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Elizabeth Fowler

book review of

*Rookwood and the Industry of Art: Women, Culture, and Commerce, 1880–1913* by Nancy E. Owen

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Nancy E. Owen

*Rookwood and the Industry of Art: Women, Culture, and Commerce, 1880–1913*

Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001

335 pp.; 16 color ill.; 96 b/w ill.; bibliography, index; \$49.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback)

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Nancy Owen's book, *Rookwood and the Industry of Art: Women, Culture, and Commerce, 1880–1913*, is the outgrowth of the author's doctoral dissertation written under Hollis Clayton at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Owen's text is an invaluable addition to Rookwood scholarship and contributes to a better understanding of such fields as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century decorative arts, material culture, gender studies, and cultural history. As indicated in the title, the author discusses women, culture, and commerce and the complex and often contradictory relationship between them. While the primary focus of her research is Rookwood Pottery, she is careful to place the developments of this company within a larger economic, social, and cultural context. By detailing the production methods, business practices, wares, and personalities of this pottery manufactory, Owen effectively offers a case study for examining this crucial period in American history.

Owen organized her material into seven sections: a prologue (chapter 1), five thematic chapters (chapters 2 through 6), and an epilogue (chapter 7). In the prologue, she outlines how the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia helped to catalyze the American Aesthetic movement and the American Art Pottery movement. The Art Pottery movement, which lasted until the outbreak of the First World War, was a concerted effort by manufacturers and artists to elevate American pottery to a higher aesthetic level in the eyes of the international art community. Stimulated by the display of Japanese and European wares in Philadelphia, American manufactories like Rookwood Pottery sought to create wares that were tasteful and artistic. This movement was also shaped by many important cultural developments of the period. As Owen explains, "women's roles outside the home; anxiety about industrialization, immigration, and urbanization; distinctions between fine art and craft; and technological advances in communication and transportation... are enmeshed in the American Art Pottery movement" (p. 2).

Having provided background and an overview of her argument, Owen's next five chapters examine Rookwood Pottery between 1880 and 1913, the company's "golden years." Founded in Cincinnati by Maria Longworth Nichols in 1880, Rookwood continued to operate until 1967, although after the 1920s it ceased to be financially solvent. William Watts Taylor, the president of Rookwood and the figure who can be most credited with the firm's international success, died in 1913; the National Conservation Exposition in Knoxville, Tennessee, held in that year was the last exposition in which Rookwood participated. After the outbreak of the First World War and the increasing pace of modernization and industrialization in the United States, Rookwood Pottery's production practices and wares were seen as vestiges of an earlier century.

Chapter two, entitled "Domesticity and Women's Labor," is perhaps the one that most directly addresses the complex relationship between women, culture, and commerce. The author begins by examining the Victorian cult of domesticity and how this both promoted and hindered women's artistic aspirations. Referring to such primary sources as John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* and the writings of Candace Wheeler, Owen establishes how women's presumed domestic responsibilities influenced the type and perceived quality of art that they produced. She argues that the masculine realm was associated with "production, competition, and material gain," while the feminine realm was associated with "ideal virtues, beauty, and consumption" (p. 16). While this chapter focuses on the activity of women's china painting and other amateur art production, and specifically how this played out in the early years of Rookwood Pottery (1880–83), Owen revisits these associations in a later chapter when examining female consumers.

Owen is at her best when she delves into the specifics of the pottery firm itself. Her research is thorough and the strength of her text lies in her ability to transform this information into a compelling, cohesive narrative. Drawing on the archives of the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Cincinnati Historical Society, the Winterthur Museum and Library, and the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, she examined personal correspondence, company records and publications, and advertisements to support her thesis. She also drew heavily on contemporary accounts of the pottery, especially those published in periodicals such as *Keramic Studio* and *Century*.

In chapter three, "An Ideal Workshop," Owen again moves from the general to the specific, beginning with the Arts and Crafts movement generally, and ending with the situation at Rookwood. She discusses the evolution of the English Arts and Craft movement and the subsequent development of this style in the United States. After defining the major principles and personalities of the English movement and examining the particular flavor of the American Arts and Crafts movement, she then explains the degree to which Rookwood's aesthetic sensibilities and production methods conformed to the tenets of this movement. While Rookwood's most celebrated line—its high-gloss, under-glazed "standard ware"—was not rendered in an Arts and Crafts style, Rookwood's management sought to convince the public that each piece of Rookwood pottery was hand crafted and one-of-a-kind, contrasting the firm's wares with the impersonal, mass-produced pottery made in commercial factories. Through photographs and letters, Owen establishes that Rookwood sought to disassociate itself from these factories, even going so far as to design their Tudor-style buildings to resemble "an overgrown family dwelling in a garden" (p. 68). Of the three main themes of the text, the third chapter moves away from gender issues, and focuses instead on the interplay between issues of art—or culture—and commerce in the context of the American Arts and Crafts movement.

The reality at Rookwood, however, did not always match the image that its management promoted. As the decorators themselves admitted, there was considerably less opportunity for individual expression than the public was led to believe. Taylor was a keen businessman who carefully analyzed the salability and profitability of different shapes and glaze lines. In most instances, decorators were not at liberty to create their own designs. While senior decorators would have been given more artistic freedom than their younger, less experienced counterparts, Taylor's responsibility was to ensure a viable and profitable

company. Nevertheless, Taylor would state that Rookwood's wares were not influenced by commercial concerns, but were instead "authentic" and "unique" artistic creations. In her fourth chapter, aptly entitled "An Artist's Studio, Not a Factory," Owen outlines how and why Taylor sought to establish Rookwood as producing "fine art." As Owen argues, Rookwood artists who copied old master paintings or painted tonalist landscape images onto their vases blurred the distinctions between fine and decorative art. Rookwood also used other tactics, such as donations to museums and a carefully crafted "Thompson method" advertising campaign, to inform and influence public opinion.

Chapter five, "Americanism and the Culture of Crisis," and chapter seven, "Give the Lady What She Wants," continue the arguments set forth in Owen's original thesis. Chapter six returns to the "women, culture, and commerce" dynamic by exploring how these forces informed Rookwood's marketing and advertising. The author examines how, where, and to whom Rookwood pottery was marketed, constructing what she calls the "imagined [Rookwood] consumer" (p. 209). She argues that the conservative tastes and preferences of the buyers—urban, upper or middle-class women—in turn influenced the shapes and motifs that Rookwood produced. Owen suggests that there was a dialogue, often facilitated by floor salesmen in the retail outlets, between the producers and consumers of Rookwood that informed the look of the wares. As a result of this dialogue, Rookwood's produced numerous pieces with traditional shapes and floral motifs.

This chapter curiously includes a section on Rookwood's relationship to the international *art nouveau* movement under the heading "Rookwood Shapes" (pp. 211–16). There are two problems with this section. First, the discussion of *art nouveau* does not directly correspond with the other themes addressed in the chapter. Logically, this would have fit better at the end of "Americanism and the Culture of Crisis," which examines Rookwood and its "Americanness" in a larger international context. Second, Owen argues against understanding Rookwood as part of the larger international *art nouveau* movement. She relies primarily on five articles published in *The Craftsman* between 1902 and 1905 to argue that American critics understood *art nouveau* as a European style associated with natural forms and whiplash curves. Although these articles do indeed suggest this, more recent scholarship, by authors such as Diane Chalmers Johnson, Gabriel P. Weisberg, and Jeremy Howard, illustrates that while American critics may not have identified it as such, American artists and architects were producing work that should be categorized as *art nouveau*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Interestingly, in chapter five, Owen states that while Rookwood was proud of its Americanness, its innovations in the ceramics were celebrated throughout the world. Rookwood received numerous prizes and awards at international exhibitions, culminating in the Grand Prize at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. Collectors, artists, and art schools now looked to Rookwood as a model of a "new art": one that broke with historical models and created pieces that were innovative and original. In this chapter, Owen's sources and conclusions firmly establish Rookwood as a firm actively involved in producing art nouveau. Indeed, the terms that she associates with the "typical American pottery" (that is, Rookwood)—"individuality and originality"—are precisely those characteristics that defined *art nouveau* as an international movement (p. 155).

An apparent reversal of contradictions is revealed in a section at the end of chapter five. After successfully situating Rookwood in an international context in terms of critical reception, international exhibitions, and Japonisme, Owen examines a particular product line that contributed to Rookwood's "Americanness," namely its Native American portraits. These portraits were painted on ceramic vessels and featured at all major international exhibitions from 1893 to 1904 (p. 130). Owen's research is resourceful and informative, but the section is out of place at the end of this chapter and its inclusion hardly furthers the thesis advanced in this chapter. The valuable information would be better presented as an independent article. As suggested above, Owen's discussion of *art nouveau* would make a better conclusion to this chapter and reinforce her overall thesis.

Despite these problems in argumentation, this book is still a key text for historians in many disciplines. Owen has effectively described how women, culture, and commerce interacted within the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, her research on Rookwood Pottery has brought to light much information on the company that will lead to a greater understanding, not only of the day-to-day workings of the company, but also of its role in the American Art Pottery movement. Few scholars have delved this deeply into Rookwood's business practices and policies as Owen, and her research reveals not only how its objects were created, but for whom and why.[2]

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## Notes

[1] See Diane Chalmers Johnson, *American Art Nouveau* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1986); and Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau: National and International Styles* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996); Gabriel P. Weisberg and Elizabeth K. Menon, *Art Nouveau: A Research Guide for Design Reform in France, Belgium, England, and the United States* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

[2] For other sources on Rookwood Pottery, see Anita Ellis's exhibition catalogue, *Rookwood Pottery: The Glorious Gamble* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992); Anita Ellis, *Rookwood Pottery: The Glaze Lines* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Co., 1995); as well as Kenneth P. Trapp, *Ode to Nature: Flowers and Landscapes of the Rookwood Pottery, 1880–1940* (New York: The Jordan-Volpe Gallery, 1980). The standard reference books for Rookwood Pottery are Herbert Peck, *Book of Rookwood Pottery* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968); Herbert Peck, *Second Book of Rookwood Pottery* (published by the author, 1985); and Virginia R. Cummins, *Rookwood Pottery Potpourri* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Galleries, 1991).