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The Story of a VASE

From its beginnings as an occupational therapy workshop, Marblehead Pottery grew to be a commercial success and coveted name among collectors.

BY JEANNE SCHINTO



Marblehead Pottery was active between 1904 and 1936 in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Back row, left to right, Decoration by Hannah Tutt, 1860–1952, vase, circa 1910, wheel-thrown earthenware with incised and glazed leaf and berry decoration, 8 1/2 x 4 inches, impressed factory mark and HT with original paper label.

Decoration by Arthur E. Baggs, 1886–1947, vase, circa 1910, wheel-thrown earthenware with incised and glazed pinecone decoration, 12 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches, impressed factory mark and AB with remnants of original paper label.

Decoration by Hannah Tutt, 1860–1952, vase, 1910, wheel-thrown earthenware with incised and glazed leaf and berry decoration, 11 1/4 x 4 3/4 inches, impressed factory mark and HT with original paper label.

Front row, left to right, Ink stand, early 20th century, wheel-thrown earthenware with green glaze and paneled top, 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches, impressed factory mark.

Vase, early 20th century, Wheel-thrown earthenware with dark green glaze and paneled and incised decoration, 4 3/4 x 4 inches, impressed factory mark.

Vase, early 20th century, wheel-thrown earthenware with ecru ground and painted blossom decoration, 3 1/2 x 3 inches, impressed factory mark.

Vase, early 20th century, wheel-thrown earthenware with gray glaze and blossom and tendrils decoration, 4 x 3 1/2 inches, impressed factory mark.

PHOTOGRAPH
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Two summers ago, a 19-year-old antiques picker cruising New England yard sales happened upon an earthenware vase. Only 8½ inches tall, the piece was glazed in a matte yellow and decorated with a landscape of haystacks. He turned it upside down. The bottom was incised with an "M" and "P" flanking a sailing ship. A couple of other initials marked the bottom as well. He bought it along with a snowmobile helmet for about \$60.

Pickers can make a living because they have good instincts. Usually, though, it takes years to develop them. This young picker changed his life when he bought that vase. Doing research online, he learned the "M" and "P" stood for Marblehead Pottery and the sailing ship was its logo. Then he saw some eye-popping prices. He sent photos to Skinner, the Boston-based auction house. A 20th-century design specialist, Dan Ayer, didn't hesitate. He drove 250 miles the next morning to pick up the vase for consignment.

Not just an early piece made in Marblehead (around 1909), this Marblehead Pottery vase is a rarity due to its design. Experts think the landscape was based on images of Ipswich marshes painted by the esteemed artist Arthur Wesley Dow, and only three others like it are known to exist. The other initials, "A" and "T," designate the vase's designer, Annie E. Aldrich, and decorator, Sarah Tutt.

Ayer estimated it would sell for \$10,000 to \$12,000 at Skinner's next 20th-century design sale, to be held that December. When the catalog came out, word spread, and on auction day, there were multiple contenders: Five had left absentee bids, three sat in the audience, and ten were on the phone lines. One phone bidder went up to a level characterized by some as "shocking" and others as "crazy." Unnamed by Skinner and described only as "a private collector," he or she can now claim to have paid the highest price for any Marblehead Pottery piece ever sold at auction—\$303,000.

Marblehead Pottery itself began as workshop for people suffering from so-called nervous conditions—nervous breakdowns, if you will. Today a medication and counseling would undoubtedly be prescribed, but in 1904 the Harvard-trained physician Herbert J. Hall, who pioneered "occupational therapy," arranged for his charges to engage in arts and crafts. Basket weaving, metalwork,



Top to bottom, Marblehead Pottery bowl with "Stalking Panther" pattern, 1920, wheel-thrown earthenware with incised and glazed decoration, 7 5/8 x 9 inches, impressed factory mark. Panther Bowl from the collection of Peter Lynch

Marblehead Pottery, pair of bookends with sailing ships, circa 1910, cast in shades of blue, 5 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 3 inches, impressed factory mark.

Opposite page, Natzi ceramic collection, master Bedroom, Marblehead © 2018 Peabody Essex Museum



and pottery making were believed by Dr. Hall to calm troubled minds. His in-laws, the Goldthwaits, lived at 69 Pleasant Street in Marblehead and owned property near Devereux Beach. That's one reason why his sanitarium got established at Devereux Mansion, once a popular resort hotel on the North Shore railroad line.

Dr. Hall hired Arthur E. Baggs, an art student at Alfred University in upstate New York, to oversee the pottery making that first summer. Baggs stayed on. A few years later, the therapy workshop had been spun off as a commercial enterprise and Baggs became its director. In 1915, he bought it from Dr. Hall, carrying on until it closed in 1936, during the Great Depression.

Baggs and his small staff of artisans made everything by hand, in keeping with the creed of the Arts & Crafts movement. To its acolytes, handwork was considered an antidote to the machine-driven pace of modern life that was, supposedly, causing nervous conditions in

the first place. Marblehead Pottery sold its vases, bowls, pitchers, planters, bookends, tiles, tea sets, and more at a retail shop on 111 Front Street. The shapes were simple and smooth. The matte glazes were distinctive: smoky gray, wisteria purple, rose pink, various greens, yellow (like the picker's vase), a hue now known as "Marblehead blue," and one that a 1919 Marblehead Pottery catalog called "tobacco brown."

Tourists visiting the North Shore bought the items as souvenirs, but the operation was more than local. For example, at a 2015 auction in Lambertville, New Jersey, a 6-inch square tile that fetched \$100,000 bore a tag showing it had been sold originally by Tiffany's in New York in 1908—for \$5.

Collectors started buying on the secondary market in the 1960s, riding a new wave of interest in the Arts & Crafts movement. Pieces were cheap then, and prices didn't take off until the whole antiques market did in the 1980s. Especially coveted were early items,

ones with rare designs, and those marked with the initials of the designer, decorator, or a combination. Some collectors of Marblehead Pottery, like Robert A. Ellison, Jr., who has promised his collection of art pottery in general to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, are famous in the collecting community. There has been at least one celebrity collector: Bruce Willis sold 25 Marblehead Pottery pieces through the Los Angeles branch of the auction house Bonhams in 2014.

Not every piece commands six figures, or even five. At a more recent 20th-century design sale at Skinner, last June, two Marblehead Pottery vases sold, one (with initials and logo) for \$9,840 and another (without markings) for \$923. What's more, some of the best pieces aren't for sale. These examples can be seen in museums as far away as Indianapolis and Chicago, as well as at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, and on the North Shore.

About 30 pieces are on permanent exhibition at Marblehead's Jeremiah Lee Mansion. Open June through October, it is run by the Marblehead Museum, whose executive director, Lauren McCormack, says all these pieces were donated, mostly in the 1980s and 1990s. Another collection, overseen by the Marblehead Historical Commission, is in Abbott Hall, the town's municipal offices, whose renovation is due for completion by year's end.

Those who visit A Passion for American Art: Selections from the Peter and Carolyn Lynch Collection, which runs through February 2, 2020 at Salem's Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), will see one particularly choice piece. It is a bowl glazed in Marblehead blue and ringed with a pattern of sinuous, stalking panthers. The MFA owns a similar one, donated by Boston collector John P. Axelrod in 1990. PEM itself owns about 10 pieces, says associate curator Sarah N. Chasse, who considers the best example a 1912 bowl designed by Arthur Irwin Hennessey. Some scholars speculate that Hennessey, a local fisherman's son, may have once been a patient of Dr. Hall's. Some say the same about Annie E. Aldrich, who designed the picker's vase, which just adds to its mystique. ♦ skinnerinc.com, mfa.org, pem.org, marbleheadmuseum.org, marbleheadhistory.org, marbleheadpottery.net.