

Wunderkammer

A Collection of Early 20th Century
European Ceramics



J. Maresch, dragon vase, ceramic

College of Lake County
Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art
August 12 – September 25, 2005

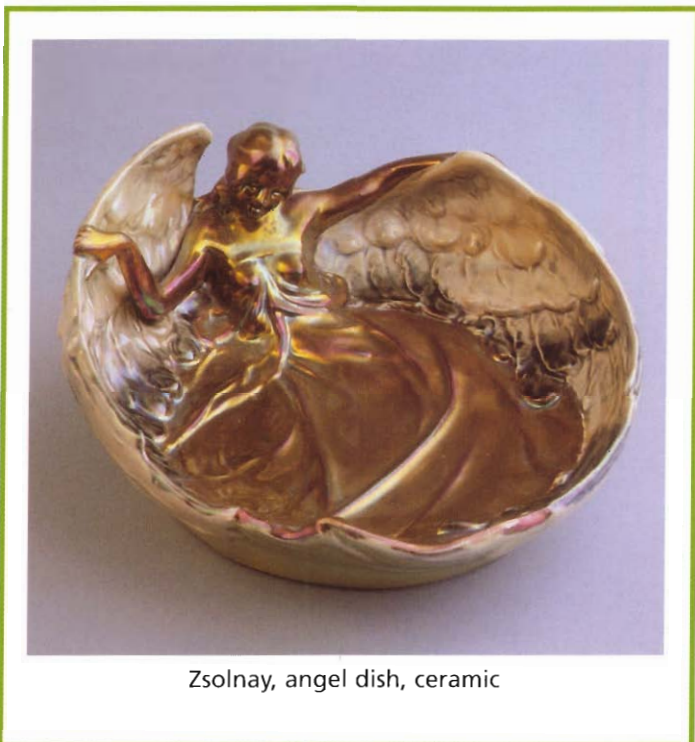
Wunderkammer

A Collection of Early 20th Century Central European Ceramics

The *Wunderkammer* (curiosity cabinet or chamber of wonders as it was often called in English), is widely recognized as the precursor to the modern museum. The term is German, although collections of curiosities existed in Italy as far back as the 16th century. Generally a *wunderkammer* was a small room, windowless, and lined with shelves on which were displayed an array of natural and manufactured rarities, marvels and curiosities. This included small paintings, sculptures and ceramics jostled with minerals, coins, rare shells and fossils. Some might even contain hides of exotic animals, unicorn horns, walrus teeth, or even a stuffed two-headed sheep! ¹

This exhibition of Central European ceramics is intended to touch upon the spirit of the *wunderkammer*. All the pieces, which are themselves “marvels and curiosities”, are on loan from the collection of Lake County residents Thom and Carol Kapheim. The Robert T. Wright Gallery is grateful for the Kapheim’s generosity in sharing their “wonders” with the community.

Over their years of collecting, the Kapheims have transformed their home into their own version of a *wunderkammer*. Their penchant has been to collect Central European ceramics from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To a lesser degree Thom and Carol also pursued prints from around the same period. In addition to being a collector, Thom Kapheim is also an arts educator, illustrator, and artist. Thom has said that most of their collection is the result of being in the right place at the right time with the right amount in their checking account. The Kapheims collection, tucked into every nook and cranny of their abode, reflects many of the influences on Thom as a painter. As such, their home creates fertile ground for his imagination and is truly a *wunderkammer*.



Zsolnay, angel dish, ceramic

Central European Ceramics

At the turn of the 20th century, the aesthetics of Modernism spread across the European continent. Artists, breaking free of past conventions, became engaged in expressing a personal vision. This impact was felt throughout all the visual arts. There were numerous ceramic factories at that time in Austria and other Central European countries. Previously, they manufactured traditional figurines and vases of exceptional quality. Among these art pottery manufacturers are names such as Amphora, Zsolnay, Royal Bayreuth, J. Maresch, and Heliosine Ware. These factories employed artists and artisans with exceptional skill and imagination. The rising new aesthetics sparked the creation of startling new and innovative ceramics. For several decades this zeitgeist (the cultural climate) had a profound effect on the decorative arts.

One such factory, Amphora, produced art pottery in Teplitz, Austria from 1892 to 1918. Amphora ceramics combines delicate craftsmanship with remarkable imagination. The Amphora factory was noted for its ventures into Art Nouveau, Symbolism, Secessionism, as well as other Austrian art movements. ²

Teplitz was a ceramics industry center because of its rich deposits of kaolin, an ingredient of porcelain. Kaolin had once been the best kept secret of China's ceramics trade. The Teplitz ceramics industry was widely recognized for developing a soft paste porcelain, which could be poured into molds. ³

One of the pieces in the exhibit is an Amphora vase with an "owl and bird" motif. Most works in this exhibit are not titled; rather "owl and bird" is a description. Its style and subject appear to have been influenced by Art Nouveau. An owl is perched on the mouth of the vessel with its wings wrapped around the opening. Its protective attitude seems to guard the vase's contents. On the side of the vessel, a bird in full relief has a fish in its beak. Bamboo stalks, with their Asian associations, ornamentally cover the vase to form delicate handles.

Another factory, Zsolnay, was located in southwest Hungary. The Zsolnay factory employed a Nabis painter who designed and painted ceramics for them. Another designer was known for his Symbolist paintings. Lazlo Mack designed for Zsolnay during the Art Nouveau period. He is most well known for his figurative pieces. ⁴

One Zsolnay piece on exhibit is the "angel dish". This piece depicts a reclining female figure with long, slender arms holding up her angel wings to form the sides of an oval shaped dish. The wings are tinged with a metallic green color, perhaps the result of an Eosine glaze. The figure and her long, flowing gown are gold with iridescent undertones of green and red violet. Lazlo Mack's influence (or perhaps his hand) can be seen in its Art Nouveau style of flowing, ornamental lines and its symbolic depiction of resurrection. On the bottom of the piece is the mark of the Zsolnay factory which dates it between 1893-1930.

Vilmos Zsolnay, son of the factory founder, was highly influenced by Clement Massier while he was in Paris. Massier developed a "reflective metallic" glaze and may have shared his secret with Vilmos. The Eosine glaze of the Zsolnay factory was highly regarded and extensively used. ⁵

Royal Bayreuth, located in eastern Germany, was another art pottery manufacturer that produced highly idiosyncratic pieces. Due to its proximity to the previously mentioned factories, it also broke free of past conventions. For example, there is a "devil and

cards pitcher” in this exhibition. This angular piece is composed of playing cards forming the pitcher body and a menacing, red devil as the handle. This unique design was unprecedented. The moralizing tone of this work is unmistakable. However, the playfulness of the piece also suggests that its metaphor is tongue-in-cheek.

Another important art pottery manufacturer was the J. Maresch Factory in Aussig on the Elbe, Czechoslovakia. J. Maresch was known for its “ironstone” clay mixture that is more durable and heavier than fine porcelain. One of the Maresch “dragon vases” in this exhibition is highly sought after for its style and craftsmanship. This vase is certainly hefty, with a roughly hewn surface. The un-winged, yet ferocious dragon, slithers around the vessel to form handles. The Maresch Factory was widely known for its fairy tale figures such as this dragon. While on the one hand Maresch created absolutely superb pieces, it also produced a line of garden gnomes that are unmistakably Kitsch. ⁶

All of these ceramics companies had their high and low points; however, the art pottery end of their businesses was never very profitable. It was always more a labor of love by a small cadre of visionary artists and highly skilled artisans. The Robert T. Wright Gallery hopes this exhibition may illuminate this period of production pottery in Central Europe. Its quirkiness may raise an eyebrow or even a smile. Perhaps our students and artistic community may even find the works inspiring. The Gallery hopes all will find that its Wunderkammer exhibition is truly wunderbar!

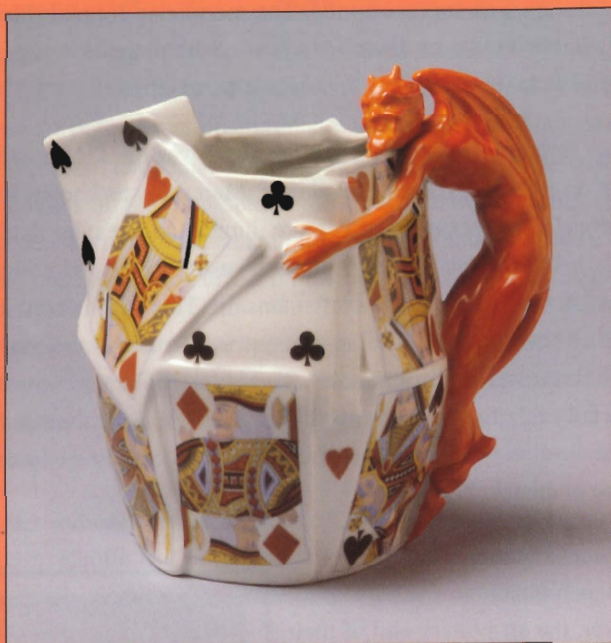
Steven Jones
Art Gallery Curator



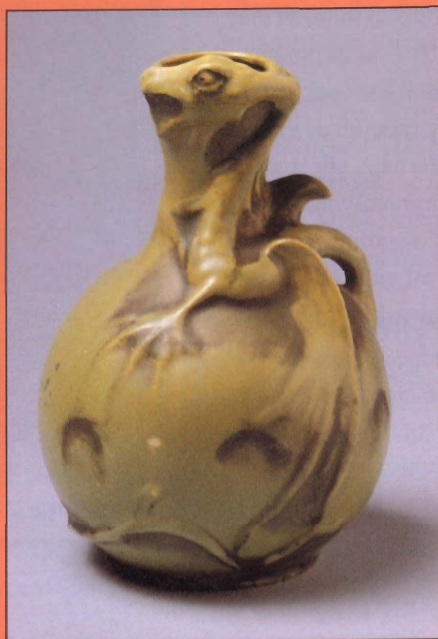
Heliosine Ware, vase, ceramic

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Royal Bayreuth, devil and cards pitcher, ceramic



Amphora, dragon vase, ceramic

Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art Upcoming Exhibitions

Recent Works: A Juried Competition September 30 – November 6

This 25th annual competition includes all fine art media and is open to all artists who reside or work in Lake County.

Reception: Friday, September 30, 7-9 pm

Reginald Coleman: A Retrospective November 11 – December 16

Reginald Coleman makes abstract, geometric compositions with subtle nuances of color. This retrospective exhibition covers the years from 1975-2005 and features his painting and works on paper.

Reception: Friday, November 11, 7-9 pm

Members Exhibition January 13 – February 26

A diverse group show of all fine art media by over ninety Lake County artists. Funds from artist memberships support the endowment of the Robert T. Wright Gallery.

Reception: Friday, January 13, 7-9 pm

Information:

Voice: 847-543-2240, E-mail sjones@clcillinois.edu

Web page: <http://yyz.clcillinois.edu/artgallery/>

College of Lake County

Robert T. Wright

Community Gallery of Art

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This program is supported in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.
The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art is a project
of the College of Lake County Foundation.



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partially sponsored
by a grant from the
Illinois Arts Council