GEORGE OHR: "THE MAD POTTER OF BILOXI"

http://proficioweb.mdah.ms.gov/MResults.aspx?pS=George%20Ohr&sletter=undefined&dS=&dletter=&db=object&sSort=undefined&dir=MDAHWEB

George E. Ohr was a dynamic American pottery artist with the personality to match. A native of Biloxi, Mississippi, Ohr was born in 1857 to German immigrants, Johanna Weidman and George Ohr. He found himself drawn to ceramics after following his mom on a trip to New Orleans where he met ceramics artist, Joseph Fortune Meyer. He soon began an apprenticeship with Meyer and throughout his training, Ohr traveled the country to art shows gaining exposure to the arts & craft movement of the late 19th century. Among these shows was the 1885 World's Fair in New Orleans where he first displayed his pottery. Ohr's life was marked by tragedy and passion for self-expression shown in his pottery and personality. He endured many hardships such as the death of two of his children, the theft of his 600-piece collection in 1883, and the overall art community not being receptive to the Mississippi artist. Ohr's unconventional style was reviewed sarcastically by fine arts critics of the time, but he held onto the belief that one-day people would appreciate his pottery.

Towards the end of his life, Ohr's production slowed down and he started to approach museums and universities to purchase his collection. His dream was to have one entity buy it completely. In his own words, "My object is to dispose of the whole collection to one creature or one country…My creations shall not! Will not! and won't be sold separate." After facing rejection from these institutions, Ohr packed his works into boxes in his garage, and started a car shop with his sons. He died in 1918; but a half century later, his dream came true. In 1968, a New Jersey antiques dealer James Carpenter discovered and purchased the George Ohr collection from his sons at that car shop. James Carpenter introduced Ohr's style to the 1970s – 80s American society. Soon Ohr was heralded as an artistic genius and pieces that didn't sell while he was living were auctioned for upwards of $100,000. Today, his work is shown in numerous museums, such as The Mississippi History Museum, Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Smithsonian American Art Museum.

George Ohr forged a career that deviated from cultural and artistic norms. Centuries later, he is renowned as the premier pottery artist for modern American pottery.

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Note: This activity can be done as a full class discussion or as individual student work. A fillable PDF student version is provided at WEBLINK

Subjects addressed in this digital archive:

- Mississippi artwork and artists
- Famous Mississippians
- Fine art
- Pottery and cereamics

Directions: The students will be able to compose interpretations of George Ohr's ceramics work from the 19th and 20th centuries.

1. On the MDAH home page https://www.mdah.ms.gov/
a. Select "Collections" in the top banner of the page
2. On the following, Collections page scroll towards the bottom left of the page
a. Select "Search the Collection" https://www.mdah.ms.gov/collections
3. Scroll towards the bottom of the page
a. Select "Show All Exhibits" http://proficioweb.mdah.ms.gov/MEResults.aspx?pS=*&dir=MDAHWEB

4. Select “Search” at the top of the page
5. Under “Field Specific Searches” > “People” enter the name, “GEORGE OHR”
a. SCROLL near the bottom of the page to select the blue “Search Collection” button
6. Displayed the George Ohr collection

1. Navigate to and select Catalog #2009.3.1.
Question: Study the portrait of George Ohr.
Describe his appearance and what connection to his job as a pottery artist and or personality they might represent.

2. Navigate and select Catalog #1977.14.10
Question: “When I found the potter’s wheel, I felt it all over like a wild duck in water” – George E. Ohr
How is this attitude of Ohr reflected in this piece? Describe how you imagine him creating the vessel.

3. Navigate to and select Catalog #1980.5.3
Question:
Does this piece look finished? Why or why not?
a. What common dish/ home wear does this creation resemble?

4. Navigate to and select Catalog # 1977.14.5
Question:
In 3 ways, how is this ceramic work different from the previous works of Ohr? What do you notice about his style?
a. Compare the following piece to a previous one. What differentiates the two? Describe these differences with at least five sentences and include features such as the color, form and one other unique characteristics.

5. Navigate to and select Catalog #1984.66.5
Question:
Do you see this pottery as primarily an artistic work to be observed or a work to be utilized? If for utilization, what uses would you see this pottery being used for? If for artistic observation? Where would you see this pottery displayed, describe the setting?

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