series progressed, became larger and more detailed.

At this point Arneson was having minor success selling his work and was not represented by a gallery. That changed in 1967 when Wanda Hansen invited him to join her gallery, the first in the Bay Area to have ceramic artists. His work began receiving more attention and was included in the Berkeley Art Museum Funk show generating national notice. In addition he received an appointment that year to the Institute of Creative Arts, a University of California program which allows artists to have a year off at full salary to work on their art. Arneson was able to rent a house in Doylestown, PA, a location chosen because of its proximity to the Diagnostic Hearing Center at St. Christopher's Hospital in Philadelphia where the Arnesons' youngest son was being evaluated for a hearing loss and also to New York where Arneson rented a loft for his studio. He spent the year painting and at the end of the sabbatical took a summer teaching appointment at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, continuing to paint. When he returned to Davis, it was time to get back into ceramics, so he made a series of teapots followed by a group of pieces done in collaboration with Roy de Forest.

Arneson's work continued to be shown including the Whitney Museum of American Art Exhibition, the San Francisco Art Institute Centennial Exhibition in 1970, and "Clay Works: Twenty Americans" at the Craft Museum in New York in 1971. Arneson is perhaps best known, however, for his busts, self-portraits as well as busts of artists he admired, pieces that he believed established him as a major sculptor. His first major show featuring busts sold out and received high critical praise. He followed with another show in 1973 and his place in ceramics was sealed; in addition, he was promoted to Professor of Art at the university giving him the security to freely pursue his art.

One of the more infamous aspects of Arneson's career was the controversial bust he did of Mayor George Moscone in 1981 for the Moscone Convention Center. The piece was ultimately rejected by the Art Commission, a decision many felt was political. The controversy centered around the inscriptions and bullet holes on the pedestal which Moscone's family found upsetting. Arneson refused to change the piece, it was rejected and returned to him, and he repaid the fee that had been advanced. The piece was ultimately bought by a private collector, later exhibited, and then sold again. Another series of busts resulted from his personal fight with liver cancer, first diagnosed in the 1970's. Darker, more serious, some give expression to the agonies of chemotherapy and others the psychological effects of a serious illness.

1975 found Arneson once again living in Benicia. His first marriage had ended in divorce and he had remarried. He bought an old saloon and set up a studio and subsequently added another studio next door. His work was now well-received, being purchased for museum collections. His subjects broadened to include his concerns over war and death, and his earlier anger was directed more toward global concerns.

Although he endured repeated bouts of illness, Arneson continued to teach at the University of California, Davis until his retirement in 1991, and afterwards worked as a studio artist almost until the end of his life. He died in Benicia in 1992. Some years earlier he had written that when he died, he "wanted his body glazed, fired up to 2000 degrees 'and when it's cool, roll me over and shake out my ashes...Make a glaze and color it bright.'"<sup>3</sup>

Arneson's work has been included in numerous exhibitions including two retrospectives: in 1974 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art, and in 1986 at the Des Moines Art Center and several other museums. Among the collections that hold his work are the Chicago Art Institute, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

1. Interview with Robert Arneson conducted by Madie Jones.  
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/arneso81.htm>.
2. Ibid.
3. Susan Sward. "Sculptor Robert Arneson Dies of Cancer." *The San Francisco Chronicle*. November 4, 1992.

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## **GALLERY REPRESENTATION – ROBERT ARNESON**

Secondary Market

## **WEB SITES – ROBERT ARNESON**

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Oral history interview of Robert Arneson with Madie Jones, August 8, 1981

<http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue008/articles/17.htm>

"Visualizing Mortality." Article by Mary Drach McInnes

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Articles on Arneson's "Egghead" sculptures at University of California, Davis

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"Thick as a Brick." Article by Donna Duren.

<http://www.magnoliaeditions.com/Content/Arneson/F00001.html>

Article, photo of Arneson



[http://www.askart.com/AskART/A/robert\\_carston\\_arneson/robert\\_carston\\_arneson.aspx](http://www.askart.com/AskART/A/robert_carston_arneson/robert_carston_arneson.aspx)

Brief facts and links to information about Arneson

<http://www.artnet.com/artist/18698/estate-of-robert-arneson.html>

Biography and photos of Arneson's work

<http://www.verisimilitudo.com/arneson/>

Resume, photos, articles, more about Robert Arneson

[http://pub.ucsf.edu/today/news.php?news\\_id=200606221](http://pub.ucsf.edu/today/news.php?news_id=200606221)

Article by Lisa Cisneros on Arneson exhibit.

[http://www.sfmoma.org/voices/index\\_ra.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/voices/index_ra.html)

Interactive piece on Robert Arneson

[http://www.netropolitan.org/ciafpp/arneson\\_dsl.html](http://www.netropolitan.org/ciafpp/arneson_dsl.html)

Link to video of Arneson talking about his work

<http://wwar.com/masters/a/arneson-robert.html>

List of museums whose collections include Arneson's work with links to the pieces

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