

Robert Reviews

07-14-04

ROOKWOOD POTTERY AT THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART
BY NANCY E. OWEN
PUBLISHED AS A CATALOG TO ACCOMPANY AN EXHIBITION OF
THE GERALD AND VIRGINIA GORDON COLLECTION
THAT OPENED AT THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM IN NOVEMBER 2003

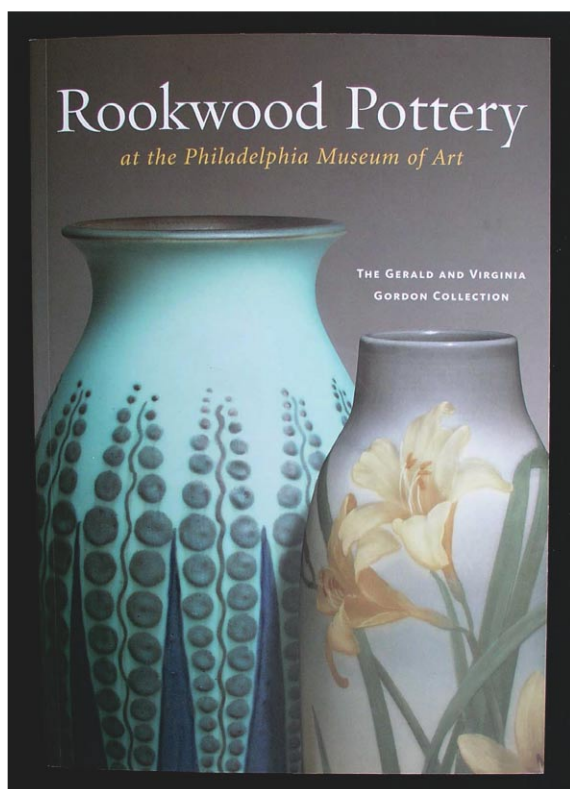


ROBT EDWARDS

AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS, 1860-1960

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Rookwood Pottery at the Philadelphia Museum of art by Nancy E. Owen has a less ambitious, more focused *raison d'être* than the Taunton opus. It was published as a catalog to accompany an exhibition of the Gerald and Virginia Gordon Collection that opened at the Philadelphia museum in November 2003. Without seeing the actual pieces of pottery, one might surmise that this book was just a sop for the Gordons' vanity like the 1991 Los Angeles County Museum of Art's paean to Palevsky, *American Arts & Crafts: Virtue in Design*. But this book is much more than that.

These days, Philadelphia's role in the arts is often overshadowed and overlooked. It is nice that the now departed American decorative arts curator Jack Lindsey makes a case for the importance of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition not just as inspiration for the Cincinnati pottery ladies but also as the seed for the Arts & Crafts movement in America. What is now the Philadelphia Museum of Art grew out of the exposition. Edwin AtLee Barber became curator of pottery and porcelain at the museum in 1893 and from 1907 to 1916 he was also the museum's director. Barber had researched ceramics from every part of the world and wrote the still influential *The Pottery and Porcelain of the United States*. He was greatly interested in Native American

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ceramics yet he also had an appreciation of American art pottery. He assembled an extremely important collection for the museum that included the best examples of most of the early art potters (see Jane Perkins Claney, “Edwin AtLee Barber and the Robineaus: Correspondence 1901-1916” *TILLER*, Volume I, number 2.) To read Lindsey’s piece, one would think the Barber collection was still at the museum. Sadly, most of it was sold off in the 1960s and 70s. I remember buying sets of tiles in museum frames with red catalog numbers still on them from Freeman’s auction house around 1976—need I point out the significance of that date?

The catalog’s photos are not just gorgeous, they are essential. Now that the pottery is in a museum, most of us will have to view them from a distance or through glass cases as was the case with this showing. Under those circumstances, the decorations on many pieces cannot be appreciated. Reflections from spotlights and plate glass make the underglaze painting on standard-glazed pieces all but invisible. The careful lighting of the photographer’s studio makes the goblins and dragons emerge from the syrupy, dark murk with a clarity that allows study of the artistry not obtainable by any other means. Indeed it is sometimes hard to reconcile the photographs with the actual pieces.



The Rookwood pottery produced a wide variety of wares from 1880 until 1967 and grand examples from each era are included in the Gordon collection although, as they acknowledge, they were drawn to later works from after 1920. They remember, as do I, that in the mid-1970s, the early standard-glazed pieces were the most coveted—the more flames around the Rookwood mark, the fewer dollars a dealer could expect. Those artless portraits of Chief Uggia Mugga were hot and for awhile the Gordons were able to stay ahead of the market by buying many fine examples by Hentschel and Sax. As a result, their collection is more about the art of Rookwood pottery than it is about the history, which is appropriate in an art museum context. Their collection of masterpieces somewhat distorts the picture of Rookwood production since factory profits were dependent on ditzy little pots churned out by the thousands. Much of their ware was little better than the “painted cuspidors” disdained by business manager William Watts Taylor and even factory rejects got sold.



Nancy Owen tries to fill in the history in the catalog text. She begins by claiming Rookwood to be “the largest and most important of more than one hundred art potteries in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Like Rodel and his claims about Gustav Stickley’s factory, Owen has to make her subject the biggest and best. She doesn’t bother to support her assertion perhaps because it cannot be proven. This is yet another case of latter day scholars buying into the marketing ploys of the companies they write about. Taylor tried to shove Rookwood into every art fair that came along and loaned or gave pieces to art museums. Mere acceptance into these expositions or museums didn’t turn art pottery into fine art. Neither did plastering copies of two-dimensional fine art on the sides of three-dimensional vases as was often done at Rookwood.

Maria Longworth Nichols Storer who founded Rookwood with family money was not even a good amateur artist. Her attempts to decorate pottery using the then popular “Limoges” technique might be charming in their naivete, but the fish and frogs she favored were clumsy copies of more sophisticated Japanese and French motifs. She deserves much credit for her vision in starting the company but it is hyperbolic to characterize her china painting as “Victorian Japonisme at its finest”—again the need to make one’s subject the biggest and best. However, a case could be made for describing early Rookwood (1880s) decorated by artists like Fannie Auckland, Matthew Daly, and Albert Valentien as American Aesthetic movement at its finest. I don’t think Rookwood ceramists ever equaled or surpassed their foreign counterparts even though I prefer the American product.

American potters spent lifetimes looking for glaze formulae that had been used for centuries in Europe and the Orient. Hugh Roberston was obsessed with making a reliable blood-red glaze. Ralph Whitehead tinkered with thousands of glaze recipes and came up with some velvety reds and sparkling “goldstones.”



But Rookwood never got their glazes quite right. They were never able to repeat the kiln accident they called “tiger eye” even though Oriental potters and, later, American potteries like White Pines and Fulper found a fairly predictable method of producing goldstone effects. Even Rookwood’s “standard glaze” was not all that standard. As mentioned above, many pieces with standard glaze were too dark for the underglaze decorations to show in normal lighting. A good red underglaze was hard to achieve so Rookwood berries and blossoms are a dull, dark orange color.



Uncontrolled crazing plagued Standard glazed wares as well as many other Rookwood glaze lines.

Rookwood would have had less of a problem with unwanted crazing if their glazes had be “fit” their clay bodies. I don’t want to get into a long discussion of ceramic firing technique, in part because I am not an expert on the matter. The short of it is that crazing is caused after firing when the glaze cools and shrinks at a different rate than the clay body—if it doesn’t “fit”, something’s gotta give so hairline cracks appear in the glaze. The Japanese prized a fine network of crazing and the Dedham Pottery made crazing a signature.



Crazing was seldom intentional at Rookwood and when long widely spaced cracks snake across the surface of a pot as they do on a Matthew Daly piece in this exhibition (plate 41), the effect of the floral decoration is diminished. The European potteries Rookwood emulated with their “Iris”, “Ariel”, and “Sea Green” glaze lines avoided crazing because they used a kind of porcelain, which was fired at a very high temperature that required suitable glazes. This brings up a serious problem in the catalogue text.

Owens catalogs all early Rookwood wares as “stoneware” and all the late wares as “porcelain”. Both of these clays are fired to the point of being vitreous using very high temperatures and producing a very hard ware with many of the properties of glass. Other ceramics experts classify most Rookwood wares as “earthenware”, which is fired at a much lower temperature and produces a much more porous, softer ware. Rookwood made little true porcelain as far as I know and I would have thought most of the pieces in the second half of the catalog are actually merely earthenware fired at higher than usual



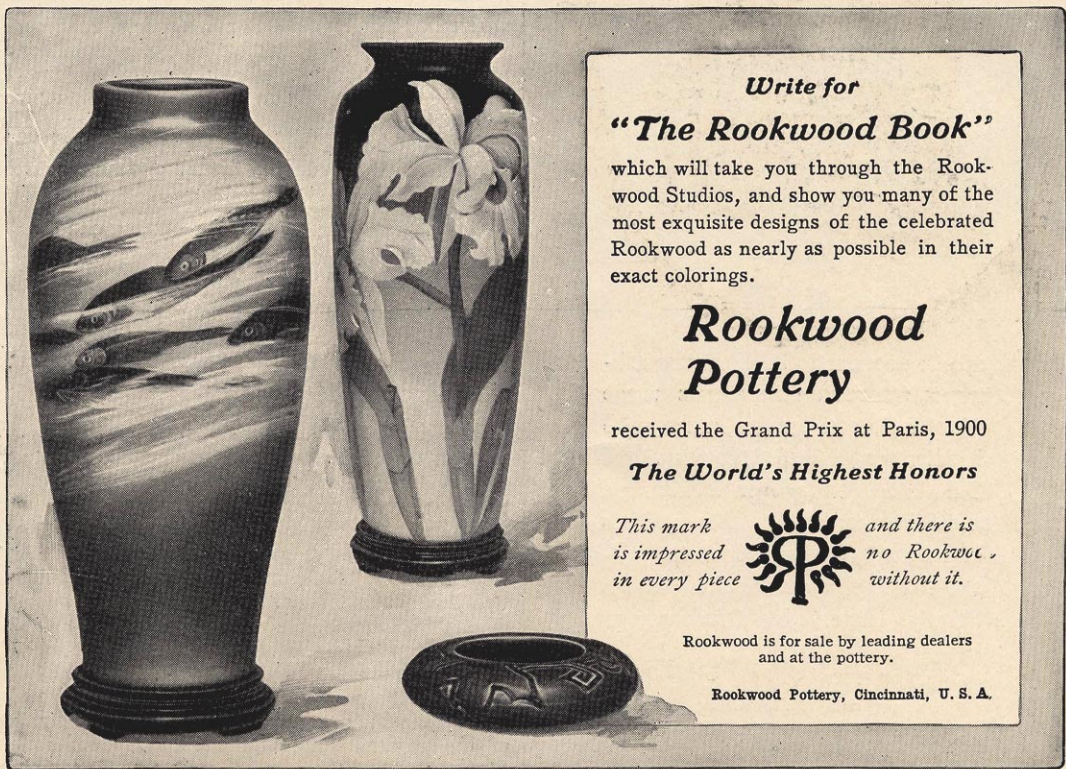
temperatures or the “soft-paste porcelain” Owens mentions in her text. This is not a nit-picking point and if Owens has done an analysis that disproves the opinions of other authorities, she should have noted the fact.

There are other problems with terminology. Owens implies that all of the examples in the Gordon collection are unique. I suppose the hand-painted vases can be considered unique even if some designs were repeated over and over again. But the exhibition itself documents the fact that some pieces with relief decoration were cast in multiples. The first piece at the entrance to the exhibit (plate 49) is an example. Owens states that William McDonald “sculpted ware inspired by Art Nouveau style.” At least two identical casts of these vases can be seen in an enlargement of a photograph of Rookwood workrooms that was mounted just behind the actual vase. Owens does not distinguish between “modeled” and “molded” and even states that the factory didn’t slip-cast wares until after 1915. The pillow vases of the 1880s could not have been made on a potter’s wheel. They might have been built by hand, but my guess is that they were molded. The 1910 vase shown in plate was almost certainly a molded multiple as were the pieces shown in plates 21, 48, and 61 and none are less beautiful for it. Some of these show evidence of handwork, but finishers probably added definition to molded lines, not the artist who designed the prototype.



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Write for
"The Rookwood Book"
which will take you through the Rookwood Studios, and show you many of the most exquisite designs of the celebrated Rookwood as nearly as possible in their exact colorings.

Rookwood Pottery

received the Grand Prix at Paris, 1900

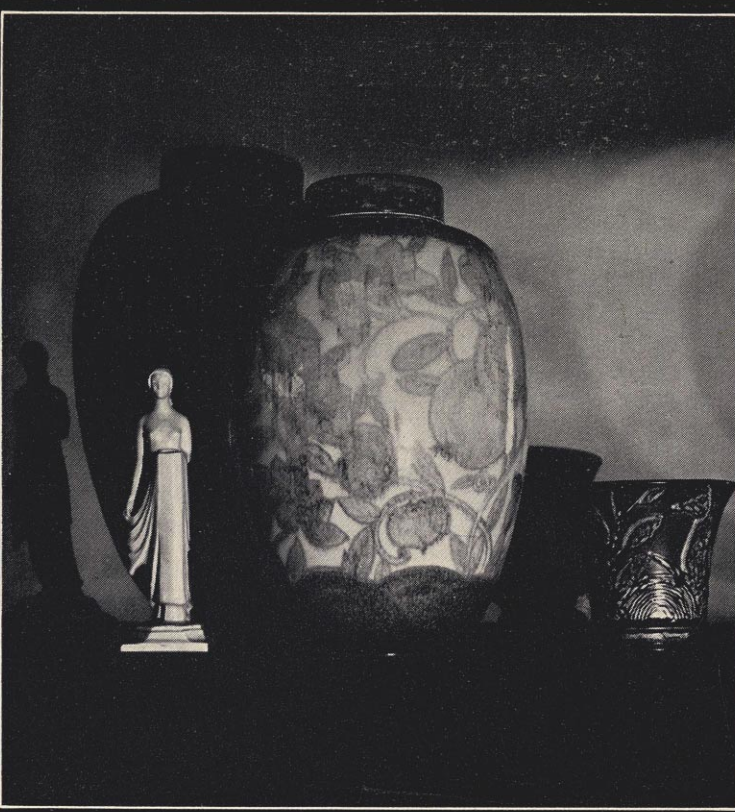
The World's Highest Honors

This mark is impressed in every piece  *and there is no Rookwood without it.*

Rookwood is for sale by leading dealers and at the pottery.

Rookwood Pottery, Cincinnati, U. S. A.

A 1904 advertisement showing hand painted vases and a bowl cast from a plaster mold.

DRAMATIC Arrangements of Beautiful Pottery may answer some particular requirement just as the subtle massing of its color, form and unctuous glazing might meet another.

Rookwood pieces suitable for dramatic or subtle arrangements may be had at moderate price through Tiffany and Company, B. Altman and Company and Frederick Loeser and Company, Inc., in the Metropolitan New York area. A store of similar quality represents the pottery exclusively in your city. We invite your direct inquiry.

ROOKWOOD POTTERY **CINCINNATI**

A 1930 advertisement showing artist decorated vases next to a slip cast figurine that was made in multiples.

Owen joins the herd of modern writers who seek credibility for their subjects by invoking Arthur Wesley Dow--if Saint Peter didn't touch you, you can't be the Pope. American design at the turn of the last century cannot be homogenized into one bland formula. Rookwood was well on its way to fame and fortune before 1899 when Dow's major design treatise was published. The majority of Rookwood decorators followed European and Oriental precedents. Owen has precious little to go on so she has to dream up a context in which Dow's design theories would be unavoidable: "must have," "might have," "could have," "should have," "would have." Owen gets all messed up when she writes "Simplified designs that may have been inspired by Dow's aesthetic appeared on iris glaze items." The items she refers to are two Wareham



vases that are almost direct copies of European designs of the sort that were regularly published in the *Studio* magazine. In the same short paragraph, she notes that Wareham's Black Iris color glazes "permitted easel-like painting, obviating the need for an overall ground color." Easel-like painting was not a part of Dow's lessons in abstraction.



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We offer an endless collection from which to make a selection. Breakfast, Luncheon, and Dinner Sets. Tea and Coffee Service. Porcelain Sculpture of Lifelike Figures, Animals, Birds, Lamps, Vases, Flower-holders, etc.

A postal card will procure our very interesting illustrated catalog No. 12.

We have just published a very beautifully illustrated article of fascinating romantic interest by Evelyn Marie Stuart, "THE STORY OF ROYAL COPENHAGEN" which we will gladly send free upon request.

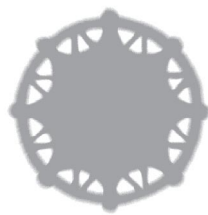
Royal Copenhagen Porcelain & Danish Arts
256 Fifth Avenue, New York

A 1915 advertisement for Royal Copenhagen porcelain showing the "easel-like painting" type of decoration often emulated at Rookwood.

So this is a pretty booklet about a pretty exhibition about a collection of pretty pots. Nothing wrong with pretty so I bought the soft-cover version of the catalogue.

Robert Edwards has assembled the information on the web site
www.AmericanDecorativeArt.com to share his interests.

Important figures like Jane and Ralph Whitehead of the
Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony and Will Price of Rose Valley
are featured. This site also explores the work of artists
and craftsmen like Daniel Pabst, Frank Furness, A. H. Davenport,
John Scott Bradstreet, Wharton Esherick, Max Kuehne,
Norman Arsenault, and many others who were active between
1860 and 1960.



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