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Cowan Pottery's legacy as a Cleveland institution and an art form

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This ongoing series looks back at the finest elements of Cleveland's stylish history, as shown in architecture, fashion and other cultural touchstones.

Thelma Frazier was the rare woman making her living as a sculptor in the 1920s-- something far more unusual then than now. In the same Rocky River studio where she worked, another artist would design a famous punch bowl with an Art Deco motif that would be purchased by one of the century's best-known first ladies.

And this same business -- which would sell its wares at department stores like Gump's in San Francisco and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York -- was created with money invested by some of Cleveland's wealthiest arts patrons, with familiar names like Severance and Burke.

The man serving as the common link to it all: R. Guy Cowan, who aimed to combine the world of art with the craft of pottery-making, and, just as important, to make excellence in design affordable to the middle class.

"He proved there could be a marriage of arts and industry in a ceramic medium," says Mark Bassett, who co-wrote the definitive book on Cowan pottery, "Cowan Pottery and the Cleveland School" (Schiffer Publishing, 1997).

Cowan achieved that with such panache that some of his pieces were featured on Hollywood's silver screen in the 1930s.

Born into the trade Reginald Guy Cowan was born and raised in the Ohio city best known for its wealth of potteries -- East Liverpool, where the yellow clay from natural mineral deposits was ideal for pottery-making.

That Ohio River town, once known as the "Pottery Capital of the World," was, and remains, home to such well-known potteries as the Hall China Co. and Homer Laughlin (maker of famously colorful Fiesta Dinnerware).

The Cowan family had long made its living in the ceramics trade, and Cowan's father, Louis, taught him the basics.

Guy Cowan (as he was always known) took his skills to a higher level by attending the New York State School of Ceramics at Alfred, where he studied ceramic engineering. He moved to Cleveland in 1908, when he was hired to teach ceramics and design at the new East Technical High School, which had an impressive ceramics studio. He also joined the faculty of the Cleveland School of Art, now known as the Cleveland Institute of Art.

Cowan continued his own ceramic work as well -- sometimes experimenting at his friend and landlord Horace Potter's arts and craft studio at East 107th Street and Euclid Avenue. (Potter would become well-known for the elegant jewelry, silver and brasswork that he would sell at a shop later known as Potter and Mellen.)

But Cowan had bigger dreams, and by 1912, he left teaching to open his own studio, at Nicholson and Detroit avenues in Lakewood, called the Cleveland Pottery and Tile Co. Cowan did all the designing, but he ran the three-kiln studio with the help of Richard O. Hummel, who would remain Cowan's ceramic chemist for the company's duration.

Already, Cowan's metier was functional art pottery, but he also would go on to create the ceramic tile for the floor of the solarium, garden and music room at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In 1917, two important things happened: Cowan won a prestigious first prize for pottery in a show at the Art Institute of Chicago, and he temporarily closed his business when he was called to serve in World War I, as a captain in the Chemical Warfare Service.

When the war ended and Cowan returned to Lakewood, there was a complication: The gas well that fired the kilns had run dry. So, while Cowan and his wife, Bertha Bogue, continued to live on Cohasset Avenue in Lakewood, he moved his pottery business to the town that would forever be associated with him: Rocky River.

His new studio at 19621 Lake Road had its own gas well to fire nine kilns. A small house adjacent to it would serve as the pottery showroom, where buyers from department stores would visit to make their selections.

Cowan also began working with a finer clay than the rough red type he'd used in Lakewood. This meant he didn't need a heavy glaze, which in turn freed Cowan and his artists to work with the delicate or vibrant hues in glazes that would bring the pottery further acclaim.

Anyone who owns Cowan pieces today sees that their distinctive shimmer remains.

Where talented artists flourished Cowan Pottery, as the new firm was called, thrived during an interesting time -- just as the Arts and Crafts movement that began in the late 19th century had evolved into what later became known as the Art Deco movement. Arts and Crafts was a cleaner style than the previous, ornate Victorian style -- and aptly suited for the simpler but high-impact pottery designs Cowan created.

Over the years, the business -- a compound with 10 buildings that stretched over two acres -- shifted from tile designs to objects and figurines.

Cowan, through his connections with the Cleveland School, excelled at selecting talented designers to work for him. Even those who didn't stay long, like sculptor Elizabeth Andersen (who would become Eliot Ness' third wife), made an impact. She only worked there for a year but created such elegantly styled pieces as "Pierrot and Pierette" and the "Spanish Dancers," prominently featured in "The Woman in the Window," an Edward G. Robinson/Joan Bennett classic of 1944.

Cowan Pottery flourished in the 1920s, and some of the people who made it so productive included Clarence Brunt and eight of his family members, whom Cowan had hired from East Liverpool. Then there were artists such as Frazier (who, along with Waylande Gregory, would be present during most of Cowan Pottery's existence) and her husband, Edward Winter; Paul Bogatay; Alexander Blazys, who brought an exotic Russian flair to his figurines; Jose Martin; and Raoul Jossett.

Cowan was progressive when it came to hiring women. Besides Frazier and Andersen, there were sculptor and enamelist Edris Eckhardt and muralist Elsa Vick Shaw, whose dramatic tiles are featured in the lobby of Severance Hall.

Another Cowan artist with an interesting back story was Margaret Postgate, who'd studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and New York's Cooper Union.

She first gained attention because she won a promotional soap-carving contest sponsored by Cincinnati's Procter & Gamble, makers of Ivory soap. Her skill was such that she later turned those striking designs -- Art Deco-like elephants in particular -- into Cowan bookends.

The years Cowan Pottery operated coincided with the start of another famous Cleveland tradition: the Cleveland Museum of Art's May Show, a juried exhibition of works by Northeast Ohio artists that included several categories of art. It was instituted by William Milliken, the museum's curator of decorative arts, and many pieces made by Cowan and his artists won May Show prizes.

"Cleveland was really a satellite in the art world," says Dean Zimmerman, chief curator of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland. "This city was an important place during the Arts and Crafts movement, and the synergy between Cowan and Cleveland School and the art museum were part of that.

"The lines of distinction between traditional art mediums and crafts were diminishing."

Early in the 1920s, the Cowan studios began producing items whose unlvely name, "flower frogs," doesn't do justice to their grace.

These figurines -- often in the style of a dancer in the midst of a balletic move -- were used by florists or homemakers to assist in flower arranging. The figurine would be placed in a shallow bowl that held water, and the flowers would be artfully intertwined amid the dancer's limbs.

One of Cowan's flower figures was based on Anna Pavlova, the Russian ballerina whom Cowan had taken his two daughters to see in 1924, at the Cleveland performance of her farewell tour.

To get the proportions right, though, he'd rely on local dancers or his daughters to hold similar poses as he re-created their lines. He also asked his friend, sculptor Walter Sinz, to help him with proportions and the center of gravity. The figurines -- which later included "The Scarf Dancer" and "The Swirl Dancer" -- became some of Cowan's most popular sellers.

Schreckengost and the Jazz Bowl

By the late 1920s, nearly 200,000 pieces were being created each year at Cowan, sold from San Francisco and Los Angeles to Chicago and Boston and of course, Cleveland, where the line was a favorite at Halle Bros., Kinney & Levan and Sterling & Welch.

But one can't write the history of Cowan Pottery without the late Viktor Schreckengost, its most famous artist, who worked there in the company's final years, 1930 and 1931.

Schreckengost was raised in another famous Ohio pottery town, Sebring. Cowan met him when Schreckengost was a student at the Cleveland School of Art.

After he spent 1929 studying in Vienna, Austria, he came to Cowan. Though Schreckengost's career eventually would encompass wide-ranging facets of art and industrial design, the year he worked at Cowan would result in his most famous piece, which would become known as the Jazz Bowl.

It was created at the behest of a New York City art dealer. Schreckengost pulled the order out of a job jar at Cowan, and went to work on what the dealer had said was a special punch bowl ordered by a New York housewife.

Having visited Manhattan on New Year's Eve, Schreckengost decided to incorporate those vivid images, including cocktail glasses and skyscrapers, onto a jet-blue and Egyptian black bowl. The technique, known as sgraffito, involved using sharp tools to scrape away the black pigment.

The "housewife" -- Eleanor Roosevelt -- liked it so much that she ordered two more: one for the mansion she lived in at Hyde Park, N.Y., and the other for the White House. Later, another run of 50 bowls was created and sold by the Cowan studio, selling for \$50 apiece. The Cowan Museum at the Rocky River Public Library features one of those. At auction a couple of years ago, a Jazz Bowl sold for \$254,000.

Revival of appreciation By the year of that masterpiece, Cowan Pottery was in trouble. The effects of the Depression were exacerbated by an unscrupulous California dealer who absconded with the cash people paid him for a huge Cowan order. He did place the order, but he failed to pay the company.

The studio folded in 1931.

For decades, little attention was paid the Cowan pottery and figurines that remained, fairly plentifully, in antiques stores and homes around Cleveland. It had its dedicated collectors, but by the 1960s, Cowan forms were relatively unappreciated.

That shifted with the revival of interest in Art Deco in recent decades. Locally, it was helped by the creation of the Cowan Museum at the Rocky River library in 1978, and the ongoing activism of Rocky River's Cowan Society.

Cowan pieces are now fetching increasingly higher prices, depending on their rarity.

Today, following a 2007 restoration of the Rocky River library, breathtaking displays of Cowan's work set amid the cases of books draw the attention that Cowan -- who often went to that library for research -- could never have imagined.

Every spring, the Cowan Society has a symposium on the history of pottery. Schreckengost often attended, including the one right before his 101st birthday. Yes, Cowan still has drawing power. In fact, it was a trip to the Cowan Museum in the early 1990s that helped author Mark Bassett decide to move here from Iowa.

"To me, Cowan has a really optimistic spirit," says Bassett, who lives in Lakewood. "These pieces are connected to the past, but they also have a sense of the future."

Guy Cowan, he points out, didn't just make "pretty things that were mass-produced."

"Museums and art schools still honor the work today, because he and those who worked for him made art. "

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