

Robert C. Turner, alumnus and professor emeritus, dies

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Robert C. Turner, an emeritus professor of ceramic art at Alfred University, and an internationally acclaimed artist, died July 26, 2005, at the Friends House Retirement Community in Sandy Spring, MD, where he and his wife, Sue, had resided for the past six years. "As a teacher, Bob Turner could always bring a touch of harmony, often just by his presence, to the studio of youthful artistic angst," said D. Wayne Higby, who this spring was named the first-ever Robert C. Turner Professor of Ceramic Art at Alfred University established in April 2005. Turner "had an uncanny ability to empower the necessary journey of imagination," Higby said. "A few words with Bob would secure an embrace of doubt that permitted one to travel to a personal zone beyond common assumption. Bob helped us all chart the mysteries we know are there but can't quite grasp." Recipient of the State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1973, Turner was also a past president and honorary member of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). In addition to teaching at Alfred University's School of Art & Design, Turner started the ceramic program at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and also taught as a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin. He taught summer sessions at Anderson Ranch in Aspen, CO, and the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, and served as chairman of the Board of Directors of the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME. "As an artist, Bob Turner gave to us ceramic art that is an inspired, improvisational mapping of the secret rhythms of human awareness," Higby said. "His extraordinary pots are archetypes of a legendary art form. They are and are becoming. They are the experiences of life." A Fellow of the American Craft Council and recipient of its highest honor, the Gold Medal, Turner was also a member of the International Academy of Ceramics. Throughout his 60-year career as a ceramic artist, Turner received numerous awards for his work, and participated in a number of group and solo exhibitions, both in the United States and abroad. His work is found in the permanent collections at museums in Japan and New Zealand, as well as The Smithsonian, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and numerous other private and public collections. "Robert Turner - Shaping Silence, A Life in Clay" which contains essays by Marsha Miro, an art critic at the Detroit Free Press for 21 years, and Tony Hepburn, a colleague of Turner's at Alfred University before becoming head of ceramics at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, with a forward by Janet Koplos, senior editor at "Art in America," was published in 2003 by Kodansha International, Ltd. (Tokyo). Born July 22, 1913, in Port Washington, NY, and raised in Brooklyn, Turner was the son of Henry Chandlee Turner, who owned Turner Construction Co., which was among the first to use steel-reinforced concrete as a building material, and Charlotte Haines Chapman Turner. He attended Swarthmore College, earning a B.A. degree in economics in 1936. He married the former Sue Leggett Thomas, who is also a graduate of Swarthmore College, in 1938. Interested in art, Turner enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1936 to study painting. He received the school's Cresson Traveling Scholarships in Painting in 1939 and 1940. He completed his studies in 1941, just as the United States was entering the war. As a Quaker and a conscientious objector, Turner was assigned to the Civilian Public Service and spent the next four years at a forestry conservation camp in Big Flats, NY, and at a school for developmentally disabled children in Pownal, ME. With the birth of his son, John, in 1944, Turner began questioning whether he could make a living and support a family as a painter. As he completed his civilian service, he began thinking about what he would do next. "I realized I wanted to use my hands as tools and make things," he wrote in a letter to a friend in December 1945. He decided upon a career as a potter, and began searching for a program that would give him the skills he wanted, along with an advanced degree. The search led him to the Master of Fine Arts program in ceramic art at Alfred University and the place that would be his home for more than 50 years. Entering as a special student in 1946, Turner had a footed stoneware ashtray, made during his first year, accepted in the Ceramic National Exhibition in Syracuse in 1947, and won honorable mention in the Ceramic National Exhibition the following year, foreshadowing a career filled with honors and awards. He was graduated from AU in 1949 with a Master of Fine Arts degree. After graduation, Turner was invited to go to Black Mountain College in North Carolina to establish the first ceramic art program at the avant-garde school. He taught there until 1951, when he returned to Alfred Station to establish his own studio, making stoneware bowls, jars and candleholders. In 1953, he had a solo exhibition at the American Craft Guild's America House in New York City, and was named the "Potter of the Year" by the Philadelphia Art Alliance. Two years later, he was awarded the silver medal at the International Ceramics Exposition, Palais Miramor, Cannes, France. In 1958, he joined the ceramic art faculty at Alfred University as a special instructor in pottery and sculpture and became full-time in 1966.

He served twice as chairman of the Art Department and was awarded emeritus status upon his retirement in 1979. Alfred University awarded him the Charles Fergus Binns Medal for Excellence in Ceramic Art in 2000. Swarthmore College awarded the Turners honorary degrees in 1987. Robert Turner received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree and Sue Turner an honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1987. Sue Turner served on Swarthmore's Board of Managers from 1959 to 1973 and from 1975 to 1986. She was secretary of the corporation from 1968 to 1973, and was named an emerita member of the board in 1987. A lifelong member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Turner and his wife, Sue, were founding members of the Alfred Friends Meeting. He was active in the work of Friends through the New York Yearly Meeting for 50 years. Turner served on the boards of The George School in Newtown, PA; Pendle Hill, a study retreat center in Philadelphia, and Oakwood Friends School in Poughkeepsie, NY. Dr. Sharon Hoover, a professor emerita of English at Alfred University, is a member of the Alfred Friends Meeting, and recalls being impressed with Turner's work on behalf of the Friends, particularly with the Quaker Schools. "He was very well-liked by students and faculty," Hoover said. "He could talk to kids as easily as he could talk to adults." Turner's beliefs had a profound effect on his life. In a letter to Winslow Ames, who had served with him in the Quaker camp in Indianapolis, Turner wrote, "What part, if any, can and should the art world play in revitalizing people of a perhaps degenerative culture, a culture in which people seem to be morally soft, often, and unaware of their actions, insensitive to the moral religious values in situations. Have not art and those people who know its value more to say than they have said, not only to make art a more vital and integral part of community life, but to minister to the spiritual needs in the broadest sense of the term?" That attitude prompted Turner to make one of the most controversial decisions of his professional career. In 1968, during the Vietnam Conflict, Turner, Jeff Schlanger and Peter Voulkos were jurors for the Ceramic National Exhibition. After reviewing the slides showing a variety of functional objects, the three rejected all the entries. "I felt the absence of the power of strong conviction to match the depth of the Vietnam despair, at least in what the slides presented to us," Turner wrote at the time. In addition to his widow, he is survived by three children: John Frederic (Brier Smith) Turner of Memphis, TN; Robert Henry (Karen Koski) Turner of Santa Fe, NM; and Rosalind Turner (Howard) Zuses of Ashton, MD; and six grandchildren, Rachel Sarah Zuses; Elizabeth Rebecca Zuses; Benjamin Isaac Zuses; John Thomas Turner; Brier Cutting Turner; and Joseph Edan Ashton Turner. He was predeceased by three brothers and a sister: Henry Chandlee Turner Jr. of Greenwich, CT; Katherine Turner Parsons of Mattituck, NY; Howard Haines Turner of Bloomington, IN; and James Sinclair Turner of San Antonio, TX. A Quaker memorial service will be held at 10:30 a.m. August 27, 2005, at the Sandy Spring Friends Meeting, Sandy Spring, MD. His ashes will be buried in the graveyard at the Sandy Spring Friends Meeting. The family has asked that memorial contributions in Turner's name be made to the Sandy Spring Friends Meeting, 17715 Meetinghouse Road, Sandy Spring, MD 20860 or to the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), 77 Erie Village Square, Suite 280, Erie, CO 80516-6996.