

# Nino Caruso

sculptor and ceramist

*A great Italian artist  
devoted to research and promoting culture*

*Article by  
Rolando Giovannini*



**A**NYONE WHO IS INVOLVED IN ART CRITICISM AND who studies ceramics would be honoured to deal with the work of this great Italian master, certainly the most internationally renowned Italian artist of the second half of the 20th century. Nino Caruso owes his fame, first of all, to the ongoing artistic research work he has done in the field of

ceramic sculpture and its application in architecture and urban design works. He has devoted himself to this activity for more than 50 years now, mainly in Rome, where he founded the Centro Internazionale di Ceramica (International Centre for Ceramics) in Piazza S Salvatore in Lauro (1965–1985). The centre was housed in a building overlooking the beautiful

loggia of a Renaissance monastery and was attended by dozens of artists from all over the world. Among these, mention must be made of the young Japanese artist Tomokazu Hirai who, after two years in Rome, moved to Faenza and attended the State Art Institute, Ballardini, (there he met Carlo Zauli) and the famous Japanese ceramist Hideto Satonaka. The Centro Internazionale di Ceramica was attended by other artists such as Winifred Lutz, Howard Shapiro and Tom Kerrigan from the US and Ulrike Bogel from Germany.

Caruso's biography also includes details about the many universities where he held courses in the US. The great respect in which he is held is also due to the many books he has written that have been published by the Italian publishing house, Hoepli, based

in Milan. The first book he wrote was *Ceramica Viva* (*Live Ceramics*), reprinted many times (1979, 1989, 2003). His most recent book is *Dizionario illustrato dei materiali e delle Tecniche ceramiche* (*An Illustrated Dictionary of Ceramic Materials and Techniques*) 2004. Another cornerstone of ceramics literature, published in 1984 with an introduction by Gillo Dorfles, is *Decorazione Ceramica* (*Ceramic Decoration*), a topic intimately connected to artistic production. Gillo Dorfles wrote a critical essay on the state of the art of ceramics and he describes in it, with extraordinary clarity, the way Caruso works and his poetics, calling him "one of the few true lovers of this art, deeply initiated into all the deepest secrets of the technique" and also adds "and by contrast the most free from traditional schemes", recognising his important role in the now strengthened relationship between ceramics and architecture.

Caruso's reputation as a teacher makes him a good speaker who is able to talk about his projects and poetic art. A good example of this is the "*Dieci Lezioni sulla Ceramica*" ("*Ten Lessons on Ceramics*") broadcast back in 1981 on the third channel of national Italian television (RAI 3) in 10 episodes lasting 30 minutes each. The episode that obtained the highest audience ratings was the last lesson on Raku ceramics, a technique that, at that time, had been practiced in Italy only by Caruso at his studio in Rome (with a Raku master, who had been invited by the Japan Cultural Institute in Rome, in 1972-1973). The Italian ceramics culture was (and largely still is today) closely linked to traditions and to the accuracy and perfection of the technological processes, that should ideally be controlled in their entirety. Illustrating the ceramics production process collectively, within an organised set and involving several people, all of them called on to take part in it, was amazing and extraordinary. This is why the Raku technique and the seminars and workshops he then held on a

Previous page: **Arch/Sculpture**. 1980. Terracotta. 200 x 110 x 30 cm. Photo by Cheil Studio.

This page, top: **Evangelic Church**. 1967. Continuous low relief, ceramic. Savona, Italy. Photo by Maurizio Di Puolo.

Below: **Master show**. 2010. Clayarch Gimhae Museum, Korea. Photo by Cheil Studio.

Facing page: **Pala Rossa**. 2005. Terra sigillata. 65 cm/h. Photo by Gianfranco Tommassini.



regular basis were so successful and enjoyed great popularity. This *modus operandi* is something that must be acknowledged to Maestro Caruso. Following this success, he wrote a specific book also published by Hoepli in 1982, with the title *Ceramica Raku* (*Raku Ceramics*): the book illustrates this special technique, the way kilns were designed, built and managed, the various formulations and artists.

"This book on Raku ceramics led to something interesting: aggregation. We ceramists" the artist says, "normally work alone in our studio, load the kiln with the pieces to fire, wait until the right temperature is reached, then wait until pieces cool. With Raku, instead, people are brought together, they exchange information, other groups of people join in, they all keep in touch with each other on Facebook™. This means there are thousands of people out there who are interested in this."

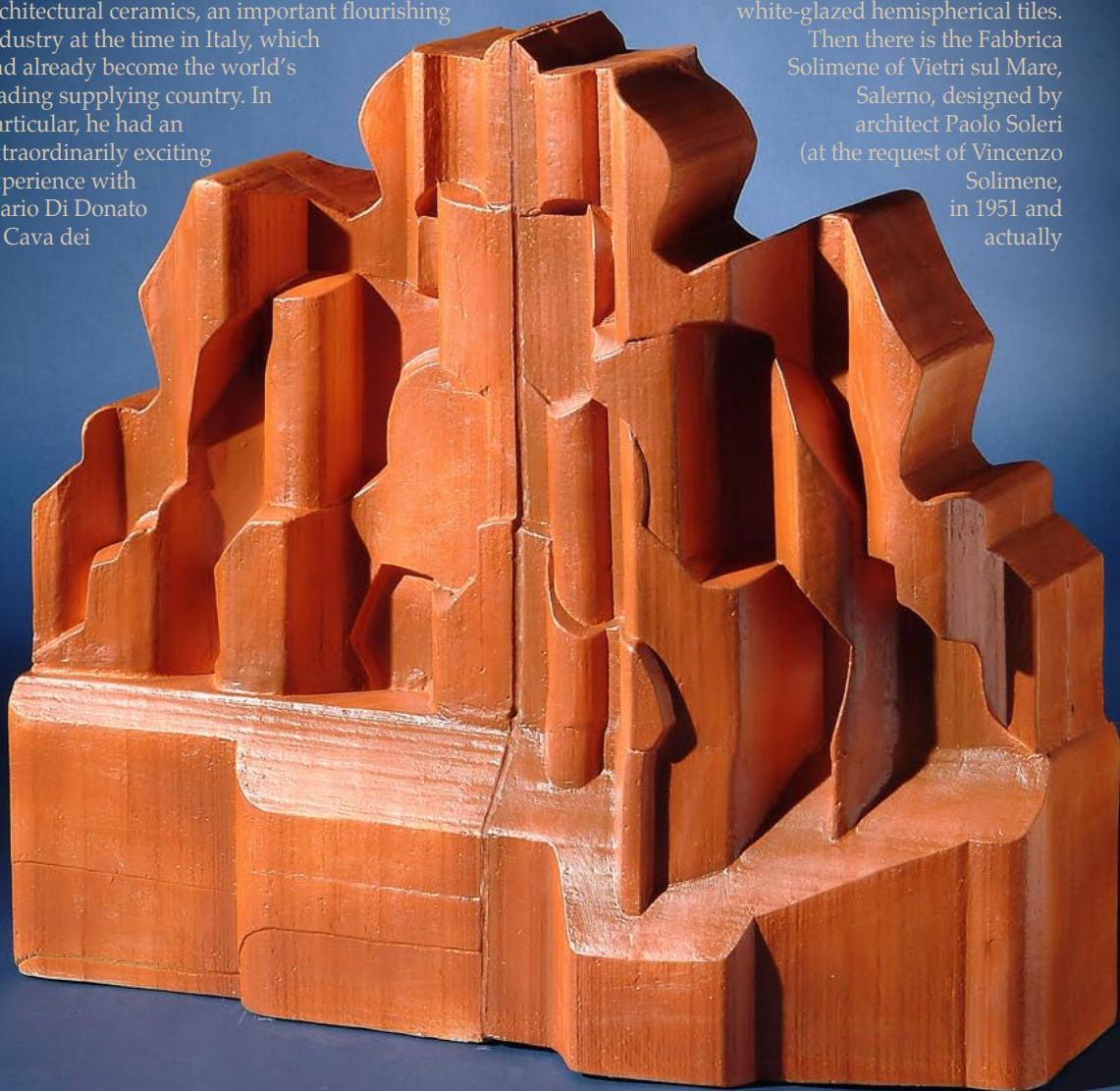
Caruso was not foreign to designing for ceramics manufacturing companies and in particular for architectural ceramics, an important flourishing industry at the time in Italy, which had already become the world's leading supplying country. In particular, he had an extraordinarily exciting experience with Mario Di Donato at Cava dei

Tirreni (Salerno): in 1966–1970 he designed several tile collections with a relief motif for the Ceramica Cava company.

He then later designed some decorative, modular units for the UDA and D'AS" brands using black and white and a geometrically-inspired iconography. He also designed the famous *Canne d'Organo* (Organ pipes) for the ceramics firm Ceramiche Marazzi of Sassuolo in fire clay at 1250°C with a 50 x 50 x 8 cm moulded relief texture (1970); these exceptionally large tiles were an innovation at the time and they were used to give the wall a musical feel, vibrating and pulsating with tiles put together to create a defined pattern, made up of full and empty areas, of continuous and broken lines. This desire of Caruso's to shape and compose architectural surfaces has other examples in Italy, in the work done by Giò Ponti for the brand Joo Gresite (1960), with the famous 'diamond' small tiles, or in that of D'Agostino for the Hotel Parco dei Principi in Sorrento, consisting of

white-glazed hemispherical tiles.

Then there is the Fabbrica Solimene of Vietri sul Mare, Salerno, designed by architect Paolo Soleri (at the request of Vincenzo Solimene, in 1951 and actually



produced in 1954). Finally, mention must be made of the great wall created by Giampolo Bertozzi and Stefano Dal Monte Casoni *Ditelo con i fiori* (The Language of Flowers) for the hospital Nuovo Ospedale di Imola (1990-94), made up of bas-relief tiles and large embossed flowers.

Caruso taught ceramics design at the State Art Institute in Rome from 1970 to 1985 and was the Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia from 2002 to 2005 (the second oldest art academy in Italy, founded in 1573). He has always been a great entertainer at events, generous in promoting young artists and artistic gatherings and was called upon to promote discussion and debate on poetic art and contemporary art themes. One such event was *CottaTerra*, held in Deruta-Gubbio-Gualdo Tadino in 1998, when the essentials of contemporary sculpture were formally defined: also present were the artists Nedda Guidi from Rome, Alessio Tasca, Pompeo Pianezzola, Betty Woodman, Kichizaeamon Raku and other international artists. Caruso's poetic expression is based on a personal way of creating and designing, which he himself invented. Looking at a piece of cut polystyrene, he realised that by

cutting it with a hot metal wire, you obtained various modular units with a similar style. Gillo Dorfles already had talked about this in the 1960s, when he described how Caruso was able to obtain interlocked shapes using blocks laid down following different directions of force. "When you are working, it often happens that things occur and discoveries are made by chance. I once happened to cut a piece of polystyrene, I opened it and found a negative/positive. I used to create objects with these pieces, at the beginning. I put some of these pieces together and the idea came to create a system with two or four pieces, which would give me the possibility to vary the surface and make it continuous." Then there is the essence of his poetics: "a continuous surface, which you can keep on developing horizontally or vertically: it is exactly from here that integration with architecture has come naturally".

This experience gave him the stimulus to transfer this technique to ceramics. On this subject he says: "Clay is generally used initially to make a ceramic piece. I used Styrofoam instead. And the approach is so different from what you normally use in the manipulation of clay that you can get a new aesthetic language." In other words, "the technical process is so unusual that it takes you to absolutely new results far from traditional ceramics production processes."

It is important to mention here the monumental ceramic walls created in Japan by Shino Toseki of Kyoto, on a design by Caruso for the famous collection *Artist Series* published in 1983 and, since then, also produced for public use. The walls were made up of original textures, never produced before, put together following a varying rhythm, a sheet music, with repeated sequences and cadences, rhythm and sound pauses.

The entire production of Caruso is characterised by this special approach and method of working. The union of these solid modules would be used to create self-bearing structures. So we have these "quasi-architectural", three-dimensional structures: arches or large columns (alike and yet differing from each other), articulated on a geometric basic composition that is rational and yet relates with the environment in which it is set, playing the role of the protagonist. Then, there are the walls. Walls are flexible structures, according to him. Given a certain

Below left: *Art in Town*. 1989. Terracotta and ceramic. Conserve Square, Cesenatico, Italy. Photo by Rolando Baraghini.

Below right: *Wall sculpture*. 1972. High fire ceramic. 129 x 1500 x 30 cm. Clayarch Gimhae Museum. Photo by Cheil Studio.



space, the pieces that make up a wall are put together following what space suggests to the artist, to create various situations: in other words, becoming a flexible structure.

This is mass-produced ceramic, destined to the public and capable of transmitting a sense of precise expressive quality. The comparison between the 'design' of the 1960s in Italy (Ambrogio Pozzi and Antonia Campi, for Richard Ginori and Pozzi Ginori; Enzo Mari, for Danese and Gabbianelli) and in Europe and the work done by Caruso, is evident: each pursues its own essentiality, elegance, functionality qualities. Both aim at addressing the public and include objects that everyone can understand and use. His functional and commemorative objects also draw from the same images, with modular parts that are composed and then assembled.

His work does have, at its origins, an orientation toward myths and archaic symbols. The studies he has made on the Greek world and culture, his interest in the Etruscans, some ideas he put in his works, recalling the cuneiform calligraphy of the Sumerians or the bas-reliefs of the Egyptians, can be understood as coming from his Mediterranean origins, from the time he spent of his life in Libya first and then in Sicily and finally, from the knowledge and experience he had of artistic and historic finds in the countries where he lived. All this continued and became even more marked and clear after he made journeys to Latin America, Mexico, Japan, Korea, China.

More important, longer lasting jobs, such as works on existing buildings (such as Piazza delle Conserve in Cesenatico 1989 and the Hospital of Tokai, 1984) or new projects designed hand-in-hand with the architect (Cornices in building, terracotta cornices on an important building in the town of Fano in 2001, made under the aegis of the Cultural Heritage), have a different flavour, because they show the desire of others to create things that last, to produce works of architecture that will stand the test of time.

Among his most notable works is that of the interior of the Evangelical Church of Savona (1967–1968)

the walls of which are covered entirely in white relief creating vibrations of strong visual impact and appeal. According to Caruso, "If cooperation starts from the beginning of a building design stage – an example of this is that mentioned above in Savona – a valuable aesthetic solution can be obtained. In that case it was the continuous bas-relief, fully integrated in the building project" with perfect harmony and this means that "ceramic is not something applied at a later stage".

This is the original contribution by Caruso, who will be 85 on April 19, 2013: bringing innovation also in the initial stages of design, using a contemporary material that has nothing to do in a context as old as that of ceramics, acquiring the ability to express his art in a particular, unique, personal way. In *Nino Caruso ON THE ROAD – Tra Arte e Mito*, a retrospective (Edimond, Perugia 2008), this route is well described.

One of the interpretations that Caruso likes best of himself is this one: a self-taught artist, free from the constraints school often imposes, sometimes against the tide – far from the ceramics world – catapulted there by chance, free to experiment. As he actually has done since the 1950s, when he used sand as a finish as opposed to the prevailing style of the time that required shiny finishes.

Nino Caruso is today an artist who creates his works perfectly in tune with the contemporary world, dialoguing and competing with space, to interpret the requirements of an environmental art.

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Translated by

Left: *Gijon Train Station*. 1992. High fire terracotta. Gijon, Spain.  
Photo by Jesus Castagnon.

Top right: *Nino Caruso Signature*. Photo by Nino Caruso.  
Below right: *Nino Caruso Portrait*. Photo by Niccolò Crisafi.

