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When Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio loaded abstract expressionism onto a pickup truck and drove it to Montana, they replaced centuries of ceramic tradition with a rude spontaneity. Meanwhile Shōji Hamada and Kanjirō Kawai climbed into a time machine to revisit age-old folk pottery in Japan. These two journeys might not be quite as different as they appear: the expressivist ceramist Don Reitz, a wizard of firing, once told me that he sometimes intentionally created effects that he made look accidental. Still, Voulkos's large battered sculptures are a long way from Hamada's vivacious but humble tableware.

Enter Ralph Bacerra. He adored the incredible technical achievements of Japanese Imari ware from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and understood how Imari artists built on eons of stunning accomplishments by East Asian potters. Yet Bacerra was also an American modernist who engaged cubism and color-field abstraction. Through

some form of alchemy unknown to others, he managed to yoke the opposites of open rebellion and cherished tradition. His works sprang from a vast knowledge of East Asian glazes and from his own countless scientific glaze experiments. Yet his designs also dialogue with the impossible perspectives of M. C. Escher and the bright non-Euclidean geometries of Al Held.

Bacerra's mutually eclipsing, always sliding checkerboards and optically illusionist staircases bewitch the eye while simultaneously upholding and defying two-dimensional space. His stark modernity critiques many well-rehearsed rituals in clay. Yet his respectful reinvention of age-old practices—particularly in glazing—rebukes those modern artists who seek the easy path of discarding everything before the Armory Show. He seized immense artistic resources of the past in order to assert a dizzying present. I can't imagine twentieth-century art without Ralph Bacerra, and neither should anyone else.





Ralph Bacerra, *Untitled Bowl*, 2008. Ceramic. Height: 18½ in. (45.7 cm); diameter: 22 in. (55.9 cm). Collection of Douglas Moreland.