

## April 2011 OOM “Rookwood Pottery Vase- Mary Samuels



***Rookwood Pottery Vase, 1901, Ceramic/Sea Green Glaze, Cincinnati OH, G379***

### ***Norwest Collection of Modernist Design 1880-1940, Accession 98.276.56***

**Social/Historical Context:** The Arts and Crafts movement in England was largely a reaction against the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on both worker morale and the artistic life. John Ruskin was its leader, looking backward rather than forward for inspiration. He advanced medievalism as the panacea for society’s loss of daily contact with handcrafted objects fashioned with pride, integrity and attention to beauty. This led to a strong aesthetic of individualism that provided the impetus to the Arts and Crafts movement. Ruskin proposed the formation of craftsman communes with the aim of reforming the existing social order. Although the communes did not succeed, the ideas did. The impact was felt particularly in the United States, where the movement reached its highpoint between 1890-1910.

America’s size and its capitalist traditions contributed to the wide variety of regional interpretations of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, the profitability and survival of the movement was due to its success in the marketplace. Manufacturers were able to adapt themselves to the nation’s free enterprise system. While US companies cultivated the myth that they emulated the parent movement in England, most products were actually made on assembly lines by a combination of artisans and machines. The tastemaker and standard-bearer of the American Arts and Crafts movement was the furniture-maker Gustave Stickley. He courted the late Victorian/Edwardian middle class, one recently moneyed due to industrialization and eager to both proclaim and solidify their newly won position in society. The US began its evolution into a consumer culture around 1900 in the aftermath of industrialization.

Although furniture received the largest share of the Arts and Crafts market, ancillary disciplines such as ceramics, lighting and metalwork joined in the movement's concept of the unified home environment. Among the larger manufactories, the Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati was most renowned.

**Rookwood Pottery Founder/Artists** It is no accident that Cincinnati, OH became the birthplace of American art pottery. First, the properties of the clay in the Ohio valley were well known. Second, the romance of flowers that held the Victorian imagination was heightened by urgent 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century conservation efforts (the National Park Service was established in 1905). Third, Cincinnati was called the "Queen City" with an active artistic community and thriving commerce. It was a major flower market and center of floriculture.

Immediately following the Centennial of 1876, where Cincinnatians and their fellow Americans were introduced to both English and French art pottery and the arts of Japan, a decorative arts movement began to take form in the "Queen City". Maria Longworth Nichols of Cincinnati was a notable 19<sup>th</sup> century American art patron and ceramic enthusiast. Captivated by Japanese forms, she opened a kiln in 1880 and experimented with glazes. Maria's husband, George Ward Nichols was an advocate of applying art to industry and was familiar with works of John Ruskin, William Morris and Charles Eastlake. Mrs. Nichols decided to create a business of pottery and in 1881, Rookwood hired its first decorator, Albert Valentien, who in turn hired decorators from the Cincinnati School of Design. The decorator's were the basic foundation of the pottery's success. In 1883, the decorator Laura Fry discovered that colored slips applied to a green, or still moist clay body with an atomizer could be used to create an even, delicately shaped ground. Several colors could be laid one over the other to develop a richly varied ground over which the decoration in colored slips in slight relief would be painted and modeled. *The similarity of the under glaze painting process to oil painting has often been noted.* Flowers and landscapes were the primary pottery subjects.

In 1887, Rookwood employed a native Japanese decorator Kitaro Shirayamadani who became its most famous company artist (the MIA has one of his vases but it's not on view). In 1889 Rookwood Pottery secured a First Prize Gold Medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle, the belle of international fairs. Immediately, 24 world museums acquired pottery examples. However, Rookwood began to suffer the consequences of its own fame. Imitators appeared. Rookwood did not embrace the sinuous forms and lines of art nouveau with enthusiasm. While nature remained the primary source of designs for Rookwood decorators in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the treatment moved steadily away from naturalism. Ever sensitive to public taste, Rookwood developed a mail-order business in 1904 to increase its sales using a new mat glaze painting unique to Rookwood, which gave a flat or modern look to the pottery. Eventually, Rookwood developed a Vellum glaze comparable to the tonalist photographs of Steichen and Steiglitz.

The Great Depression dealt Rookwood a brutal blow as its art became an impossible luxury for the middle class. Though it struggled on, Rookwood pottery plummeted in public esteem following WW II and closed.

**Object:** The vase is in the Modernist Design case across from the Tatra. It is from Rookwood's early history, decorated with a carved tulip motif and sea green glaze by Sturgis Lawrence. He worked as a decorator at the studio from 1895-1904 and later was in charge of Rookwood's New York sales office. This vase was exhibited at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 and awarded a medal for artistic merit.

**Tour Possibilities:** While this piece is limited to adults, it is a wonderful example of the American Arts and Crafts movement. It could also be used on a tour on flowers or as an example of modernism and the growth of a consumer culture.

**Sources from MIA library:**

"The Book of Rookwood Pottery" by Herbert Peck, Crown Publishers, New York, 1968.

"Ode to Nature: Flowers and Landscapes of the Rookwood Pottery 1880-1940" by Kenneth Trapp, 1980.

"Modernist Design 1880-1940" The Norwest Collection, Norwest Corporation, Minneapolis, MN. Text by Alastair Duncan, Antique Collector's Club.