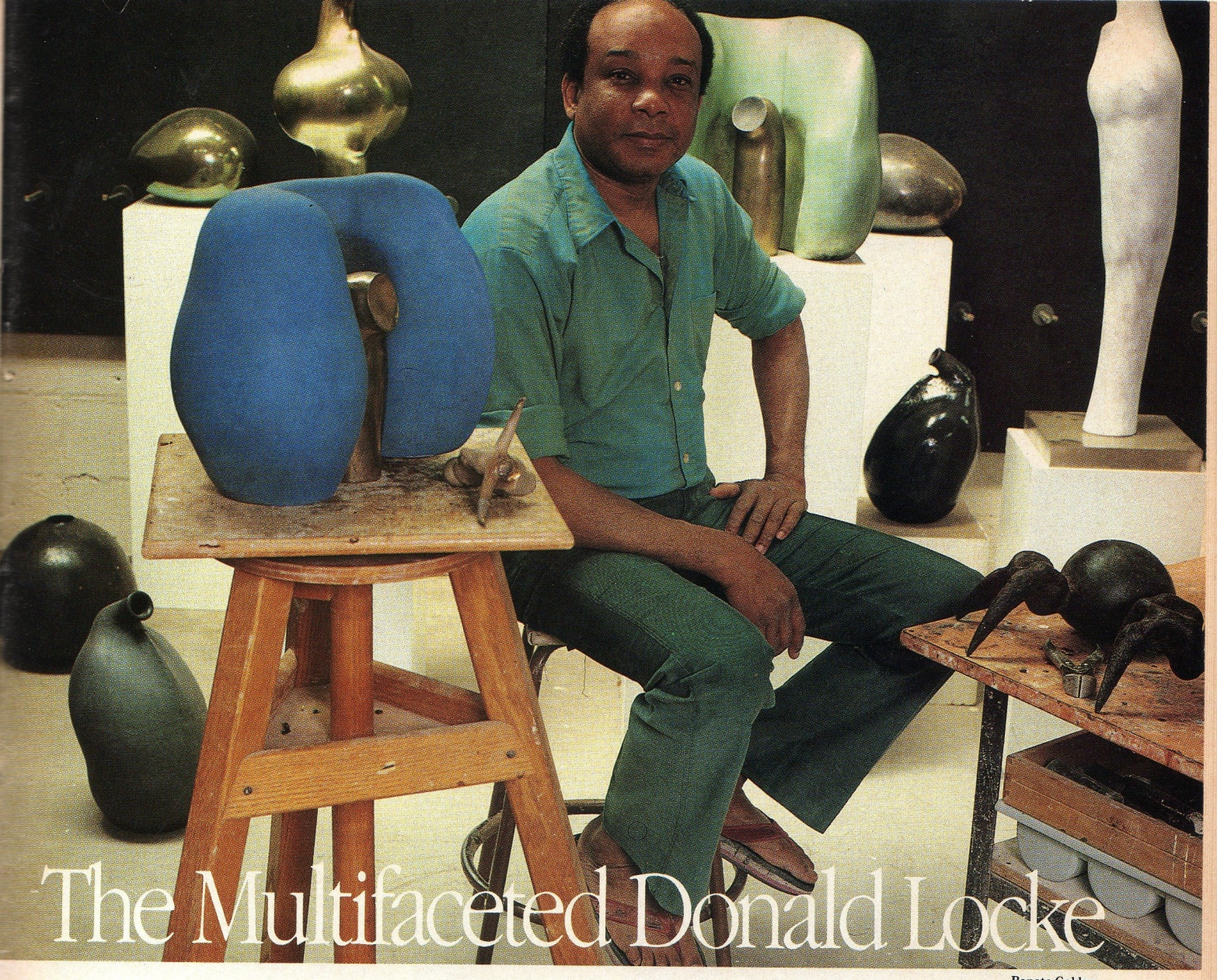


The Multifaceted Donald Locke

Renata Golden

Sometimes sculptor, sometimes painter or potter, the Arizona artist brings a cultural eclecticism to his work

by Vicky Hay

Artist Donald Locke lives in Arizona, but in a creative and artistic sense he is a citizen of the world.

Born in Stewartville, Guyana, and educated in England and Scotland, he is by turns a sculptor, potter and painter of the most innovative ranks. His work contains autobiographical references—to his youth in Guyana, to a beloved English mentor, to his adopted home in the Southwest. He also draws fully on intellectual resources ranging from Afro-Indian folklore to da Vinci, Picasso and Mark Rothko.

Locke's recent focus has been his sculpture, but regardless of the medium he works in, it is the imprint of his style that matters most, he says.

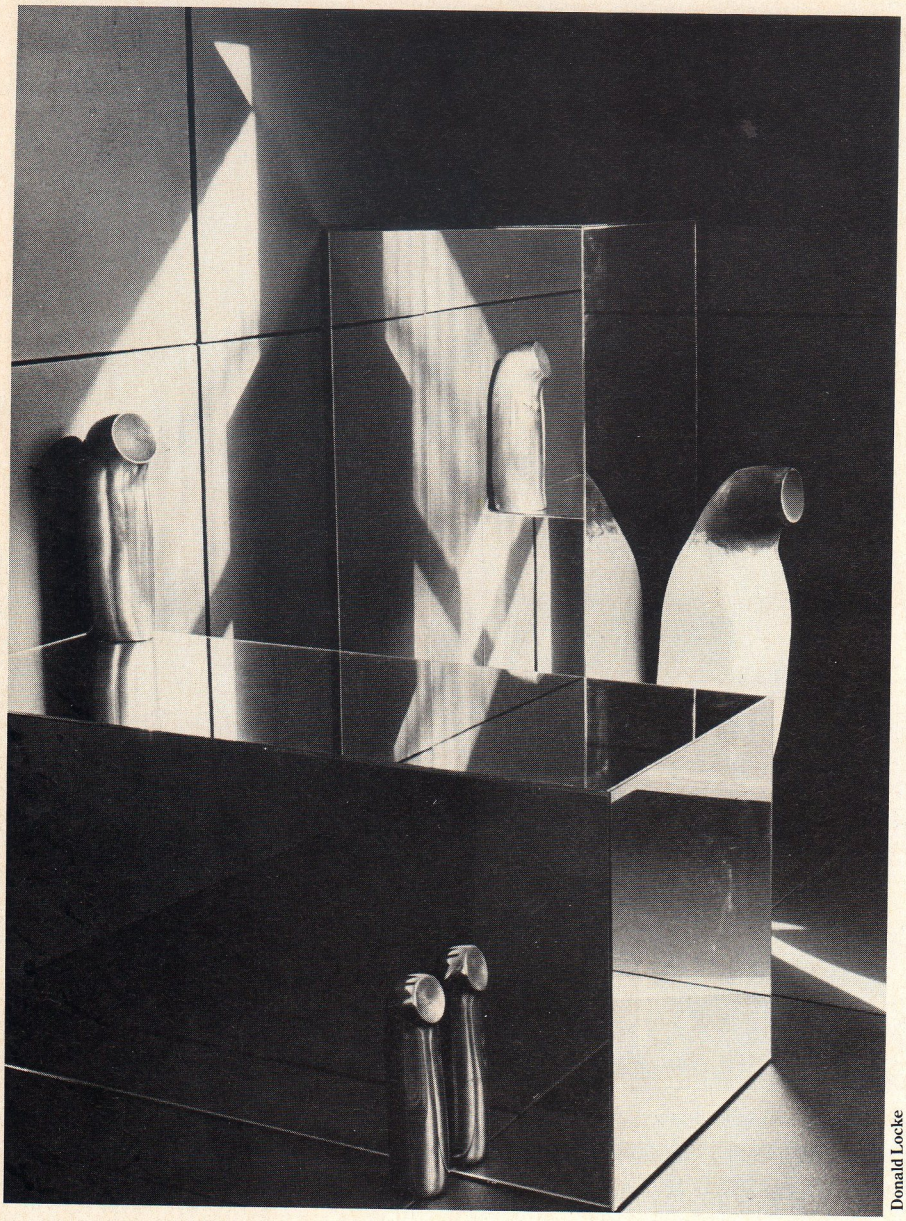
"I do not define differences between painting, sculpture and pottery," he says sitting in his Phoenix studio. "There was a time when I called myself a potter, there was a time when I called myself a painter and there was a time when I called myself a sculptor. I am an artist, and I want my work to have maximum artistic force."

His sculpture hovers between the abstract and the figurative. Working and reworking certain basic geometric shapes—the cylinder, the egg, the grid—into organic entities, he alludes to the personal and to the universal.

Locke, 59, studied at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham, England, and at Scotland's Edinburgh University. After a Guggenheim fellowship in sculpture brought him to Arizona State University as artist in residence in 1979, he decided to stay in the United States.

Locke's sculpture and abstract paintings were showcased recently at the Ianuzzi Gallery in Scottsdale, Ariz. Earlier this year, his works were part of an immigrant artists exhibit, "They Came to America," at the Arnesen Gallery in Vail, Colo. There, he featured his bronze African female figures for which he is renowned.

In December, his work will be in-



Donald Locke

cluded in a London show, "The Other Side: A Historical Survey of Afro-Asian Art Since the War." Organized by the Arts Council of Great Britain, the show focuses on the contribution black artists have made to the visual arts tradition of England.

Locke's red-brick cottage is filled with art—his work as well as others. One piece that occupies a place of honor is a striking abstract pot, a slender, flattened cylinder with a delicate multicolored glaze. "We're very pleased to be able to have this piece," he says. "We just got it. It was done by James Tower, one of my first teachers." Tower, one of the first generations of post World War II potters in England, took an avant-garde approach to the medium of pottery, one that led away from traditional forms, shapes and ideas of English pottery—earthenware, round and utilitarian.

"Naturally, we as students didn't understand," says Locke. "We wanted to learn pottery." It took Locke two years to grasp Tower's new vision of ceramics and art, where "a pot did not have to be round, or be made on the wheel," Locke explains. "The pot did not also have to be functional.

"These two concepts were absolutely revolutionary at the time, eventually leading to the development of ceramic sculpture," he says. "You ended up with a completely new object that wasn't pottery; it was sculpture. These innovations reflected the development that Henry Moore had introduced in sculpture proper. This innovation led to the transition from pottery to ceramic sculpture."

Much of Locke's inspiration traces back to Tower. Shieldlike sculptures, such as the sensual—indeed, erotic—*Maesta*, which he completed in the early '70s, bring to mind Tower's flattened cylinder, but it is flexed and transmuted into a form Locke describes as biomorphic. The stocky, chunky *Phoenix Bird*, which was cast in 1980, is a powerfully masculine creature, at once vividly alive yet oddly pot-like. The *Pomona* figure, completed in 1985, is really, Locke notes, "an articulated cylinder, with a bulge in the back for buttocks, and a bulge in the front for a tummy and two sort of rounded places for hips."

Perhaps his most beautiful work, *Pomona* is a richly fecund female torso, mature and imbued with feminine strength, both African and classical in appearance. In 1955, at the beginning of his abstract period, Locke visited the Musee de l'Homme in Paris. There he saw a body cast and skeleton of Sarah Bartman, the famed early 19th-century artists' model who, because of her exaggerated figure, was known as the Hottentot Venus. She struck the young student's fancy and he did a few drawings, which he pulls out of a file in his studio. "Here's a back view, and here's a front view." He frowns at the picture's rough quality. "You can see why I never liked to draw.

"Almost 30 years later, I did this." He lays a photograph of *Pomona* beside the old sketches. The resemblance arrests one's eye. The two figures share the same great female buttocks, the same slight maternal bulge, the same pendulous breasts. The sketches are crude; but the bronze is superbly developed and rich with psychological and artistic allusion. The image must have stayed with Locke throughout a long intellectual ripening.

'The sense of fertility you see in Locke's work relates to his deep concerns about creativity—the process of things coming into being.'—William Peterson, art critic

"It took me about four years to accept the fact that my first sculptures were figures, done 30 years ago. And now I have almost completely become a figurative artist."

A variation on the physicality of *Pomona* and *Phoenix Bird* is *Venus of Tuba City*, a rotund figure inspired by Native American mothers. While all of his works have what might be called a family resemblance, the *Pomona* figures are as different from his early Picasso-esque paintings and abstract potlike sculptures as siblings with sharply divergent characteristics.

His abstract paintings today are incorporated primarily within his collages. In these pieces, he says "one can find expressions of architecture, politics, sociology as well as the physical way that people actually look. It's not only a portrait of the people themselves, but their environment."

"The sense of fertility you see in Locke's work relates to his deep concerns about creativity—the process of things coming into being," says William Peterson, editor and critic of the Albuquerque-based magazine *Artspace*, where Locke is the Arizona correspondent. "One of the things that most interests me about Locke," Peterson continues, "is his ability to bring together aspects from his Caribbean black heritage with mainstream formal concerns."

Locke's career has been anything but a smooth progression from one success to the next. Not until he was in his late teens did he learn of art or uncover his own talent. He came from a family of teachers, and that is how he was trained. In the late 1940s he earned a teaching certificate in Guyana, which required him to study drawing. At 17, Locke enrolled in a class taught by E. R. Burrowes, a Guyanese art teacher.

"Most Guyanese artists today can trace their interest in art and their commitment to art to his teaching and his example," Locke recalls. "He was a brilliant man. I attended his class because I needed to learn to draw. The first night I went I saw this man talking about painting and landscape and trees and how artists look at trees . . . and as he talked he drew a tree on the blackboard. It probably wasn't a very good drawing of a tree, but it converted me to art. And my life hasn't been the same since."

Before long, he obtained a British Council Scholarship to the Bath Academy of Art, and later another scholarship sent him to Edinburgh University. When he returned to Guyana, he made his living teaching primary school and experimented on his own with native clays in a primitive kiln. By the

Donald Locke

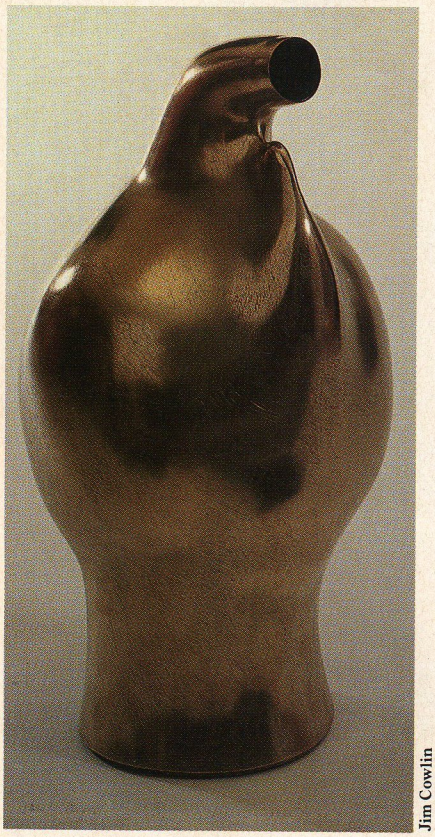
Above left, detail of *The Room: An Environment with Fifteen Black Surfaces. Pomona* (right) gracefully embodies feminine strength.

Bob Sherwood

mid-1970s, he was again in England, where he took a teaching position.

"I discovered an important principle," he says. "Very crudely put in Americanese, it says, 'There is no free lunch.'" Unsubsidized friends at Bath and Edinburgh had told him he didn't know what life was like because his grants freed him from the need to work while he studied. "It made me feel inferior, until I went to London to live as an adult."

In London, where he met his wife, Brenda, he gave up teaching to devote all his time to art. While he was visiting Maine as a guest artist at a craft school, the London art school that employed him cut its staff. When he returned, he found a notice that his position was no longer available. Within days, the administration changed its collective mind, but by then Locke had made his own decision: he would become an artist full time.



Jim Cowlin

The sculptural philosophy Locke employed in *Phoenix Bird* was inspired by his avant-garde teacher, James Tower. Above right, *Venus Seed*.

"It was not easy, by any means," he recalls, noting that at this time his paintings reflected his struggles, becoming dark, pessimistic. "Then I got this fellowship [the Guggenheim], which lifted me out of that environment."

The project that came out of the Guggenheim fellowship was called *The Room: An Environment with Fifteen Black Surfaces*. It contains 10 different arrangements of wood, canvas, paint, feathers, rug, epoxy and bronze figures. Some of the objects are found objects combined in a process influenced by Kurt Schwitters. Yet Locke says *The Room*, with its stark black background, stacked black boxes and decaying wooden timbers evokes his personal vision of the tenement houses in his native Guyana, particularly in their reflection of the darkness and gloom of the homes contrasted with the lush greenery surrounding them.

"In the Caribbean," he says, "the most dominant sociological event is the plantation system. I grew up at a time when the plantation system was still in existence. It dominated the sky; it dominated your life from beginning to end."

He did a series of paintings and sculptures on the theme called *The Plantation Series*. "These are sculptural metaphors where forms are held in strict lines, connected together as if with chains held within a system of metal bars or metal grids, analogous to the system whereby one group of people were kept in economic and political subjugation by another group."

One of the plantation sculptures consists of ceramic figures herded in bleak, straight rows as if chained together, but separated by clear acrylic panes like walls of silence. "It's the nearest I came to making a political statement," he says.

The result of his artistic development has been an oeuvre of luminous sensitivity. Locke's sculptures—the fruitful *Pomona* and all her related *Venus* figures—embody their maker's increasing confidence and maturity.

"Coming to America with my particular background, over the years I have developed the kind of expertise where I could call myself a professional artist," he says. "In Europe there is the weight of tradition. In America, we do not pay homage to tradition in the same way, so we are freer to be more enterprising, more energetic and more innovative in establishing the artist's own personal language." ●

Vicky Hay, author of The Life of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester, *lives in Phoenix. She has written about the Southwest for* Saturday Review, Arizona Highways *and other publications.*