



The Cowan Pottery Museum showcases a piece of Rocky River history

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By

Today, a part of Rocky River's history, and the history of one of the greatest pottery companies in the nation, lives on in the Rocky River Public Library. It's the Cowan Pottery Museum.

What is the museum all about?

Carol Jacobs, curator: The museum is all about the cultural heritage of the entire Cleveland area. Cowan Pottery was the only art pottery of any note in Northeast Ohio and it was located right here in Rocky River. In 1978, the Museum opened in the Rocky River Public Library to pay tribute to this wonderful collection. Today, the museum has over 1,200 original pieces of Cowan Pottery.

Tell me about the history of Cowan Pottery.

Carol: Cowan Pottery was actually located in Lakewood from 1913 to 1917. It had to move because the gas well on the property became depleted, and it was the gas well that fired the kiln. R. Guy Cowan looked westward and found that Rocky River had a lot of gas wells. He bought a nice parcel of land with a well on Lake Road just west of the bridge over the Rocky River. It backed up to the Nickel Plate Railroad, which was convenient for shipping his products and receiving supplies.

What did Cowan Pottery make?

Carol: In Lakewood, the company made art tiles. Tile brought in a lot of capital because it was used on projects that were very big in scope. One of the company's first jobs was to produce the tile floor for the indoor garden court of the Cleveland Museum of Art, which opened in 1916. The company also did a lovely fire surround at the East Cleveland Public Library, which also opened in 1916. That piece still exists today.

When the company moved to Rocky River, the emphasis changed to items of everyday living, as well as objects of art for display. There were all sorts of bowls, urns, ivy jars, tea sets, vases, candlesticks, and more. Many of them were very affordable for middle class families, and they were held to the same high artistic standards as the high-end pieces. They were gorgeous. Housewives of the 1920s loved having a centerpiece with a Cowan bowl and a flower frog figurine surrounded by Cowan candlesticks. It was cutting edge at the time.



Jazz Bowl

By the end of the 1920s, about 175,000 pieces a year were being produced.

Was there a showroom?

Carol: It was a small showroom, but people came from all over the country to view and purchase these wonderful products. They were also sold in other retail outlets such as Marshall Field's in Chicago and Wanamaker's in Philadelphia. It was known nationally.

How long was Cowan Pottery in business?

Carol: The company was in business for 18 years. In October 1929, the stock market plunged and right away the orders started to slow down. In 1931, the company went into receivership but it still made some gorgeous stuff in the later years. By December 1931, the company was forced to close its doors. But Cowan didn't instantly disappear. There were still so many pieces being sold. Some of the artists finished their pieces after the company closed, that's why some of the pieces are dated 1932.

You said that some of the pieces ended up in movies?

Carol: Two very recognizable pieces appeared in the 1930's movie *The Divorcee*. There were also pieces in *Johnny Eager*, *Next Time We Love*, *Ohio Hour With You*, *Three Smart Girls*, and more.

How did the library end up with the collection?

Carol: In the late 1960s, the library director George Scherma happened to see some pieces of Cowan's on the first librarian's desk. He was absolutely enchanted and wanted to know all about it. He was determined to bring Cowan back to the forefront and make people aware of the wonderful heritage we had here. He began networking with collectors in the area, and one of the individuals had an 800-piece collection of Cowan Pottery, which he wanted to sell. In the mid 1970s, a private bequest was made to the library, which allowed the library to purchase the collection.

What happened to R. Guy Cowan?

Carol: He ended up in Syracuse, New York working for the Onondaga Pottery Company, which became Syracuse China. He helped establish the National Ceramic Exhibition. He died in 1957 and is buried in Lakewood Park Cemetery in Rocky River.

For a private tour, call:

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