







Fig. 1 Mary Chase Perry at the Stable Studio, Alfred Street, 1905

The Success Story of An American Pottery April Kingsley

Pewabic Pottery in Detroit, Michigan, still exists more than 100 years after its founding, which makes it a success story of the Arts & Crafts movement. That movement was an Anglo-Euro-American crusade for reform that began in England in 1860 and ended there in the 1920s, in Germany with the founding of the Bauhaus in 1919, and in France with the 1925 International Exposition of Decorative Arts and Machine Modernism in Paris, where the union of art and industry was celebrated. In America the crusade continued in various manifestations, but even though some production centers, like Cincinnati's Rookwood and Roseville potteries, resisted the temptations of the Machine Age, fewer still survived the Great Depression and World War II, and only two small potteries are still in operation, Pewabic in Michigan, and Van Briggle in Colorado. And Pewabic wouldn't be if it hadn't been for the intervention of Michigan State University, which took over the building in 1965, repaired it, and put it back into operation, albeit with six-figure yearly subsidies, handing it over to the non-profit Pewabic Society in 1981. Since then, in addition to serving as an educational institution, teaching and exhibiting pottery, and producing pottery and tiles for sale, Pewabic Pottery executes large commissions such as the tilework at the new Tigers' stadium in 2000 and murals in Detroit's People Mover stations between 1987 and 2004. To accommodate growing programs, exhibits, and staff, nearby buildings are being purchased for planned expansions of the facility.

The Arts & Crafts movement was an attempt by the material and intellectual elite to stem the tide of the Industrial Revolution's sweeping rush toward commercialization and its destruction of the quality of life. John Ruskin's moral aesthetics and William Morris' anti-capitalist social stance formed the seawall: Ruskin believing that art could exercise a moral function in daily life and Morris that doing so challenged the existing economic system. Formulated in the mid-19th century, these ideas spread quickly in England, with the creation of numerous societies, guilds, schools, and workshops along the Medieval lines advocated by these two men. The "craftsmen ideal" and the objects it engendered came to America with a splash at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia where the handcrafted far surpassed the manufactured in quality. Then, with the rising number of individual craftspeople in New England, the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts was formed in 1897. The Chicago Society of Arts and Crafts also was formed that year. In Detroit, just as automobiles began rolling off the early assembly lines there, the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (DSAC) was founded in 1906 by George G. Booth, its first president and the founder of Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills. A metalsmith from a family of the same in England, he had a natural sympathy with the Arts and Crafts movement there and instilled its principles at Cranbrook where young artists were educated in crafts such as weaving, metalwork, ceramics, as well as design, architecture, painting and sculpture.

In addition to societies, schools, and workshops usually not patterned after the guilds of the Middle Ages as they were in England, Americans established many communities or colonies where the craftperson's life could be lived ideally. Brydcliffe Colony (1902-1915) and Roycroft (1895-1938) in New York, and Pennsylvania's Rose Valley Association (1901-1909), are some of the better known of these usually short-lived communal living and working situations. All aspects of home decoration and some of its functions were crafted. Gustav Stickley's Craftsman (1891-present) furniture production center was the best known, but the Roycroft and Rose Valley Shops, and mid-westerner architect/furniture designers George Washington Maher, and Charles P. Limbert, among others were also successful, though none survive except Stickley. In glass, New York's Steuben Glass Works (later Steuben Division of Corning Glass) and Tiffany Glass were the best known and still survive, though they never were and are not really small, production centers. There were less than a dozen other much smaller glassmaking firms. Metalworking shops were more common, the strongest being The Copper Shop of the Roycrofters (1903-1938), and the Kalo (1900-1970), Jarvie (1800s-1950), and Volund (1914-1915) Copper Shops, in Illinois and San Francisco's Palmer Copper Shop (1910-1918). By 1906 the Handicraft Shop of the DSAC produced metalwork exclusively, and Rhode Island's Gorham began producing handcrafted silver in 1896 on special order, continuing to do so until 1920. Tiffany and Company and Marcus and Company of New York are the two most famous in this field, and still going strong. In textiles, a few small shops such as the one for Italian needlecrafters in Philadelphia (1917-n.d.), or the one for local mountain folk in New Hampshire (Abnakee 1897-1955) existed, and some companies specialized, as Cheney Brothers (1838-1955) did in decorative silk, Stearns and Foster (1846-n.d.) in quilts, and Thread and Thrum (1905, 1909) in camel's hair rugs.

It was in ceramics that the bulk of craft activity went on during the Arts and Crafts movement's peak years in America, 1900-1930. There were 75 potteries well enough established and known to be included in The Ideal Home 1900-1920, the first volume of the American Craft Museum's 1993 History of Twentieth Century American Craft. Of them the most famous are or were: the Batchelder

Tile Company of Pasadena (1909-1932); George Ohr's Biloxi Art Pottery (c. 1883-c.1907); Clifton Art Pottery of Newark, NJ (1905-1911); Volkmar Kilns in Metuchen, NJ (1903-1911); and Fulper Pottery Company in Flemington, NJ (1860-1972); Grueby Faience Company in Boston (1894-1911) and Low Tile Company in Chelsea, MA, (1878-1909); Zanesville, Ohio's Roseville Pottery Company (1890-1934); Colorado Spring's Van Briggle Pottery Company (1902-present); and the Byrdcliffe (NY), Dedham and Marblehead (MA), Markham, Pewabic (MI), Middle Lane (NY), Moravian (PA), Rhead (CA), Robineau (NY); and Rookwood and Weller (OH) potteries. Because they evolved from china painting, generally a solitary or small scale women's occupation, many of the art potteries were started and run by women. China painting could be learned from other china painters and could be practiced at home in the person's spare time. Fired biscuits (pronounced bisque) blanksplates, bowls, vases, place settings—were painted using high-fire china paint following any of the many available patterns and then fired, often in small kilns in the home, or taken to a working

pottery for firing. Whether run by men or women, most of the specialized potteries got much deeper into quantity production than Pewabic ever did.² Mary Chase Perry (Stratton) kept her pottery small, but she kept it running. Her passion was experimentation and expanding the possibilities of her medium.

Mary Chase Perry was born in Hancock, Michigan in 1867, and at the age of five modeled her first clay and had it fired. She learned to paint and was actually earning money with Christmas card decorations at age twelve. Still a 'teen and living in Detroit she continued to sell her decorated scarves and eggshells in the Women's Exchange and she began studying oil painting and drawing with a local artist. Then she took up china painting, a very popular activity among women young and old, and was quite successful at it, working in various studios in Michigan and teaching herself refinements from books. After two years of intensive art training at the Cincinnati Art Academy in Ohio, she moved to Asheville, North Carolina

where her family was, set up her kiln and went into the china painting business. Early plates were decorated with simple designs around the rims; later, working from her



kilns by demonstrating their portability and ease of use. She traveled to many American cities, set up a temporary studio in each, visited the various potteries in the area (including Grueby in Boston), and wrote about them for the ceramic journals. (Fig. 2) Orders came from all over the country for Caulkins' kilns.

Whether it was the result of visiting potteries, childhood memories of working and firing

clay, or a sudden revelation,³ at some point in the mid 1890s Perry decided to master clay. Studying books and kiln testing in small amounts went on for a year before she and Caulkins had a clay body with the smoothness, workability, and predictable firing character they wanted. An architect friend, William Buck Stratton (1865-1938), who would later become her husband, helped her with design problems. Many hundreds of tiny test bowls and reams of careful notes as to chemical amounts and combinations

were amassed in the search to find beautiful glazes that could be high-fired in the open flame Revelation kiln, which is unmuffled and used without saggers, a real feat at that time. Perry and Caulkins rented an unused stable on Alfred Street in 1898 and hired help, a wheel thrower and a studio manager. (Fig. 3) Meanwhile she continued to learn everything she could about her medium from books



Fig. 2 Mary Chase Perry with Revelation kilns, late 1890s

Fig. 3 The Stable Studio, Alfred Street, 1898-1907



Fig. 4 Stearns Company Cold Cream Jar, Detroit, 3 inches high, 1906

6 Jelphs

and from experiencing other potteries first hand. She also went to Alfred, New York where famed ceramist Charles F. Binns was establishing the New York State College of

Ceramics. She spent three weeks in its first class, studying overglazing with Marshall Fry, an expert on glazes and glazing. Back on Alfred Street, a Detroit firm placed an order for hundreds of small cosmetic containers and the little team had its first, and last, Revelation production work. (Fig. 4) After a year of it they chose to return to making art pottery and never went back. She had

found a green Grueby-like glaze without the crackle and wanted to explore new forms. An order in 1903 from Burley & Co. in Chicago, the largest purveyor of porcelain and pottery in the country, got them started making bowls, lamp bases, and vases, and Pewabic Pottery was born. (Figs. 5, 6) Burley thought Perry should have a trade name for her pottery and Pewabic came to her mind because it was the name of a coppermine near her birthplace. Research told that the word meant metal to the Indians of the area. Burley was delighted with its American-ness.

The early pieces utilize a soft green glaze with generalized leaf forms so common in post-Art Nouveau Arts & Crafts. Perry would draw the designs for the objects and Joseph Heerich, an experienced wheel thrower,

would fashion the clay into those shapes, incise and model the plant forms or other decorative ornamentation. Once hardened and bisque fired by Caulkins, she would glaze it with her "flowing" glazes, described in Burley's catalogue as being "of a texture which is a delight to the touch." Pieces from this period are identified by a maple leaf insignia stamped on the bottom. (Pls. 5, 6) She also developed a dark blue matte glaze early on, which was used for a long period of time making dating difficult. She experimented with buff, ivory, and brown glazes and tried to incorporate metallic pigments as she had done painting china. Often an underglaze was utilized, coated

by a semi-transparent overglaze of one color, which in turn was partially covered by an opaque glaze poured from the vessel's top over its sides. An experimental, accidental

look characterized Pewabic pottery produced during Perry's reign. It never settled into slick predictability. Because design and the aesthetics of glazing were separate from the physics and techniques of throwing or casting, each element retained a kind of purity. In addition to the bowls, vases and lamps the pottery was making in the early years, Perry decided to begin making tiles. She visited a tile factory and ordered the steel molds

used there, but soon realized that natural looking handcast tiles with rounded edges and smooth but not perfectly flat surfaces were superior. Her first fireplace, designed by Stratton for her new home on East Grand Boulevard in Detroit, was misty gray.

In part because of the tile work Perry had decided to embark upon, particularly her popular fireplace designs, by 1907 they had expanded to the point of needing a new, much larger facility. Perry's friend Stratton was the architect of the English Arts & Crafts style building they erected on Jefferson Avenue, (see p. 2) where it remains today. They now had much better and bigger equipment, but they didn't go into production work, preferring to experiment and try new

avenues. They began making leaded glass shades for the lamps, ceramic fountains, garden pots, and urns. The tile work opened up numerous architectural possibilities which interested all three of them: Perry, Caulkins, and Stratton. But the most important new development, which affected everything, but especially their future architectural commissions, was Perry's development of iridescent glazes.

A major factor in Perry's determination to produce these was Charles Lang Freer's (1854-1919) challenge to her that she'd never be able to create a ruby iridescent



Fig. 5 Small lamps with shades, c. 1903-1908



Fig. 6 Display at Stable Studio, c. 1903-08

glaze. The famed collector lived in Detroit and had introduced her to Persian lusterware as well as the finest Chinese and Japanese ceramics. He often visited the pottery to see what Perry was producing when he was back from one of his numerous trips. Freer collected her

best pieces, adding them to his fabulous collection of Asian art (particularly strong in ceramics) and paintings by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1904), and other Japanese-influenced American Impressionists. (Pl. 10) He combined these loves in his Detroit home, where he attached a wing that would also enclose Whistler's famous Peacock Room, which he had purchased in 1904 from the estate of Frederick Leyland, the British shipping magnate who had commissioned it from the artist in 1976. Whistler's famous portrait of his mistress Jo in a Japanese kimono, La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine, was and remains the focus of the room, which Leyland had filled with his collection of blue and white Chinese porcelain. (Fig. 7) In 1909 Mary Chase Perry finally fired a tiny National Shrine of vase with a lustrous red iridescent glaze and Freer was overjoyed. Gray, green-gold, blue Washington DC, and other iridescent glazes soon followed late 1920s, Albion using copper and zinc oxides, carbonates of College Collection. silver, copper, and tin, bismuth, and copper,

tin, silver, and zinc sulfides in various combinations.5 She began mixing iridescent tiles with matte glazed tiles in her growing number of church and other commissions for tile work. In the next decade she became ever more



Fig. 7 James McNeill Whistler, The Peacock Room, 1876-1877; moved to the Freer House, Detroit in 1904, now in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

experimental with these glazes making many gorgeous discoveries and using them on ever bolder sized pieces. Freer took the finest for himself and soon Pewabic was taking its place beside ancient Asian masterpieces in the Peacock Room.

Freer was not only a collector and a friend of Perry's, he was a mentor and source of information unobtainable elsewhere. He introduced her to other collectors and to

Professors Ernest Fenollosa of the Boston Museum of Fine Art and Arthur Wesley Dow of Columbia University. The former wrote Chinese and Japanese Art (first published in 1913) after living many years in Japan, and is the reason the Boston museum has such an outstanding collection

of Asian art. The latter published a manual in 1899, Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers, which became a widely used text influencing teaching practice in general and the Arts & Crafts movement in particular. The compositional principles were derived from those of Asian art stressing balance and beauty in composition, not the imitation of nature. Dow promoted the Arts & Crafts movement vigorously in the places he taught and in his own school in Ipswich, Massachusetts.

Mary Chase Perry married William Buck Stratton in 1918 and their union strengthened both of them.6 He became increasingly interested in pottery and came to excel at it (Pl. 13); she became increasingly ambitious in her architectural embellishments and designs, expanding from simple tile work to



Fig. 9 William Buck Stratton (vase design), Pair of Monumental Vases, Detroit Public Library, each 23 7/8 inches high, Public Works of Art Project, 1934

mosaics, fountain construction, church furnishings, hotel interiors, restaurants, lobbies, mausoleums, altars, and facades. Between them they had an enormous library of source material for their ideas and in 1924 they went on an extensive tour of Spain, Portugal and Italy to view first hand mosaics and architectural decoration through the centuries. They went, in part, because she had received the commission to do the decoration of the crypt in the Shrine of Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., which was her greatest commission, involving three apses and altars, the stations of the cross and numerous saints and tiles on floors, arches and ceilings. (Fig. 8) It took three years of thought and planning on her part and seven years to build.

Mary Stratton believed each new design or commission should teach her something or be an occasion to learn something new. The two decades following her discovery of iridescent glazes saw her full realization as an artist. She

Fig. 8 Saint for the

the Immaculate

continued to experiment, not only with glaze colors, (Pl. 9) surfaces, (Pl. 15) crackling, and accidental effect, but also by adding to the repertoire of shapes and sizes to which they were applied (Pl. 14). In general, the focus being on the glorious iridescent glazes, the shapes were simplified and enlarged, some almost reaching the dimensions of those enormous Chinese vessels that decorated many a wealthy Victorian's parlor. Two pairs of such monumental vases are in the collection of the Detroit Public Library. (Fig. 9) The demand for her pottery was only exceeded by the number of architectural commissions that poured in. Following her designs, the pottery executed almost 400

major installations in businesses, public buildings, churches, clubs, and schools between 1910 and 1930, plus countless private homes mainly in the midwest. Some of these involved mosaics, which she began making at the behest of New York architect Cass Gilbert who wanted mosaictocovertheoutsidedomeentrance to the Allen Memorial Art Gallery he was constructing for Oberlin College in Ohio. She also designed seals and plaques for corporations, governmental departments and agencies, universities, and civic organizations drawing upon her imagination, her many sources in earlier art, and her innate artistic talent.

Pewabic pottery at its best provides a rainbow of changing visual and tactile experiences as you view it, (Pl. 11) turning the piece to see all the different glaze events fused in time

by the heat of the kiln. Crackle and lava-like bubbling, craters and crusts create the impression that a piece like the one in the Kresge Art Museum's collection (see cover), is some ancient ceremonial vessel interred in the earth for centuries with its surface constantly acted upon by nature's chemicals. Because of the way the light hits first this area then that as you turn an iridescent piece in your hands or move around it, other colors appear and disappear within the depths of the glaze. The finest pieces, such as the Freer Vase, 1912, in the Detroit Institute of Arts collection (Pl. 10) seem alive, so small and so colorful are the hue variations as the iridescent gold color overall shifts from blue-green at the top to golden brown at the bottom. A pinkish gray, blue and purplish-black iridescent vase in the Cranbrook Art Museum is dazzling in a jewel-like way (pl. 12). Considering the origins of its name, it is not surprising that Mary Stratton created many metallic glazes for Pewabic, the copper and bronze glazes being the most beautiful.

Although major installations in public buildings and churches dropped to only 68 between 1930 and 1966, Pewabic had 86 commissions for installations in schools and libraries. While not always as interesting or challenging as some of the others, school and other public commissions under the National Relief Act (PWAP) kept the doors open and the staff working during those very lean thirties and war years. And Mary Stratton never stopped experimenting or looking for new ways to treat old themes. Candlesticks, urns, plates, cups, and ceramic jewelry (in the 1940s) were added to the work they had for sale. (Fig. 10) She also taught ceramics at the

University of Michigan (1937-1941) and at Wayne State University (1936-1947), as well as at the Pottery. When her students became independent potters, they usually returned to purchase clay and other materials. Pewabic wares won numerous prizes and awards and Mary Stratton received many honorary degrees and awards including the Art Institute of Chicago's prestigious Logan Medal in 1921. In 1947 she had her highest honor, the Charles Fergus Binns Medal, an award given annually to the most outstanding contributor to the field of ceramics. With it came international fame, press attention at home, and orders from everywhere. Joseph Heerich, her head potter since the beginning, had died in 1937, but his nephew, Joseph Ender, who had been trained by his uncle, was able to

carry on in his place, doing so until his death in 1959 after completing the last two important church commissions for Mary Stratton, Kirk-in-the-Hills in Bloomfield Hills and All Saints Church in Pontiac, Michigan.

After Mary Chase Perry Stratton died in 1961, no new designs were attempted, but the pottery had a repertoire of fountain, fireplace and floor designs to fall back on. Likewise, glazes they were accustomed to using could be continued by Ella Peters who was in charge of the pottery by then, but Stratton left no formulas for them to follow. Pewabic Pottery as a studio and research laboratory was no longer. Henry L. Caulkins, Horace's son, was then sole owner but found that the pottery couldn't make enough money to justify the repairs and replacement of the equipment that would make it an efficient commercial venture. He tried various ways to salvage it, eventually offering it to MSU, being the largest school in the area without a ceramic program. The story of the MSU years, 1965 to 1981, continues here in Thomas W. Brunk's essay.



Fig. 10 Advertisement for Pewabic Pottery jewelry, buttons and small gifts for sale at John Junge, NY, 1940s

Endnotes

¹In 1904 a large rundown farm in Bloomfield Hills was purchased by George Booth as a future vacation spot for his growing family and named Cranbrook for the town in England where he was born. Buildings were repaired and constructed and gardens landscaped from then on, the important ones being: Albert Kahn's Cranbrook House (decorated with a Pewabic-tiled fireplace) and Tower Cottage in 1907 where they lived; the Greek Theater in 1915 by Burroughs and Wells; a 1916 Flowing Well (Rainbow Fountain) tiled by Pewabic; and a George and Henry S. Booth designed Meeting House built in 1918 and used in part as the Bloomfield Hills School after 1922. Young Henry S. Booth and Eliel Saarinen designed a master plan for the Art Academy by 1925; Swanson and Booth designed the Architecture Office of the Academy; 1925-28 Bertram Goodhue Associates built Christ Church; Saarinen constructed the Cranbrook School for Boys 1925-1930 and the Headmaster's House, the Fine Arts and Crafts Building, and the Keppel Gymnasium in the same period, and Kingswood in the next two years. He did many more buildings at Cranbrook, which considers itself an educational community, the most important being the Cranbrook Academy Library and Museum, 1939-1942. In recent years significant architects have designed several buildings.

See: Cranbrook Art Museum: 100 Treasures, Dora Apel, ed. (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Art Museum, 2004).

² Thomas W. Brunk, in his "Pewabic Pottery: A Comparative Analysis," chapter 14 of his unpublished manuscript, *Pewabic Pottery* - *The American Arts and Crafts Movement Expressed in Clay*, notes that, unlike other potteries, Pewabic never standardized their production or published catalogues of it. The differences in income were dramatic. For example, in 1903 Rookwood Pottery grossed \$88,735; Pewabic's entire gross sales from 1903 through 1914 were only \$84,429.

³ Lillian Myers Pear, *The Pewabic Pottery: A History of Its Products and Its People* (Des Moines, Iowa: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1976). Pears relates that Perry's chance finding on a beach of an article about developing the resources of the United States like copper and clay, "changed the course of her life" and she went running to Caulkins to ask his help in learning to work with clay.

 4 From a copy of the 1903 Burley & Co. catalogue reproduced in Pear, *The Pewabic Pottery*, 20.

⁵Thomas W. Brunk, *Painting with Fire, Pewabic Vessels in the Margaret Watson Parker Collection* (An Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1995), 8.

⁶Later, in the 1920s, they also became familiar with the ideas of Jay Hambidge whose concept of *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* was initiated by a study of Greek vases. William Stratton deliberately shaped certain pots using the 1.618 proportion based on nature's growth spiral. Mathematically it is expressed in the Fibonacci number series. They were not alone in using this extrapolation of the golden rectangle. Sophisticated artists from Stuart Davis to Arthur Dove were learning from Hambidge.

⁷ Mary Stratton left daybooks in which she recorded all the daily transactions at the pottery, wrote a book on *Ceramic Processes*, published in 1941, which included basic glaze recipes, but not her own invented ones, and she also wrote an autobiography which she revised later in life.

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Plate 2



Plate 4



Plate 3