Born in 1884, R. Guy Cowan (1884-1958) was a generation older than the artists who made up the Cleveland School. Cowan’s pottery studio, which was a thriving entity in Cleveland in the 1920s, employed many Cleveland ceramists, including Edris Eckhardt, Waylande Gregory, Viktor Schreckengost, and Thelma Winter Frazier. He also taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art where he mentored many artists who would remain lifelong friends and colleagues.

Cowan grew up in Syracuse. His father, Louis, was a head decorator at the Onondaga Pottery Company (which would later change its name to Syracuse China). As a child, he assisted his father with odd jobs at the pottery. During his teenage years, when he confessed his dreams of becoming a fine artist to his father, he was instead ushered into an apprenticeship at Onondaga Pottery. He learned the pottery trade from the ground up, eventually picking up skills that ranged from mold making to dinnerware design.

Cowan was one of the first students at Alfred University’s New York School of Clay-Working and Ceramics in 1902, where he studied with the influential educator Charles Fergus Binns. At Alfred, he bolstered his knowledge of design and glaze chemistry while befriending fellow students like Arthur Baggs, who would go on to become legendary artists and educators in their own right. After graduating from Alfred, Cowan quickly found his way to Cleveland, where his expertise was in demand by a variety of industrial companies. After building a base of clients and supporters, he opened his own business, the Cleveland Pottery and Tile Company, in 1913.

Cowan’s experience working as a chemist for the U.S. Army during World War I inspired him to create efficient workflows in his factory. Once his factory reopened after the war, Cowan focused on mold-made pottery whose production could be efficiently scaled up according to demand. He also eliminated time-consuming unique commissions from his clients. At the same time, Cowan also focused on creating a positive working environment and social purpose for his dozens of employees who were held to high standards of craftsmanship.

This sense of camaraderie extended to the fledgling designers of the Cleveland School who he brought into his studio. Because of his reputation and standing, Cowan was able to attract designers from outside of the Cleveland area, as he did with Waylande Gregory in 1928. As the sophistication of his designers grew, Cowan Pottery produced increasingly elaborate figural sculptures like Gregory’s Salome, which was produced not long after his arrival. In the late 1920s, the pottery also began making modernist wares and sculptures that were heavily influenced by the Art Deco movement, chief among them Viktor Schreckengost’s acclaimed Jazz Bowl series.

As with many other potteries, Cowan’s business was decimated by the Great Depression. Under a mountain of debt, Cowan decided to close the pottery in 1931. After the pottery’s closure, Cowan moved back to Syracuse to take a position as the chief designer for Syracuse China where he had begun his career. In 1932, the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts began hosting the Ceramic National exhibitions, which helped to bring acclaim to many of the artists Cowan had employed and mentored. Until his death in 1958, Cowan served as a frequent juror and trustee for the Ceramic National exhibitions.
n its surface, Cleveland would seem like an unlikely birthplace for a modernist sculptural movement. Even less likely are the connections that were forged between Cleveland and Vienna, Austria in the 1920s and 30s. Because it possessed thriving cultural, educational, and industrial centers, Cleveland had all of the ingredients to attract and educate talented artists. Many of the artists featured in this exhibition were either born, educated, or had formative career experiences in Cleveland including Viktor Schreckengost, Edris Eckhardt, Russell Barnett Aitken, and Waylande Gregory. Each of these artists also undertook extensive studies in Vienna.

“The Cleveland School” is a broad name coined in 1928 by Elrick Davis, who was a journalist with the *Cleveland Press*. In addition to the ceramic artists featured in this exhibition, artists like painters August Biehle and Martha Burchfield, lithographer and muralist William Sommer, and enamellist Kalman Kubinyi all lived and worked in Cleveland, and enjoyed national reputations. This hothouse atmosphere contributed to Cleveland’s vital art scene which nurtured the careers of these artists, many of whom worked fluidly across different media and collaborations with industry.

The Cleveland Institute of Art was founded in 1882 and distinguished itself through its close relationship with industry. Students like Viktor Schreckengost were given rigorous fine art training, but were also shown paths into product design and other industrial pursuits. The Institute thrived during the Great Depression by participating in the WPA Federal Art Project, and during World War II by adding degrees like medical drawing and mapmaking. In particular, Julius Mihalik, a Hungarian immigrant who taught at the Institute, opened the eyes of his students to the work of influential studios and workshops like the German Bauhaus in Dessau and the Werkstätte in Vienna.

Although it was certainly a world away from Cleveland, Vienna in the 1920s and 30s shared Cleveland’s close relationship between artists and industry. The Wiener Werkstätte was a workshop founded in 1903 that brought together artists, designers, and architects to create high quality products in a range of materials and processes that included ceramics, metals, woodworking, and even graphic design.

Cleveland Institute of Art professor Julius Mihalik encouraged his students to travel and study in Vienna, particularly with artist Michael Powolny, who taught at Vienna’s Kunstgewerbeschule. After Viktor Schreckengost arrived for postgraduate studies in Austria in 1930, he worked closely with Powolny, but also rubbed elbows with Josef Hoffmann, a major figure in Viennese design whose philosophies about extending art into daily life became central to the Wiener Werkstätte and indirectly influenced the Cleveland School.

Vally Wieselthier, an Austrian sculptor who worked closely with the Wiener Werkstätte, embodies many of the qualities that came to influence ceramic sculptors of the Cleveland school. Her work, which is modeled directly in clay rather than cast in molds, is animated by a lively sense of humor and held together by a strong sense of design that utilizes underlying geometric forms and brightly-colored glazes to hold the viewer’s attention. Wieselthier would eventually move to the United States, where her work was often shown with artists of the Cleveland School.

The rise of Nazism in the 1930s quickly extinguished Vienna’s appetite for the Wiener Werkstätte’s particular brand of design. Artists associated with the Werkstätte and the German Bauhaus fled to the United States, among other destinations, where their influence would only continue to grow through the postwar years.
In 1932, Anna Wetherill Olmsted, director of the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts (today the Everson Museum) established the first annual Robineau Memorial Ceramic Exhibition in honor of local ceramist Adelaide Alsop Robineau, who had passed away in 1929. Olmsted intended the exhibition to provide a venue for American ceramists to present their work as well as establish the Museum as the center for American ceramics. Known today as the Ceramic Nationals, these juried exhibitions ultimately sparked a major national interest in ceramic art and paved the way for museums around the country to collect and exhibit both functional pottery and ceramic sculpture.

Despite a lack of funding and appropriate exhibition space—the Museum’s entire exhibition budget in 1932 was $419 and it rented space on the top floor of Syracuse’s Carnegie Library—Olmsted managed to pull together a successful exhibition featuring artists from New York State, which she displayed atop sateen-covered folding tables borrowed from the local YMCA. Following its opening and positive reception from critics and the public alike, ceramists around the country wrote to Olmsted requesting the next exhibition be national in scope. Olmsted recognized the difficulty of putting on a national exhibition with insufficient funding, but she also recognized the opportunity. In a letter to Carleton Atherton, she wrote, “Perhaps it is rather mad to consider a national exhibition just now... but with no other national exhibition devoted exclusively to ceramics in the country this might truly be the chance of a lifetime, and the museum ought to be put on the art map thereby.” Ultimately, the 1933 exhibition was opened to ceramists around the country and included almost two hundred works from seventy-two artists. Olmsted kept costs low by borrowing casket crates from the Marcellus Casket Company to use as pedestals.

Beginning with the Third Ceramic National in 1934, each exhibition toured nationally, and sometimes internationally, to as many as a dozen other museums and galleries. The Ceramic Nationals continued annually until 1952 (with a short break due to World War II), at which time they became biennials due to the number of participating artists and their expense. The Everson purchased prize-winning works from every National, building an incomparable collection of twentieth century American ceramics that documents the rise and fall of different styles and subjects over the years. Figurative work, in particular, played an important role in the early years of the Nationals, and many of the works in Key Figures were purchased from the Nationals throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

By 1972, the Ceramic National had reached unwieldy proportions. After several days of reviewing slides for more than 4,500 entries, the jurors rejected all submissions and announced that the 1972 National would be replaced with a four-part exhibition that included a slideshow of the best slide entries, an invitational, a survey of prior National works curated by Olmsted, and a display of Robineau’s work from the Museum’s collection. This highly controversial decision effectively ended the Ceramic Nationals, and while the Everson revived the show in 1987, 1990, 1993, and 2000, the exhibition never again received the acclaim it had in earlier years.

The Ceramic National exhibitions were a major force in bringing contemporary ceramics to the attention of museums and the public throughout the United States. As scholarship about American ceramics becomes more widespread, the importance of the Ceramic Nationals is once again at the forefront of the conversation.
In their foreword for the 1948 Ceramic National, jurors Carl Schmitz, Maija Grotell, and Charles B. Jeffery praised the sculptural works in that year’s exhibition for revealing “deep feeling” and for the simplicity and strength of their designs. This, they stated, was in contrast to the “whimsical, even grotesque, small pieces which dominated a few former shows.” In 1948, they added, “cuteness is definitely on the wane.”

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, all but the most abstracted figurative works had disappeared from the Ceramic Nationals. With the emergence of artists like Peter Voulkos, Win Ng, Jeff Schlanger, and others who translated the energy of abstract expressionism into clay, figuration fell even further from grace. In the late 1960s, “Funk” artists like Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, and Patty Warashina gleefully returned working with the figure to prominence. In doing so, Funk artists reveled in grotesque humor, bright “hobby shop” glazes, and scatological references.

The 1980s ushered in a period of post-modernism that included many artists who embraced the figure. Bay Area artists like Viola Frey and Stephen de Staebler began creating monumental works that foregrounded clay’s expressive potential. The 1990s saw the rise of figural ceramic sculptors like Ann Agee, Dirk Statschke, and Justin Novak, who imbued their work with keenly observed details and a sense of empathy.

As the boundaries between “craft” and “fine art” have come tumbling down, fine art galleries have slowly come to embrace ceramics as a viable (and commercial) medium. A new generation of artists has emerged who are not beholden to outdated hierarchies and unspoken rules about what constitutes fine art. Artists like Cristina Córdova and Alessandro Gallo use classical training and a nod social realism to create works that evoke a sense of poetic empathy that can be inflected with longing and emotion. Adelaide Paul’s work revolves around a similar empathetic response to the treatment of animals, as she often wraps her sculptures in materials like leather. Columbian-American artist Natalia Arbelaez examines her identity through family lore and Columbian folk culture. Christina A. West explores the psychological elements that simmer below the surface of the figures that populate her installations.

All of these artists inhabit an art world that is very different from the one that existed during the period of the Everson’s Ceramic Nationals (1932-1972). However, from the use of humor by Alessandro Gallo and Natalia Arbelaez to the deft realist touches of Cristina Córdova, a direct lineage can be traced back to the artists highlighted in Key Figures. “Cuteness” is even slowly creeping back into favor alongside the whimsical, the grotesque, and even the scatological. The time has come not only for contemporary figurative artists to receive the recognition they deserve, but also for a re-evaluation of giants upon whose shoulders they stand.