

Cowan Pottery: The Centennial

By Jack Sullivan
(Special to the Ohio Swirl)

Last summer, while visiting in the Cleveland area, I was introduced to the Cowan Pottery Museum, located in the Rocky River Public Library (**Fig. 1**).

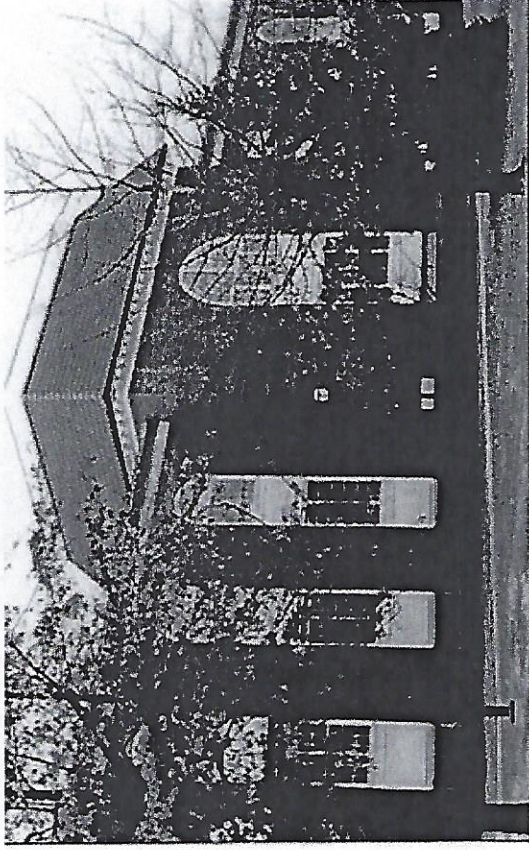


Figure 1

This full service library also contains a collection of some 1,100 ceramic objects, many of them on display. They were inspired by one of Ohio's most famous sculptors in clay, Reginald Guy Cowan, who founded his pottery almost one hundred years ago.

Known simply as "Guy" throughout his life, Cowan was born in 1884 and raised in East Liverpool, Ohio, known as "Pottery Capital of the World" for the many ceramics companies located there. The Cowan family was steeped in the pottery trade. After studying ceramics engineering in New York State, Cowan moved to Cleveland in 1908 to teach ceramics and design at the East Technical High School.

About 1912 Cowan left teaching to open his own studio, located at Nicholson and Detroit Avenues in Lakewood. He called it the Cleveland Pottery and Tile Company. Working with three kilns and a small staff, he designed and

executed functional art pottery. In 1917 recognition came to him in the form of the prestigious first prize in pottery in a show at the Chicago Art Institute. Shortly thereafter, however, he was forced to close his business when called to serve during World War One as a captain in the Chemical Warfare Service.

After the war Cowan returned to find that his Lakewood location had run out of natural gas to fire the kilns. While Cowan and his wife, Bertha, continued to live in Lakewood, he moved his pottery operation to Lake Road in Rocky River. He is shown there in the new studio (Fig. 2) that he called "Cowan Pottery." That facility had nine

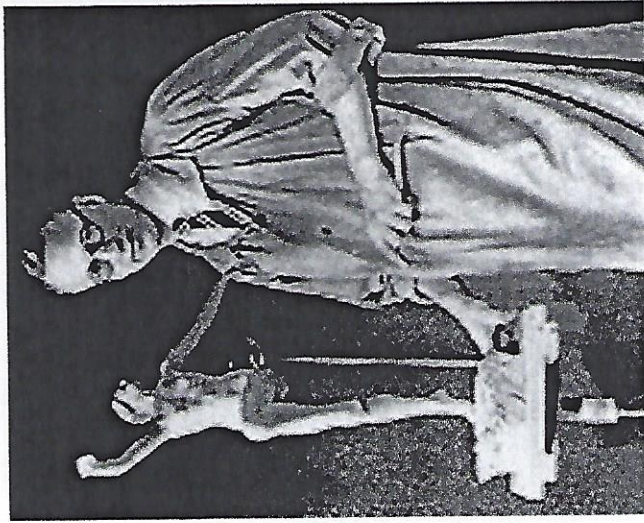


Figure 2

kilns and a small house on the property that became a showroom. His designs were perfect for the times. The Art Deco movement was sweeping across America and the demand for the sinuous and stylish Cowan pieces found a ready market.

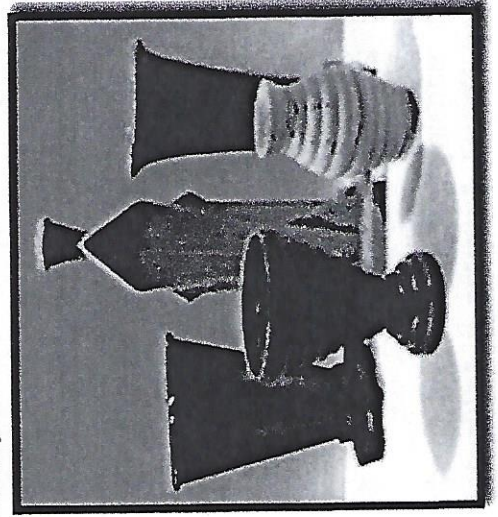


Figure 3

Cowan served up practical items like vases and sconces



Figure 4

(Fig. 3, 4) and a whole line of ceramic statuary featuring sweeping poses (Fig. 5, 6) and highly discrete nudity (Fig. 7).

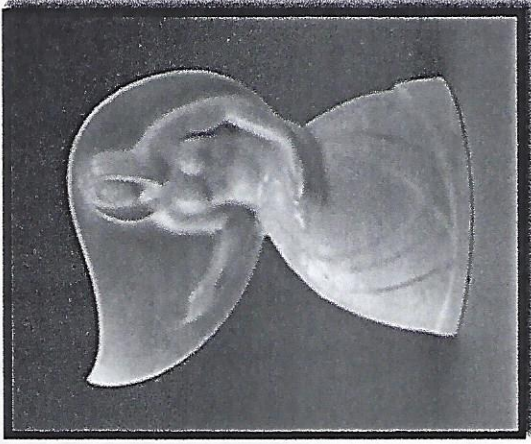


Figure 5



Figure 6

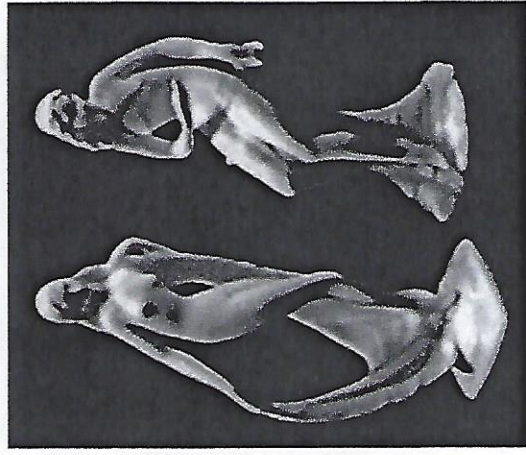


Figure 7

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. Repeatedly pieces made by Cowan and his artists won medals.

The company, however, did not rely on prizes for their merchandising. As the studio prospered, Cowan formed a nationwide dealer network with an estimated 1,200 outlets. They distributed pottery to such prestige stores as Marshall Field of Chicago, Wanamakers of Philadelphia and Halle's of Cleveland. This prosperity allowed Cowan to diversify his designs by hiring some of the Nation's best known artists in clay, a number of whom had been students at the Cleveland School of Art (Fig. 8). They continued to keep Cowan Pottery at the forefront of the Art Deco movement and gained additional respect for the Rocky River studio.



Figure 8

Two pieces by Cowan artists particularly caught my eye. Considered perhaps the gem of the museum's collection is a piece generally known as "The Jazz Bowl." (Fig. 9). It was made by Viktor Schreckengost. Born and raised in Sebring, Ohio, Schreckengost was a student at the Cleveland School of Art when Cowan met him and recognized his talent. He reputedly created the bowl on an order from

"a New York housewife." The object incorporates cocktail glasses and skyscrapers in jet-blue and Egyptian black in apparent homage to New Year's Eve in the Big Apple. It is definitely worth a look as are other Schreckengost pieces in the collection, including a plate entitled "Danse Moderne" (Fig. 10).



Figure 9



Figure 10

A second piece of particular note is by one of the several female artists employed by Cowan, who was ahead of his time in employing women. Displayed near the entrance of the library, this mural only recently has been restored. It

was created in 1930 by Elsa Vick Shaw, a Cowan artist and is called "Egyptian Maidens (Fig. 11)." The vivid colors and graceful shapes make the sizable ceramic mural an impressive introduction to the collection.

Even as early as 1929 Cowan's business began to suffer financially as competition to sell art pottery intensified. The Stock Market crash and the onset of the Great Depression eventually spelled doom for his pottery as the public had no spare money for nonessentials. The company went into bankruptcy in early 1931 and closed its doors for good in December of that year. After the studio closed,



Figure 11

Cowan spent the rest of this life as the chief designer for Syracuse China and a trustee for the National Ceramic Exhibitions. He died of a heart attack while vacationing in Tucson, Arizona, in 1957 and is buried in Rocky River.

During the relatively brief existence of the firm, Guy Cowan and his artists had produced outstanding and technically advanced artifacts which brought them and American art pottery international recognition. Today Cowan pieces sell at auction anywhere from a few dollars to more than \$10,000. The prices reflect a continuing respect for Cowan's output.

The library and museum this year and next are celebrating the centennial of the founding of the pottery. Events have included speakers, an open house, and a pottery sale. The celebration will be concluded in December 2013 with a "grand finale" reception that also will commemorate the 35th anniversary of the opening of the Cowan Pottery Museum at the Rocky River site.

Note: The information for this article was derived from materials available from the Cowan Pottery Museum and from news stories that have appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Illustrations:

- Fig. 1: Rocky River Library
- Fig. 2: Guy Cowan in his studio
- Fig. 3: Five Art Deco items
- Fig. 4: Vase with squirrel
- Fig. 5: Figurine #1
- Fig. 6: Figurine #2
- Fig. 7: Nude figurines
- Fig. 8: Cowan artists at work
- Fig. 9: The "Jazz Bowl"
- Fig. 10: "Danse Moderne" plate
- Fig. 11: Mural: "Egyptian Maidens"