

Illinois Women Artists, Part 55

The Atlan Ceramic Art Club Adopts Modern Design

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The Atlan Ceramic Art Club was one of the most highly regarded American china painting clubs at the turn of the 20th century, and a key influence in the shift from naturalistic to “conventional” designs in an effort to express modern American identity. Active in Chicago from 1893 to 1923, its members elevated the status of china painting in America by their dedicated study, commitment to quality, and high standards for works placed on public exhibition.



Fifteen of the best-known women china painters in Chicago formed the club in February 1893, soon after Florence Pratt Steward shared her idea for a professional club limited to the city’s “better artists” at a dinner party in her home. The women, all members of the large Chicago Ceramic Association organized in 1892, were hoping to participate in the World’s Columbian Exposition opening in late April. Through the efforts of Cornelia Hooker Mann, elected as the club’s first president and curator of ceramics for the Illinois Woman’s Exposition Board, and Susan S. Frackelton, president of the National League of Mineral Painters, they were able to exhibit as a group. The work of Atlan Club members, shown both collec-



The Atlan Ceramic Art Club logo, which referenced its motto—“Patience, Persistence, Progress”—was added on the underside of objects intended for public exhibition.

tively and individually, earned the most awards of any club at the Fair.

Atlan Club members never lost sight of the founders’ three goals to continue improving their skills, to elevate china painting from a hobby to a respected art form, and to develop an original American style of decoration. Membership numbers were limited, growing to as many as 30 active members in 1916. Admission was contingent on demonstrating originality of design and an exceptional level of craftsmanship, and to receiving a favorable review of two works executed

without the aid of an instructor. Once accepted into the Club, each member was expected to “be a conscientious worker,” to dedicate time and effort to the yearly winter course of study meant to improve her understanding and execution of designs. In an April 1899 *Brush and Pencil* article on the club, long-time member Mabel C. Dibble reported that many “social, and some financial plans are cheerfully thrown aside” by members for the pursuit of their weekly studies. Topics varied from the scientific basics of mineral painting, to evaluating a series of enamels, to design history. By 1901, associate members could attend the study courses and constituted a pool from which new active members could be chosen.

The affiliated membership which the Art Institute of Chicago conferred on the Atlan Club in 1894 included exhibition privileges. The exhibit they organized that year drew more than 1,000 visitors for opening day with xxx objects on view; that success was followed by an annual exhibit of two weeks duration at the Art Institute which became “a most popular social event,” and occasional exhibits at other locations. Reviews in professional art journals about the Atlan Club exhibits promulgated their values and greatly enhanced their reputation across the nation. Reviews of exhibitions in the *Inter Ocean* and other Chicago news-



The Atlan Ceramic Art Club display at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.



Designer and decorator: Helen Fenton Frazee (1858-1923) plate, circa 1900, porcelain Collection of Chicago History Museum, Gift of Mrs. Clifford Nolan, Sr.

papers praised club members for the improvements each one demonstrated with successive years.

It was Grace Long Updyke, an instructor at the Art Institute who led club members in their studies over the winter of 1895, who first encouraged them to abandon “figure work” or representations of flowers, fruit and people on ceramic table wares, as being too elaborate for the forms. Her suggestion to focus on “conventional design” was reinforced by William M.R. French, director of the Art Institute, in 1898. That same year the club hired Florence Koehler as their instructor. She had “made a most thorough and exhaustive study of Oriental

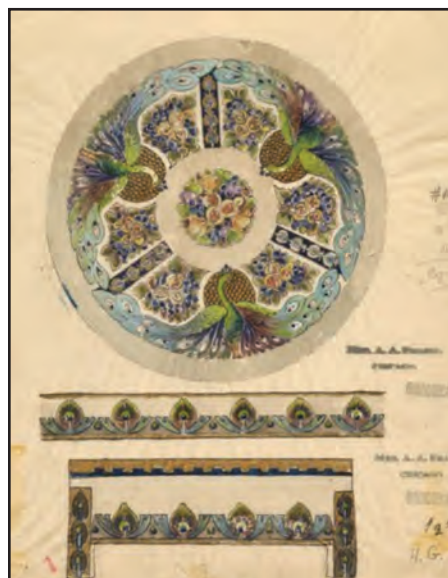


In 1910, Florence Steward (1851-1921), founder and lifetime director of the Atlan Ceramic Art Club, produced a “conversation set,” a dessert service with each of its seven place settings inspired by one of the cultural traditions studied by club members. This cup and saucer are part of the “Japanese” place setting in this set. Collection of Chicago History Museum

Helen Fenton Frazee (1858-1923) border design, circa 1900, Collection of Chicago History Museum ICHi-073129

pottery.” During the winter months, Club members conscientiously studied designs of different historical periods with a view to learning the principles of good design and conventionalization, beginning with Egyptian, followed by Persian, Arabic, Moorish, East Indian, Indo-Persian, Japanese and Chinese.

“Conventional” ornament was understood at the time to be derived from historical design traditions or



Helen Fenton Frazee (1858-1923) design for lid and border decorations on a ceramic vessel, circa 1900, Collection of Chicago History Museum ICHi-073098

characterized by a flattening and simplification of plant forms. This modern design attitude which gained popularity at the turn of the 20th century advocated for abstract, often geometric motifs appropriately scaled to the size and shape of the object being decorated. Atlan Ceramic Art Club members pioneered a commitment to conventional decoration, which was soon adopted by the most progressive china painters in the United States. Members also carefully considered the types of blanks they used and how they applied their designs: American Belleek and European porcelains with over-glaze decoration dominated the items placed on exhibition after 1901.

Well before the Atlan Ceramic Art Club merged with the Technic Arts League in 1923, it had set new standards for china painting in this country and become a model for china painting clubs in communities across the country. The unidentified author of a brief history of the Club included in the catalog of their 1914 exhibition asserted that the “Club has certainly succeeded in presenting a new and beautiful form of ornament, and the public has accepted it; I see no reason why it should not become an established American style of decoration for china.”

Mabel C. Dibble (1858-1917) was considered “one of the leading disciples of the Conventional school. She developed “Dibble Green,” a dark rich green enamel color offered by a large manufacturer, and she was the first Midwestern woman to be named a Master Craftsman by the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts. She decorated this vase circa 1900.

