



Rookwood Pottery as "Fine Art"

By Daneel S. Smith

The University of Tampa, Tampa, FL

Vol 1, Yr 2006

A widely accepted definition of fine art is something that both provides a visual experience and is significant beyond its utility. This definition tends to be exclusionary and makes it difficult for certain media to be accepted as fine art. Pottery, for example, is inherently utilitarian and often described as being decorative, but when closely examined it can easily be defined as fine art. William Morris (1834-1896), the pioneer of the American Arts and Crafts movement, wrote the essay *Hopes and Fears for Art* in 1882, which justified the artistic value of pottery while referring to it as a “lesser art”. In this essay he states, “I say that without these [lesser] arts, our rest would be vacant and uninteresting, our labour mere endurance, mere wearing away of body and mind.”⁽¹⁾ He also wrote an address similar to this essay for The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings titled *The Lesser Arts of Life*. Today, we celebrate ceramics produced during the Arts and Crafts movement for its aesthetic value, while not denigrating its utilitarian potential. Often upheld as exceeding the quality of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ceramics⁽²⁾, Rookwood Pottery created innovations in ceramics that continue to influence the aesthetics of pottery and indeed prove it to be anything but a “lesser art.”

Maria Longworth Nichols (1849-1932) founded Rookwood pottery in the late 1870s, at the outset of the beginning of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America (both would reach their apex around 1890 to 1920). Nichols started her business as a way to sell pottery that she and other women of leisure had hand painted. She had hand painted designs on blank china as a hobby for years, and had been taught by Ben Pittman of the Cincinnati School of Design. Her father, Joseph Longworth, eventually purchased a deserted school house on her behalf in Cincinnati, Ohio. Here she started the Rookwood Pottery studio, which inherited its name from the Longworth family country house in Walnut Hills, Ohio.

Rookwood quickly flourished into a highly regarded business. Even before it became a fully functioning ceramics studio, it was one of the few respectable businesses of the time which a woman owned and operated. Natural minerals in the Ohio clay made early Rookwood pottery notably distinct against competitors, who tried to mimic the look of Rookwood. The Ohio clay produced rich green and gold glazes that the ceramics world had never seen. The superiority of the workmanship, creativity and ingenious glazes slowly became recognized and then prized.

Nichols was always emphatic that her pottery studio should maintain an artistic atmosphere and not succumb to industrialization. Her philosophy fit perfectly with the Arts and Crafts Movement's beliefs in quality craftsmanship with attention to detail. The movement rebuffed mass production techniques—which spawned generic, characterless products—that the Industrial Revolution promoted. The use of machines was not entirely rejected, however. Machines were sometimes employed to complete mundane tasks such as mixing clay and glazes. Over time, the Rookwood studio became less of a gathering spot for upperclass women and more of a creative think tank for talented artists and chemists.

Nichols made a point of employing artists with established reputations in the “fine” arts of painting and sculpture, such as Henry Farny (1847-1916) and Albert Robert Valentien (1862-1925)—thus joining the fine arts with the “lesser” arts. Morris himself articulated the beneficial relationship between the lesser arts and the fine arts in *Hopes and Fears for Art*. “When they are so parted, it is ill for the Arts altogether: the lesser ones become trivial...while the greater, are sure to lose their dignity of popular arts, and become nothing but dull adjuncts to unmeaning pomp.”⁽³⁾ Morris also defended the lesser arts in his address by saying “I want you to agree with me in thinking that these lesser arts are really part of the greater ones.”⁽⁴⁾

In 1883, Nichols hired William Watts Taylor (1847-1913) as the general business manager of Rookwood pottery. Taylor's goals for Rookwood echoed those of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement which was to restore quality and integrity to the arts. Taylor was adamant about nurturing innovative ideas and even commissioned leading chemists, such as Karl Langenbeck⁽⁵⁾ (1861-1938),

to aid in the development of new glazes. The results were the extraordinary glazes that were at the time exclusive to Rookwood pottery. It was under Taylor's command that Rookwood would reach the summit of its success.

Taylor and his top chemists produced unique finishing glazes that leant themselves to the exceptional aesthetic value of Rookwood pottery. Morris presented the undeniable point in his article that "[pottery] has always been thought to be unfinished till it has had some touch or other of decoration about it." The glazes developed by Rookwood were unlike any other glazes before, giving their works a distinctly recognizable decoration. The Arts and Crafts movement had always promoted the handcrafted finish of non-machine-made products provided the finish was carried out in a skillful fashion. Rookwood's glazes were well researched and specially formulated to fit some of their hallmark designs. Their signature glazes included: Standard Glaze—which was a high gloss typically with red, orange and deep yellow painted over dark brown (this glaze was also used on pieces with Indian portraits); Matte Glaze—a simple textured flat glaze; Ariel Blue—a sky blue glaze; Ombroso—which was black or brown and produced a matte finish; Sea Green—a blue-green glaze on soft blue, yellow and red (typically reserved for floral and water scenes); and the Iris Glaze—a glossy white glaze typically painted on pink, gray, soft blue, and yellow (fig. 1; also used for floral and other scenery)



[Picture included from print edition]

1. Katoro Shirayamadani, 1911 (Iris Glaze)

Another distinct trait Rookwood developed under the mastermind of William Watts Taylor was the use of symbols and monograms to sign individual pieces. In 1886, the same year, incidentally, that the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society was founded, Rookwood started to monogram its pottery with what is still today its most recognized symbol: the Rookwood "R-P" monogram. A radial flame was added to the R-P monogram for every year after that for fourteen years, after which point Roman numerals were used instead. Other artistic symbols, although utilitarian in purpose, were: "P" for soft porcelain, "S" for special piece, "Z" for matte glaze, "V" for vellum glaze, "T" for trial piece, and "X" for imperfect piece. Also found on pieces were the individual marks of Rookwood's artists, the most well-known of whom were Elizabeth Barrett, Artus Van Briggles, Sarah Coyne, Mathew Andrew Daly, Lorinda Epply, Laura Ann Fry, Edward Timothy Hurley, Sarah Sax, Charles Schmidt, Sarah Alice Toohey, Grace Young and, most notably, Katoro Shirayamadani (1865-1947). Katoro Shirayamadani was arguably Rookwood's most famous artist. (See fig. 1) Nichols always held a fascination for Japanese art and had wanted to hire Shirayamadani for a long time. She finally convinced him to leave his job on Boston and work for her in 1890. Shirayamadani worked at the studio until his death at age 93.

Rookwood was highly recognized for its well-designed surface treatments above all else. The vessels themselves were eventually mass produced, but all adornments continued to be painted by hand. Most of the decorations were created using inspiration from a "greater art" of either drawing or

photography. The Arts and Crafts philosophy applauded this approach in that it insisted on the inclusion of the designer from a project's start to finish. Many of the motifs were organic in nature, a trait that complimented the malleable properties of the clay and the vibrant colors of the glazes. These organic motifs generally included flowers, fruits, leaves and vines. Another notable motif was portrait decorations that included portrayals of Native Americans, African Americans and "Old Masters" such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Albrecht Dürer.

It was not before long that Rookwood pottery started to receive international acclaim. Rookwood artists participated in the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, and the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In these prestigious expositions, competition included all types of media from all over the world. Pieces produced by the Rookwood studio won top awards. Rookwood would later win prizes at various other expositions, such as the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, the 1901 Pan American Exposition in Buffalo and the 1901 Exposition Internationale de Ceramique et de Verrerie in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Rookwood studio always encouraged the idea that the spontaneous personality of the designer was more important than the historical style precedent for a design. This approach fostered new distinct styles that helped the designers win in these competitions.

In 1896 William Morris died, an event which many say marked the beginning of the end for the Arts and Crafts Movement. Nichols married and became less interested in running the studio. She ultimately left the business to Taylor, who he died in 1913. After Taylor's death, Rookwood prospered by selling pottery in such stores as Tiffany and Ovington. Before he died, Taylor expanded Rookwood's range by producing commercial architectural pieces. These would be seen in major hotels and train terminals across the country—including Grand Central Station and several subway stops in New York City. In 1905, Taylor also introduced Rookwood's production line of pottery, which, finally, did not include any of the hand-painted designs or markings, but did include the studio's signature glazing techniques.

A common Arts and Crafts mantra was *art for the people by the people*. Rookwood supported this mantra and ultimately employed over 225 artists. The Great Depression witnessed the end of traditional Rookwood pottery. Always seen as a luxury item and priced accordingly, Rookwood took a huge blow during the Depression, when little money existed to be spent on luxury items. After the Depression was over, imitation Rookwood pottery became abundant and the Rookwood studio never fully recovered. The studio did manage to stay in business, but barely, until 1960, at which point its doors finally closed.

Today, original Rookwood pottery is considered to be a highly collectable antique. A world record price was set for pottery at Christie's in New York when a piece of Rookwood sold for \$23,000 at auction in 1980. A dentist in Michigan bought the remaining original Rookwood molds in 1983, and continued to make a limited quantity of tiles each year. Although pottery is seen by many as a decorative, or "lesser art;" in fact, as the example of Rookwood proves, it is a fine art. William Morris argued that the reason why fine art is considered just that is because we feel it "stir[s] our emotions deeply, or strain[s] the attention of the most intellectual part of our minds."⁽⁶⁾ The innovative techniques created by Rookwood and the intricacies of the designs prove that Rookwood pottery provides just such an experience. In addition, Rookwood provides us with an intellectual and visual experience unsurpassed by any other ceramics studio in the Arts and Crafts movement. As such, it is clear that Rookwood pottery is anything but a "lesser art."

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Two Red Roses Foundation, Tarpon Springs, Florida, for sponsoring the college essay competition for which I wrote the initial version of this essay, and for awarding me the third place scholarship prize.

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Footnotes

(1) William Morris, Hopes and Fears for Art (London: Ellis and White, 1882), p.1

(2) This paper draws on the following general sources: David Cathers, Furniture of the Arts and Crafts Movement (The New American Library, Inc., 1981); Charles Theodore Greve, A. B., Centennial History of Cincinnati (Chicago, Illinois: Biographical Publishing Company, 1904); Wendy Kaplan, "The Art that is Life," The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, (1875-1920) (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1987); Karl Langenbeck, The Chemistry of Pottery (Easton, Pennsylvania: Chemical Publishing Co., 1895) Kenneth R. Trapp, Ode to Nature: Flowers and Landscapes of the Rookwood Pottery, 1880-1940 (New York, Jordan-Volpe Gallery, 1980); Kenneth R. Trapp, Toward Modern Style: Rookwood Pottery, the Later Years 1915-1950 (New York, Jordan-Volpe Gallery, 1980). In addition to William Morris' Hopes and Fears for Art this paper also references his speech, "The Lesser Arts of Life; An Address Delivered in Support of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings," (London, 1882).

(3) Morris W, Hopes and Fears, 1882.

(4) Morris W, "The lesser Arts of Life," 1882.

(5) Karl Langenbeck would later be hired by J. B. Owens at Owens Pottery Company.

(6) Morris W, "The Lesser Arts of Life," 1882.