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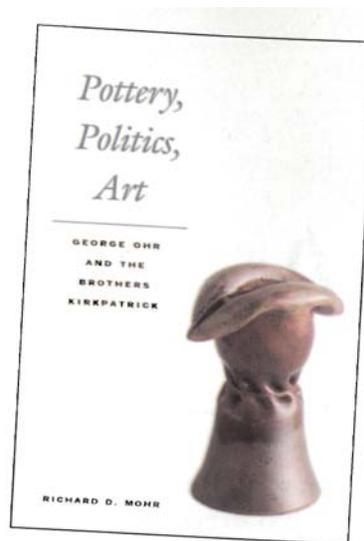
Book Review

Pottery, Politics, Art: George Ohr and the Brothers Kirkpatrick.

By Richard D. Mohr. University of Illinois Press, Springfield 2003.

xii, 225 p. 22 col. pls., 113 figs. Hard cover, \$60.

Review by James L. Murphy



I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in Kirkpatrick and Ohr pottery and ceramic art in general, although some readers might say, as doubtless would, the author's hypothetical New Orleans society matron faced with George Ohr's fright creamer/chamberpot, "not my cup of tea." Actually a series of inter-related essays, the book's overriding theme is "the creative confusion of the products of our bodies and the products of our hands," as exemplified by the pottery of Ohr and the Kirkpatricks and their deliberate fusing of the object and the "object." This thesis is reiterated throughout, though seldom with this much delicacy.

Author Richard Mohr shares at least one significant characteristic with George Ohr, the self-styled "Mad Potter of Biloxi." Ohr, the potter, took considerable pleasure in creating impossible pots, crushed and folded to the extreme; Mohr, the philosopher, does much the same with his own medium—words and ideas—and very likely had as much fun writing this book as Ohr had producing his mud babies. Given the right perspective, the book is fun to read; but, as with Ohr, at times Mohr's work is a little overwrought. Some readers may also be put off by Professor Mohr's polemical style and the relentless pursuit of his overriding theses. In some instances the result is not so much provocative as merely provoking, perhaps deliberately inciteful as well as insightful.

In his first chapter and in an Appendix, Mohr explores the political connotations and implications of the Kirkpatricks' pottery, particularly Cornwall's flirtation with the temperance movement. He convincingly argues that Cornwall's temperance snake jugs were essentially ironic in intent. This is a very important corrective and possibly the most significant aspect of his interpretation of the Kirkpatricks. Specific points are less convincing, such as whether the Kirkpatricks were deliberately subversive (philosophically or politically) in sending to the Southern states pipes and "shoo-fly" jugs that suggested or invited miscegenation.

As befits a philosopher, Mohr is usually very precise about his definitions. But some will be troubled by his assertion that the Kirkpatricks operated an "art pottery." They certainly made some pottery that might be called artistic, but few if any of their productions would fall under the more common definitions of art pottery. Novelty ware would be a better cognomen, a point made by others but stoutly downplayed by Mohr. In any case the Kirkpatrick establishment was certainly not an "art pottery." Producing thousands of gallons of utilitarian stoneware crocks and jugs every year, their Anna Pottery also produced a significant amount of stoneware novelties such as the pig flasks. (Elsewhere the author [p.116-120] has a very cogent discussion as to whether Ohr actually distinguished between his novelty ware and his artware.)

Perhaps the easiest of Mohr's theses to grasp (Chapter 2) is that a visit to Anna, Illinois, in 1882 introduced a young George Ohr to two of the Kirkpatrick brothers, Cornwall and Wallace, who had an enormous influence on the itinerant potter's aesthetic. Mohr ignores similar artistic strains in other stoneware potters to emphasize the creative and psychological individuality of the Kirkpatrick Brothers, and uses the difficulty in attributing specific pieces to one or the other Kirkpatrick (he does spend considerable effort to do this) to suggest a certain psychic unity between the two men, in developing the idea that they passed the torch or baton of artistic eccentricity to the young Ohr.¹

Mohr at times molds facts to suit his argument, using two enigmatic ceramic capacity stamps found in the effects of a descendant of the Pinson, Tennessee, stoneware pottery, to infer that Ohr stopped there on his way to the Kirkpatricks' pottery at Anna, Illinois, and had already acquired his "scatological bent." Both stamps bear Ohr's name or initials; one bears a short scatological verse and the other bears an 1881 date and the name "Lockhart." Mohr assumes that Ohr made both capacity marks at Pinson, yet the archaeologist whom he cites remains less than certain that the capacity stamps were actually made there (Samuel Smith, pers. comm.), and the name "Lockhart," of "unknown significance" to Mohr, suggests to me a connection with the stoneware pottery at Lockhart, Mississippi. Maybe the itinerant Ohr stopped there rather than or in addition to Pinson, Tennessee, a possibility that would not materially alter Mohr's conclusion but does reflect seriously upon the scholarship on which the conclusion is based.

Sometimes Mohr strikes me as being too eager to pursue an idea to its extreme, in the thrill of the chase, using facts and ideas when they suit his purpose but ignoring them when they do not. Openly disdainful of A.A. Robineau's monumental Scarab Vase ("The Apotheosis of the Toiler"), for example, he dismisses her use of the scarab motif as "Egyptian bugs" and copy-cat Japonisme, yet slathers it on when the Kirkpatricks incorporate a dung beetle in their "Free Trade Inkwell." Mrs. Robineau doubtless was no less aware of the life cycle of the dung beetle and the irony inherent in the subject of her work, and if one wishes to search for anality as a personality trait among potters, certainly spending a thousand hours on one vase should qualify as a marked symptom. But Mohr is not interested in Robineau and especially not interested in any evidence that might suggest the Kirkpatricks and Ohr partake of a more general or universal attitude; he is intent on making them different and, if at all possible, unique.

By de-emphasizing their historical context, Mohr tends to over-emphasize the Kirkpatricks' originality. Glass pig flasks, he admits, are known to predate the Kirkpatricks' pottery examples, but it is also possible that neither Kirkpatrick actually invented the pig flask. They most definitely did not originate the fright mug, or the whimsical miniature chamberpot, which was produced by many yellowware potteries, throughout the country, as well as by other stoneware companies and at least one electric porcelain manufacturer. This does not diminish the originality of the Kirkpatricks' ceramic wit and humor, but it does make them part of an extensive and long-lived tradition dating at least as far back as 18th C. England. The Kirkpatricks may have a clearer claim to originating the combination of the pottery pig flask and its barnyard geographical humor. Even so, they remain simply "sooey" generics; it is Ohr, of course, who was or was to become the genius.

Having visited the fecund, fetid delta of Illinois "Little Egypt," and having personally experienced the "abject" in the comparatively innocuous form of highways literally paved with squashed turtles, snakes, and toads, I submit that perhaps the Kirkpatricks weren't so much kinky and subversive as just plain bored. To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a joke is just a joke. Ohr, along with the Kirkpatricks, and many other 19th C. and even earlier potters rather matter-of-factly produced clay whimsies such as the aptly named "fright mugs." Virtually every Rockingham and yellow ware pottery in England and North America produced "frog mugs" and miniature chamberpots containing a small pile of stool in the bottom. The chamberpot was such a ubiquitous necessity during the 19th C. that these little ceramic jokes, whether involving frog or feces, can scarcely be taken as evidence of a prurient or unhealthy fixation. There are numerous 19th C. Ohio stoneware field jugs bearing remarkable depictions of various male and female appendages. And the number of vulgarly explicit clay tobacco pipes—both sexual and scatological—is legion. These certainly were not all inspired by the Kirkpatricks or by Ohr, more likely vice versa. In any case I would not make too much of this rich, risqué ceramic tradition in terms of the psychological make-up of its participants.

Much of the Kirkpatricks' and Ohr's work presages that 20th Century phenomenon, "outsider art" (though Mohr might make that "inside-outside art"); like today's outsider artists, their work seems to invite not so much appreciation as (psycho)analysis. In the third chapter, Mohr provides just that— a detailed (psycho)analysis of Ohr's work, particularly in terms of anality. Ohr ceramic forms which might once have been naively accepted and appreciated, if admittedly glossed over as simply "organic," are now classified with all the vigor of a Vesalius as either female, male, or "vascular"—hetero, homo, or polymorphously perverse, as it were. Mohr's analysis is reminiscent of Freud's interpretation of Michelangelo (with maybe a dash of Norman O. Brown and Levi-Strauss), both studies representing impressive intellectual edifices constructed on rather meager biographical data. In the last analysis, as with much history, factual reality becomes something of a secondary issue. Such interpretation is often highly subjective, however. For example, Mohr interprets the famous portrait of Ohr with arms folded across his chest as "posing masculinely and showing masculinity to be a pose," yet this was a standard photographic stance for standing working men of the period and there are group photos of dozens of such laborers posed similarly, surely not all "overripe posturing" and "self-tweaking."



A curvaceous 19th C. Ohio harvest jug, neither inspired by nor an inspiration to the Kirkpatricks or George Ohr. Also note the snake handle. Photograph courtesy of the Author.

A recent book by Paul Mathieu aptly entitled *Sex Pots: Eroticism in Ceramics* helps provide the ceramic context that Mohr's book lacks. Sex can be fun and sex can be funny, and it should be no surprise that artists, including potters, have been aware of this throughout history and have enthusiastically pursued the idea in a variety of ways, including the religious and the mystic—not just the pornographic or the humorous. It is useful and important to recognize this aspect, as well as the scatological element, in the work of 19th C. potters—not just Ohr and the Kirkpatricks—but let's not, in today's parlance, obsess about it.

After several rereadings, I remain unconvinced that the Kirkpatricks' influence on Ohr was quite as direct and as important as the author claims. Granted that Ohr made some pig flasks and "snake ware" of his own, elaborating on similar forms made by the Kirkpatricks, just how seminal their "inside-outside" snake jugs were to Ohr's creative processes remains a question. As for how much light is shed upon the personalities of these poorly-known 19th C. potters, other readers will have to judge for themselves.

Mohr hopes that his book raises the level of discussion about the decorative arts beyond mere issues of identification and connoisseurship. That it does, though much of the Kirkpatrick and Ohr oeuvre is neither decorative nor decorous, and there can be no question that his interpretation is an ambitious and even ingenious effort to understand the artistic impulse in these waspish "muddaubers."

Footnotes

¹ Brother Murray Kirkpatrick is nowhere mentioned; although he, too, essayed numerous stoneware sculptural novelties and "specialty" pieces. (It may be argued that Ohr probably never met Murray but the point is that the third Kirkpatrick, like his brothers and virtually every 19th C. stoneware potter, often "relieved himself" from the tedium of throwing crocks by producing artistic novelties. With at least ten men working for them, Wallace and Cornwall had considerably more time than Murray had to devote to their novelties, some of which became economically significant.)

James L. Murphy is a Professor at Ohio State University Libraries, Columbus, Ohio. He is particularly interested in 19th C. Ohio pottery, Ohio art pottery, and archaeological aspects of Ohio ceramics.