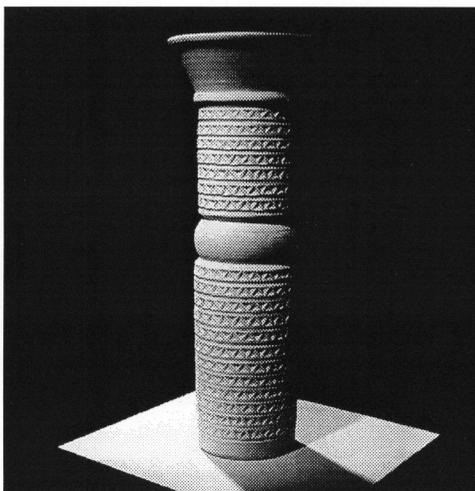


RESTING PLACES

by
Ellen Braaten



Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE in ARCHITECTURE

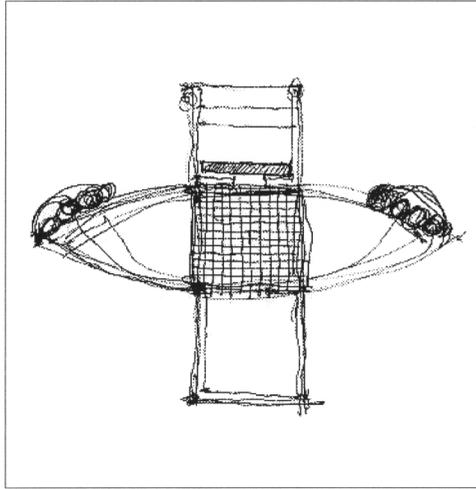
Approved by:


Dennis Kilper


Frank Weiner


Robert Schubert

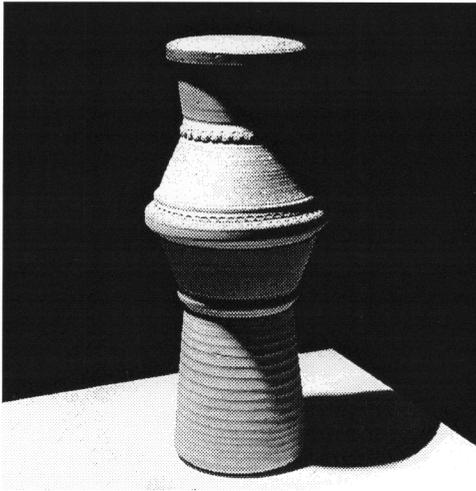
January 1995
Blacksburg, Virginia



Olivio C. Ferrari, Chairman
1989 - 1994

*Life is a pure flame
and we live
as if by an invisible sun
burning within us.*

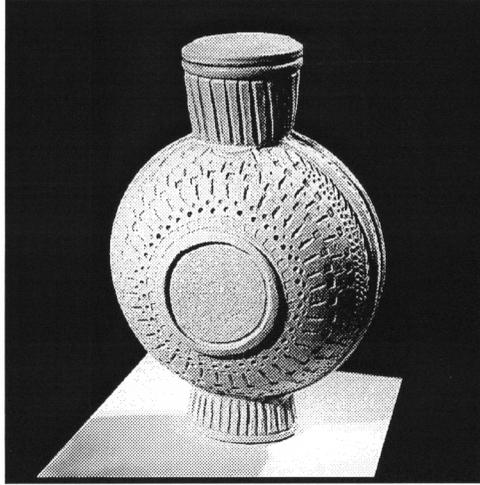
- Sir Thomas Brown
The Urn Burial

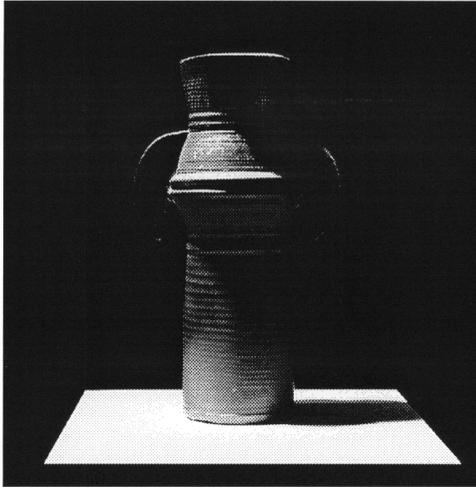


ABSTRACT

Ancient humans stored family remains under their houses as we have surely stored memories in our attics. As civilization progressed, ashes were placed in urns which often replicated the house where one lived on earth. Eventually more elaborate and stylized monuments housed the remains. Recent practices have shown estrangement to death and denial of its importance to the natural cycle. This project reintroduces the funeral urn as object and ritual. It attempts to reawaken and reconnect us to our historically diverse cultures and to the life-death cycle by creating the house for ashes. This house is our last abode.

RESTING PLACES





BODY

Several years ago I was asked to make an urn for the ashes of a friend's mother. The ashes had been returned from the funeral home in a vacuum-formed plastic container, anonymous and devoid of distinguishing characteristics. I agreed to take on the project and make a vessel that would dignify her mother's remains.

With that agreement, I started my research into the history, practices, monuments and containers related to death, burial and the cycle of life/death. The objects of death make up a large part of the historical artifacts of past

It is important for me to emphasize here that I am a maker; I create objects that draw their influence from the history and tradition of form and ornament.



(Monuments of Egypt)

Nothing occupies the human mind more than death.

cultures. My exploration has barely begun to scratch the surface of the customs and rituals surrounding death.

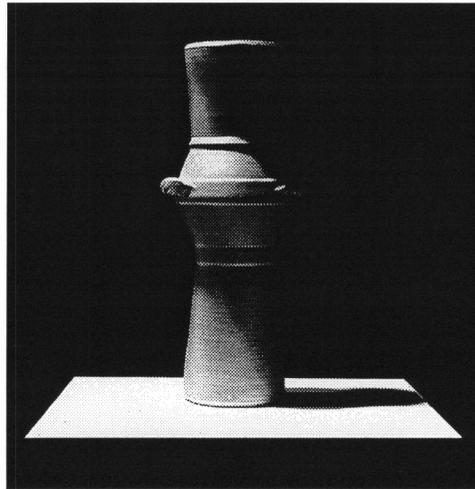
It is my aim to make clay objects which have purpose in today's world while reflecting cultural roots which impart a sense of the depth of civilization and place. These objects pay homage to the cycle of life-death.

Clay exists within both the telluric and tectonic realms. Its primal earth characteristics speak of its telluric nature and origin. The clay pieces I make, however, are assemblages which address the concept of connectedness, one form to another. In so doing, they are constructions in the tectonic sense. Clay is earth and of the earth and is, therefore, inherently bound to its telluric roots. It is here, within the realm of this rich material, that I have chosen to work.

Ancient cemeteries, cities of the dead and Victorian graves have always reflected life. For instance, the cemetery in Gibolina, Sicily, was the sole survivor of an earthquake. It stands, replica after replica of houses, devastated. One sees Burri's monument to the city as a mass and the cemetery as the memory - a reflection of the house.

Over time, human remains have moved from

The making in itself is a layered, structured process. It involves understanding of the material as a material, form as object and decoration as reconstituted memory. The love of work, of tradition and culture constitute the larger process of making.



(Monuments of Egypt)

The sculptor, Burri, erected a monument to the devastated city of Gibolina by taking the rubble from the houses, mixing it with concrete and casting solid masses to indicate the form as a resting place. The cemetery at Gibolina, still intact, stands as the primary reminder; a replica of the house and as the final resting place. Le Corbusier's Ronchamp employs a similar technique utilizing debris from the past to build the present. Is this not what we must do all the time?

the cellar of the home to burial urns, to vast underground cities of the dead, to above ground burial places, magnificently landscaped parks and rigorously planned cemeteries.

The place to house the dead has always been the microcosm of the world of the living. In the Neolithic age, burial crypts were constructed as images of their dwellings, modelled after the caves from which the Neolithic people had emerged. The Etruscans also believed that the tomb was an extension of the house.

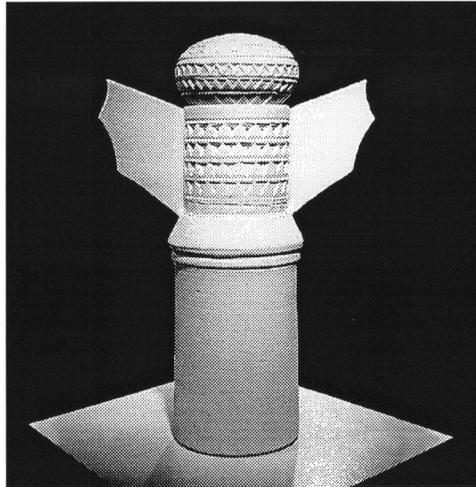
Their underground crypts were reproductions, in section, of their timber-framed, tiled houses. The garden graves of the Victorian Era combined elaborate landscaping with intricate urns and memorials. These were, likewise, mirrors of the decoration found in their houses. The cemetery, through time, has provided the object and the place for reflection and contemplation. It embodies respect for the deceased and at the same moment provides a place for the living to acknowledge the dead.

The concept of the heavily landscaped, park-like cemetery arose from a preoccupation with health. As populations grew, earlier burial practices were thought to be dangerous and were abandoned. It was believed that poisonous vapors were generated from the

The first urns were huts, which closely replicated the dwelling places of the living.

"Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are housed. Our soul is an abode. And remembering 'houses' and 'rooms' we learn to 'abide' in them ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images evoke

in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them." (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 183)



The relationship of the house to the burial place has long been evidenced. Prevailing through many changes in belief and history has been the house-model, the coffin-house, the pyramid-house and the hut-urn. All of these cited examples have associated death with the house. Perhaps the transitory nature of increased urbanization has destroyed the notion of the house as the natural

repository for our deceased family. In any case, burial of the dead has lost its ties to culture and place, especially when crematory practices are followed. The results of this transitory behavior are seen in a fragmentary society without ties and disassociated from its ancestry. We are, to cite Joseph Campbell, in great need of a return to ritualistic, culturally based practices. The loss of these practices leaves humankind floundering with no knowledge of beginning or end.

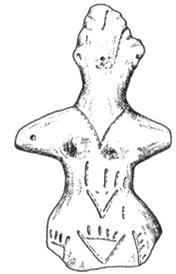
In "One Way of Thinking About a House," published in *Lotus*, 1974, Joseph Rykwert describes the ancient use of urns: "Even earlier than the Egyptian timber house-coffins, hut-urns appeared in the fertile crescent. The notion of cremating the dead and burying their remains in a model of a house is as diffused as the cremation rite itself." For me, the modern day issue may not be to produce the historical hut-type urn, but to create a vessel that derives from the fabric texture evident in the culture's art and architecture. The strongest of these forms is the amphora.

decaying bones of the dead. Fear of disease from these vapors caused the dismantling of above ground burial houses. Consequently, burial places were moved outside of the city. It was thought that the trees, shrubs, along with the fresh air, would dispel any poisons. These new sites were meant to be beautiful, inspirational and to provide a healthy environment.

Today, the typical American ritual involves the casket as a mass-produced "home" of the dead. The embalmed, fully clothed body is placed inside the casket, which is placed in a concrete vault. The vault separates man from nature and epitomizes the removal of death from its natural cycle. Stone slabs mark the ground where the dead are buried. These markers are often adorned with plastic flowers and are the final step in the burial rite. The place, the cemetery, has lost its importance in today's world. Travelling America's roadways shows the progression from the small intimate churchyard graves to large, unadorned stretches of flat land of anonymous markers. This sterility is a removal from death and evidence of how irrelevant death has become for the living.



Most notable was the destruction of the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris, in 1876. This structure was replaced by an extravagant fountain monument memorializing those buried there. (*Architecture of Death*)



(The Language of the Goddess)

Victorians believed that with death, individuals were reunited with nature, achieving a state of divinity; the individual became a part of the universal whole. (*Architecture of Death*)



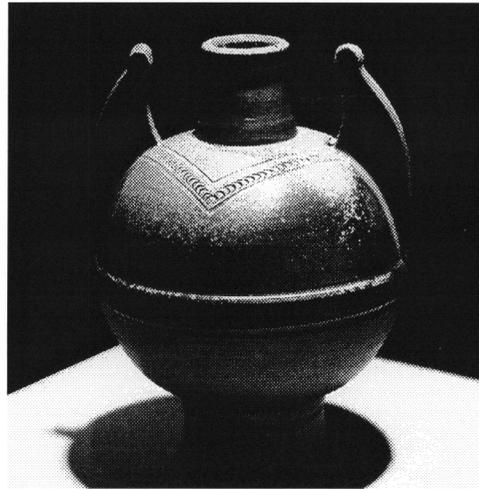
(Architecture of Death)



(Architecture of Death)

Today, trips to cemeteries and mausoleums have become activities for the older generations. The technically driven world is transient and its people have no time. Family graves, stone crypts and burial plots, are no longer on the daily, weekly or yearly itinerary; they have been forgotten.

Throughout time, people have pre-occupied themselves with the rituals of death and the containers of the dead. The container identified the family and the civilization. It fixed memory in space and was the tangible footprint of culture. Cremation and urn burial has been a continuous practice throughout history. In the past, architects and artists were occupied with the design of monuments, sculptures and containers for the dead. Again, these objects were another type of house: a memory container for the soul of the living. These objects point to a time when accepting and celebrating death was important. Life and death had a sense of place, a sense of cycle. Each civilization and tribe, no matter how technologically primitive or sophisticated, had special ceremonies for the dead. If the burial lacked in scale, it never lacked in detail. Ritual was a part of the daily cycle and it had to be recognized and performed. Obscure burial sites, great stone edifices and massive tombs mark the world's landscape and are a major part of the built environment. Thus measured,



On the boat to Murano, I saw old women with flower-filled laps waiting for the stop at the island of the dead to make their offering. Will their daughters do the same?



(The Language of the Goddess)



(The Language of the Goddess)

So often, clay objects, urns and burial artifacts serve as clues to the past. Mycenaean constructed hut urns for their dead; slaves in America buried their dead with their

household items; in African cultures, amulets and jewelry accompanied the corpse; pre-Columbian and American Indian tribes made effigy pots to carry the ashes of the dead.

The ancient artifacts of death are striking in their beauty. They recall a time when objects were sacred. They speak of a solemnity and dignity that was involved in the act of burial.

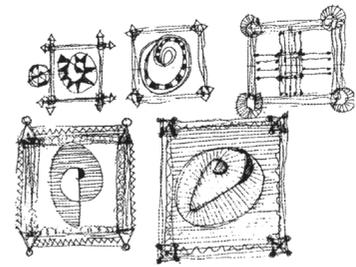


Sketch (Patrick Bell)

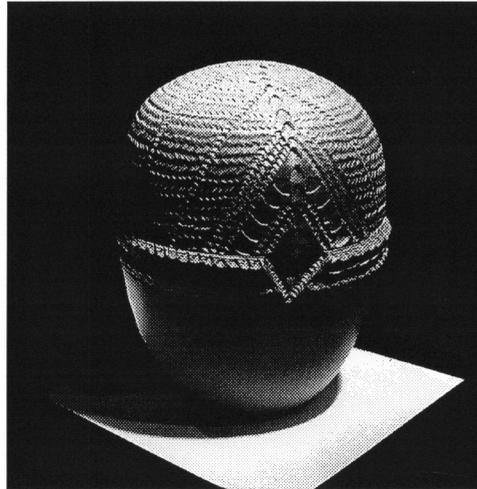
past cultures were obviously connected to the spiritual as well as the tangible realms simultaneously. It was this connection, this presence of death in life, that gave them their need to honor the dead.

Detachment from ritual and tradition is but one of the problems confronting an honorable burial today. Burial is becoming a problem of space because it necessitates large tracts of land which are no longer available in urban areas. In some countries, bones are being exhumed after a period of time, moved to common burial grounds and replaced by the recently deceased, and in many parts of the world today, mass burial resulting from natural disaster and massacre is an accepted fact of life. The cremation rite has increased as ashes require much less space and urns can be moved. Without roots to a single grave site or cemetery plot, our culture has widened the separation between the living and the dead. Through the urn-house, I suggest that the proximity to the life-death cycle can be more immediate, more vital for the living.

I make objects which honor life and death and attempt to embrace the individual, culture and tradition. These moving houses are made with a concern for the restoration of balance



sketches



216 cubic inches - the average volume of ashes from the cremation of the human body.

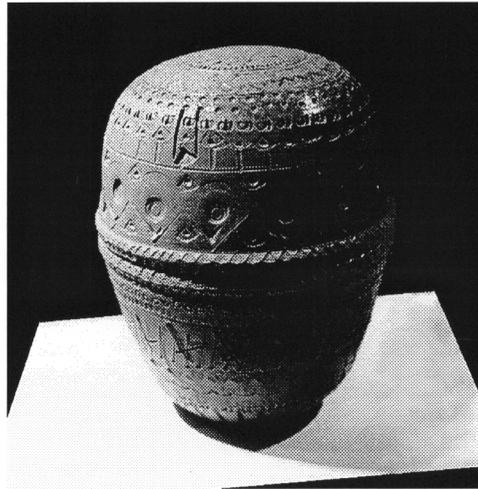
Death is a return to earth, and the earth is referenced as a womb. In this sense, the vessel becomes a womb. The final house is nothing but a return to the first house.

On decoration: "to adorn" or "to clothe." In a metaphorical sense, decoration refers to ornamentation, especially rhetoric, but from its origins, the word has carried a semantic ambivalence between the meanings "to clothe by covering" and "to render clear." In Islam the purpose of decoration is not to elicit chosen structural details, but rather to mask or blur the construction. The Ottoman meaning of decoration was "transfiguration" not "clarification." (Sinan)

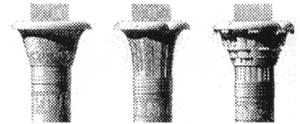
between life and death. They serve as a reconnection to culture and to prior traditions in craft and refinement. We have been displaced. To recultivate, to *replace*, we must reference the past. Currently, our buildings and our burial places are lost in a senseless landscape of strip malls and fast-track living. The last house and its rituals no longer exists; only a shadow resides as a memory held in repeated gestures and in vague resemblances of the past.

I have explored the ornament and form given in the rituals and objects of many cultures: Hispanic, American Indian, pre-Columbian, Oriental, African and Indo-European. Part of the research has centered around the mandala: a circular form which is central to religious rites of many cultures. It has been for centuries both a meditative and a healing device. It is a model and symbol of the infinite universe.

Working in the concentric world of pot throwing is working with the mandala. The use and presence of ornament on my urns is representative of the outward energy of the mandala which reaches to the infinite. The ornament generated from the mandala is also reminiscent of African tribal neck jewelry as well as of the primal act of scaring and decorating the body of the pot as well as the human body.



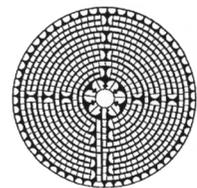
Ornamentation carries with it an instinctive and natural relation to form. Ornamentation enriches objects and breathes life into them. Ornamentation speaks of culture, of history, of tradition. Derived from ancient symbolic languages existent long before the written word, ornamentation is seen as a signal of a meaningful daily life filled with the oneness of nature, objects and the self.



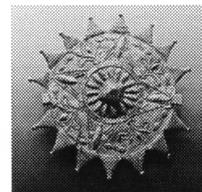
(Monuments of Egypt)



(Mandala)

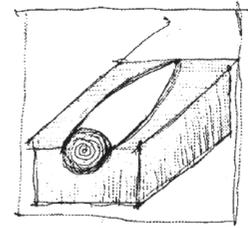
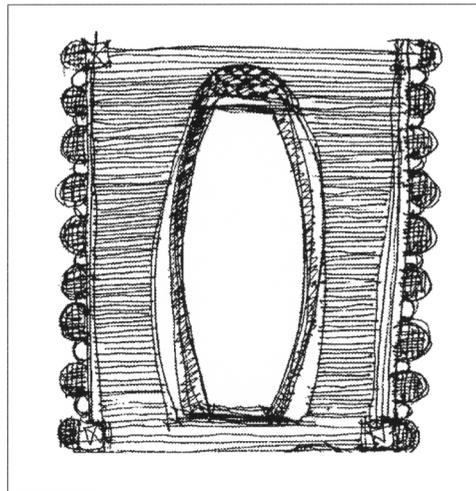


(Mandala)



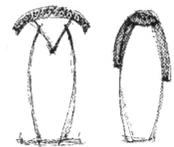
(The Gold of Africa)

During my search for a meaningful, contemporary form I studied the greek *diotae*. This is an undecorated, round bottomed amphora-like vessel, set in the earth and used to store honey, corn, oil or wine. The shape is a long curve, devoid of ornament. Using this form as inspiration, I have made an elongated shape whose curve is similar to the *diotae*. The vessel is completed with ornament, a cultural identification. The ornament is a mandala and forms the head which is then held upward by the curve of the urn's body. This is the final study in my quest to find a meaningful vessel for our time. It stands anonymous, but its cap reflects history and tradition; it lives by holding death in serene quiet beauty.



sketch of the mold

Mandalas reminded one of rose windows, snow flakes, wheels, seasonal cycles and the sun.



sketches



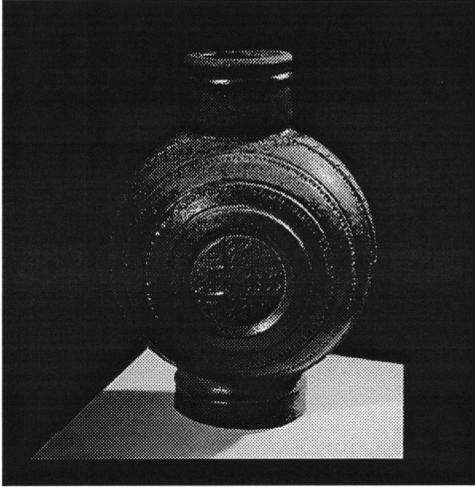
(Ceramics in the Liao Dynasty)



(The Chinese Potter)

Clay is the root of our existence; it reflects all ages, embraces each change and is malleable and giving. It's source is inexhaustible. In reestablishing the act of returning to the mother earth we become it and ourselves again and again. Clay recalls connection to nature; its craft speaks of the importance of the experience of making and its manifestations re-establish connection to culture and speak to the memory of our age.

"... memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are." (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxiii)



PLATES

urn series by Ellen Braaten

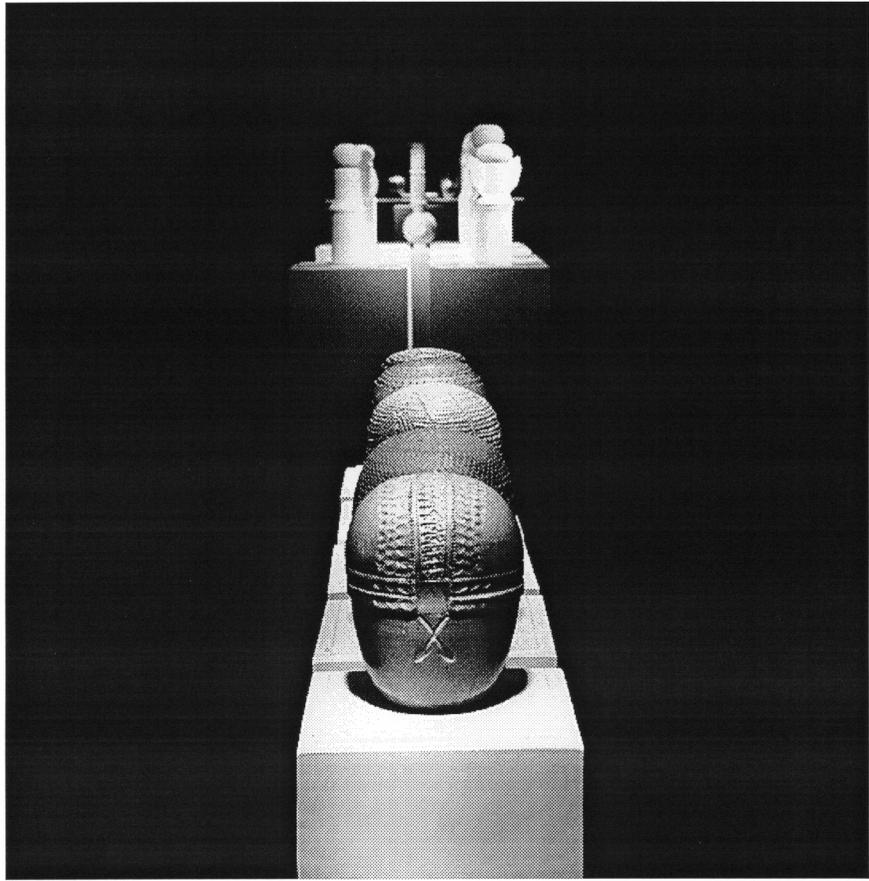


PLATE I

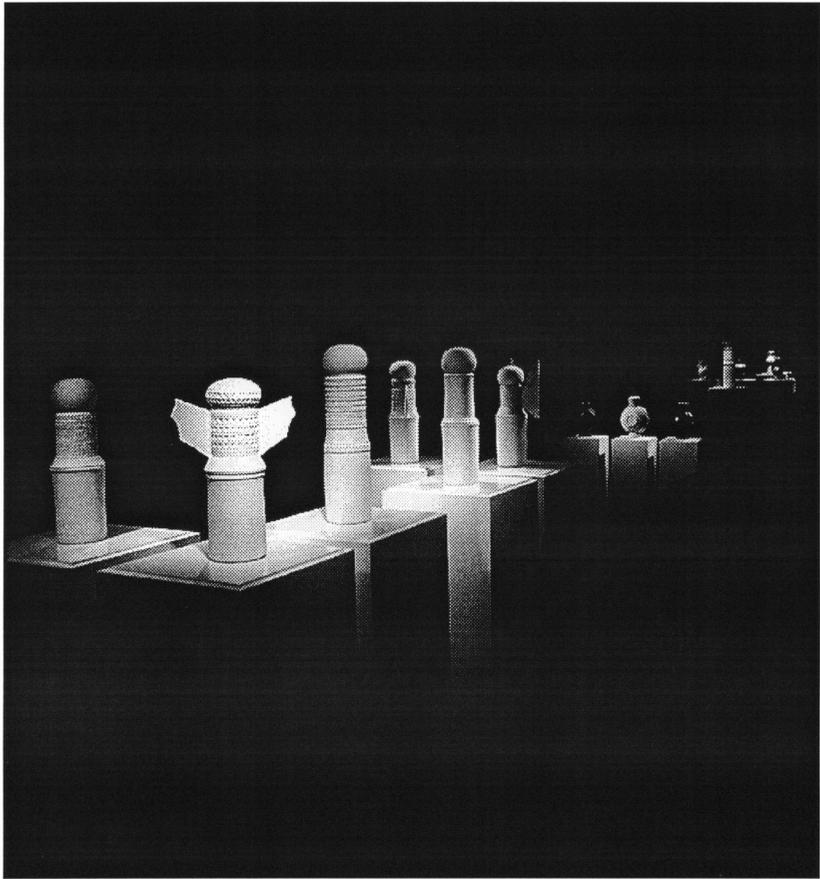


PLATE II

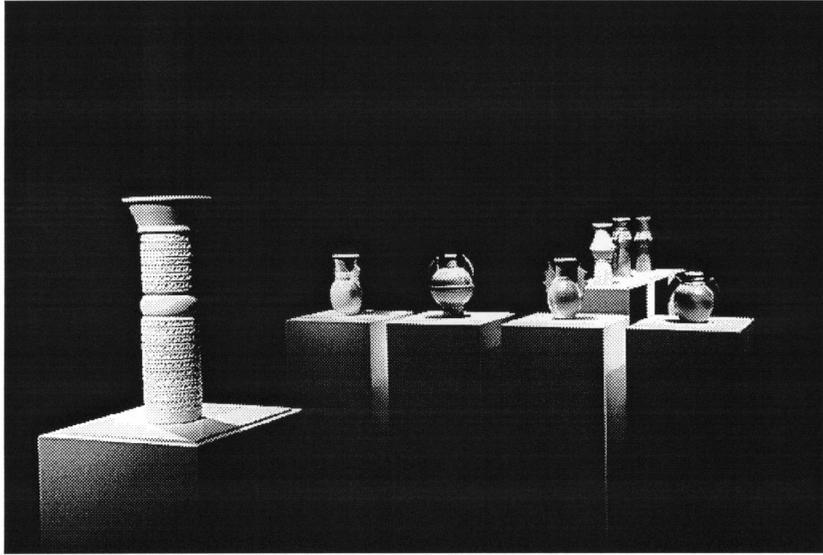


PLATE III

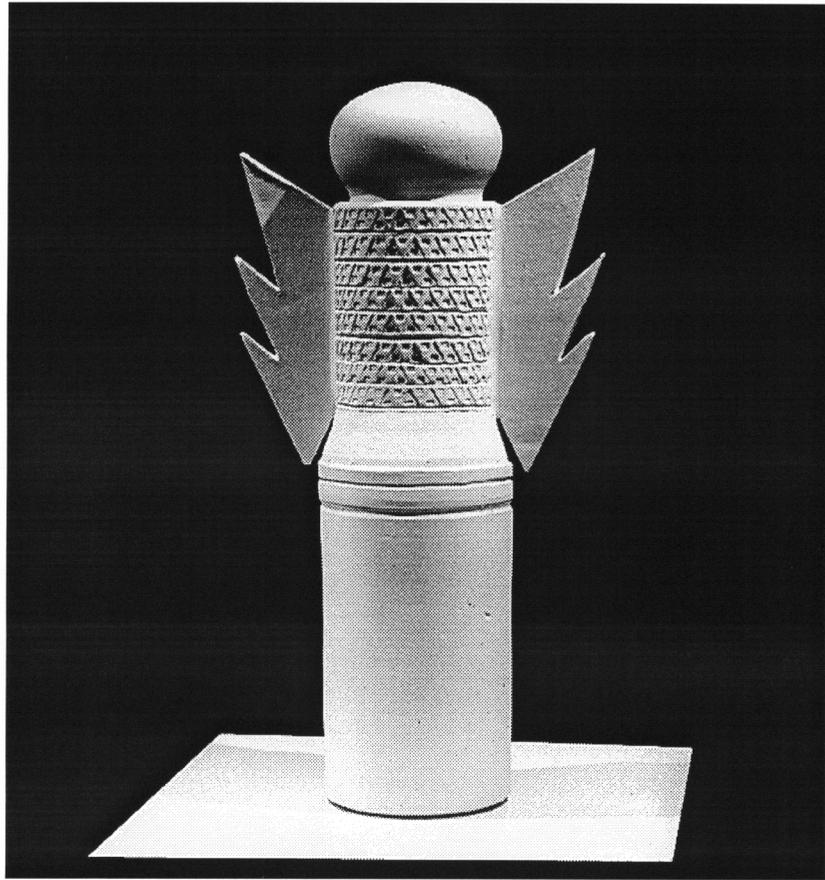


PLATE IV

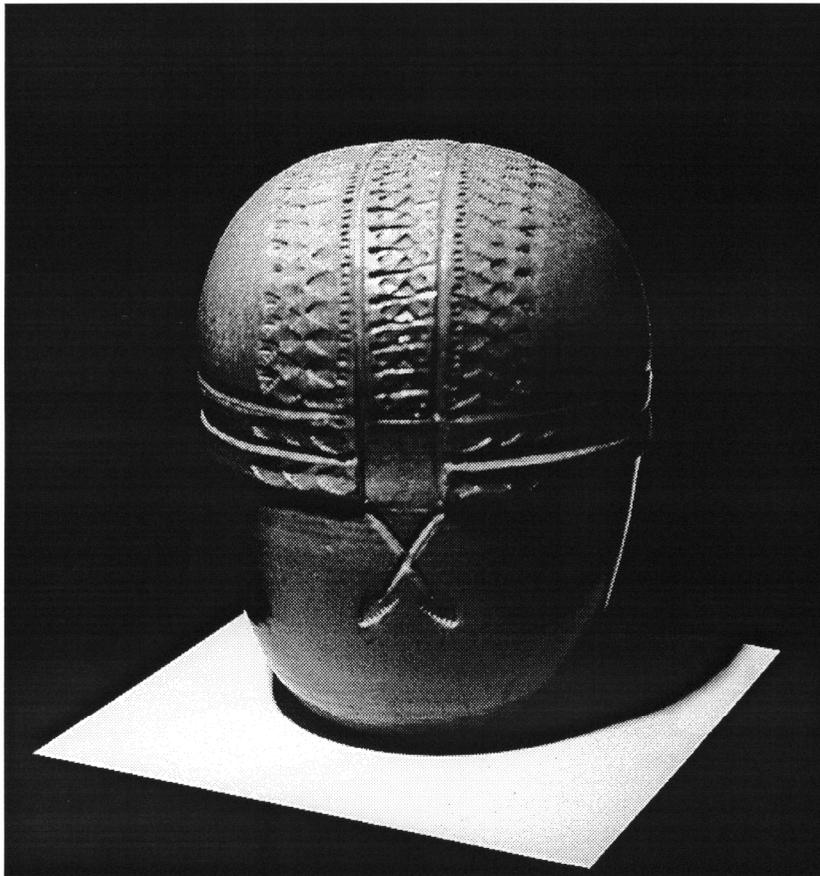


PLATE V

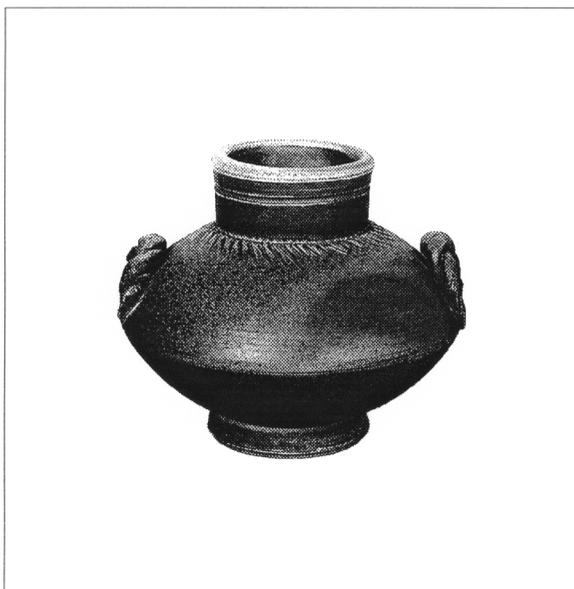


PLATE VI

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