

DISCOVERING SAAR CERAMICS

Jo Lauria



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American Museum of Ceramic Art



HONORING A LEGACY IN DESIGN

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For the past one hundred years, the Golden State of California has been home to a vast network of pottery businesses that have dotted the landscape from north to south. Notably, in the mid-20th century, Los Angeles County provided fertile ground for both sizeable ceramic factories and modestly scaled studio production facilities to flourish. In the 1950s, the largest commercial producers of ceramic dinnerware and accessories in the Los Angeles region were J.A. Bauer Pottery, Gladding, McBean/Franciscan, Metlox Potteries, and Vernon Kilns. (1) The ceramic products of these large-scale companies were commercially successful as their production lines kept pace with the times: they continued to offer innovative pottery shapes, popular glaze palettes, and fresh designs that tilted toward a modernist sensibility.

Existing alongside the large established factories were studio producers of commercial lines who were the sole artistic directors of their industrial productions: Jerome and Evelyn Ackerman (Jenev Design Studios), Marc Bellaire, Sascha Brastoff, Betty and George Cleminson (California Cleminsons), Jack and Ruth Hirsch (Jarú Art Products; Edmund Ronaky, designer), and Barbara Willis, to name a few prominent among the many. (2) These sole proprietors produced design lines in smaller runs that added verve and individuality to the modernist decorative vocabulary, and moreover, most created limited production art wares with original, hand-painted designs.

Note: All Saar Ceramics represented in this catalog are slipcast earthenware and were in production from 1949 - 1962. Measurements are listed in inches (H x W x D).

Cover: Table (detail) with hand decorated tiles, walnut frame, 16.5 x 52 x 22 in., Collection of Deletta Saar-Azterbaum

Inside Cover: Richard Saar in studio, c. 1950's, Courtesy of Saar Ceramics Archives

Opposite page: Plate with Fish, Feather, and Scroll, 8.75 x 8.75 x 0.5 in., Collection of Alison Saar and Thomas Leeser

The works of the above-cited potteries, large and small, have been documented and their narratives are interwoven into the cultural fabric of 20th century Los Angeles. Missing from the historical record, however, is Saar Ceramics, a pottery studio that remains mostly undocumented and under-acknowledged.

The Discovery

It is not often that a curator discovers an artist whose work hovered below the horizon and remained invisible to art history for more than fifty years. But such is the discovery of Richard Saar and Saar Ceramics. Alison Saar who guided me every step of the way set me on this journey of discovery. Today the Saar name is synonymous with 20th and 21st Century art, given the notoriety of African-American artist Betye Saar, Richard's wife from 1952

– 1970, and daughters Lezley and Alison Saar, acclaimed visual artists. Richard's artistic talent was equally masterful, but his career and creativity remained unsung. This exhibition and catalog aim to establish Richard Saar and Saar Ceramics as a vital creative force in the decorative arts scene that blossomed in California at mid-20th century. Further, it will serve to introduce Richard and Saar Ceramics to a broader art audience – beyond the select group of Saar aficionados – who will learn about Richard's creativity and the pottery's contribution to California's industrial ceramics heritage.



The Backstory

Richard Warner Saar (1924-2004) was raised in Cleveland, Ohio and attended East Technical High School (1939-1942) where, Richard noted, the course of study offered “four hours of arts and crafts every day.”⁽³⁾ During his high school years, Richard's artistic talents were revealed, and he was encouraged to study painting, drawing, and sculpture. It was in a high school art class that Richard first learned to create ceramics. Saar continued his art studies at Cleveland

Museum of Art (1942-1943), but World War II interrupted his education. Prompted by the fighting overseas, Richard enlisted in the Coast Guard where he served both as coxswain and combat artist. A press release from the U.S. Coast Guard, Washington, D.C., described Richard's service duty as an artist:

“Coast Guardsman Richard W. Saar...is a combat artist serving aboard a Coast Guard-manned invasion transport in the South Pacific. A veteran of a year's sea duty, the 20-year-old painter does his impressions of the battles, beaches, and of shipboard life in oils and watercolors. He is also a talented cartoonist.”⁽⁴⁾

In 1945, Richard was presented with the opportunity of traveling with the art exhibition “Combat On Beaches” that featured his paintings among the 185 works. The exhibit toured nationally to major cities, and Richard was present, along with fellow Coast Guardsman and artist John Morris, to “explain the pictures and tell the dramatic circumstances under which they were made.”⁽⁵⁾

Opposite page: Richard Saar in East Technical High School Ceramics Studio, Cleveland, 1941, Courtesy of Saar Family

Left: Richard and Betye Saar Wedding, September 18, 1952, Courtesy of Saar Family

After receiving his discharge, Richard used his GI Bill to attend Jepson School of Art in Los Angeles. There he studied painting with Rico LeBrun and was classmates with Malcolm Leland. (Leland would become a distinguished designer of architectural ceramics.)

Founding Saar Ceramics

Richard had strong family ties and was very close with his brothers William and Raymond. In 1949, Richard and older brother William (Bill) decided to enter a business venture together. They opened Saar Ceramics in Lawndale, California. After a short period of time, in 1952, the brothers relocated the pottery to a small Quonset hut in an industrial area of El Segundo, known as the Smoky Hollow district – due to the pollution from an adjacent oil refinery. (6) Designer and classmate Malcolm Leland, with whom Richard maintained a long friendship, later moved his studio to the neighboring Quonset hut, and both shared the same address: 410 E. Franklin Ave., El Segundo. Other artists had studios nearby, and the area became an artist's enclave of sorts.

Methodology and Aesthetics

The organization of the pottery was straightforward: As the designer, Richard originated the shapes of all the wares and created the various decorative treatments. Bill helped with production and was responsible for managing the business. Slip-casting in plaster molds was the method of production, and the surface designs and glaze applications were done individually by hand. After the slipware was formed, it was hand painted in the greenware stage with an underglaze or colored slip, bisque fired, and then hand-dipped in a glossy or matte clear glaze for the final firing. In essence, each piece was distinct: decorative



Right: Richard Saar at Jepson Art Institute, Los Angeles, c. 1948, Courtesy of Saar Family

Opposite page: Plate with Tiger, 9 x 9 x 0.5 in., Collection of Betye Saar





Above: (L to R) William, Raymond, and Richard Saar, c. 1950, Courtesy of Saar Family

Opposite page: Bowl from *Terrazzo* design line, 3 x 9 x 9 in., Collection of Raymond and Diane Saar

designs and glazing were hand-done by Richard and frequently showed variations in brushstrokes, design placement, and glaze color and thickness.

Primarily, the production of Saar Ceramics focused on table and giftware, small figurines, and accessories – almost every line included ashtrays and smoking paraphernalia, apropos of the era. Hand-painted, commercially made tiles were also part of the production; some of the tiles were made to be singular objects while others were designed in series to compose wall murals and tabletops. In addition to tiled tables, the studio explored other furnishing options by adapting appropriate forms into table lamps.

A subset of the figurines category was the curious grouping of *Mayan Gods*. Richard sculpted the God figurines in six variations, and then made molds for production. Although slipcast like the tableware, one version of the line was not glazed and instead surfaces received “colorings” in shades simulating walnut, bronze, and ebony. (Most likely these were stains made of colored oxides mixed with water.) Richard created the *Mayan Gods* with a light-handed touch and a sense of humor:

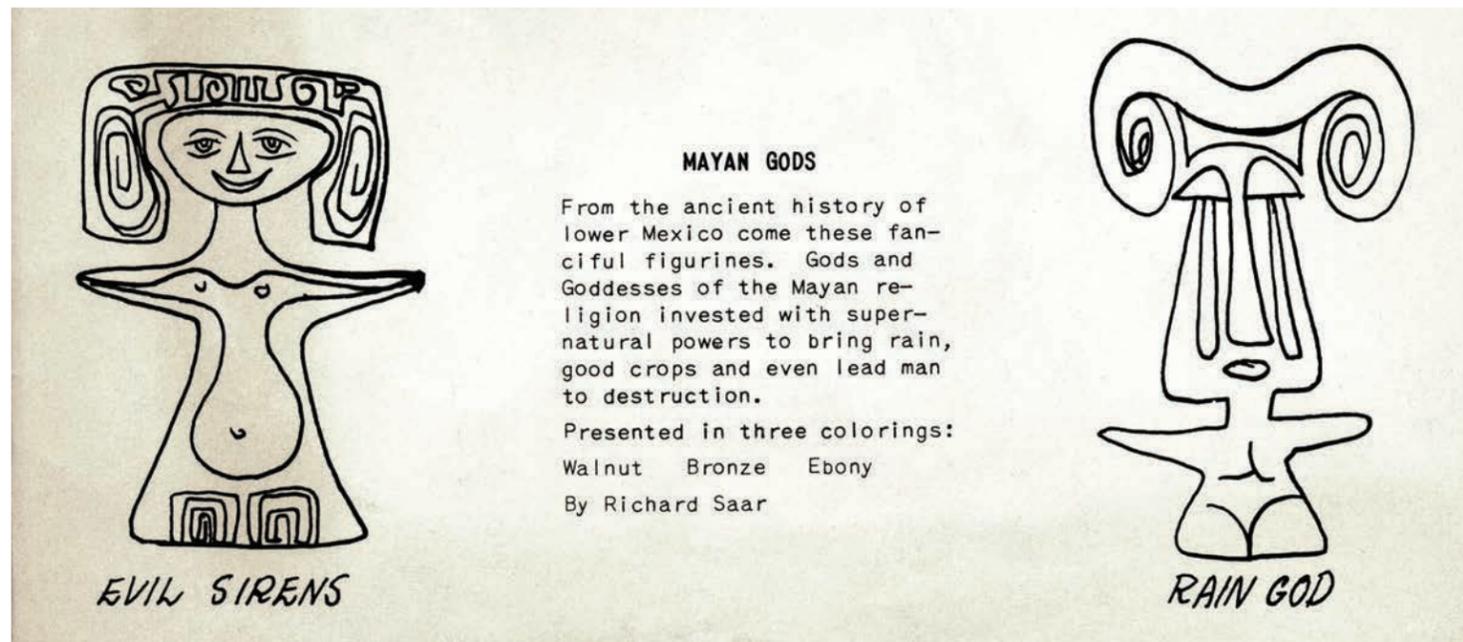
“From the ancient history of lower Mexico come these fanciful figurines. Gods and Goddesses of the Mayan religion invested with supernatural powers to bring rain, good crops and even lead man to destruction.”

Excerpt from *New Items* Sales Brochure

As production progressed, Saar Ceramics added new design lines as evinced in the studio’s sales brochures. Some lines were colorful with intricate design elements and patterning, while others were more nuanced, depicting one core image highlighted on a monochromatic background, such as “Plate with Tiger” (image page 7). Some of the more dramatic lines featured the popular glaze colors Cerulean, Persimmon, New Jade, and Raisin, as the backdrop to dynamic figural drawings or designs based on flora and fauna.

An overall assessment of the work demonstrates that Richard was experimental and inventive with his glazing techniques. Some of his innovations included: formulating speckled glazes; deploying a wax-resist method, as in the *Terrazzo* line (image right), to create intriguing





Above: Saar Ceramics *New Items* brochure (detail), Collection of Brian and Cathy Harvey

patterns of bubbly texture; and daringly applying small chunks of red or orange glass. During the firing, these glass chunks would melt into little blobs of glassy-glaze for a vibrant pop of surface color and texture. Richard referred to these glass drops as “scarlet mosaic accents.” (7)

Some Saar Ceramics shapes were sleek and starkly modern, reflecting the modernist pulse prevalent post World War II. The minimal and elegantly streamlined shapes of pitchers, handled cups, and gravy boats are exemplars of this style. Other forms were gracefully organic and biomorphic, reflecting contemporary design trends in furniture and sculptural objects. Oblong plates and saucers, elliptical-shaped platters, curvilinear footed bowls, triangular nesting plates, and vases with freeform openings echoed the organic and geometric abstraction found in the fine and applied arts.

The distinctive designs of Saar Ceramics set them apart and made them stand out. Richard derived his hand-painted glaze designs from the various source materials that he collected across continents and cultures. For inspiration, he frequently quoted historical iconography or drew directly from the natural world. Some of the motifs recalled indigenous and “exotic” cultures – as showcased on the *African* and *Primitive* lines – the designs arising from the

images and shapes of African masks, Aztec, and pre-Columbian sculptures. Richard’s depiction of Nature took the form of stylized drawings of fish, birds, horses, leaves, trees, and feathers, and the *Heron* and *Leaf* lines are examples of how he configured these designs of natural elements into decorative repeating patterns.

To a connoisseur’s eye, the most aesthetic design was *Etruscan*. Individual pieces of the *Etruscan* line were eye-catching and far more progressive than the usual floral flourishes found on the tableware of competing potteries. The line featured the various designs of a silhouetted black horse and black half moon; a large black hawk or raven; silhouettes of white birds; and curlicue leaves in both white and black. In each variation, the central design was surrounded by swirling grey brushstrokes against a white background. Indeed, the *Etruscan* line presented a striking study in contrasts (image page 17). Perhaps the most contemporaneous of the design lines was *Night & Day*; its grid-like pattern of freely drawn intersecting lines and random glaze dots and blobs resonated with the free willing jazz culture of the 1950s. *Night* featured a matte black background and *Day* a matte white backdrop (Image pages 20 and 21).



Left: Evil Siren from *Mayan God* design line, 5.75 x 4.75 x 2 in., Collection of Alvin and Jeffalyn Johnson



Right: Rain God from *Mayan God* design line, 6 x 5 x 3.75 in., Collection of Agust Agustsson and Lezley Saar

Success, then Closure

New York sales agent Mary Rodney represented Saar Ceramics and displayed the production lines in her showroom on Fifth Avenue. Rodney vigorously marketed Saar pottery at gift shows and design fairs staged along the East Coast, from Buffalo to Atlanta, and throughout major cities of the Midwest: Rodney listed Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Detroit as hubs on her sales route. Additionally, she sold the lines to large department stores including Macy's. Because Rodney concentrated her sales efforts on the East Coast and Midwest, Saar Ceramics had a less visible presence in the Western states during its production years. However, as indicated in a sales brochure, Saar Ceramics would be available through the Los Angeles Gift Show, presumably orchestrated by the brothers. (8)

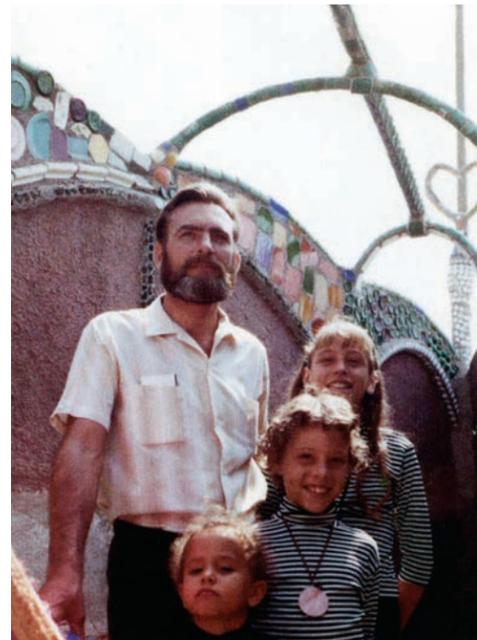
At its height, Saar Ceramics employed eight individuals including Richard and Bill. (9) Additionally, for a limited time, Malcolm Leland contracted with Saar Ceramics to use its production facility to manufacture one of his design lines. (10) The profile and marketability of the Saar studio were on a steady rise, but the financial returns remained modest. By 1956, Richard was providing for a family that now included two young daughters, Lezley and Alison, and soon third daughter, Tracye, would be born (1961).



Left: Large *Fish Vase*, 6 x 15 x 5 in., Collection of Betye Saar

Opposite page: Bowl from *Night* design line, 2 x 6.5 x 6.5 in., Collection of Dick and Franny Saar

With the added financial demands of his growing family, Richard realized he needed to increase his income. In 1958 Richard decided to leave Saar Ceramics and pursue employment elsewhere. First, he secured a job as an illustrator in the entomology department at the Natural History Museum, then as a technical illustrator for Litton Industries, and finally, he settled upon a career as an art conservator, working freelance at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Richard had previously apprenticed with a LACMA staff conservator who taught him restoration skills.) In the early 1960's, Richard opened Saar Art Conservation Studios in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Saar Ceramics continued to operate with Bill at the helm, managing the production and business of running the studio.

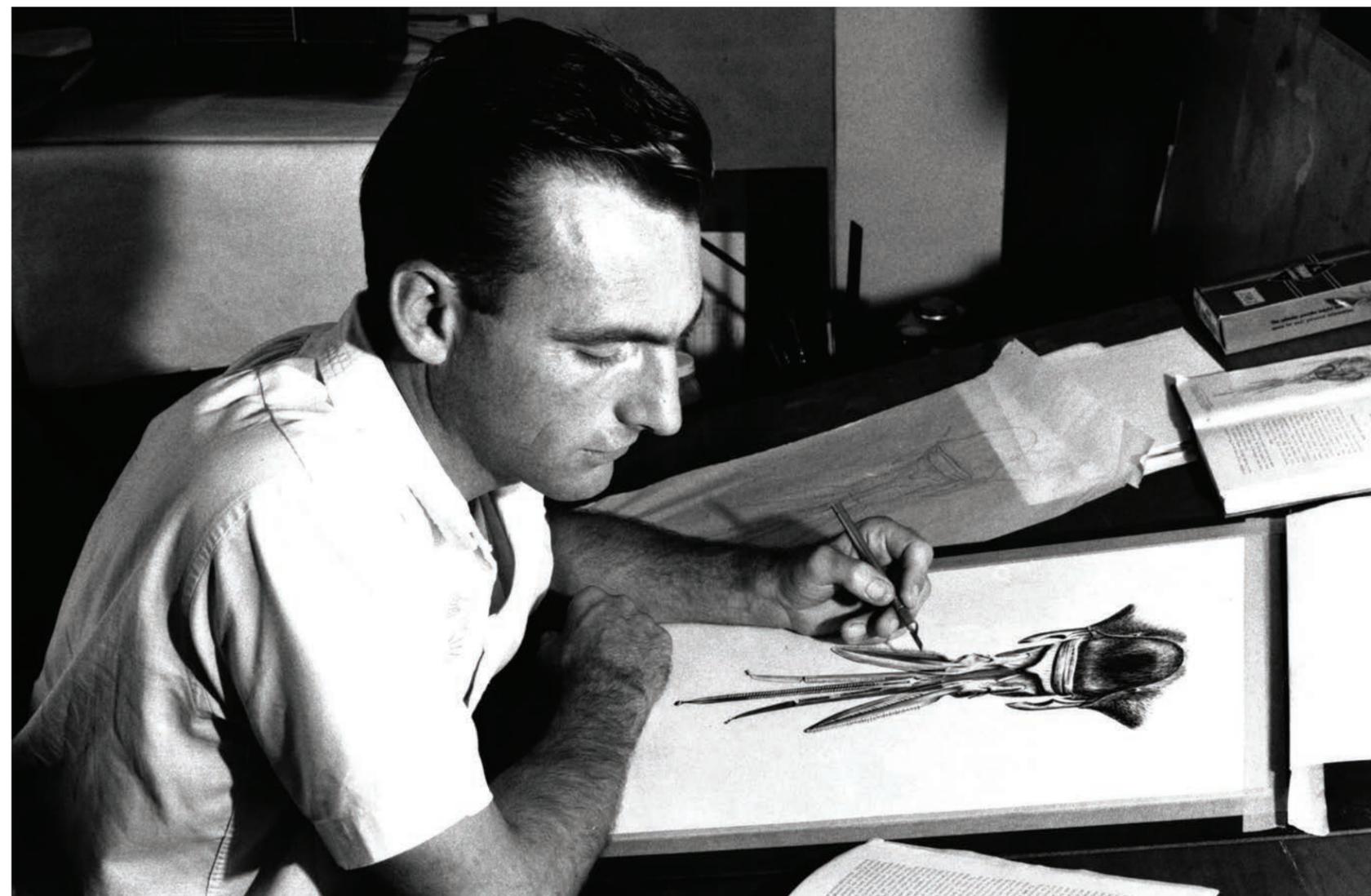


Right: Richard Saar at Watts Tower with (L to R) Tracye, Alison, and Lezley, 1965, Courtesy of Saar Family

Opposite page: Richard Saar at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, c. 1959, Courtesy of Saar Family

In 1949, when the brothers opened Saar Ceramics, there was little competition from foreign markets in tableware and home accessories. Europe and Japan were struggling to rebuild their factories after the destruction of WWII. Large and small production potteries were able to thrive in this open market. However, by the early 1960s, the European and Japanese tableware industries had resumed production on a vast scale, and less expensive imports began to flood the American marketplace. Smaller pottery businesses could no longer compete. Richard and Bill decided to close the studio in 1962, making Saar Ceramics one of the many casualties of the deluge of imports. By 1968, all the smaller production studios mentioned at the beginning of this essay had shuttered their doors. Even the behemoths J.A. Bauer Pottery and Vernon Kilns did not survive; their facilities closed in 1962 and 1958, respectively. (11) It was apparently an end to an era. But it was not the end of Richard's involvement with clay.

Richard continued to work at his art conservation studio until his death in November 2004. In the preceding years, he had married Deletta Scates (1980) and returned to his ceramics practice (in the 1990's). During his "renaissance period" – so named by daughter Alison – Richard left behind the production methods of working with low-fire slipware. Instead, he worked with high-fire stoneware and porcelain clays to create unique wheel-thrown and hand-built vases, bowls, plates, and platters. It is discernable from studying the new work that Richard enjoyed the process of carving designs into the wet clay and experimenting with new glazes – mottling and textural effects, striations of different colors, and glaze overlays resulted in dynamic surface effects. Occasionally he used the underglaze technique to paint designs of fish and leaves, re-visiting the motifs of earlier work. It is interesting to note that



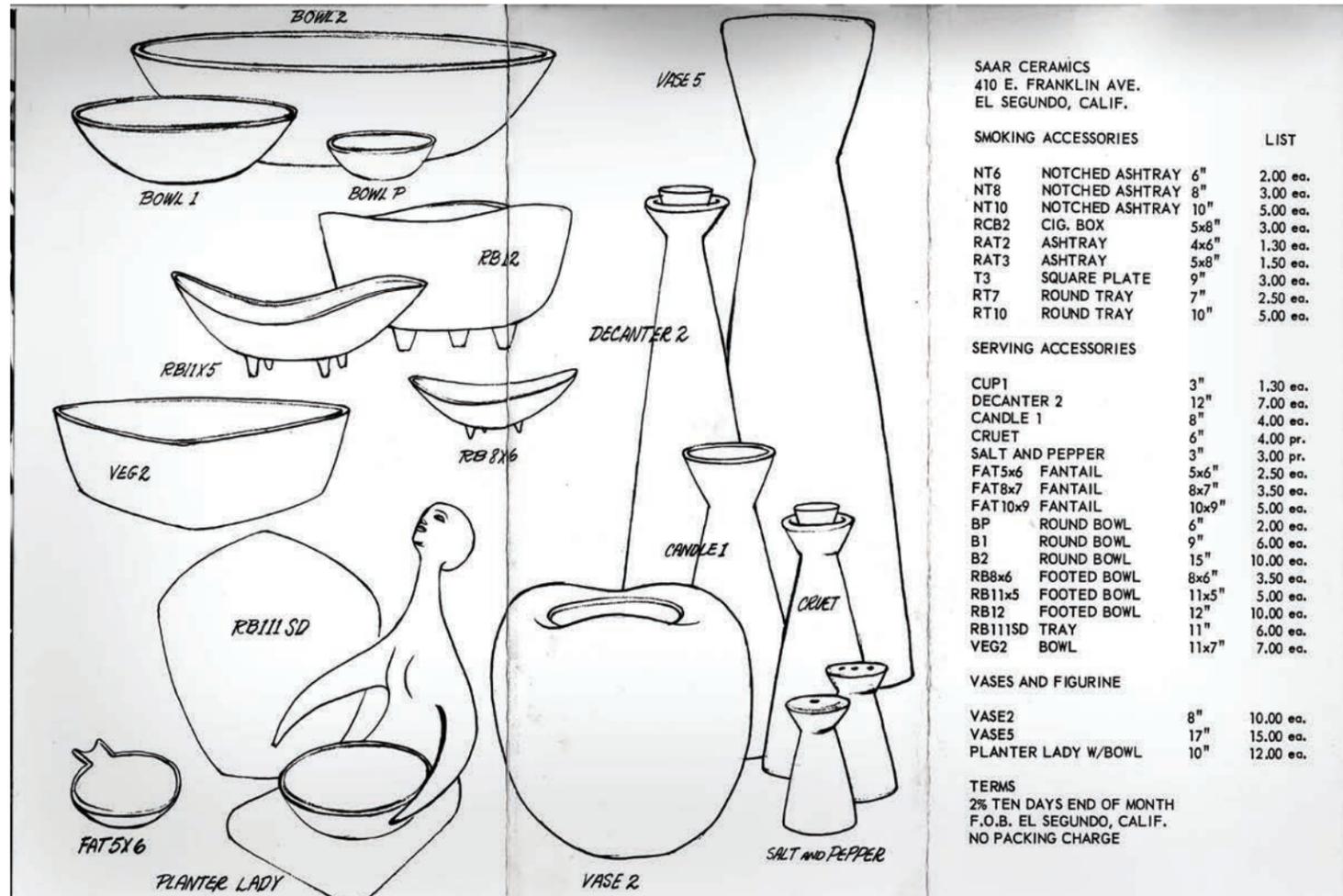
Richard signed the bottom of his “renaissance” pieces with the same signature he used for Saar Ceramics: in cursive, the name Saar was scratched through a swath of color, usually a black underglaze.

In recent years, inveterate collectors and enthusiasts of modern and contemporary ceramics have begun to discover and covet Saar Ceramics, purchasing pieces through Internet auction sites, national ceramics fairs, and regional pottery shows. Meriting broader exposure and recognition, Richard Saar and Saar Ceramics have now made their public museum debut. After more than sixty years of invisibility, their entwined legacies are documented and opened to further research, critical assessment, and contextualization.



Opposite page: Hawk Pitcher from *Etruscan* design line, 9.5 x 11 x 4.5 in., Collection of Agust Agustsson and Lezley Saar





Above: Saar Ceramics *Night & Day* Brochure (detail),
Courtesy of Saar Ceramics Archives

Opposite Page: Cruet with Cups from *Primitive* design
line, (L to R) Cruet: 6 x 3 x 3 in., Cup: 3 x 3 x 3 in.,
Collection of Alison Saar and Thomas Leaser; Cup: 3 x 3
x 3 in., Collection of Agust Agustsson and Lezley Saar

Notes

1. Stern, Bill. 2001. *California Pottery: From Missions to Modernism*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

2. Chipman, Jack. 2005. *California Pottery Scrapbook*. Paducah, Kentucky: Collector Books.

Information also found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_pottery which includes opening and closing dates of the potteries discussed:

Barbara Willis: 1942 – 1958

Jaru Art Products: 1950 - 1968

Jenev Design Studio: 1953 – 1956

Sascha Brastoff Ceramics: 1947 – 1963

Marc Bellaire, Inc.: 1953 – early 1960s

The California Ceminsons, Betty and George: 1941 – 1963

3. Notes written by Richard Saar in October 2004, www.saarceramics.org

4. Press Release accessed through Saar Ceramics Archives.

5. Milwaukee Sentinel, Tuesday, September 1945. Part 2, page 1, and press clipping accessed through Saar Ceramics Archives.

6. www.saarceramics.org

7. *Night & Day* sales brochure, www.saarceramics.org

8. *New Items* sales brochure, www.saarceramics.org

9. Chipman, Jack. 2005. *California Pottery Scrapbook*. Paducah, Kentucky: Collector Books.

10. Sales brochure showing *Primitive* and *African* lines has a handwritten note by Bill Saar to a customer indicating that Saar Ceramics “no longer manufactures lines by Malcolm Leland,” www.saarceramics.org

11. See Note 2 above.





Right: Cups, Cruet, Candleholders, and Decanter from *Night & Day* design line, dimensions range from 3 x 3 x 3 in. to 12.5 x 3.5 x 3.5 in., (L to R) Candleholder, Collection of Agust Agustsson and Lezley Saar; Cup, Cruet, Cup, Decanter, and Candleholder, Collection of Dick and Franny Saar



Above: *Three Nudes* Vase, 15 x 7 x 7.5 in.,
Collection of Betye Saar



Opposite page: Tall Vase, 13 x 5.5 x 5.5 in.,
Collection of Dick and Franny Saar



Above: Plates (details), each 9 x 9 x 0.5 in., (top row) Collection of Francis and Tracye Cavanaugh; (bottom row) Collection of Betye Saar

Opposite page: Plate with Horse design, 9 x 9 x 0.5 in., Collection of Francis and Tracye Cavanaugh





Above: Vase, Bowl, and Vegetable Bowl from *Raisin* design line, (L to R) Vase: 13 x 5 x 5 in., Collection of Francis and Tracye Cavanaugh; Bowl: 5.5 x 5.5 x 3 in., Vegetable Bowl: 11 x 7.5 x 3.75 in., Collection of Dick and Franny Saar

Opposite page: Female Tray from *Raisin* design line, 11.25 x 12 x 1.5 in., Collection of jill moniz

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we are indebted to Alison Saar for bringing this project to our attention and for her steadfast dedication, passion, and good humor to see it through. Visiting the collections of family members, cataloging objects and ephemera, and the final assembly of Saar Ceramics for exhibit required enormous effort and patience. Alison accomplished this, and more, masterfully. The resulting exhibition and catalog are a worthy honor to the memory of her father, Richard Saar, and Saar Ceramics. Also, a special thank you to Meg Linton, former director of Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, for being the go-between and igniting interest in Saar Ceramics.

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Right: Free Form Vase from *Night* design line, 8 x 8 x 8 in., Collection of Francis and Tracye Cavanaugh



Left: Bottle and Triangular Cups, Bottle: 11 x 4 x 4 in., Triangular Cups: 3 x 3 x 3 in. (each), Collection of Alison Saar and Thomas Leeser

Lenders

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