Jennifer McCurdy is known for her work with wheel-thrown porcelain, continually pushing the limits of her craft with her airy symmetrical patterns and more recently adding the ancient technique of gilding.

She takes as her inspiration the “perfect forms in nature, from the cracked conch shell on the beach revealing its perfect spiral, to the milkweed pod burst in the field, its brilliant airborne seeds streaming into the sunlight.” She considers each piece as a progression of her work, saying that a work takes “about eight hours and 30 years,” and she aspires to a construction that could last for ten millennia.

McCurdy was born in 1955 and credits her grandmother, a watercolorist and flower arranger, for spurring her interest in ceramics. She received a BFA from Michigan State University and did graduate work at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton under Louis Raynor. After initially creating functional pottery, she moved to structural objects, refining her techniques after mastering clay throwing.

McCurdy currently works out of a studio in Martha’s Vineyard where she is known as “that bicycle lady” for her 100-minute daily ride. She has exhibited in numerous museums, galleries and art shows since the early 1990s.
Peter Voulkos
American, 1924-2002

Untitled (stack), 1973
Coiled, hand-built and hand-torn Stoneware, Stones
Collection of Tweed Museum of Art, UMD
Alice Tweed Tuohy Foundation Purchase Fund
Marguerite L. Gilmore Charitable Foundation Fund

Voulkos was born in Montana in 1924 of Greek immigrants. A veteran of World War II, he studied art at Bozeman State College on the GI bill where he started working in ceramics. The artist received his MFA in 1952 from the California College of Arts and Crafts.

In the early 50’s, Voulkos returned to Montana where he produced high-quality functional pottery. Meanwhile, he won numerous prizes for his ceramic techniques. He had his first gallery exhibit in 1952, and the next year his work was included in two New York exhibitions. In the summer of 1953 he taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. During this period, he met Abstraction Expressionist artists, including Robert Rauschenberg, William de Kooning and others, and subsequently transformed his craft to an artistic pursuit that incorporated painting.

In 1954, he started teaching at the Los Angeles County Art Institute and established a ceramics program. His innovations, including his techniques of slashing and piercing, caused friction with the administrators, and he moved on to the University of California, Berkeley, where he continued to create and establish methods that have influenced a generation of potters. He started handling larger works, using up to 150 pounds of clay, as well as working in bronze. By 1968, he had returned to clay, and in 1979, he used a Japanese wood-fired kiln with high temperatures that offered spontaneity to the process. New York Times critic Robert Smith wrote that Voulkos would “reinvent ceramics as a meeting ground for painting and sculpture”.

In 1985, Voulkos retired from teaching to devote all of his time to his art. During the last two decades of his life, he worked at his ceramics mostly at public performances. Voulkos died in 2002.
Glenn C. Nelson
American, 1913-2010

Large Floor Pot, ca. 1974
Wheel-thrown Stoneware, glaze
Collection of Tweed Museum of Art, UMD

Glenn C. Nelson was born in 1913 in Racine, Wisconsin and started painting after high school. He first studied with Walter Burt Adams of Evanston, IL. Nelson took classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, began exhibiting there, and opened a small art supply store.

Nelson was drafted in 1940 and served with the Amphibious Engineers in the South Pacific during World War II. On his return, Nelson earned a B.S. degree in Art Education from Milwaukee State Teachers College (1949), and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa, where he was hired as a ceramics instructor (1954).

Nelson came to UMD in 1956 having been persuaded by his friend, Orazio Fumagalli, the first curator of the Tweed, to establish the ceramics program for the UMD Art Department. Until his retirement in 1975, Nelson taught hundreds of students, inspiring them with his love of ceramics and as a result, turned UMD and Duluth into a major center for ceramic education and production. Many of his students established significant careers as studio potters and educators, among them Robert Eckels, David Frank, Walter Hylek, and William Wold. Many who stayed in and around Duluth helped secure its reputation as an arts-rich city.

In 1957, Nelson wrote Ceramics: A Potter’s Handbook. Five editions of the book were published, the last one in 1984. This seminal guide described and illustrated techniques, clay and glaze formulas, and examples of ceramics from around the world. It was his love and knowledge of world-wide ceramic work that established Nelson’s international reputation as an authority on ceramics.

Nelson married Edith (Edie) McIntyre in 1960. She was described as a supportive force behind all of Nelson’s efforts. Edie Nelson passed away in 1987. The couple had no children. Nelson passed away in 2010 at the age of 96.
Maria Martinez was a Native American artist born in 1887 in the San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico, near Santa Fe. She drew on Pueblo pottery traditions, learning from her Aunt Nicolasa and the Santa Clara Pueblo, to revive the ancient craft in her community.

A 1908 excavation by Edgar Lee Hewett uncovered examples of black-on-black pottery, a technique that dates from the Neolithic period with examples from the 1600s. Hewett encouraged Martinez, as one of the best of the local artists, to adopt the ancient pottery style in her work.

Collaborating with artisans from the Santa Clara Pueblo who still used ancient techniques, she learned to produce the jet-black pots and gradually refined her process, while her husband Julian collaborated with decorations based on traditional patterns. For centuries, pottery has been produced as a community, and after Julian’s death in 1943, family members assisted in gathering clay and painting the vessels, including her son Popovi Da.

According to Andrew Connors, Martinez’s work was also popular because of the way “the smooth, geometric shapes matched the art deco style of design of the 1930s and 1940s, or as Maria simply put it: ‘Black goes with everything.’”

Martinez won many awards, as well as a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for a pottery workshop in 1973. She received four honorary doctorate degrees and was known to teach her craft to pueblo members and students. Renowned potters Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach also traveled to the pueblo to learn from her.
John Steffl
American, born 1958

Forest (detail), 1980
Glass, ceramic
Collection of Tweed Museum of Art, UMD

John Steffl has worked as a potter, painter and now a digital photographer. Additionally, he has been an art instructor at the University of Minnesota Duluth, an exhibition curator and former artistic director of the Duluth Art Institute. Steffl earned his BFA from Mankato State University in Ceramics and painting and an MA from UMD in Ceramics.

In an artist’s statement, Steffl wrote of his experience of growing up on the Minnesota River and its influence on his work. “By layering paint, I build a rich, tactile surface, which creates a history in the work itself. As the strata of the earth (and thus its history) are alternately buried and exposed by the ebb and flow of the river, my history, which is inherent in the evolution of the painting, is also buried or exposed. In this respect, the images represent the act of accumulating, releasing, and coming to terms with the circumstances of my existence.”

After a dramatic fight with lymphoma in 2005, involving seven months of chemotherapy, Steffl moved to digital photography for his medium. In an interview with Ann Klefstad, he described his transition. “I went from being very physical, working on big sculptures, big paintings, to doing this, sitting in a chair eight hours a day, clicking a mouse. A huge adaptation that I owe that to cancer and chemotherapy for the resulting changes it’s offered me.”

Steffl added that, “People can bring their own experiences to the work and make their own meanings. That’s something my [former] clay work, my paintings and these photographs have in common: I’ve worked abstractly and expressively for 35 years, and even though I use imagery now, I hope the work is open to its viewers, open to their meanings.”
Karen Karnes
American, born 1925

Vessel, 2008
Wood-fired stoneware
Collection of Tweed Museum of Art, UMD

Karnes was born of immigrant socialist parents who worked in the garment industry. She attended arts schools from childhood and graduated from Brooklyn College with a degree in design. She traveled with her then-husband and fellow potter David Weinrib to the renowned summer program at Black Mountain College where she learned from potters Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Peter Voulkos, as well as meeting avant-garde artists, including Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg. Karnes also spent time observing at an Italian ceramics factory. Of Hamada and Leach she said, “Well, [Hamada] just sat there-right-and worked, and didn’t say anything. I mean, Leach was talking, philosophizing and everything, and Hamada just worked. He was wonderful.” After Black Mountain College closed, a group of artists formed the Gate Hill Cooperative in Stony Point, New York where they lived and worked in common.

In 1968, the artist began working with British potter Ann Stannard who had come to teach kiln building. Karnes said, “We just went mad building things—an oil drip kiln, a salt kiln, a small wood-fired kiln, a peat kiln, a sawdust kiln. It was so exciting because there wasn’t much kiln building going on in the late 1960s.”

In 1998, a fire destroyed her studio, but with the help of potter friends, Karnes started up again, moving to making smaller works. Her art has been documented both in a film, Don’t Know, We’ll See, and in the book A Chosen Path edited by ceramicist Mark Shapiro.

Karnes has been a studio potter for sixty years, influenced by Italian as well as Japanese crafts, and over time she has moved from functional salt-glazed pieces, work she did to support herself and her son, to more finely sculptured ceramics. She said that she was glad she was in at the early stages of the ceramics movement because she felt freer to “work from my own impulse.” Her work is displayed in galleries worldwide.