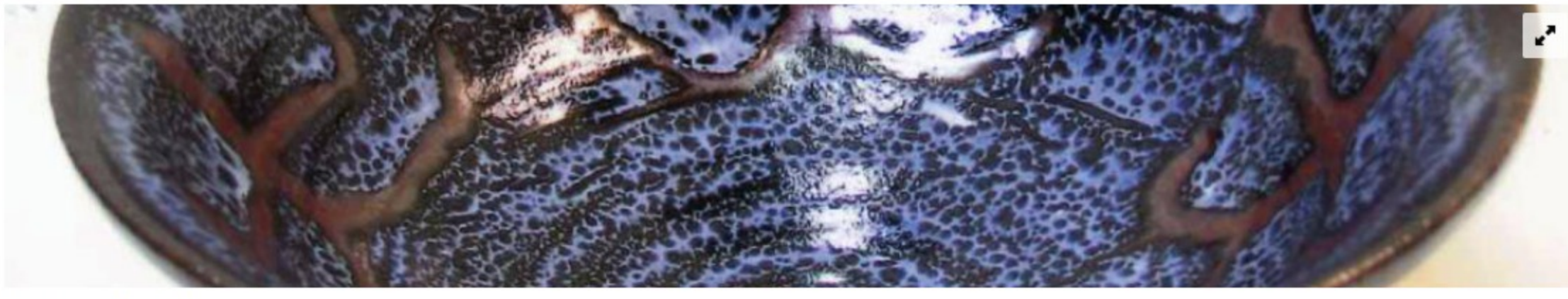


Fired Up: The Pottery of Abe Cohn



Introduction

Paying tribute to a man who taught, encouraged and flamed the creative spark of countless individuals was what blues musician and clay enthusiast Steve Cohen had in mind when he shared his idea for an online exhibit about renowned Wisconsin potter, Abe Cohn. With Steve's collection of Abe Cohn's work and recollections of the iconic pottery mentor as a jumping-off point, other of Abe's friends and family members shared their memories and photographs of his work.

After serving in WWII, Abe, a visionary and pioneer, opened his first studio in Milwaukee in 1953, The Potter's Wheel, and married his wife Ginka in 1954. In the summer of 1956, they established the first pottery studio in Fish Creek, laying the foundation for Door County to become a renowned destination for potters and pottery fans alike. Following a fire in 1975, the Milwaukee branch of The Potter's Wheel found a new home in an old warehouse shared by the Milwaukee School of Art and Design. After years of maintaining both locations, founding the seminal Door County Potter's Guild in 1976, and spending solely summers in Fish Creek, Abe and Ginka moved there in 1994, making the Door Peninsula their permanent home.

Along the way, he received several awards including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award (1958) and a Smithsonian Institute Purchase Award for its 7th Annual Exhibition of Ceramic Art (1961). In 1964, Abe was granted the first one-man show by a craftsman at the new Memorial Art Center in Milwaukee – the precursor to the Milwaukee Art Museum, which has several pieces of Abe's in its permanent collection. In 2010, Abe received the Wisconsin Visual Arts Lifetime Achievement Award.

Following a lifetime of prolific creative productivity and inspired guidance, Abe died in May 2013, leaving a legacy to students, collectors and other artists. A number of those people provided information and materials to make this online exhibit possible. I would like to thank Steve Cohen (Milwaukee), Robin Cohn, Tamar Cohn, Jon Cohn, Steve Cohen (California), Dick Woppert and Greg Miller for their contributions.

Molly Dubin
 Curator, Jewish Museum Milwaukee

My Time with Abe Cohn

By Steve Cohen

I was among the many potters who passed through the doors of Abe's two studios. I was 24 years old and had briefly operated my own pottery studio a few blocks away from The Potter's Wheel. My studio was also destroyed by fire shortly before the fire at The Potter's Wheel. I had been buying some supplies from The Potter's Wheel during this period, and though this had been the extent of my association with Abe at the time, I was one of many who helped him relocate. It was the beginning of what became an important period in my life.

When his new studio was set up, I became an apprentice to Abe. One of the other potters working in the studio at the time was Greg Miller. Through Greg and Abe, as well as another associate potter, Dick Woppert, I absorbed great information about potting, glazing, kilns, firing, aesthetics and expression, and in exchange, I helped sell supplies, taught some classes and helped with the day-to-day upkeep of the studio. Greg, Dick and I remain friends to this day.



Steve Cohen at the Wheel

Abe was a quiet person, but he chose his words carefully and offered his critical opinion only when he felt it was absolutely necessary. He had a wry and understated sense of humor, and I never saw him lose his temper. He worked slowly, meticulously, and pragmatically. What he chose to contribute to my education was always carefully considered, and his example as a potter and as a person helped me become the person and the potter that I am today.

My time as one of Abe's apprentices concluded when I and my future wife, Karen, traveled for a year. When we returned, I opted to have a career as a musician. Though my time as one of Abe's apprentices lasted only about 18 months, the lessons I learned stuck with me, and I have returned to making ceramic art at the age of 65, still much influenced by my time at Abe's studios.

Through the last 10 years, I have accumulated a couple dozen of Abe's pots, mostly at estate sales and Goodwill stores. Abe's pots are among the very few things that I collect, and they are important to me. This presentation of my small collection has been a pleasure to assemble. Thinking about Abe and looking at the pots that he made takes me back to a happy and developmental time in my life. I think of this project as an opportunity to look back fondly at my time with Abe.



Snapshot of potters at The Potter's Wheel, in Milwaukee, 1975. (Left to right) Steve Cohen, Ivy Balian, Joan Backes-Sillis, Ginka Cohn, Abe Cohn, Greg Miller, Dick Woppert. Image courtesy of Steve Cohen.

Steve Cohen's Collection



TAN, RUST AND BLUE TEAPOT

Tan, rust and blue Teapot, 8" tall, 1974. Collection of Steve Cohen. This is an excellent example of a signature Abe Cohn teapot. All elements including the body, spout, lid and lid handle are hand-thrown stoneware. The handle is pulled. This teapot is decorated with colored slips and then carved before an ash glaze was applied before final firing. It is numbered 188 and has the Potter's Wheel symbol brushed on with underglaze. Photo by and collection of Steve Cohen.



Abe's Early Career, Friends, Family

Abe Cohn grew up in Waukesha, the youngest of six brothers. He joined the army at a young age, studied painting in Paris and at UW-Madison, where he discovered his love of clay. This led to studios and galleries in Milwaukee and Door County, a marriage to his wife Ginka and a rewarding life filled with teaching, children, grandchildren and many friends.



ABE COHN WITH HIS BROTHERS

Born in 1925, Abe (on the farthest left) was the youngest of six; the Cohn brothers grew up in Waukesha. Image courtesy of Tamar Cohn.



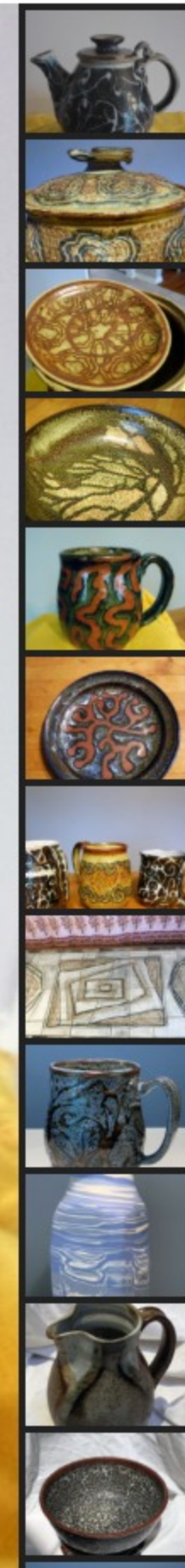
Abe's Prolific Pottery

During his decades-long career, Abe created a prolific body of creations. Public and private collections throughout Wisconsin and the country include his creations. His children have diverse collections of their father's work, proudly displaying many pieces in their homes.



BLACK AND GRAY SWIRLED TEAPOT

Black and gray swirled teapot, ca. 1990s. Collection of Jon Cohn.



The Potter's Wheel

Abe and Ginka learned of the beauty of Fish Creek, Door County in the early 1950s and after visiting, became smitten. The Milwaukee Potter's Wheel gallery gained a second location following their establishment of the first pottery studio there in 1953. The venue would soon become an iconic destination for potters seeking guidance and for pottery enthusiasts.



THE POTTER'S WHEEL IN FISH CREEK

In the summer of 1956, Abe and Ginka established the first pottery studio in Fish Creek, laying the pioneering foundation for Door County to become a renowned destination for potters and pottery enthusiasts alike. In 1958, Abe and Ginka bought this property, transforming it into the popular and celebrated venue, The Potter's Wheel. Image courtesy of Tamar Cohn.



#FiredUpWithJMM

We know that there are many Abe Cohn pieces, experiences, and stories in the greater Wisconsin community and beyond, and we want to collect those experiences! Share your story and any Abe Cohn pottery you have collected throughout the years with us via [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) or by emailing us at programs@jewishmuseummilwaukee.org. Use the hashtag [#FiredUpWithJMM](#) so we can find your story on social media and share it with our visitors. Select stories will be shared below.

Carol Vihon Hirsch (Evanston, IL)

Roger and I enjoy Door County with its charming little stores, beautiful nature to drive through, the same Inn we like as well as the art galleries. Quite a while ago we found this piece of pottery at The Potter's Wheel. Then we found out Abe was Jewish. I did think I saw the spirit of Judaism in this piece of pottery. Recently, after I found out our favorite Jewish Museum Milwaukee was having a showing of his work I was going through old business cards while being kept inside due to COVID-19. Lo and behold, there was a card from The Potter's Wheel among those old business cards. I could not believe it.



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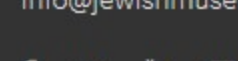
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