NEWCOMB POTTERY

by Susan Tucker, Ph.D.

NEWCOMB POTTERY IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT AMERICAN art potteries of the first half of the twentieth century. Influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement, Newcomb pottery was exhibited around the world, sold in shops on both coasts, and written about in art journals throughout the United States and Europe. Newcomb potters (always men) and designers (always women and girls, though called craftsmen) were awarded eight medals at international exhibitions before 1916. Began in 1895, the pottery operated until 1940.

The pottery derives its name from H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, the coordinate women's college of Tulane University in New Orleans, where the works were cast and decorated as part of the art educational program. The Newcomb art curriculum, as well as the utilitarian philosophy underlying it, were unique among art potteries and women's colleges of the time. Josephine Louise Newcomb's gift founding Newcomb College in 1886, as a memorial to her deceased teenage daughter, stressed an education both "practical and literary." The art department would become the focus of this institutional ideal.

Among the young faculty hired to develop Newcomb's program of art education was Ellsworth Woodward, who brought with him traditions he learned at the Rhode Island School of Design. Woodward envisioned an ambitious program of vocational training for young women artists. Under his guidance, Mary Given Sheerer was recruited from Cincinnati to teach first china decoration and then pottery. Sheerer became a dedicated leader within the early Newcomb community and a respected authority on ceramics. From 1896 through 1925 most Newcomb Pottery was thrown by Joseph Meyer based on designs prepared by Newcomb students and alumnae under Sheerer's direction. Completed pots also were decorated by women in the Newcomb art department. Newcomb Pottery always operated as a studio pottery, never as a large-scale production pottery.

Meyer had been hired in fall 1897 as the third potter for the Newcomb Pottery. His classically shaped pots and consistently high standards provided the background needed for the designs of the Newcomb women. Together they collaborated on a style of pottery with great appeal and artistic merit. Their first success was in the award of a bronze medal at the Paris International Exposition of 1900.

Earlier, Meyer and his friend George Ohr had worked with designers involved in the short-lived New Orleans Art Pottery (1886-1890), some of whose participants became Newcomb students or inspired them. Ohr is said to have worked at Newcomb for a short time in the late 1880s. Biographical information indicates that Ohr left New Orleans in 1890 to return to the Mississippi studio and store he built in 1888. He later became known as the "Mad Potter of Biloxi," a moniker given for his eccentric personality and his wild and exaggerated pottery...
SADIE IRVINE
Opposite: Newcomb College vase, 1918
Ceramic: 6 x 9 in.
Roger W. Ogden Collection

pieces that rank among the most experimental works of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Paul Cox was brought to Newcomb Pottery in 1910 to
improve the quality of the clay and glazes. Cox developed the
soft, waxy, semi-matte glazes that Newcomb Pottery became
famous for during its transitional period of production. Cox was
with Newcomb Pottery until 1918.

Based on the visions of Shearer and Woodward, the distinct
wares of Newcomb Pottery became well known in the art world
of the day. The students and graduates worked with designs
evocative of the American South, inspired by Louisiana flora
and crafted from local and regional clay. As the twentieth
century opened before them, some students moved toward
developing more modern designs, yet still maintained the
philosophy that no two pieces of pottery should be alike.
During its nearly fifty years of operation, Newcomb Pottery
provided employment to roughly ninety Newcomb graduates,
and produced some seventy thousand distinct pieces of work.

Although Newcomb pottery is best known for its blue and
green, several other colors can be found as well. The early

works reflected a wide variety of colors, with green and yellow
marked by a blue glass glaze, and orange marked by a red
blue and green with greens
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works reflect an interest in earth tones such as olive greens and yellows, though in general, the period 1895-1900 was marked by experimentation with a variety of clay bodies, glazes, and colors. During 1910-1918, a transparent matte glaze over blue and green underglazes was frequently used. In the period 1918-1928 pink sometimes was added to these blue and green tints. From 1928-1934, a strong cobalt blue with green was added; and in 1935-1940, blues, soft pinks, and greens of different shades appeared.

Newcomb Pottery was sold through exhibitions and displays. In addition, the college advertised its wares in The Newcomb Arcade, the college magazine (published 1909-1934), and, from 1898 onward, through consignment to various stores, shops, and organizations around the country. Family records show that the first piece of pottery was sold in 1896 for $4.00 by Selina Bres (later the mother of sculptor Angela Gregory) to a Mrs. Biddham in Boston. Newspaper records in 1901 indicate "a lump was ... sent to Berlin, and ... to Connecticut." By this time, Ellsworth Woodward noted that young women could make a modest income from their own work. Soon, Woodward was able to
convince the college administration to put up funds for the construction of a separate pottery building, which included a spacious sales room. New Orleans newspapers regularly reported on the pottery's commercial success.

In the January 1909 edition of the Arcade, Woodward wrote: "Schools have come to realize that where one may be prepared to add to the sum of beauty and achieve personal success through the pictorial arts, a hundred may be trained to useful enterprise in the field of artistic craftsmanship—a limitless field in which the world of industry ministers to the needs of a refined civilization."

**Sadie Irvine**

Sadie Irvine was the most well-known of all the Newcomb designers. Scholars have called her "the cornerstone" of the Newcomb pottery program. More so than any other artist, Irvine maintained a lifelong connection with the college, through most of the early years of acclaim and later when she and others tried new designs, colors, and motifs.

She came from a small Catholic family in Uptown New Orleans. Irvine's mother died when she was quite young; her stepmother at Newcomb as an Art 160. Irvine's watercolor, Independent, directly on them, and the various their design..."
stepmother encouraged her talents and oversaw her enrollment at Newcomb in 1902. She graduated in 1906, and was listed as an Art Craftsman from 1908-1929. From 1929 until her retirement in 1952, she taught pottery design, embroidery, watercolor, drawing and design, bookplates, and blockprints.

Independent and immensely capable, Irvine could draw directly onto the clay shape, perfectly measuring with her eye the various widths. She encouraged her students to think out their designs, and gave them freedom to select modeling in low relief, incisions, painting, or a combination of these methods on the clay shape.

She designed many vases with the oak, moss, and moon motif. "I have surely lived to regret it," she said many years later. "Our beautiful moss draped oak trees appealed to the buying public but nothing is less suited to the tall graceful vases—no way to convey the true character of the tree. And oh, how boring it was to use the same motif over and over though each one was a fresh drawing...."
Harriet J.

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416 Newcomb Pottery
HARRIET JOOR

Born in Texas in 1875, Harriet "Hattie" Joor arrived in New Orleans at a young age when her father became a physician and botanist at Tulane University. Joor's mother made sure that all her daughters partook of the education (and tuition waivers for the families of professors) offered to young women at Newcomb High School and College.

The young Joor proved to be versatile as well as talented while a student at Newcomb College. Her studies centered around both the "scientific" course—the study of languages, literature, history, and the sciences—and the art curriculum. She graduated in 1895, one of nine members of the first class to work extensively with pottery and china painting alongside teacher Mary Given Sheerer.

Always an enthusiastic person, Joor described her co-workers as a "little band of stouthearted students who worked shoulder to shoulder with Miss Sheerer in the low, gaunt, barn-like room which was at once kiln room and studio, turning room and sales place." She remembered the tubs of clay that had been brought from Bayou Bougie Falaya and the many lessons about the "vagaries of the kiln" and the "mysterious interrelation of pastes and glazes."

This learning served her well. In 1900, she traveled to the Dow Summer School at Ipswich, Massachusetts—and in this journey, she was one of the first Newcomb students to leave the South. During that same year, her work earned a bronze medal at an international exhibit in Paris. She also sent a cracker jar with taney motif, a vase with holly design, and a large vase with magnolia motif to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in 1904. She won the Nell medal for proficiency in watercolor painting in 1904.

Shortly thereafter, she moved to Chicago where she taught at the University of Chicago and directed the work of an art pottery. Then she homesteaded in South Dakota, writing a number of articles on her experiences in a mud cabin. She returned to the South to teach at various schools in Louisiana and Mississippi, including All Saints' School in Vicksburg. In the late twenties through the 1950s, she taught at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette (today's University of Louisiana-Lafayette).

MARIE DE HOA LEBLANC

Marie de Hoa LeBlanc was one of the most colorful and prolific of the early Newcomb designers. Born in 1874 into an old Creole family, LeBlanc first attended Newcomb College at age 20. With the blessing of the family, she and her sister Emilie (also a prolific artist) rode the streetcar from their French Quarter home to Newcomb's Washington Avenue campus.

Until this time, both had probably lived within the confines of French-speaking New Orleans, venturing to Ursuline Academy and other spots closer to their neighborhood. Little scholarly work has been done on the demographics of early Newcomb students, yet rumor always held that Creole families questioned higher education for girls, particularly at Newcomb College. But the Creole roots of Marie and Emilie appeared no problem in their ventures to the Uptown campus. They spoke French and English with equal eloquence; they later learned German and Spanish.

These languages served them well as they made yearly trips to study art, often in Europe; they also traveled to many Asian countries. In between these trips, Marie de Hoa LeBlanc worked as a Newcomb Pottery crafts-person, a painter, and a teacher within New Orleans public, private, and vocational schools. She won many awards for her efforts.

In 1902, for example, she was awarded $150 to travel to Harvard for the Ross lecture series; in 1904, she was awarded $300 to travel to Europe for her superior work in pottery; and in 1912, she was the New Orleans delegate to the International Art Congress in Dresden, Germany. She was awarded the Louisiana Purchase Exposition bronze medal in 1904 and the Art Association of New Orleans gold medal in 1914.

She returned to Newcomb College to study from 1909 to 1914, and also received further education at the Art Institute of Chicago and at Harvard University, along with periods of study in Munich, Germany and Paris, France. 411

This essay was adapted from an online exhibit of Newcomb Pottery researched, designed, and produced by Veronica Leandres, Crystal Kile, Lisa Pollack, and Susan Tucher.