



**Fig. 1:** Charles Volkmar (1841–1914), vase, France, 1877–1878. Earthenware. H. 26 in. Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr. L.2009.22.44. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.

# American Ceramics, 1876–1956

The Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

by Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen and Adrienne Spinozzi

Among the significant additions to the new American Wing of The Metropolitan Museum are the thirteen glass cases featuring the promised gift by collector Robert A. Ellison Jr. of over 250 examples of American art pottery. The earliest works date to the nation's centennial; the latest to 1956, which saw the rise of the studio potter. The Ellison collection offers a visual progression of this innovative and rich period of ceramic making in America.

The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was an important catalyst for the art pottery movement in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Deriving inspiration from the

ceramics displays from Great Britain, France, and the Far East, some potters took up the French technique of *barbotine*—painting on a vase with liquid clay or slip. One of the most skilled practitioners of this technique was Charles Volkmar (1841–1914). Volkmar studied as an easel painter and was first attracted to pottery during studies in France, leading him to create painterly landscapes in heavy impasto on ceramic vases, one of the most notable of which features a pastoral scene (Fig. 1) that evokes similar scenes by the Barbizon painters. Artist-signed, the piece was executed in France prior to Volkmar's return to New York, where he set up a pottery making

and decorating establishment and continued to paint vases, plaques, and tiles in the same mode.

John Bennett (1840–1907) was another leading proponent of painted wares in the early years of the art pottery movement. Bennett, who had worked at the Doulton pottery at Lambeth, London, in the early 1870s and exhibited his painted ceramics at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, set up his own workshops in New York City for the decorating of pottery. The large vase by Bennett in the Ellison collection (Fig. 2) relates to the British design reform movement of the late 1860s and early 1870s, and features sprays



of peonies with heavy black outlines on a rich mottled blue background. Also artist-signed, it is dated 1882, indicating that it was executed in the peak year of Bennett's production, just prior to his relocation to Orange, New Jersey, in the following year.

Nonrepresentational ceramic decoration in the form of glazes also fascinated Americans during the formative years of the movement and continued to do so over the ensuing decades. The earliest practitioner was Hugh C. Robertson (1845–1908), the principal of the Chelsea Ceramic Art Works in Massachusetts. Achieving the rich red of Chinese sang de boeuf (or oxblood red) glaze became his pri-

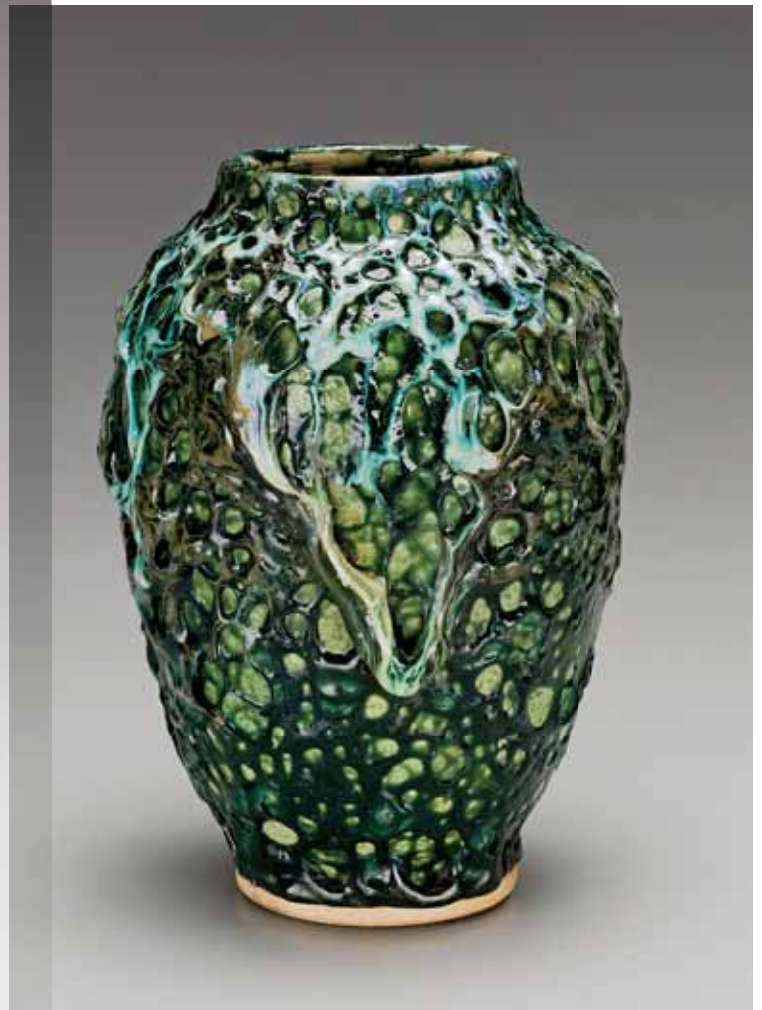
mary preoccupation, and one that he perfected in countless variations. The Ellison collection reveals the endless subtleties of color effects and textures that he produced from about 1884 until his experimentation forced the firm into bankruptcy in 1889. In 1895, with new funding, Robertson founded the Dedham Pottery, where he parlayed the crackle glaze he had developed earlier into a commercially successful business in tablewares. This enabled him to continue his glaze experiments, now in polychrome, which resulted in thick, multi-colored volcanic flowing glazes with blistering textures (Fig. 5).

The late 1890s saw numerous potters

**LEFT TO RIGHT:**

**Fig. 2:** John Bennett (1840-1907), vase, New York, N.Y., 1882. Earthenware. H. 25½ in. Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr. L.2009.22.50. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.

**Fig. 3:** Rookwood Pottery (1880-1967), decorated by Harriet E. Wilcox (active at Rookwood 1886-1907), vase, Cincinnati, OH, 1901. Earthenware. H. 10⅝ in. Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr. L.2009.22.270. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.



exploring innovative glaze effects, including the highly distinctive matte glazes achieved by William A. Grueby in Boston and unusual monochromatic glazes at the Merrimac Pottery and the Walley Pottery, both also in Massachusetts. Although William J. Walley (1852–1919), experimented with a variety of different color effects at his pottery, one of the most unusual is on a slender vase with cutout handles and rim (Fig. 4). The glaze of deep forest green, which reveals the form's dark muted body, has pulled and separated in a seemingly accidental manner that gives it a remarkable textural quality.

Nature remained the principle source of inspiration for many ceramic artists. Decorators of the Arts and Crafts period, in particular, celebrated plant motifs in countless variations and interpretations; their techniques were equally

as varied and included painting, molding, incising, and carving. Floral themes dominated the decorated ceramics of Rookwood Pottery, Cincinnati, Ohio; one of the most unusual responses appears in an example executed by Harriet E. Wilcox (active 1886–1907). Her abstract evocation of a flower (Fig. 3) — perhaps a peony — whose fleshy petals are rendered in almost shocking hues of fuschia, chartreuse, and purple, contrasts to the naturalistically rendered version of the same genus by John Bennett. Yet another approach is illustrated in the stylized chrysanthemum vase executed at the Paul Revere Pottery of the Saturday Evening Girls (Fig. 6); the pottery established as a social experiment in training young girls in Boston's immigrant North End neighborhood. Rejecting the painterly quality of earlier styles, the decorators here embraced a

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**Fig. 4:** William J. Walley (1852–1919), vase, West Sterling, Mass., 1898–1919. Stoneware. H. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.

Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr. L.2009.22.105. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.

**Fig. 5:** Dedham Pottery (1895–1943), Hugh C. Robertson (1845–1908), vase, Dedham, Mass. 1895–1908. Stoneware. H. 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.

Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr. L.2009.22.99. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.


Fig. 6: Paul Revere Pottery of the Saturday Evening Girls (1908–42),  
executed by Ida Goldstein (b. 1894),  
vase, Boston and Brighton, Mass., ca. 1911 – 1914  
Earthenware. H. 8¾ in.  
Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr.  
L.2009.22.233. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.





**Fig. 7:** George E. Ohr (1857–1918),  
vase, Biloxi, Miss., 1897–1900.  
Earthenware. H. 7¾ in.  
Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr.  
L.2009.22.282. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.

of studio pottery; W. Hunt Diederich (1884–1953) among them. His large charger (Fig. 8) recalls the silhouettes of stylized animals he produced in a range of media. The sgraffito design of a stylized cat and dog creates positive and negative space that gives this piece a strong graphic quality. Work in the collection by later studio artists Otto and Gertrude Natzler and Peter Voulkos, among others, underscores the continued experimental fervor for new surfaces and forms.

In presenting this survey of art pottery to the museum, Ellison envisions the collection stimulating new appreciation for this formative period of American ceramics. 

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much more simplified and geometricized approach to design. The vase is organized in bands of incised decoration on a tonal matte ground. The floral motif, with its crisply delineated petals and leaves, adheres to the tenets of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Ellison collection contains a group of twenty works of the Biloxi, Mississippi, potter George E. Ohr (1857–1918), who manipulated finely potted vessels by twisting, bending, folding, and crimping. He experimented with both form and glazes, and his idiosyncratic works, each one a kind of nonrepresentational sculpture, presaged abstraction by several decades. One such example is a slumped footed vase with a pocked blue glaze (Fig. 7). Its vertical shape is off balance, giving it an unexpected gestural quality.

The abstracted designs of the Art Deco era provided stylistic inspiration for many artists during the early years



**Fig. 8:** W. Hunt Diederich (1884–1953),  
charger, New York, N.Y., 1925–1935.  
Earthenware. Diam. 16¾ in.  
Promised Gift of Robert A. Ellison Jr.  
L.2009.22.76. Photograph Robert A. Ellison Jr.