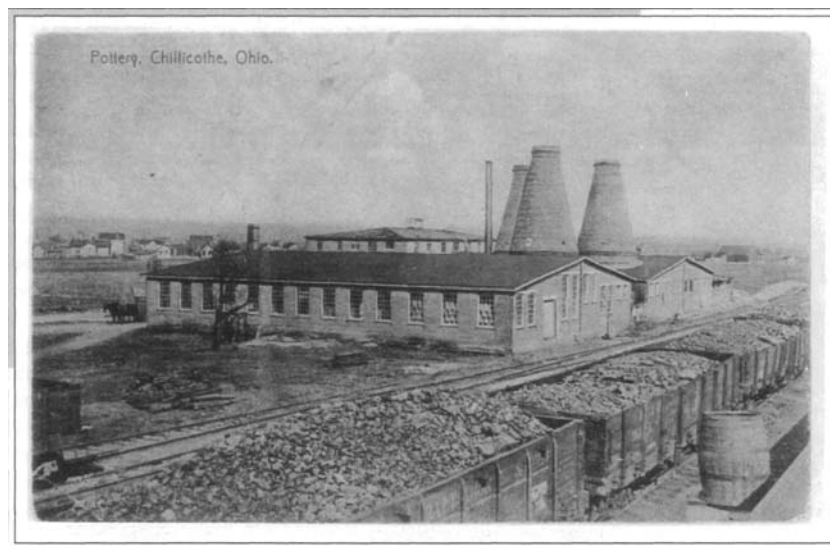


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ART POTTERY ARCHAEOLOGY: CHILLICOTHE'S FLORENTINE POTTERY

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Contemporary postcard view of the Florentine Pottery

Although the Florentine Pottery Co. of Chillicothe, Ohio, cannot be said to have ever flourished, for a few short years between 1901 and 1905, it did produce a variety of art pottery that clearly is equal in quality to that of such contemporaries as Weller, Roseville, and Owens. Unfortunately, products of this short-lived art pottery venture are rare, even more rarely are they marked, and there is little known documentation of this unsuccessful pottery venture.

In a little over a page, Paul Evans (1987: 103-104) has collected nearly all of the published information available on this little-known pottery: local citizens raised \$5000 to establish the firm, which was incorporated in West Virginia in 1900, with W.E. Eberts as president and Frederick C. Arbenz as secretary-treasurer. (Plans for an initial four kilns, with four additional kilns to follow as business warranted appear to have been scaled back to three, judging from the only known contemporary photographs.) Production began around the first of July, 1901, but the plant was not in full operation until the following year. General superintendent of the pottery was George J. Bradshaw, an English potter who had managed Wheeling Pottery, then superintended J.B. Owens' pottery at Zanesville and subsequently worked at Homer Laughlin in East Liverpool.

(As John Arbenz, a prominent Wheeling citizen, was a large stockholder in the Florentine Pottery, and the Arbenz family had removed their substantial furniture factory to Chillicothe in 1888, the Arbenz family had known Bradshaw in Wheeling; in fact F. C. Arbenz's brother John had married Florence Bradshaw, George J. Bradshaw's daughter.)

George Bradshaw, who had begun working in potteries as a lad of nine years in Hanley, England, and continued in this profession for nearly sixty years, had a serious heart ailment which led to his death less than a year after the Florentine Pottery began operation. He was succeeded by his assistant, F. John Arbenz, who was later credited by his father, Fred C. Arbenz, the company president, with having produced a bronze glaze scarcely distinguishable from the actual metal (letter, F.C. Arbenz to Wilber Stout, January 28, 1921). While Evans notes that the discovery of this metallic glaze was due to a kiln accident shortly before Bradshaw's death and that it was subsequently perfected by Arbenz, Nelson (1988: 24) more cautiously writes that the glaze was *said* [italics added] to be the result of an accident, and his caution certainly seems justified. It is very likely that Bradshaw, in his work at Owens, learned the formulas for Owens' metallic Feroza and Venetian glazes, and remembered enough to produce a very similar glaze later at Chillicothe. A convenient kiln accident would have been a handy means of diverting any suspicion that Owens might have about the source of the Florentine glaze formula.



A blended glaze jardiniere attributed to the Florentine Pottery.

The original report of this accidental discovery is worth quoting (Brick and Clay Record Vol. 20, no. 5 (March 15 1902): "Some Unusual Results in Pottery. Accident, or a remarkable trick of fire, has succeeded in accomplishing a much desired result at the Florentine pottery in Chillicothe, that the expenditure of much money and long experimenting utterly failed to do. Efforts have long been made to obtain a blending of certain tints in the manufacture of ware but without avail, and the attempt was about to be abandoned when chance came to the rescue. Two pieces of pottery were taken from the kiln which were so beautiful that they filled the hearts of all with delight. The pieces were in bronze, the graduation being from silver, gold and bronze, all of beautiful metallic lustre. So perfect is the ware that an expert could not distinguish it from the French bronze product. The cause leading to the accidental discovery will be traced for the purpose of reproduction. The ware is absolutely new and far more beautiful than the celebrated Mexican lustre ware."



Matching bisque and glazed sherds from the Florentine waster dump.

Perhaps the best known example of this metallic glaze is the tripodal Ohio Statehood Centennial commemorative vase, which must date to 1903. Although unmarked, the piece is unquestionably a product of the Chillicothe pottery. On one side is a representation of Ohio's first state-house, which stood in Chillicothe; on the other, the seal of Ohio. A similar tripodal form with deliberately dimpled surface is also known but is considerably rarer. Although it, too, is unmarked, similarity of form supports attribution to the Florentine Pottery rather than to Owens, though the Florentine and Owens glazes are virtually indistinguishable. Despite a recent local history (Casari 1995: 279-280) that describes the Centennial souvenir vase as "an achievement in ceramics, having all the characteristic shades of green, gold, and copper and states that "it was said no other pottery in the world produced anything like this *Effeco* [italics added] art ware." Owens pottery experts cannot distinguish it from Owens' Feroza glaze.

There is a surprising and rather significant disagreement or discrepancy in the few reports mentioning the name of the Florentine Pottery's art ware, in the case of Evans due apparently to a typographical error on the part of Stout (1923: 97), who refers to "Effeco ware," although Stout does not explicitly state that this was the name of the Florentine Pottery's metallic glaze. Nelson (1988:24) notes that "Effecte was the major type exhibited... at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904," citing Clay Record, though the name of the line does not seem actually to be given in this source. In any case, the line name was Efpeco, derived, none too imaginatively, from the initials of the company, Florentine Pottery Co. Significantly, there are only two known instances where the name is correctly given- in an unpublished 1921 letter from F.C. Arbenz to Wilbur Stout and on the marked vase described below.



A matt green vase attributed to the Florentine Pottery.

This confusion regarding the spelling of Efpeco Ware becomes especially important in confirming the manufacture of a rare matte green vase (*see below*) which can now rather certainly be attributed to the Florentine Pottery. Labeled in India ink, above the glaze, as "Efpeco Ware, Florentine Pottery, Chillicothe, Ohio, 1903," the vase has been known for at least ten years (D. Rago, pers. comm.) and was apparently labeled by someone familiar with the Florentine pottery and its ware, someone familiar enough with it to spell the line name correctly! This, together with a general lack of previous interest in Florentine pottery among collectors, and the fact that this particular shape is clearly not represented in well-known similar lines such as Weller's Chloron and Roseville's Egypto, is substantial indication that the attribution of this piece to Chillicothe's Florentine Pottery is correct.



Florentine's Chillicothe Ohio Centennial vase and a similar form, both with the pottery's metallic glaze.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Florentine Pottery's brief history is the fact that in 1903, the firm hired a Viennese designer. This was none other than Rudolph Lorber, who left the Avon Faience Co. Of Tiltonsville, Ohio, to come to Chillicothe. In 1905, when the Florentine Pottery turned from artware to sanitary ware, Lorber moved to Zanesville's Weller Pottery, where he remained for the rest of his career. Would that we could recognize some trace of Lorber's talent in the known products of the Florentine Pottery, but such is not the case. Nothing currently attributable to the Florentine Pottery harks back to Lorber's products at the Vance Faience and Avon Faience Co., and nothing suggests his future successes at Weller.

Several additional unmarked pieces can be attributed to the Florentine Pottery on the basis of matching bisque and glazed sherds excavated at the pottery site by the author several years ago. The buildings still stand, although the large bottle kilns are long gone, and the area to the south of the pottery (extreme right of the illustration) is now occupied by an auto paint shop. Nevertheless, a portion of the waster pile shown in the post card view still remains beneath a cover of poison ivy and other weeds.

Although the only ceramic remains noted on the surface were fragments of porcelain bathroom fixtures manufactured after the production of art ware had been abandoned, a small excavation behind the paint shop and immediately adjacent to the railroad bed produced numerous fragments of bisque and glazed sherds, mostly of blended glaze jardiniere and pedestal fragments, together with sherds that probably represent cupsidors, and numerous sagger fragments. The amount of excavation possible at this site is very small, and digging was curtailed by the fact that most of the waster material is probably within the actual railroad right-of-way.

Nonetheless, a sufficient quantity of sherds was obtained to permit identification of several distinctive shapes. And so began an intensive search for complete examples that could be attributed to the Florentine Pottery. To date, three jardiniere forms have been found, including one matching pedestal. Other than the specific shapes, there is nothing particularly distinctive about these forms, and they could easily be - in fact, usually are mis-identified as Weller or "early Roseville."

Such blended glaze ware, whether cuspidor, jardiniere, or umbrella stand, is seldom marked, whatever the pottery, and our identification of Roseville and Weller forms is due mainly to catalog information. Lacking similar documentation for the Florentine Pottery's wares, our knowledge of this little-known Ohio art pottery has been considerably advanced by a modest amount of digging and a slight case of poison ivy.

In the summer of 1906, the Florentine Pottery Co. turned from art pottery to the production of glazed sanitary ware. John Arbenz died in December, 1906, in Wheeling, but the Arbenz family continued to operate the pottery until World War I. Following the war, the pottery continued to make toilet tanks and bowls as the Horton Pottery Co. In 1923, the adjacent Arbenz furniture factory was rejuvenated as the Buckeye Tile Co., which began the manufacture of ceramic floor and wall tile. In 1928, the Buckeye Tile Co. took over the Horton Pottery Co. and operated both firms for about five more years, before going into receivership. At the age of 75, Fred C. Arbenz was still employed there as a tile worker in 1930 (Casari 1995).



A sponge decorated jardiniere and pedestal attributed to the Florentine Pottery.

Acknowledgments

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