



89.1992.1 Overbeck House and Studio
Wayne County
Marker Text Review Report
09/25/2013

Marker Text

Indiana's first art pottery, a nationally-recognized product of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, was produced 1911-1955 by the Overbeck sisters. Their 1830s Federal Style house, one block south, was listed in National Register of Historic Places, 1976.

Report

This marker was flagged for review because its file did not contain primary sources to support the text or background information to properly contextualize the significance of the Overbeck ceramic studio in Indiana and nationwide. No primary sources could be located to support the claim that the Overbeck Studio was Indiana's first art pottery; furthermore, IHB now avoids the use of subjective and superlative terms such as "first," "best," and "most." Such claims are often not verifiable or require extensive qualification to be truly accurate. And, while the marker is correct that the Overbeck home is on the National Register of Historic Places and was built in the Federal style in the 1830s, IHB no longer commemorates this information on its contemporary historical markers.¹ The following report provides more information about the Overbeck sisters and their influence on turn-of-the-century American art.

[The Arts and Crafts movement](#) originated in England during the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement, which included ceramics as well as furniture, textiles, jewelry, and metalwork, valued one-of-a-kind craftsmanship as opposed to industrial production. Arts and Crafts pottery was produced in small studios by hand. Art historian and curator Ulysses G. Dietz describes Arts and Crafts as "a notion born of Victorian idealism, romantic hindsight, and fear of industry," developed as a reaction to the perceived impersonality and danger of factory work.² As the marker correctly indicates, the Overbeck Pottery was part of the American incarnation of this movement, but it was in London that women first began to assert themselves as a presence in the field of ceramics craftsmanship.³ Arts and Crafts production afforded middle-class women a profession which was considered respectable and a path into the art community at large. "The prejudice against professions for women had to be overcome, and the idea finally take root that a girl who does not marry, or desire to earn her living, needs some stated occupation," mused Katherine Louis Smith in *Brush and Pencil* in 1896. She continued, "Now women painters and art students are so numerous that one wonders when there were none."⁴ In the first decades of Arts and Crafts production, men and women potters had different duties; men threw clay (physically made the pottery) and mixed glazes, and then women decorated the pottery after it was fired in the kiln. By the turn of the twentieth century, this strict line of division was blurring, a "breakdown of sexual barriers that allowed for the rise of the studio potter" like the Overbecks.⁵

Starting with the Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1851, Arts and Crafts pottery was exhibited at international expositions and World Fairs. Americans visiting the expositions noticed and appreciated the new style, and in this way the Arts and Crafts movement moved overseas and gained traction in the United States.⁶ The hub of Arts and Crafts pottery production in the United States was Cincinnati, Ohio, and the style was particularly popular throughout the Midwest.⁷ Small pottery studios sprang up to fulfill this demand. Best known among them was the [Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati](#), which Maria Longworth Nichol established in 1878.⁸ Women potters were by this time beginning to branch out from china decoration to the work of throwing clay, but even potteries employing women in this new capacity were usually owned and financially managed by men. In this respect the Overbeck Studio was different. According to Dietz, "When women broke out of the role set for them in the art



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pottery world, it was the exception, not the rule. One such exception was the Overbeck Pottery of Cambridge, Indiana...the four Overbeck sisters ran the operation virtually alone.”⁹ The marker does not acknowledge this significant distinction.

The marker is also accurate in establishing the dates of the Overbeck Studio’s pottery operations. The eldest sister, Margaret Overbeck, studied at the Cincinnati School of Design in 1895.¹⁰ She worked briefly at a Zanesville, Ohio pottery studio and took several short-term positions teaching art in Kentucky and Missouri before assuming a more permanent position teaching at DePauw University in Indiana.¹¹ It was Margaret who helped instruct her younger sisters in the art of pottery decoration, and she lived just long enough to help get the studio off the ground in early 1911.¹² After her death later that year, her younger sisters Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary Overbeck continued the work. Elizabeth, who trained with Charles C. Binns at the New York State School of Clay Workers and Ceramics, was primarily responsible for the technical work of mixing glazes and throwing the clay.¹³ Hannah and Mary were responsible for painting the ceramics after they came out of the kiln. The studio produced decorative pieces, matching sets of dishware for everyday use, miniature figurines, and odd, off-kilter miniatures they called “grotesques.”¹⁴ The sisters relied on the output of the studio for their primary source of income, and handled all the finances and business transactions themselves. Hannah died in 1931; Elizabeth, in 1936.¹⁵ The year before her death, Elizabeth was elected to an honorary fellowship in the American Ceramics Society.¹⁶ Although Elizabeth had been the primary caster of pottery, youngest sister Mary Overbeck continued the studio’s operation, producing mostly small pins and figurines she could assemble by hand.¹⁷ However, with Mary’s death in 1955, the studio closed.¹⁸

Also correct is the marker’s assertion that the Overbeck Studio was nationally-recognized for its artistic contributions to the Arts and Crafts movement. Starting in 1900, the sisters began regularly submitting designs to the national ceramics magazine *Keramic Studio*, under the editorial management of Adelaide Alsop Robineau.¹⁹ Robineau frequently chose to print the Overbecks’ designs, and the sisters won many prizes in the nearly two decades they submitted to the magazine (1900-circa 1920).²⁰ An issue of the magazine featured Margaret’s work in March of 1907.²¹ The Overbecks also placed pieces in the nationally-traveling collections of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the American Ceramics Society.²² Perhaps most notably, they were invited to enter pieces in the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco and the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago.²³ Margaret Overbeck also exhibited a watercolor at the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904.²⁴ While several secondary sources assert that the sisters’ work won prizes at these major international events, no primary sources could be located to support this claim. More research is necessary to ascertain to what degree Overbeck work was recognized at these events. They did receive an Honorable Mention at the Robineau Memorial Ceramic Exhibition in Syracuse, New York in 1934.²⁵

The marker does not acknowledge the Overbecks’ abundant statewide and local significance. Overbeck pottery was routinely exhibited at the Indiana State Fair, often winning one or several prizes, and one year “practically [capturing] all the awards in their department.”²⁶ The Overbecks also exhibited their pottery statewide, notably at the Keramic League in Richmond and the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis.²⁷ In 1927, the Overbecks won First Handicraft Prize at the Richmond art fair; in 1928 they won first prize in the Applied Arts category at the Indiana Artists Exhibition in Indianapolis.²⁸ The Overbeck home and studio functioned as an educational facility; the sisters taught ceramics classes for locals there during the summer, and frequently hosted workshops for other Indiana artists.²⁹ Elizabeth Overbeck also taught a ceramics class in Richmond.³⁰ All four sisters were active members (and, at



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times, elected officers) of the Helen Hunt Club, a women's club in Cambridge City, and often exhibited their work at Club functions.³¹ Overbeck pottery was valued by collectors throughout the state, and John Nixon, the president of the Wayne County Art Collectors' League, said in 1926, "Here, right at our doors, are objects of art that are as fine as any to be found anywhere and, in the future, will mount in value."³²

This prediction would prove to be true. In 2006 a small collection of Overbeck pottery was featured on the PBS television program [Antiques Roadshow](#), where it was appraised by Riley Humler, gallery director of Cincinnati Art Galleries. "Interest in Overbeck goes way beyond Indiana now," Humler said. "The people buying it are serious Arts and Crafts collectors all over the United States."³³ In the last thirty years, Overbeck pottery has been displayed at the Wayne County Historical Museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Ball State University Art Gallery, the Art Association of Richmond, and the [Cambridge City Public Library](#).³⁴ Overbeck pottery has been featured in *Antique Week* and *Today's Collector*.³⁵ [Tours of the Overbeck home and studio in Cambridge City are available by appointment.](#)

¹ National Register of Historic Places, Lackey-Overbeck House, Cambridge City, Indiana, National Register #76000030 [copy in marker file at Indiana Historical Bureau].

² Ulysses G. Dietz, "Art Pottery 1880-1920", in *American Ceramics: The Collection of Everson Museum of Art*, ed. Barbara Perry (Rizzoli, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 59.

³ Andrea Callan, *Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York City: Random House, 1979), 54. Per Callan, in the early years of Arts and Crafts pottery "women, relegated to the most menial tasks, rarely reached a sufficiently elevated position in the hierarchy to receive recognition for their work. Generally speaking it was the designer, usually male, who received acclaim for his creativity while the executant of his design, usually female, remained anonymous; this anomaly was partially corrected by the advent of greater respect for craftsmanship with the Arts and Crafts movement proper."

⁴ Katherine Louise Smith, "Women in the Art Crafts," *Brush and Pencil* 5: 2 (November 1899): 76.

⁵ Dietz, 63.

⁶ Dietz, 61. American Arts and Crafts ceramics came of age at the 1889 Paris fair, where Rookwood won the gold medal, and continued to flourish at international expositions through the first three decades of the twentieth century. For more on the culture exchange between Britain and the United States as it relates to Arts and Crafts pottery, see Martin Eidelberg, "Myths of Style and Nationalism: American Art Pottery at the Turn of the Century," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 20 (1994): 84-111.

⁷ Kathleen Postle, *The Chronicle of the Overbeck Pottery* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1978), 35; Martin Eidelberg, "Art Pottery," in *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, ed. Robert Judson Clark (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 119. Eidelberg minces no words: "It was in Cincinnati that the American art pottery movement began." Eidelberg's illustrated essay is an excellent resource on the origins of art pottery in America and some of its most important artists. For perspective on the Arts and Crafts pottery scene from one of its leading participants, see Charles F. Binns, "Pottery in America," *The American Magazine of Art* 7: 4 (Feb., 1916): 131-138.

⁸ Dietz, 64. While the female-founded Rookwood put Cincinnati on the map of the ceramics world, other studios of notable success also employed women. However, within these studios women tended to be the decorators while



men tended to cast the pots and win individual recognition. Even at Rookwood, the primary technicians of the pottery were male.

⁹ Dietz, 65. Dietz goes on to suggest that as the sister who did the actual clay firing and throwing, and the primary “face” of the pottery, Elizabeth Overbeck achieved “male status” in a family-run operation and was regarded as head of the household by her sisters.

¹⁰ Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune* (Cambridge City, IN), June 2, 1892, 8.

¹¹ Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, May 23, 1895, 2; Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, September 5, 1895, 3; Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, July 21, 1904, 11.

¹² Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, March 8, 1911, 3. The cause of Margaret’s death is not recorded, but some secondary sources have speculated it was related to lingering poor health following a car accident she sustained in 1908.

¹³ Postle, 50. Binns has been called “the father of American ceramics,” and it is evident from Elizabeth’s fellowship application to the American Ceramics Society that he was *the* defining influence of her working life. “Under Prof. Binns’ incomparable teaching, the amount learned depended only on the ability of the student and the number of hours in a day,” she effused.

¹⁴ Postle 76-77. Postle’s *The Chronicle of the Overbeck Pottery* is an excellent resource for the more technical aspects of the Overbecks’ process and the art it produced. Postle’s collection of Overbeck pieces is now on display at the Museum of Overbeck Art Pottery in the Cambridge City Public Library in Cambridge City, Indiana. For color photographs of Overbeck pottery, see Ellen Paul Denker, “Creating a Life: The Overbeck Sisters and Their Cambridge City Pottery,” *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, 17: 2 (Spring 2005): 20-29; Ellen Paul Denker, “Sister Act: The Overbeck Pottery, 1911-1955,” *The Magazine Antiques* 168:1 (Jul. 2005): 74-81.

¹⁵ “Miss Elizabeth Overbeck,” obituary, *Cambridge City Tribune*, December 3, 1936, 1; “Pottery Head Dies at Cambridge City,” *Indianapolis Star*, December 2, 1936, 19; “Hoosier Woman Potter Passes,” *Greensburg Daily News*, December 2, 1936, 5.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Overbeck, Nomination for American Ceramic Society Fellowship dated January 25, 1935, private collection of Jerry and Phyllis Mattheis.

¹⁷ “Last of Famous Overbeck Sisters Here Carries On Family’s Art Tradition,” *Cambridge City National Road Traveler*, June 3, 1948, 9; “Magic in Her Fingers,” *Indy Star Magazine*, July 16, 1950, 12.

¹⁸ “Miss Mary F. Overbeck,” obituary, *Cambridge City National Road Traveler*, March 24, 1955, 1. Mary refused to disclose the recipe for the studio’s most popular glazes, and these recipes died with her.

¹⁹ Dietz, 65. Robineau was undoubtedly one of the leading figures in American Arts and Crafts pottery. Like Elizabeth Overbeck, Robineau got her start in ceramics painting and eventually made the switch to throwing clay; also like Elizabeth, she studied under Charles Binns in New York. Dietz suggests she “has claim to more real historical importance today than any other woman in the art pottery movement.”

²⁰ For examples: Adelaide Alsop Robineau, *Keramic Studio* 6:4 (August 1904); *Keramic Studio* 8: 5 (September 1906); *Keramic Studio* 9: 2 (June 1907). The first Overbeck contribution to *Keramic Studio* was Margaret’s, in May 1901. After her death, Hannah and Mary continued to submit, but frequency of submission decreased significantly as their interest shifted from china decoration to ceramic production. More samples of the Overbeck’s involvement in *Keramic Studio* over these two decades are available in the marker folder at IHB.



²¹ Adelaide Alsop Robineau, *Keramic Studio* 8: 11 (March 1907), 1.

²² Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, July 13, 1922, 12; "Exhibit of Art Pottery Coming Soon," *Attica Ledger Press*, April 3, 1914, 1.

²³ Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, December 17, 1914, 5; "With Europe Strife-Ridden, Tourists Turn Towards West," *The Indianapolis Sunday Star*, April 11, 1915, 36; Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, July 15, 1915, 7. These newspapers do not record any awards won by the Overbecks at these major international exhibitions, but do indicate that their pieces were well-received by the public and reflected well upon the Indiana art community.

²⁴ "Greencastle Banner," *Cambridge City Tribune*, April 21, 1904, 14.

²⁵ Elizabeth Overbeck, Nomination for American Ceramic Society Fellowship dated January 25, 1935, p. 3, private collection of Jerry and Phyllis Mattheis.

²⁶ "Overbeck Sisters Win Awards," *Cambridge City Tribune*, September 18, 1932, 1.

²⁷ "Will Be Represented in Annual Display," *Richmond Morning News*, January 1, 1909, 1; "Society and Personal Items of Interest," *Richmond Morning News*, November 12, 1908, p. 4; Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, April 1, 1918, 1

²⁸ Elizabeth Overbeck, Nomination for American Ceramic Society Fellowship dated January 25, 1935, 3, private collection of Jerry and Phyllis Mattheis.

²⁹ "Hoosier Artists Enjoy a Trip to the Overbeck Pottery," *Cambridge City Tribune*, July 1, 1920, 1.

³⁰ Society notes, *Cambridge City Tribune*, November 14, 1918, 11.

³¹ "Overbeck Art Exhibit Under Management of Helen Hunt Club," *Cambridge City Tribune*, February 15, 1917, 7.

³² "Overbeck Sisters Pottery Gaining National Reputation," *Cambridge City Tribune*, August 26, 1926, 2.

³³ "Next of Kiln: The Overbeck Sisters," Dennis Gaffney for Antiques Roadshow, PBS, last modified January 30, 2006, accessed September 24, 2013, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/fts/houston_200503A35.html.

³⁴ "Host Exhibition of Overbeck Work," *The Graphic*, November 13, 1985, 4.

³⁵ "Overbeck is an Arts and Crafts Legacy," *Antique Week*, April 25, 2005, 1, 40; Don Johnson, "Overbeck Pottery," *Today's Collector* 2: 10 (October 1994): 1, 38-46.