

WOMEN, ART, & SOCIAL CHANGE: THE NEWCOMB POTTERY ENTERPRISE

...a beautiful art is developing which is the expression of its environment as truly as each vase is the individual expression of one woman who has found herself.

© Ednah Robinson, "Newcomb Pottery," *Sunset*, Southern Pacific Company, Passenger Dept., vol. 11, 1903

ABOVE: Platter of Gulf Stream ware, c. 1942–48. Sarah A.E. "Sadie" Irvine, decorator; Kenneth Smith or Francis Ford, potter. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University.

COVER: Pitcher with pomegranate and leaf cross-section design, c. 1900–1905. Gertrude Roberts Smith, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Underglaze painting with glossy glaze. Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Baton Rouge; gift of the Friends of the LSU Museum of Art.

INTERIOR FLAP, LEFT: Archival photograph, c. 1903. Newcomb decorators and Joseph Meyer in Pottery enterprise studio, Newcomb Pottery building, Washington Avenue campus. University photography album, University Archives, Tulane University.

INTERIOR FLAP, RIGHT: Two-handled jar with bull tongue arrowhead design, c. 1898. Esther Huger Elliott, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Underglaze painting with glossy glaze. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; purchased through the Mignon Faget Acquisition Fund.

Women Art and Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise is organized by the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibition is supported by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Artworks, and the Newcomb College Institute.

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Design by Nancy Bratton Design



The story of the Newcomb Pottery began just after the Civil War—a time when the American South struggled to reinvent itself. American women were beginning a long road toward suffrage and self-determination. In the decades to follow, the Newcomb Pottery enterprise emerged as a quietly radical experiment—an unprecedented opportunity for Southern women to train as artists and support themselves financially. Working as a collective, the enterprise produced a rich body of work—not only world-renowned pottery, but also metalwork, textiles, bookbinding, jewelry, and other handicrafts.

1890s: The Early Years

Emerging out of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, the pottery enterprise was founded by Newcomb College faculty members Ellsworth Woodward, a painter and draftsman, and Mary Sheerer, a ceramicist hired to teach china painting. Female graduates of the Newcomb Art Department were employed to design pottery and paint china, (and later execute original jewelry, needlework, metalwork, and book binding), the best pieces of which were sold as Newcomb Pottery. Early students experimented with a wide range of motifs and techniques. A key tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement was retaining a regional sensibility, so Southern flora and fauna were always the focus. Popular motifs included cross-sections of Southern plants, and winged

insects circling around a light. The pottery from this period was distinguished by bright underglaze colors and transparent glazes, although there was also experimentation with other techniques, influenced by Delftware, as well as Chinese and Japanese motifs. By the turn of the century, Newcomb increasingly featured sage green and cobalt blue color schemes under clear lead glazes.

1900–1914: The Growth Years

With the new century came a new look for Newcomb Pottery, guided by the influential writings of American designer Arthur W. Dow. From his school in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where many Newcomb students traveled to study, Dow

encouraged the study of tonal gradation and the use of distinct outlines and flat patterns. In 1900, Newcomb earned international acclaim with a bronze medal at Paris' Exposition Universelle. This success brought in students from across the country, and the school expanded course offerings to include metalwork, textiles, and bookbinding.

Designers modulated the popular blue and green tones, and produced a surprising range within a limited palette. Also during this time, ceramicist Joseph Meyer experimented with reduction fired copper-red glazes that ranged from iridescent to brilliant red. In 1910, pottery decorating instructor Mary Sheerer and ceramicist Paul Cox successfully developed a new transparent matt glaze, which became the school's standard.

1914–1930: The Beginnings of Modernism

The Roaring Twenties saw an expansion of the world economy, growing freedoms for women, and new artistic styles. In 1925, influenced by her trip to Paris, Mary Sheerer advocated for the angular forms of the Art Deco style, while founder Ellsworth Woodward remained committed to the older romantic aesthetic. Bestsellers at Newcomb continued to be the naturalistic images celebrating the Deep South, such as the tonal, hazy "moon and moss" motif invented by Sadie Irvine. Another motif, the Español, appeared in the mid-1920s, and was based on Ellsworth Woodward's discovery of a Spanish colonial-era mantel in the French Quarter.

1930–1948: The Closing Chapter

In its final decade, Newcomb artists shifted away from naturalistic scenes, and moved toward a more modernist aesthetic. Though the familiar romantic subjects continued to sell well, artists also depicted highly abstracted scenes of the Gulf South region. A final phase, known as the "Newcomb Guild," continued from 1940–1948. Potters shifted from using detailed carved design to a more austere, mid-century Modernist approach that emphasized the vessel form and the qualities of the glaze itself. The legacy of Newcomb is the continuing spirit of self-actualization and artistic exploration that inspires artists to this day.



NEWCOMB ARTISTS: A Closer Look



Mary Williams Butler

Known for launching the metalwork program, Mary Williams Butler received her diploma from Newcomb College in 1901 and worked as an instructor and later a professor in drawing and design. She continued her training with Harvard design theorist Denman Ross and at the Kalo Shop, a renowned Chicago silversmith. When she died in 1937, Newcomb College suspended classes for the day to honor her 40-year commitment.

Silver necklace with moonstone and pendant, c. 1929. Hand-wrought chain with cut-out "NBM" (Nellie Mae Bartlett) monogram. Attributed to Mary Williams Butler. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; gift of Mrs. Harry B. "Jack" Kelleher.



Amelie & Desirée Roman

Cornerstones of the Newcomb crafts program, sisters Desirée and Amelie were members of the Saturday Drawing class between 1885 and 1887. Desirée was one of two art graduates to receive a diploma in Normal Art at the college's first commencement in 1890. She continued to work at Newcomb as the Pottery's bookkeeper, then as a pottery and sales agent. Amelie's initials appear on some of the Pottery's earliest and most successful hand-painted pieces, and she attended Dow's prestigious summer school at Ipswich. Amelie worked first as an instructor, then as an assistant professor of drawing and design at Newcomb. Both women retired by 1940.

Mug with rabbits in a forest design, c. 1902. Amelie Roman, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Underglaze painting with glossy glaze. Collection of Caren Fine.



Archival photograph, n.d. Art Students in the metalwork studio of the Newcomb Art School, Broadway Street campus. Newcomb Art Scrapbook, University Archives, Tulane University.

And slowly, month by month, as the vagaries of the kiln were brought under control and the mysterious interrelation of pastes and glazes mastered through repeated failure, tragedies grew steadily rarer and success each day more sure.

© Harriet Joor, Newcomb artist, July 1910

Harriet Joor



After receiving a Bachelor of Science from Newcomb College in 1895, Harriet Joor enrolled as an art student from 1896 to 1900 and as a graduate art student from 1900 to 1901. She was one of the first Newcomb students to attend Arthur Dow's summer school in Ipswich, Massachusetts. In the early 1900s she was an active Newcomb Pottery designer, and worked in Chicago from 1906 to 1920. In 1920, she moved to Washington, D.C. where she was employed as a reconstructive aide and handicrafts instructor at Walter Reed Hospital. She moved back to Louisiana in 1923, to teach at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now University of Lafayette, Louisiana), and retired in 1940.

Plate with cactus design, c. 1903. Harriet Coulter Joor, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Incised; underglaze with glossy glaze. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; gift of Mrs. Arthur L. (Harriet) Jung, Jr., N '40.



Sadie Irvine



A New Orleans native, Irvine received a diploma in art in 1906, and studied as a graduate student for the next two years. From 1908 to 1929, she was an Art Craftsman at the Pottery, and worked for the college from 1929 to 1952. Irvine won numerous awards for her watercolors, block prints, and pottery decoration and received several scholarships, including to Dow's Ipswich summer school and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Candlesticks with butterfly design, c. 1926. Sarah A.E. "Sadie" Irvine, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Low-relief carving; underglaze with matte glaze. Collection of Caren Fine.



R. Roos

Rosalie Roos Wiener

Rosalie Roos entered Newcomb College as a freshman in 1923. In her sophomore year, she married, and later took classes part-time but never graduated from the school. In 1930, she received the Molley Palfrey prize in metalwork, awarded to the most skillful of undergraduates. From 1930 to 1938, she worked as an Art Craftsman at the Pottery. At the outbreak of World War II, Roos volunteered for the Navy, and was one of ten female members of the Motor Corps service. She returned to Tulane in 1948 to study architecture.

Amethyst set in hand-wrought gold ring, c. 1928-33. Moderne design. Rosalie Roos Wiener, artist. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University.



Popular Flora and Fauna of Newcomb Pottery

MAGNOLIA (genus *Magnolia*)

This genus includes over 200 flowering plant species, but the most common blossom to Louisiana and the state flower is the Southern Magnolia, or *Magnolia grandiflora*. The velvety white blossom was popular with Newcomb craftswomen, as it evokes romanticism and old southern charm.

SOUTHERN LIVE OAK (*Quercus virginiana*) Native to the southeastern U.S., the live oak is a quintessential icon of the Old South. Oaks still thrive on Newcomb College's Broadway campus, and some say the trees were grown from acorns taken from the original Washington Avenue campus in 1918.

BLUE CRAB (*Callinectes sapidus*) The blue crab's scientific name comes from the Greek words for "beautiful swimmer" and "savory." Native to the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, blue crabs have significant culinary and economic importance to Louisiana.

CREPE MYRTLE (genus *Lagerstroemia*) Native to the Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia, the crepe myrtle is a genus of around 50 species that thrives in the humid Louisiana air. The small blossoms, in vibrant hues of pink, purple, or white, cover the tree in the heat of the summer months with a crinkly texture reminiscent of crepe paper.

LOUISIANA IRIS (genus *Iris*) Refers to any one of five iris species that are native to Louisiana. Louisiana irises are beardless, unlike older varieties indigenous to the temperate zones of Europe and the arid regions of Africa and Asia. Louisiana irises were first documented by John James Audubon in the 1820s.

CYPRESS (*Taxodium distichum*) The indigenous bald cypress is Louisiana's state tree and is often seen overgrown with Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*). Known for their ability to grow in water, cypress trees can reach up to 100 feet, and prosper along the marshy Louisiana coastline.

LEFT: Vase with Louisiana iris design, c. 1905. Roberta Beverly Kennon, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Incised; underglaze with glossy glaze. Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University.

TOP: Plate with blue crab design, c. 1904. Sabina Elliot Wells, decorator; Joseph Meyer, potter. Incised; underglaze with glossy glaze. Two Red Roses Foundation.

