On the Road to Rookwood: Women's Art and Culture in Cincinnati, 1870-1890

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Introduction

Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati (1880-1967) was the largest, longest lasting and arguably most important of more than 150 art pottery operations in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American Art Pottery movement arose largely in reaction to the perceived inferiority of American ceramic ware exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. At the Exposition, ceramics displays from over 400 foreign exhibitors—including important displays from England, France and Japan—stimulated an interest in improving the quality of America's production on the part of both established ceramists (primarily men) and amateur china painters (primarily women). Among Centennial visitors who were to play a significant role in the American Art Pottery movement was the founder of Rookwood Pottery, Maria Longworth Nichols of Cincinnati, who had displayed her china painting in the Women's Pavilion. Reportedly Nichols was so impressed by the ceramics of Japan at the Centennial that she persuaded her wealthy father to provide the funds so that she could have her own pottery, which she named after the Longworth country estate.

Three years later, in 1883, William Watts Taylor, an able administrator with no experience in the ceramics business, was hired to manage the Pottery. Nichols, widowed in 1885, devoted less time to her decorating interests following her 1886 marriage to Bellamy Storer, a politician in Theodore Roosevelt's circle. She signed the Pottery over to Taylor in 1890 when she retired, giving it to him as a present.

Rookwood was subsequently incorporated with Taylor, the majority shareholder, as president and treasurer, roles he held until his death in 1913. Throughout his tenure at Rookwood, Taylor maintained tight control over production, marketing and consumption of the ware, overseeing the growth of the firm from a local entity to one garnering international acclaim.

This article examines Rookwood as a site of women's labor that inspired two very different views. On the one hand a sizable percentage of the populace saw and praised the Pottery as a feminine endeavor. On the other hand William Watts Taylor, who ran the company for thirty years, emphatically denied this association. These different vantage points can be understood within the nexus of domesticity and women's labor. The doctrine of separate spheres, also known as the "cult of domesticity," provided both a limitation and a springboard to women's art production in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is, this ideology insisted that women's place was in the home and viewed women as natural guardians of the arts. This made available several opportunities for women to be involved in art production but particularly favored arts accomplished in and for the home such as china painting.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, "china mania," and a "wild ceramic orgy" swept the United States and Rookwood's founder, Maria Longworth Nichols, as well as a number of other socially prominent Cincinnati women were avid participants. Nichols was the granddaughter of art patron Nicholas Longworth, sponsor of Hiram Powers and Robert Duncanson; Longworth was listed in the 1850 census as paying the largest sum in real estate taxes of any individual in the United States, except for William B. Astor. She was the daughter of Nancy Owen is a lecturer in Gender Studies at Northwestern University where she received her doctorate. Ohio University Press will publish her book on Rookwood Pottery this year.
Joseph Longworth, who became wealthy in his own right after Nicholas' death in 1863. Although Nichols and the other Cincinnati ceramists gained national recognition for art pottery efforts, they never escaped the association of their work with the amateur endeavors of the "idle rich." When Nichols founded Rookwood this association followed her into the public sphere. It was this appellation that William Taylor sought to avoid when he took over the firm as manager in order to make it a viable commercial enterprise.

Shortly after the Pottery was founded in 1880, Maria Nichols and Rookwood began to receive a great deal of positive publicity seemingly because of her sex. Writing in 1895, Nichols acknowledged this saying, "I don't suppose any undertaking ever had so much gratuitous advertising as the Rookwood Pottery, because it was a woman's." Rookwood decorator Clara Newton wrote in 1901 that, "The trying of such a project by a woman, was not only new in our country, it had in it also an element of the picturesque that fascinated the imagination." An article in The Ladies Home Journal of October 1892 suggested that, "in having been founded by a woman, it is a witness to the important and active share taken by women in the work of this country, a privilege peculiarly American, and not paralleled except in comparatively rare instances in the nations of the Old World." Rookwood was often invited to exhibit wares in the women's section of national and international expositions.

This recognition of Rookwood as a feminine endeavor persisted long after Maria Nichols had dissociated herself from the Pottery. William Watts Taylor did not welcome the links between Rookwood and femininity. Although the decorating department established in 1881 initially included only women (most of whom worked part time), when Taylor took over as manager he immediately began to hire male decorators, a practice that led some of the women to resign. Maria Nichols supported Taylor's policy and echoed evolutionary sentiments about women's lack of endurance, telling the remaining female workers, "there were simply not enough women with the proper artistic ability and sufficient energy to come day after day and do a day's work." Despite Taylor's efforts at gender segregation, during the golden age of the Pottery (1883-1913), women decorators usually outnumbered men.

Taylor may have felt some personal antipathy to women as well as to his subordinate role, for in 1887 he wrote, "while she remains the proprietor of Rookwood, the writer, who is an adult male conducts the business." Moreover, when invited to display ware in the Women's Industrial Section of the 1888 Glasgow International Exhibition Taylor responded, "On looking into the matter closely we find that practically all the high class work we now have on hand is done by men and could not well be classified in the department of women's work." When asked about participation in a local industrial fair Taylor again replied that "so large a part of our higher class work is done by men that we do not think we could make a proper exhibit in the women's department." On another occasion he tried to hedge his bets remarking that "most of our work is done by men, but of course the Pottery as an institution is 'woman's work.'" In a letter to a Chicago patron he wrote, "You please us greatly in calling Rookwood Pottery 'virile.' We do our best to get that quality into it at least." Indeed by 1904, the role of women at Rookwood was being discounted altogether. Taylor peevishly wrote to his friend and fellow art pottery expert, Charles Fergus Binns, that "The Pottery has been written about to a rather tiresome degree from the 'woman's standpoint' and you can imagine how this has been rather written to death. . . . Of course you know Rookwood so well that you appreciate how its characteristic development has been the work of the other sex to at least a controlling extent." The Cult of Domesticity

The late Victorian "cult of domesticity" was rooted in traditionalist notions of separate spheres for middle- and upper-class men and women. This powerful ideology posited a rigorous division between a masculine public realm dedicated to production, competition and material gain and a feminine private or domestic realm consecrated to ideal virtues, beauty and consumption. In this era, bourgeois masculinity was hegemonically defined in relation to paid professional work, whereas bourgeois femininity was organized in the family around marriage, domesticity, motherhood and child-care. The "masculine" professional took his meaning by inflection with its opposite, the amateur, who stayed comfortably at home within the realm of "lady amateur" dabbling at art study and more often at decorative art production.
In the Gilded Age, "amateur" lost all vestiges of its association with upper-class refinement and virtuous gentlemanly achievement. Instead, as one writer suggested, "amateur collided with professional." During this period another author noted, "It is not easy, again, for women to escape the influence of the common notions of 'amateur' as contrasted with 'professional' work, by which, in a strange confusion of meaning, we have come to understand that to do a thing 'for love of it' is really equivalent to doing it imperfectly." Because the work of amateurs was almost always understood to be the work of women, "amateur accomplishment" came to be associated with the tradition of female parlor training and amateurism came to be cultural conceit that distinguished a popular and frequently feminine art from "serious" elite and often masculine art. As Lewis Day wrote in 1881, "Assuming that lady amateurs do not, as a class, think of materially altering their mode of life, but simply desire to occupy their leisure pleasurably in the pursuit of art, it would be better for them...that they should realize at the outset that...it is improbable that their paintings will have any great value as art. The conditions of their life are against it." In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, "amateur" had the connotation of feminine, the opposite of professional. The caricature of the lady amateur not only created severe problems for professional women artists, it was also problematic for professional craftswomen trying to establish the sincerity of their involvement.

Amateurism was also threatening from an economic perspective. Charles Ashbee writing in 1908 acknowledged that amateurs were not exclusively female yet at the same time he criticized the lady amateur: "Our fellows are rightly nervous of this competition of the amateur, especially the lady amateur...She is perpetually tingling to sell her work...and her name is legion and because, being supported by her parents she is prepared to sell her labour for 2d. an hour, where the skilled workman has to sell his for 1s. in order to keep up standard and support family." Similar sentiments were expressed by a critic of "well-to-do-society ladies who are using their knowledge of the arts, especially that of china painting to increase their allowance of pin money, so that they may indulge themselves or rather their passion for more elaborate apparel." The author did not take issue with women's painting for their "own satisfaction" or "for sweet charity's sake" but considered it selfish for women of wealth and fashion to try to sell their work and possibly drive down the prices for commercial wares produced by male professionals. Thus, the constellation of attributes associated with amateurism were: female, dilettante, upper-class, self-taught and non-commercial. Features ascribed to professionalism were: male, serious or intellectual, middle-class, educated, and commercial.

The Practice of China Painting

One way for women to bridge the gap between womanliness and professionalism was to undertake typical amateur activities for pay which could be accomplished at home. As such, china painting and needlework were ideal professions for middle-class women not only because they had aristocratic associations but because they were performed at home. China painting and needlework were especially valuable because they contributed to creating a soothing environment distinctly separate from the materialistic world in which husbands and fathers worked. Estimates of the total number of china painters in the United States during the 1890s range from forty-five hundred to twenty-five thousand. Interestingly, china painting was often equated to an affliction: American women had supposedly succumbed to the "china craze" or to "china mania." These pejoratives neatly reinforced the amateur status of the work.

Most decoration was floral and was done by the overglaze process, which involved applying mineral colors to the surface of a previously fired, hard-china blank and then refiring it to a temperature that caused the enamel to fuse with the blank, making the painted design a permanent decoration. Painters could purchase white blanks, colors and other supplies from a large number of vendors. They could take or send their work by mail to be fired at a commercial kiln or could purchase a portable kiln for home use. Many larger cities featured china painting classes either with individual teachers or at schools of design. In addition to such classes, there were also at least fifty instruction manuals published between 1870 and 1920 that disseminated information on china-painting techniques and processes to enthusiasts. One of the most popular was by Mary Louise McLaughlin of Cincinnati. Her book, China Painting, first published in 1877, eventually sold over
twenty thousand copies. There were also special interest periodicals such as *The China Decorator* (1887-1901), *Keramic Studio* (1899-1924), and *Ceramic Monthly* (1895-1900) that provided instructions, color studies for copying at home and hints on firing.

China painting was not entirely segregated from the broader developing interest in art during the period. Magazines like *Art Amateur*, *International Studio*, *Brush and Pencil*, *The Magazine of Art* and *Arts & Decoration* also carried news and sometimes reviewed exhibitions held by china painting organizations or other arts and crafts exhibitions that included china painting. Thus home decoration and art endeavors such as china painting, while practiced in the private sphere, gave women some personal control over their homes and played a role in liberating women's creative spirit in the late-nineteenth century.

This is not to say that the creative efforts of many women china painters were always taken seriously. Although both men and women painted china, it was usually men who were the European-trained leaders of the movement and the women who were most often labeled "amateurs." Indeed McLaughlin's exceedingly popular manual, subtitled *A Practical Manual for the Use of Amateurs in the Decoration of Hard Porcelain*, alludes in the preface to the fact that the book was written for women: "Having been repeatedly urged to give the results of my experience in china painting to my fellow art-students, I take this method of doing so." Indeed McLaughlin's "fellow art-students" were, of course, women who were becoming increasingly attracted to china painting. To be sure, there were many women for whom china painting was little more than a way to fill leisure time made possible by household servants. However, there were other women who sought and achieved financial success and recognition but all were consumers buying materials and taking lessons. Regardless of their purpose, the great majority of women who participated in this popular art rarely, if ever, received the labels of "artist" or "professional." Although a few women china painters, such as M. Louise McLaughlin, achieved national and international professional recognition, the efforts of the majority of women participants were trivialized as amateurish.

The woman who founded Rookwood Pottery, Maria Longworth Nichols, an upper-class amateur china painter, founded the Pottery primarily for her own satisfaction but succeeded in providing consistent, respectable employment for a large number of professional women artists. In order to fully grasp what was at stake in the founding and promulgation of Rookwood Pottery, it is necessary to examine the cultural climate in Cincinnati in the late-nineteenth century and to discuss Rookwood's amateur antecedents.

**Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati**

Cincinnati, founded in 1788, was a mature and prosperous city by the mid-nineteenth century. A boom town in the years before the Civil War, immigration caused the city's population to grow from 750 persons in 1800 to 26,515 in 1830 and to 161,044 in 1860. The city's position on the Ohio River, the major transportation link between the East Coast and the opening West, brought trade and an impetus to manufacturing. Beginning in 1870, Cincinnati annually staged the largest Industrial Expositions held in the United States prior to the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. With the wealth of industry came cultural refinement. Known variously as the "Queen City," and the "Athens of the West," Cincinnati developed into a major regional art center by 1865. A number of artists lived and worked there, and patrons promoted its artists by direct support and by purchasing their paintings. Several organizations were formed to provide training and criticism.

One such organization, the Ladies' Academy of the Fine Arts (LAFA) was founded in 1854 by Sarah Worthington King Peter, who had earlier founded the Philadelphia School of Design. The purpose of the Ladies' Academy was "To aid in the cultivation of public taste—to afford encouragement to artists, and to furnish a source of intellectual recreation and enjoyment to the people by the establishment of Galleries of copies executed in the best manner from master pieces of paintings and sculpture." In the first sixty days of its existence, LAFA managed to sponsor four events including a loan exhibition, a Shakespeare reading, a gala party and a lecture. The standard price of admission to LAFA events was fifty-cents, which probably excluded all but the "best sort." Within three months, LAFA had raised enough money to send Mrs. Peter to Europe to secure...
the aforementioned copies. Although she eventually had to advance the majority of the funds herself (a money panic hit Cincinnati during her absence and the association's funds evaporated), she did succeed in obtaining copies of Raphael's *School of Athens* and numerous casts of classical sculpture. These works were exhibited in the LAFA gallery until 1864 when the Association disbanded. The collection then passed to McMicken University and sparked the McMicken School of Design, which eventually became the Cincinnati Art Academy. At least one person later gave LAFA considerable credit on a larger scale, noting that its members, "appear to have been the first body of women in America to appreciate the art-needs of the country, and to set about supplying those of their own city."

McMicken University, chartered in 1859, had been funded by a bequest from Charles McMicken's extensive land holdings and railroad investments to the city of Cincinnati for the establishment of a college where students could obtain a practical English education and sound moral instruction. The McMicken School of Design opened its doors in 1868. The new school admitted students of both sexes, charged no tuition to city residents, and forbade loud talking and use of tobacco. From the beginning, the curriculum was similar, but not identical to, the traditional European academies. First-year students worked on shading and perspective, spending long hours copying from engraved prints of acknowledged masterpieces. Second-year students drew from casts with a focus on composition and design. Third-year students were allowed to draw from nature and work with color, sometimes drawing from models dressed in costumes. Classes were offered during the day and in the evening. Day classes attracted genteel women searching for respectable careers, while evening classes were attended primarily by working-class men.

In 1873, in addition to drawing, the school offered applied art classes in sculpture, wood carving, and engraving, effecting an application of design to local manufacturing. At the center of this initiative was woodcarver Benn Pitman, who had come to the United States from England in 1853. Because furniture manufacture was a major industry in Cincinnati, wood carving was readily accepted into the curriculum at the School of Design. The writing desk shown in Figure 1, carved by Catherine Peachy, is a splendid demonstration of American romantic naturalism. The desk also embodies Pitman's ambivalent attitude toward women's work. While training, guiding and cooperatively working with them in the decorative arts, he was also to some degree supervising the segregation of specific tasks by gender. A work like this desk was usually made from Pitman's designs by a male joiner, then "deconstructed" into its separate parts for decoration by female artists, before being reassembled by the male joiner. Pitman instituted a virtual one-man revival of handicrafts in Cincinnati always stressing the fundamentals of good design. A local influence in Pitman's wood carving came from the similar work of Henry and William Fry. Father and son had come to Cincinnati at mid-century where they decorated the homes of several prominent citizens including John Shillito and Henry Probasco.

Figure 1: Writing Desk by Catherine Peachy, ca. 1870, black cherry and mahogany. (Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Miss Irene Edwards)
Subsequently, they received two commissions from Joseph Longworth: first to decorate Rookwood, his Cincinnati estate; and second to design the interior of a home built for his daughter Maria on the occasion of her marriage to George Ward Nichols in 1868. The Frys, also English, along with Pitman, played particularly influential roles in teaching artistic wood carving to a generation of Cincinnati women, many of whom came from the most refined families in the city.

The School’s exclusiveness brought criticism from one of the university trustees. He found that “instead of helping people who needed art education to make a living, it was run for the accommodation of ladies, mostly the wives and daughters of our wealthy citizens, who go into rhapsodies over the ‘Antique.’” The Frys and Pitman agreed that decoration, especially in the home, not only fit the proper domestic sphere of women but that women “possessed more refined sentiment” and worked “for less sordid ends” than men. “Let men construct and women decorate,” suggested Pitman in his influential A Plea for American Decorative Art.

Pitman was also a major force in introducing the art of china painting to Cincinnati. Reportedly, he obtained a set of colors for china painting in 1874 during a trip to Philadelphia. He subsequently invited a number of students from his wood carving class to try some experiments in mineral painting. The class met in his business office at the Phonographic Institute, which was in the Carlisle Building, diagonally across from the School of Design. Because china painting was not yet included in the School’s curriculum, such classes could not be offered there. Pitman hired Marie Eggers, a young German woman, to give instruction to this small class of interested women that included Mary Louise McLaughlin, Clara Chipman Newton, and Jane Porter Dodd among others. Independent of Pitman’s efforts, Maria Longworth Nichols had discovered china painting a year earlier when a neighbor, Karl Langenbeck, received a set of mineral colors from an uncle in Germany. Whatever the genesis of the movement, at least one local observer noted, “the decorated china fever broke out in this city in almost epidemic form.”

This socially prominent and artistically inclined women’s interest in china decorating came to the attention of the local organization established “to secure a creditable representation of women’s work at the approaching ‘Centennial,’” the Women’s Centennial Committee. The Committee, which included virtually every woman of prominence in Cincinnati, sponsored several events designed to arouse public interest and, more important, to raise funds for participation in the national celebration. The most lavish, the “Martha Washington Tea Party,” featured dancing, food, and beverages served on china decorated with flags and facsimile signatures of George and Martha Washington.

As a result of their fund raising, the Women’s Centennial Committee had $7,000 in their treasury when they recessed for the summer. Eventually $5,000 of this was donated to help raise the $30,000 needed to construct the Women’s Pavilion in Philadelphia. As a consequence of their generosity, the northwest corner of the Women’s Pavilion was reserved for an exhibit from the Cincinnati School of Design, under the sponsorship of the Women’s Centennial Committee. The school’s clientele in 1876 was largely of the same class as the women who sponsored the Centennial activities and some of the students were also members of the Centennial committee. Benn Pitman, who cooperated closely with the Women’s Centennial Committee, accompanied the exhibit of carved furniture, painted china and other art work to Philadelphia and set up the display. The installation, which included wares by Maria Longworth Nichols as well as Mary Louise McLaughlin, was “unquestionably the most extensive and satisfactory exhibit of amateur overglaze decoration made up to that time in the United States.” Indeed, the event marked a significant step in the development of ceramic art in Cincinnati and “can well be designated as an event in the history of pottery in the West. . . . It was a remarkable exhibit, prepared by a few society ladies, and attracted universal comment, so much so that it was deemed worthy of a prominent place in the Centennial.” The Cincinnati exhibition received a great deal of attention and praise, “as its features of wood carving and china painting were novel and in advance of women’s work shown by other cities.” This exhibition was particularly important for these Cincinnati women in that their work, seen outside the city for the first time, was subjected to professional scrutiny and criticism.

An even greater impact than national recogni-
tion came from the displays of other nations at the Centennial. Several Cincinnati craftswomen visited the exhibition, and both Mary Louise McLaughlin and Maria Nichols returned inspired by the work of foreign artists. McLaughlin was impressed by the distinctive underglaze faience pottery produced by Haviland and Company of Limoges, France and began to direct her own efforts in this direction. Their technique known as *proces barbotine*, involved painting under a clear glaze with a liquid mixture of clay and oxides. Nichols's attention was claimed by the Japanese display of pottery and lacquer ware. Both she and her husband came to believe that Japanese design promised "to exert a wide and positive influence upon American art industries."

In the year following the Centennial, McLaughlin not only published her china painting manual but she also began working at Coultry Pottery to try to duplicate the Limoges *proces barbotine* of underglaze decoration. It is important to realize the differences between china painting and art pottery making. Critically, china painting was accomplished most often at home, whereas art pottery production was of necessity carried out in the public sphere. China painting involved painting designs with mineral colors on glazed blanks, which could then be fired in a small, low-temperature kiln. Making art pottery involved many steps: mixing clay, shaping the ware, painting the design, first firing, glazing and second firing. In order to make art pottery one had to have access to facilities, equipment and a staff of workers.

McLaughlin succeeded in producing "Limoges" style decoration the next year, but her technique differed from that of the French in using natural slip on a damp unfired ground rather than slip prepared from fired clay on a thoroughly dried ground. Figure 3 shows McLaughlin's "Ali Baba" vase: a virtuoso example of her mastery of the new technique that is over three feet tall. Once she accomplished this goal, McLaughlin then joined her socially prominent friends to organize the Pottery Club. The minutes of the first meeting record, "The purpose of the Club shall be the development of the art interests of Cincinnati in the direction of underglaze work in Pottery, carving in clay, and in such other directions as may suggest themselves as practicable." It is likely that Maria Nichols was also asked to join, but her invitation somehow became mislaid. Nichols interpreted the undelivered invitation as a slight and
decided to work independently, renting space from Frederick Dallas, owner of Hamilton Road Pottery.

While McLaughlin and Nichols traveled their separate paths, the city had awakened to the fact that it was in the midst of “a wild ceramic orgy.” The Women’s Centennial Committee reorganized to become the Women’s Art Museum Association of Cincinnati (WAMA). In concert with their male advisors, they decided that Cincinnati should have both a museum and an art school modeled on the South Kensington Museum in London. As had been the case for the Ladies Academy of Fine Art, WAMA was interested in decorative arts as much if not more than they were in painting and sculpture. Copies rather than originals were still considered to be the main goal of the collection. The newly formed WAMA organized several classes, including one on china painting. Contending that they had used “good judgment in providing new art classes,” Benn Pitman urged WAMA to take over the operation of the School of Design. They also initiated a Decorative Art Society to encourage women who possessed artistic talent and to furnish a standard of excellence as well as a market for their work.

Separately, John Rettig, a local artist and scene painter, and Albert Valentine opened a class in the Limoges style of pottery decoration, which numbered about “fifty ladies” by the summer of 1880. After three months of instruction it was noted, “A number of the pupils have been learning with the hope of adding to their income by their products. Others have entered the class for amusement.” Mary Gay Humphreys commented, “A whirlwind of petticoats had invaded the potteries. . . . Every woman who could find a corner in a pottery installed herself there.” Frederick Dallas alone was firing the work of more than two hundred amateurs, all but two of whom were women.

Among these hundreds of amateur pottery decorators, there may well have been some women who engaged in the activity in order to add to their income. However, most of the national attention focused on Cincinnati faience concerned the “idle rich” who were neglecting their social duties but avoiding hysteria as mentioned in this quotation from Harper’s Weekly Magazine: “There are scores of women in Cincinnati belonging to the ‘idle rich’ class who spend most of their time in the potteries. It is to be feared that this occupation is often at the expense of what are called ‘social duties,’ but there can be no doubt of the fact that they are by it much healthier in mind and body . . . . Handling dear old mother earth, whether it be digging potatoes or making pots and plaques, does not leave much room for hysteria.”

Given that women were urged to eschew intellectual stimulation in order to avoid nervous ailments, it is striking that pottery decoration was viewed as a way to prevent hysteria. Presumably this judgment stemmed from the idea that pottery decoration was not serious enough to be dangerous, an idea borne out by another author who asserted that the art pottery movement was “Begun by a few thoughtful women of
taste and social influence." The writer noted that there was much to be said in favor of pottery making and decorating as a "purely social and domestic entertainment" which was also "an educating and refining influence," and went on to point out, "It is an interesting commentary upon the occupations of our women that the dusty quarters of the manufacture of iron-stone and Rockingham should be the point of attraction for so many of the refined, and cultivated women of the city." Nonetheless, she meted out praise for "the introduction of a new industry in the United States, in which the feeble instrumentality of women's hands are quietly doing the initial work."

In Potter's American Monthly, Alice Hall noted, "Still another lady who does not seem to consider that abundant wealth and family prestige imposes upon her a life of idleness or social vacuity, devotes herself to the construction of dragon vases to such an extent that her work may also be regarded as distinctive." The person referred to is almost certainly Maria Longworth Nichols. Finally, Lilian Whiting observed that, "The Cincinnati ceramic ware is almost exclusively the product of the leisure of ladies whom a love of art, and not necessity has inspired to exertion." The attribution of amateur was most often deployed to suggest inferior work, but it could also be used to demonstrate social standing and financial independence.

Contemporary commentators went to some length to emphasize not only the class and refinement of the participants in the pottery movement but also their amateur status and differences from the professional, male potters and decorators. The male employees of the potteries were often referred to as "patient," "gallant" or as "having a soft place in their hearts" for the lady amateurs. It was observed that, "It must have been with grim humor and some condescension that the potters saw this eruption into the Dallas and Coulter [sic] establishments, the ringed fingers in the day, and the fashionable toilettes mudbesmeared." Tellingly, an article in Crockery and Glass Journal, a publication geared toward commercial ceramic and glass manufacturers, praised the work of the Cincinnati lady potters with the caveat, "Of course these pieces are done by our amateurs and not by the professional decorators. For the regular

Figure 4: Rookwood Pottery Personnel—Valentien is second from the left in the back row. (From CHS Photograph Collection)
trade Mr. Dallas has employed a gentleman well versed in his art, and is turning out a large quantity of decorated ware, and of a superiority that promises to make a good name for Cincinnati and a specially good name for the Hamilton Road Pottery in this particular line."

Thus, in Cincinnati as elsewhere, there were decided gender- and class-based distinctions within potteries. Commercial potteries were the province of male professionals who were serious, busy and often members of the lower- or lower-middle classes. Yet women were permitted in (for a fee) with the understanding that they were beholden to the men who made the pots and did everything but decoration. Their upper-class status was preserved, even within the confines of a manufactory, because they were amateurs.

**The Early Years at Rookwood**

This constellation of attributes—upper class lady, amateur, and artistic—were approvingly applied when Maria Longworth Nichols founded Rookwood in 1880. Nichols, shown in Figure 5, was described as a "pleasant little lady with twinkling eyes." Yet in painting garb situated in her studio, she presents the visage of a serious artist. Elizabeth Perry (herself an upper-class lady with artistic aspirations) wrote about Nichols that, "These are pleasant times and places, when women give their leisure and means to the founding of an artistic industry." Other articles about the founding do not mention Maria Nichols. *Crockery and Glass Journal* noted, "The new Pottery which is shortly to be completed on Eastern Avenue... will be devoted to the work of our lady decorators. Mr. Joseph Longworth is the chief financial supporter of it." The next week this same publication noted, "That a lady of Mrs. Nichols' wealth, culture and social standing should wish to embark in so singular a business venture is remarkable." The author goes on to note, "She has associated Mr. Cranch, Esq." who "will aid her in making designs and will also conduct the business transactions of the firm." These comments suggest that Nichols's movement into the public sphere was acceptable because she did so as an amateur with the financial backing and management skills of men.

There are several possible explanations as to why Nichols founded the Pottery when she did, among them the long distance she had to travel from her home to Dallas Pottery and her estrangement from her husband. Indeed the founding of Rookwood, which propelled Nichols into the public sphere, was closely linked to her own domestic situation. According to Mary Louise McLaughlin, Joseph Longworth agreed to finance his daughter's pottery endeavor in order to dissuade her from seeking a divorce. Another motivating factor might have been her frustration with the hard fire of the commercial kilns at Dallas Pottery. She wrote that she "was continually discouraged by the fact that the hard fire of the granite ware kilns destroyed nearly every color I used except cobalt blue and black." This explanation is cast into doubt though, because Nichols and Mary Louise McLaughlin had paid to build two lower fire kilns at the Dallas Pottery, one for underglaze, the other for overglaze work. Nichols remained determined to have her own pottery and her father agreed to give her an old schoolhouse which she then outfit-
Figure 6: Aladdin Vase by Maria Longworth Nichols, 1880-84, earthenware. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of William and Marcia Goodman)

ted as a pottery with the advice of Joseph Bailey, Sr., a friend and employee from the Dallas Pottery. The Pottery was on the banks of the Ohio River, a location thought to be advantageous for delivery of clay by barge (but instead left the fledgling operation subject to devastating floods).

Whereas Joseph Bailey provided advice and support, his employer, Frederick Dallas went to some lengths to discourage Nichols' endeavor by pointing out the difficulties involved and suggesting that it would fail as a business. Thomas Wheatley, a decorator who had worked at Coultry Pottery, then threatened to prevent Rookwood from using the underglaze slip painting technique. Wheatley had somehow obtained a patent in 1880 on the technique developed by Mary Louise McLaughlin in 1877. Wheatley's work featured underglaze slip painting as well as modeled ware. When a reporter for the Cincinnati Daily Gazette asked Nichols if she feared Mr. Wheatley instituting proceedings against her she replied, "I don't care if he does, I shall go on building my Pottery and I hope to have the first fire in the kiln in a month's time. While my principal object is my own gratification, I hope to make the Pottery pay expenses." The second clause of this statement suggests that while Nichols was aware of the need to separate women's art accomplishments from commerce, she was ambitious enough to want professional status.

Reportedly, Joseph Longworth was fond of saying that he financed the Pottery "to give employment to 'the idle rich.'" Although this humorous remark undoubtedly contained a grain of truth, several efforts were made in the first few years of the Pottery's existence intended ostensibly to help make it pay expenses. In 1881, Nichols started a pottery school intended to provide training and experience for future artists. Clara Chipman Newton taught two classes a week in overglaze painting and Laura Fry gave instruction in underglaze work. The school charged $3.00 weekly tuition or $1.00 per hour for private instruction. Students came from as far away as Chicago, Pittsburgh and Cleveland. Given the tuition charged, it is likely that the students were largely upper-class. Nichols also began renting space to the Pottery Club, firing their wares and providing them with specimens to paint. Nichols also instituted the production of commercial ware for table and household use, such as breakfast and dinner services, pitchers, plaques, wine-coolers, ice-tubs, water-buckets and the like.

However it was the art pottery produced by Maria Nichols and other decorators that received the approbation of the press. One highly acclaimed piece, shown in Figure 6, was Nichols's "Aladdin Vase," decorated with fish instead of the floral decoration more commonly used then in Cincinnati and which in size—thirty inches tall—rivaled McLaughlin's "Ali Baba." Remarking on the first year's production, Crockery and Glass Journal noted, "This Pottery has finished its first year's work with results that bear the highest testimony to the genius and courage of a woman who is laudably seeking to impress upon a great industry—whose creations enter more largely into domestic life than any other—the principles of pure art." Nichols also received awards at the Ohio Valley History
Tenth and Eleventh Cincinnati Industrial Expositions. This early success was in no small measure due to the training and experience of the decorators hired by Nichols. In 1881, she hired Albert Valentine (later Valentien) as the first full-time decorator. Valentine, who along with John Rettig taught underglaze decoration classes, had studied under Thomas Wheatley at Coultry Pottery and was a graduate of the School of Design. Valentien's work demonstrates the Japanese influence. His vase, shown in Figure 7, was influenced by Hokusai's Manga, a multi-volume set of random drawings. The banded relief decoration on this piece was created by scoring a nailhead and impressing it into the clay. The gilt, applied after the glaze firing, was probably meant to resemble Japanese brocade.

Unfortunately, the encomia earned by Rookwood at exhibitions didn't translate into financial success. Haphazard accounts make it difficult to determine the extent of the Pottery's indebtedness, but it is clear that without Joseph Longworth's continued support, Rookwood would not have survived. The financial difficulties were compounded by Maria Nichols's poor management. She was careless with the Pottery's funds, often confusing her personal and business accounts. As mentioned, in 1883, in an effort to put the Pottery on a more businesslike footing, Nichols hired William Watts Taylor to be manager. Although he had no experience in the pottery business he did possess a keen mind, sound administrative skills and a flair for public relations.

Taylor was determined to make Rookwood a thriving commercial concern. One way this could be done was to move the perception of its production into the male realm of fine art and out of the female realm of amateur production. As a first step, Taylor closed the pottery school, pointing out that people who could afford to pay $3.00 per week tuition would not be likely to go to work for the salaries currently paid by Rookwood. Fearing that an "amateur taint," gendered feminine, would damage Rookwood's reputation, he banished non-employees from the premises—taking away space from the Pottery Club and discontinuing the practice of selling ware to amateurs for decoration. Crockery and Glass Journal remarked of the announcement, "The ladies [of the Pottery Club] have been informed that they can no longer make their ware at the Rookwood Pottery." The reasons given were quite pointed: "Their products have brought the fame of the place into disrepute." It further claimed that it hurt the trade that the managers of the Pottery themselves might get, although this reason was not given publicly.

These statements are self-contradictory, suggesting on the one hand that the amateurs' work brought Rookwood's fame into disrepute and on the other hand that it was good enough to impinge on Rookwood's markets. At any rate there was confusion because pieces decorated by the Pottery Club were stamped with the Rookwood symbol, making it difficult to distinguish ware decorated by amateurs from those made entirely by the Pottery. Taylor went so far as to tell an aspiring Rookwood decorator that work by amateurs was "generally embarrassing." It is noteworthy that Edward Cranch, a lawyer with no art training, was neither fired nor referred to as an amateur, rather he was to "do anything he pleased." His rather idiosyncratic etched designs, which often related to American folktales, were said to be
“quaint” and to “possess uncommon merit” (Figure 9). Many years later, Taylor wrote about this early period noting, “the difficulties of the art were too great to tempt the amateur after the first outburst of enthusiasm.”

Nichols agreed with Taylor in her analysis of this sort of amateur occupation, “The women decorators are generally working for some specified purpose, to accumulate a certain sum of money for a given purpose, or to acquire skill enough to open a class in decoration, but very rarely with the intention of permanent employment or with the expectation of making a reputation in their art.” A few days later she added, “It was without doubt one of the objects of the Rookwood Pottery to give needy women of the refined and educated classes the opportunity to obtain profitable employment and the ‘idle rich’ a new and pleasant accomplishment.”

This first generation of women decorators was not interested in full-time employment, for this would have undermined Victorian sensibilities of what constituted a lady. What the women decorators, including Maria Nichols, wanted was an outlet for their creative energy that at the same time, would not damage their social positions. This required a more casual approach to work than a successful business could tolerate. After Taylor took over, Rookwood employed many female decorators, but these women came from a different social class, with far less restricted views on the role of women in art industries. By the mid-eighties the last of the “lady amateurs” departed and except for Maria Nichols and Edward Cranch, the individuals who had shaped Rookwood’s early years were gone.

3 Rose Angela Boehle, Maria Longworth: A Biography (Dayton, Oh.: Landfall Press, 1990), 86, 100, 138.
8 Quoted in The Cincinnati Daily Gazette (March 20, 1883), 4.
9 William Watts Taylor to Mr. J. E. Beebe, March 22, 1887, Letterpress Book 1886-87, 126, Rookwood Pottery Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University [hereinafter cited as RPC, MML/MSU].
10 Taylor to Mrs. Francis McDonald, February 4, 1888, Letterpress Book, 1887-88, 229, RPC, MML/MSU.
11 Taylor to Mrs. Delia L. Williams, March 12, 1888, Letterpress Book, 1887-88, 333, RPC, MML/MSU.
12 Taylor to Mrs. E. R. Holbrook, June 28, 1888, Letterpress Book, 1888-89, 63, RPC, MML/MSU.
13 Taylor to Mr. E. R. Garcezynski, February 14, 1890, Letterpress Book, 1889-90, 173, RPC, MML/MSU.
14 Taylor to Charles Fergus Binns, April 8, 1904, Charles Fergus Binns Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm reel 3506.
23 The lower number was reported in “White China for Amateurs,” Crockery and Glass Journal [May 17, 1895]: 14; the higher number was reported in Jeanne Madeline Weimann, The Fair Women: The Story of the Women’s Building, World’s Columbian Exposition Chicago, 1893 [Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981], 416.
26 See, for example, the following articles, all published in The Magazine of Art: “The Fourth Annual Exhibition of Paintings on China,” [1878]: 269-272; “The Fifth Annual Exhibition of Paintings on China,” [1881]: 392-395; “China Painting at the Brussels Exhibition,” [1881]: 157-159; and “The ‘Royal Academy’ of China Painting,” [1884]: 24-250.
30 In her biography of McLaughlin, Anita J. Ellis reports that she most emphatically did not self-identify as a “china painter,” believing this to be the province of amateurs. See Anita J. Ellis, “The Ceramic Career of M. Louise McLaughlin,” unpublished manuscript, 247-248.
31 Boehle, Maria Longworth, 27-28.
34 Records, Ladies’ Academy of Fine Arts, CHSL.
37 Life classes for male students were formally instituted c. 1878; a separate women’s life class was instituted in 1885. Ellis, “The Ceramic Career of M. Louise McLaughlin,” 23.
38 Vitz, The Queen and the Arts, 190.
40 [Benn Pitman], “Wood Carving Department,” in School of Design Annual Catalogue, 1873-74 [Cincinnati: A. Pugh, Printer, 1874], 10, 12, 13.
41 Cincinnati Enquirer [April 23, 1876], 1.
44 Vitz, The Queen and the Arts, 191.


49 Lawrence Mendenhall, “Mud, Mind and Modelers,” Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly 42 (December 1869): 669.


52 Haviland & Company was founded in 1842 in Limoges, France, by David Haviland, an American importer of fine china. See “David Haviland,” The Art Amateur 2 (February 1880): 55.


54 McLaughlin published the results of her studies in Pottery Decoration Under the Glaze [Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Company, 1880].

55 McLaughlin served as president, Clara Chipman Newton as secretary, Alice Belle Holabird as treasurer. There were eight other known members although sources do not always agree as to who they were. See “The Cincinnati Pottery Club,” Crockery and Glass Journal (January 29, 1880): 14.


57 McLaughlin, “Miss McLaughlin Tells Her Own Story,” 219.

58 Benn Pitman to Mrs. Elizabeth Perry, February 1, 1879, Papers of the Women’s Art Museum Association, Letter #91, CHSL.


64 Perry, “Decorative Pottery of Cincinnati,” 837, 843.

65 Hall, “Cincinnati Faience,” 462.


70 Cincinnati Daily Gazette (October 7, 1880); printed in Herbert Peck, The Book of Rookwood Pottery [Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Galleries, 1901], 11.


74 Mary Louise McLaughlin to Ross C. Purdy, February 25, 1938, Mary Louise McLaughlin Papers, CHSL.


80 McLaughlin’s brother George, a Cincinnati attorney, kept careful records which proved that Mary Louise McLaughlin had developed the technique well in advance of Wheatley’s patent. See “A Ceramic Claimant,” The Art Amateur 3 (November 1880): 112.


83 Cincinnati Daily Gazette (October 13, 1881), 8.

84 “Art and Artists: More About the Pottery Club Reception,” Cincinnati Commercial [May 1, 1881], 21; and Newton, “The Cincinnati Pottery Club,” 349.


86 “Cincinnati Reports,” Crockery and Glass Journal (October 19, 1882): 38; and “Cincinnati Reports,” ibid. (September 27, 1883): 44.

87 Albert Valentien, “Rookwood Pottery,” 4, Albert Valentien Papers, CHSL.

88 Taylor had come to Cincinnati from Louisiana as a child. Poor health prevented him from attending Harvard beyond one year; instead he joined his father’s commission house, Taylor and Brother, as a clerk. Following his father’s death in 1869, he became a partner with his uncle, a position he held until he joined Rookwood. Peck, The Book of Rookwood Pottery, 24.


90 Taylor to Miss Cornelia S. Cassady, September 17, 1890, Letterpress Book, 1889-90, 420. RPC, MML/MSU.


94 Quoted in the Cincinnati Commercial-Gazette (March 20, 1883), 8.

95 Quoted in the Cincinnati Commercial-Gazette (March 25, 1883), 4.

96 The Cincinnati Society Address Book: The Social Register, 1900 (Cincinnati and New York, 1900).