

THE POTTERY OF GEORGE OHR AT AMERICAN CRAFT MUSEUM

The times have almost caught up with George Ohr, the turn-of-the-century American potter who always knew that he was a genius and that the pots he produced were unprecedented as both art and craft. The exhibition of 91 examples of Ohr's work that has just opened at the American Craft Museum could be larger and more complete. Ohr's achievement merits more than one floor of this small museum; it certainly deserves better company than the display of umbrellas that fills the museum lobby.

Nonetheless, if small, this exhibition is all muscle. It outlines in certain, often irresistible terms many of the facets of Ohr's originality, introducing an achievement that deserves a place among the artist's greatest contemporaries - Thomas Eakins, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Louis Sullivan, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Stieglitz and perhaps even Frank Lloyd Wright.

The son of an Alsatian blacksmith, Ohr was born in Biloxi, Miss., where he would spend most of his life. His education did not extend beyond the elementary years and he trained as a blacksmith and worked as a tinker, a dock chandler and a sailor before a childhood friend offered to teach him the pottery trade. The first time he sat at a potter's wheel, Ohr knew he had found his life's calling.

Yet, despite Ohr's unwavering self-confidence and relentless, often obnoxious flair for self-promotion, his talent went largely unrecognized in his lifetime. In 1910, eight years before his death, "the mad dauber of Biloxi," as he called himself, converted his Biloxi pottery (or "Pot-Ohr-E,") into an auto repair shop. His beloved pots were packed away in wooden crates that remained stored in the garage's rafters until 1972, when they were rediscovered by an antiques dealer.

It's hard to encapsulate Ohr's sensibility and his drive to set free color and form. It's equally hard to do justice to the sense of artistic intelligence (and humor) and the extreme improvisational flair that his work exudes. The innate technical virtuosity he brought to the potter's wheel enabled him to create pots whose walls are among the thinnest known. In his mature years, which date from 1894 to 1910, his inventiveness led him to deform these thin-walled vessels with ruffles and dents, nips and tucks that turned each into a unique formal event.

Handles alone occasioned great originality, their linear profiles variously drooped, coiled or flaring, spilling down or up the sides of vases. Some handles are so full of personality they turn Ohr's more thin-waisted vases into abstracted female figurines.

On top of this, Ohr's feeling for mixing colors and glazes yielded an astounding array of hues, surfaces and application techniques. The vases, pitchers and teapots that grace this show are often splattered, dripped and dappled in patterns as free form as the pots themselves. But visitors shouldn't let the brighter colors outshine the artist's subtler greenish browns and his countless shades of black - shiny and matte, rough and smooth.

Basically Ohr invented his own brand of beauty, one so innately modern that it's easy to understand why he wasn't more appreciated in his own time. His liberations of color and form move beyond Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts Movement - with which his work has obvious links - and points toward the present. In particular, his exquisite, constantly shifting balances of randomness and control convey a kind of three-dimensional Automatism that presages ideas basic to Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. And in a way that seems both modern and close to the experience of painting, Ohr invites the viewer to rehearse the pleasure and release he felt in making his pots.

In some instances we can see where he stopped the wheel's spin to pull a pot's mouth into a delicate four-cornered box; frequently we feel that he reversed the wheel to create bands of repeating ruffles

or that he simply tapped the vessel's top to introduce the suggestion of collapse into an otherwise perfect shape. All these devices dramatize the pots' thinness and their feeling of spontaneity, but they also introduce complex emotions - gentleness or violence, irreverence or awe - that convey an undiluted sense of Ohr's presence and personality.

If we are lucky, this exhibition will lead to a full-blown survey of Ohr's work, one that would feature some of the more modest, often quite tiny (shot-glass-sized) bowls and vases, as well as the erotica that he produced. But in the meantime, this show holds its own in a moment when New York, playing host to Picasso and Braque and Velazquez, is blessed with museum exhibitions of almost overwhelming greatness. It manages this by revealing an artist who focused absolutely on his chosen medium, who believed that its possibilities were limitless and who proved them to be so.

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George Ohr, outside the second pottery, 1894