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Lost Too Early: William Wyman

Word-covered, tombstonelike slab vessels and austere architectural structures he called “Temples” were among the distinguished genres of William Wyman’s work. Wyman (1922-1980) studied at Mass College of Art and at Alfred and earned an M.A. from Columbia. By 1958 he was an assistant professor at Mass. In 1960 he opened the Herring Run Pottery, producing utilitarian stoneware for which he became widely known, the work ranging from hanging planters to architectural murals. At the same time he was producing more expressive or even spiritual works.

Homage to Robert Frost, 1962, for instance, is a flattish, unglazed stoneware vessel around 3 feet tall, its brutalized surface incised with the words of a Frost poem and embedded with pebbles of glass that melted during firing, creating icy-looking rivulets. It seems equally plaque, painting, pot and wall, with form yielding to the important surface. Other works have haiku poems, witticisms or effusions such as “so glad—so glad—so glad,” while the stained and abused surfaces convey the feeling of contemporary graffiti.

Later in the ‘60s Wyman dipped his smaller slab vessels in glaze for flows of color and applied paper cutouts to cubic forms with epoxies and resins. In 1965 he spent three months in Honduras working on an international development project and saw Mayan ruins. These inspired his “Temples” of the ‘70s—shelters ranging from 2 to 30 inches tall marked with conte crayon or pastels and featuring slits, stairs or windows and mysterious interior spaces. Usually they are unglazed and unadorned, and they convey an imposing sense of quiet. It has been suggested that they are visually formalized ventures into the unknown or metaphors of a search for

understanding; they allowed him to play concreteness against implications of infinity.¹ His growing interest in Eastern philosophies may also have influenced this body of work.

In a 1970 interview with Wyman, recounted in *Craft Horizons*, the playwright Israel Horowitz described him as having been, at the beginning of the '60s, "a rebel, a revolutionary, a radical, an anarchist threatening the tiny world where clay is sacred" and wondered whether his shift to "conservatism" in response to the rise of Pop was just as much a matter of swimming upstream.¹ Wyman called himself independent and an anomaly, but the subtle spiritual implications of his works are distinguishing but hardly radical.