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Artifact

Crafting Concrete

Garden Pottery by Eric Soderholtz

By Mark E. Weaver

Even a pedestrian material like concrete can become something wonderful in the hands of a craftsman with vision. Such was Eric Ellis Soderholtz (1867-1959), who won the prize for garden pottery at the Chicago Ceramic Association Arts and Crafts exhibition of 1913.

An immigrant from Sweden, “Sody”—as his friends called him—first became a professional photographer, excelling in the field of architectural photography. Eventually he settled in West Gouldsboro, Maine, where he built the stone bungalow he called Boreas Lodge (now on the National Register of Historic Places). West Gouldsboro would become Soderholtz’s home for the rest of his life, and the base for his pottery works.

In 1895, Soderholtz was sent overseas by a publishing firm to photograph the great architecture and gardens of Spain and Italy. It was there that he developed an affinity for the classic pottery forms that would inspire his designs. When he returned to Maine, Soderholtz produced a few experimental garden pots, developing a technique whereby he set up an inner form on a potter’s wheel, then applied layers of concrete, shaping the pot as it turned with a “screed”—a large, flat wooden tool carved to the desired profile. During the process, a grid of galvanized wire was embedded and then covered over, rendering the pots—when fully cured—extremely resistant to the harsh Maine climate.

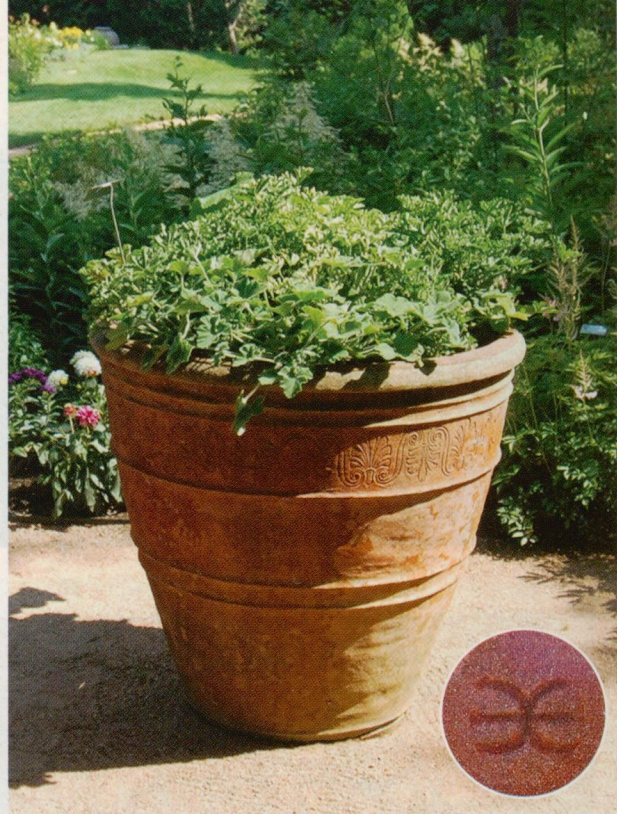
In 1901, while designing estate gardens on Maine’s Mt. Desert Island, famed landscape architect Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959) saw Soderholtz’s pottery and went on to use it in many of her most prestigious projects. Soderholtz pots not only survived the cold winters, but they also worked beautifully within her design style, which was greatly influenced by the work of British Arts and Crafts landscape designer Gertrude Jekyll. Like Jekyll, Farrand considered color, texture, and the importance of natural plantings in her designs. Similarly, color, texture, and form define Soderholtz pottery, and he himself wrote of the value of pottery to help an inspired landscaper “order and enhance the truant beauties of nature.” It is little wonder that Farrand was impressed with Sody’s work, which exemplified the Arts and Crafts guideposts of head, hand, and heart—and which has proved so durable that we can still enjoy it today.

To See and Learn More

Soderholtz pots, along with rare plants, can now be seen at the Thuya Gardens and the Asticou Azalea Gardens in Northeast Harbor, ME (www.gardenpreserve.org or 207-276-3727). A Soderholtz fountain also plays in Bar Harbor’s Agamont Park. More Soderholtz pottery can be viewed on the Fountain Terrace at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, one of Beatrix Farrand’s most important commissions (www.doaks.org/gardens or 202-339-6450).

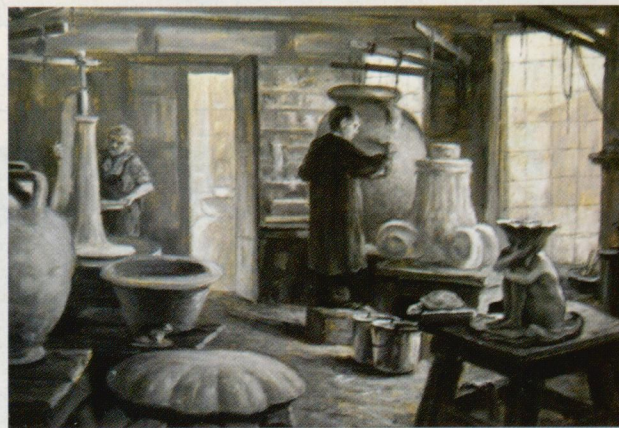
Soderholtz pots occasionally turn up at antique shops and auctions. Can’t find an original? Today, Lunaform Pottery creates Soderholtz replicas and other designs using a similar technique (see page 18).

For more on Beatrix Farrand, contact the Beatrix Farrand Society (www.beatrixfarrand.org or 207-288-0237) or read Judith B. Tankard’s *Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens, Public Landscapes* (The Monacelli Press, 2009).



Photographs by author.

Above Embellished like many of his works with chiseled decoration, this Soderholtz pot at the Thuya Gardens has survived many decades of Maine winters. **Inset** Soderholtz signed his work with a conjoined “EES.”



Collection of West Gouldsboro Historical Society.

Above This goauche drawing by Franz Lesschafft, circa 1910, shows Soderholtz in his workshop; at left, an assistant uses a large wooden “screed” to shape a bird-bath pedestal on the potter’s wheel.

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