GEORGE OHR – (1857 – 1918)

Mississippi artist George Ohr, the self-described “Mad Potter of Biloxi,” was a prolific and visionary artist. Although his functional pottery was well-received and his glazes praised, his art pottery brought favorable notice only from the critics but not from the public. Trained as a metalsmith by his father, Ohr left home at age 14 and worked a number of jobs before an apprenticeship with family friend and potter Joseph Meyer ended his search for direction. For the rest of his life he made his living as a potter, producing large quantities of functional ware; at the same time he developed a persona which was to bring him as much attention as his artistic skills – that of a wildly eccentric man with long hair and flowing mustaches. After a fire destroyed his workshop and thousands of pots, Ohr rebuilt and set about producing thousands more. The direction of his work, however, changed. He now viewed himself as an “artist-potter” and the vessels he made, while still wheel-thrown, were altered, manipulated, and tendril-like handles, delicate and fluid, added. He continued to glaze some of the pieces but others were left unglazed, the form of the pot alone the focus. The work was revolutionary and unconventional, years ahead of its time. Not until the 1950’s when the work of Peter Voulkos and others would strike off in the same way did the emergence of contemporary ceramic art truly take hold. In the last years of his life, his health failing, Ohr closed his pottery, crated up his remaining pieces, and they stayed crated in his son’s auto shop yard until an antiques dealer, James Carpenter, discovered them. Carpenter arranged to buy the entire collection – an irony, as in his lifetime Ohr had viewed his work as a whole and wanted it purchased by one individual. Once the pieces began appearing on the market the reappraisal of George Ohr began. “…when I’m gone my work…will be prized, honored, and cherished,” Ohr said, and he proved to be prophetic. Today his pieces sell for thousands of dollars and are included in such prestigious collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution.


ARTIST’S STATEMENT – GEORGE OHR

“My pottery life-work is only one collection as I alone created it – and if there is a greater variety of Pottery on this earth emanating from one creature that is and has more extreems for poor and high quality SHAPES sizes – ugly, pretty, odd, queere etc. etc. than I have – I want to see the same and Ile swim and wear out shoe leather to get there.”


RESUME – GEORGE OHR

1857

Born, Biloxi, MS

Apprentice metalsmith, Biloxi, MS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871-1879</td>
<td>Left home; worked as tinker, dock chandler and sailor</td>
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<tr>
<td>1879-1882</td>
<td>Apprentice potter for Joseph Fortune Meyer, New Orleans, LA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882-1888</td>
<td>Studio Artist, Biloxi, MS</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Exhibited in World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, New Orleans, LA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>Married Josephine Gehring</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-1890</td>
<td>Potter, New Orleans Art Pottery, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1894</td>
<td>Owner/Artist, Biloxi Art and Novelty Pottery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Major fire burned workshop and all prior work was destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894-1910</td>
<td>Studio artist, Biloxi, MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-1899</td>
<td>Studio artist, Biloxi, MS, and Potter, Sophie Newcomb College, New Orleans, LA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Award, Pan American Exposition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Silver Medal, Louisiana Purchase International Exposition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Converted pottery into an auto repair shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Died of cancer, Biloxi, MS</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Antiques dealer James W. Carpenter buys Ohr’s remaining work which has been in storage since 1910</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>American Craft Museum survey exhibition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>George E. Ohr Art and Cultural Center, Biloxi, MS, established</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, Biloxi, MS established</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Museum damaged by Hurricane Katrina; being rebuilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Inducted into Mississippi Hall of Fame</td>
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BIOGRAPHY – GEORGE OHR

Pioneer ceramic artist George Ohr was born in Biloxi, MS, his parents immigrants from Alsatia. Ohr’s father was a blacksmith, operating the first blacksmith shop in Biloxi and later opening a grocery store as well. After an elementary education, Ohr learned the blacksmith trade from his father, but left home at 14, working as a file cutter, a tinker, and a ship’s chandler – a total of 19 different jobs over a period of a few years. In 1879, an offer from a family friend in New Orleans, Joseph E. Meyer, to apprentice in pottery ended his search for direction. “When I found the potter’s wheel I felt it all over like a wild duck in water,” Ohr said. For the next few years Ohr worked at mastering functional pottery making, and then spent another two years criss-crossing the country studying other potters and their potteries. When he returned to Biloxi, he established his own pottery, making his potter’s wheel and kiln, and using local clay which he dug from the banks of the nearby Tchoutacabouffa River. His ware was practical – jugs, flues, drain tiles, flowerpots – but he also made some more artistic ware. When the New Orleans Cotton Centennial Exhibition was held in 1885, Ohr exhibited his ware – over 600 pieces. While it is not known how well his work was received, Ohr later said that much of it was stolen by the individual hired to return his work to Biloxi.

Ohr continued to prosper, building a new workshop and in 1888 returning to New Orleans to again assist his mentor Joseph Meyer in a new company, The New Orleans Art Pottery. He also married a young German woman, Josephine Gehring, and for the next two years the couple settled in New Orleans where Ohr produced large garden pots. When the New Orleans Art Pottery went out of business, Ohr returned to his workshop in Biloxi, now called the Biloxi Art and Novelty Pottery. He was very prolific, producing hundreds of pieces – “no two alike” – as he liked to say. At the same time he was creating a persona, that of a wild, eccentric person with flowing hair and a long mustache which he hooked over his ears. His “performance” as the self-styled “Mad Potter of Biloxi” drew people to his shop as much as his ceramic art. In 1894 a fire in Biloxi destroyed a number of buildings including Ohr’s workshop and all the work stored in it. Ohr was able to rescue some of the pieces although they were damaged by the fire. Determined to begin again, he built a new pottery, five stories high in a pagoda-like shape, named the Biloxi Art Pottery Unlimited, and once again, people flocked to the “Mad Potter’s” workshop. His mentor Joseph Meyer had become a potter at Sophie Newcomb College (now a part of Tulane University) in New Orleans. He invited Ohr to join him there and from 1897-1899 Ohr worked both with Meyer and at his own workshop in Biloxi, producing pottery to support his growing family which eventually included 10 children.

In addition to functional ware, which was very popular, Ohr began making non-functional thrown pots. These pots were extremely thin-walled which Ohr then manipulated by twisting, folding, ruffling, and otherwise producing very contemporary, often delicate forms. He began to refer to himself as an “artist-potter,” indicating a shift in how he viewed himself. To the manipulated forms he added handles, long tendril-like, delicate and fluid. His boast of “no two alike” held true for these new vessels as well: “I brood over [each pot] with the same tenderness a mortal child awakens in its parent,” he said. The pieces, however, were not popular with the public, which was accustomed to the more refined art pottery of the Victorian period. Undaunted, Ohr believed he would be judged by history, and in 1899 chose 8 pieces of his work to be sent to the Smithsonian Institution; one of the pots was inscribed, “I am the Potter Who Was.”

Although the public was not receptive to his art pottery, critics admired his glaze work and understood that his unconventional style was revolutionary. In 1904 his work received a Silver Medal at the St. Louis World’s Fair, the only official award he ever received, but none of his
work sold, his prices deemed far out of line. While scholarly magazines recognized him as a unique artist and Charles Binns called Ohr a genius, Ohr never received the success and recognition he felt he deserved, in part because he represented a departure from tradition but also because he demanded very high prices for his work and refused to consider selling at more attractive prices. In addition, Ohr decided that selling individual ware would dilute the total impact of his body of work and wanted to sell the entire collection, numbering in the thousands, to one buyer.

In 1909 Ohr, his health failing, gave up his profession, turning over his workshop to his sons to establish an auto repair shop, the “Ohr Boys Aut2 Repair Shop”. He packed up his remaining pots and stored them away, confident that in time history would recognize him as “the greatest art potter on earth”\(^4\). He spent his last years at the family home, riding motorcycles, his still-lengthy mustache flying, until his death from cancer in 1918.

Ohr’s pots remained in storage at the Aut2 Repair Shop for another 50 years, when antiques dealer, James W. Carpenter, visited the shop looking for old cars. What he found was crates of pots and, after a period of negotiation, bought the entire collection, numbering in the thousands. Over time individual pieces were released to the market, art collectors took notice, and art historians began to revise their thinking about Ohr’s work. Pots that Ohr could not sell at all began selling for thousands of dollars and George Ohr himself became in a sense a cult figure in the world of ceramic art. The first New York exhibit of Ohr’s work, “George E. Ohr: An Art-world Homage,” was held at the Garth Clark Gallery in 1983, and in 1989 the American Craft Museum in New York organized an exhibition of his work that appeared at the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. The artist who had predicted, “I am making pottery for art’s sake, God’s sake, the future generation and – by present indications – for my own satisfaction, but when I’m gone my work…will be prized, honored, and cherished,”\(^5\) was vindicated.

Carpenter also saw to it that the box addressed to the Smithsonian in 1899 was finally delivered, and the city of Biloxi belatedly honored its famous artist with the establishment of the George E. Ohr Art and Cultural Center in 1994. A new museum designed by Frank Gehry, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art was established in 2003 and is an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. Unfortunately the Museum was badly damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but with the assistance of architect Gehry, is being rebuilt and is expected to re-open in 2011. A traveling exhibit of work from the Museum, *George Ohr Rising*, began touring in 2007, and in 2009 Ohr was inducted into the Mississippi Hall of Fame. His work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution among other prestigious collections.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – GEORGE OHR

Books and Catalogs

Black, Patti Carr. *American Masters of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.* Jackson, MS: Mississippi Arts Commission; Starkville, MS: Department of Art, Mississippi State University, 2009.


Ohr, George E., and Garth Clark. *The Biloxi Art Pottery of George Ohr.* Jackson, MS: Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History, 1978.

Ohr, George E., Anna Harris, and Elaine Levin. *George Ohr Rising: the Emergence of an American Master.* Biloxi, MS: Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, 2007.


Periodicals

Allen, Skip, and Dennis Krueger. “Mississippi Trace: Jackson State University.” *Studio Potter* 10 (June 1982): 65-84.


Colpitt, Frances. “Ken Price/George Ohr.” *ArtUS* no. 3 (June/August 2004): 53.


**Video and Other Material**


“George Ohr Remembered.” 1997. VHS


**GALLERY REPRESENTATION – GEORGE OHR**

Clark and Del Vecchio, [http://www.garthclark.com](http://www.garthclark.com) (Garth Clark’s and Mark Del Vecchio’s web-based gallery)

**WEB SITES – GEORGE OHR**

[http://www.georgeohr.org/portal/GALLERY/AboutGeorgeOhr/tabid/117/Default.aspx](http://www.georgeohr.org/portal/GALLERY/AboutGeorgeOhr/tabid/117/Default.aspx)
George Ohr biography on Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art site


[http://www.ceramicmuseum.org/ohr-rising.htm](http://www.ceramicmuseum.org/ohr-rising.htm)
Article on exhibit “George Ohr Rising” at the American Museum of Ceramic Art

Article with photographs on identifying George Ohr pottery.


http://www.mpbonline.org/content/george-ohr-portrait-artist

http://www.craftinamerica.org/artists_clay/story_224.php?
Brief article on George Ohr from the exhibition/video/book Craft in America

Photo of George Ohr working on his wheel on Abbeville Press web site; other photos also.

http://www.georgeohr.org/portal/GALLERY/AboutGeorgeOhr/tabid/117/Default.aspx
Article and photos of George Edgar Ohr from Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, Biloxi, MS

July 2009