

THE DOWN EAST DILETTANTE ~ Tales & Strong Opinions, From Maine, Regarding Architecture, Art, Books, Design, & Landscape

Concrete Beauty: E.E. Soderholtz

26 Wednesday, May 2010

POSTED BY DOWNEASTDILETTANTE IN BAR HARBOR, BEATRIX FARRAND, GARDENS, LANDSCAPE, SODERHOLTZ

≈ **15 COMMENTS**

Pay attention, class. With the advent of summer, I will be posting about several favorite gardens here in eastern Maine, and this is a name you will need to remember: Eric Ellis Soderholtz. He was a pioneer in American garden pottery at the turn of the last century, and as well as in the artistic use of that most humble of mediums, concrete. His extraordinary garden pots, perfect in the Maine landscape, were among the fascinating features of many area gardens in my youth.

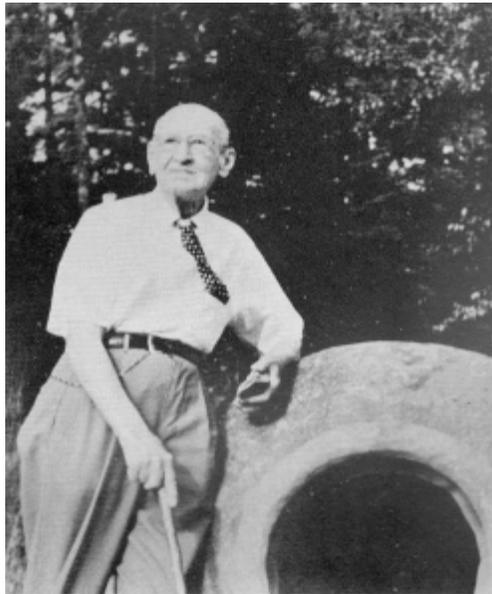


Three examples of Soderholtz at his best, two pots based on ancient forms in re-inforced concrete, and a birdbath (Soderholtz photograph)

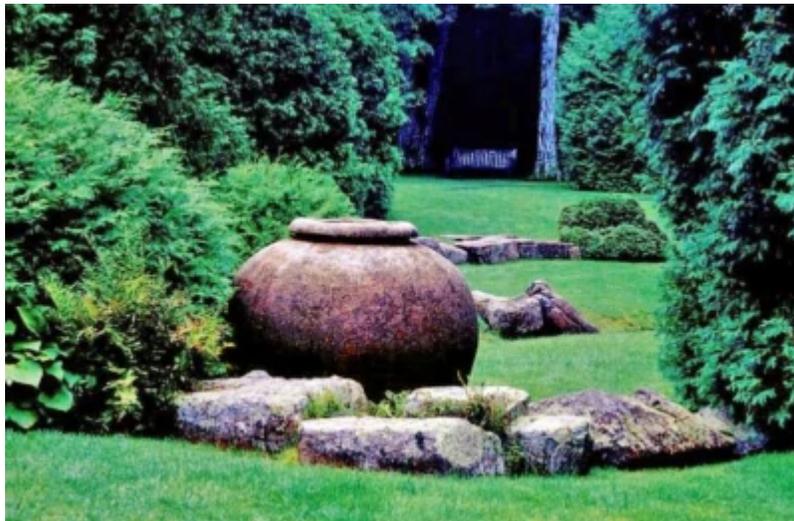
Architectural Photographer

Born in Sweden, based in Boston, Soderholtz's first career was as a photographer, specializing in Architecture. In the late 19th century, on the wave of interest in America's past, he published several groundbreaking books of photographs of early American houses. His work also appeared in most of the major magazines of the day, from Architectural Record to House Beautiful. In a review of one of his books, Architectural Review's critic opined that Soderholtz had no peer among architectural photographers.

'5



E.E. Soderholtz at age 91 in 1959, with one of his ancient inspired jars



A similar jar by Soderholtz, originally in the garden at Beatrix Farrand's 'Reef Point' estate in Bar Harbor, now at Thuya Garden in Northeast Harbor.

He first discovered Maine on a fishing trip, winding up in the hamlet of West Gouldsboro, near the spectacular scenery of the Schoodic Peninsula, now part of Acadia National Park. He fell in love with the area, and eventually built a fascinating stone Arts & Crafts bungalow, Boreas Lodge, on a rocky ledge there.



A deceptively simple turned pot, with Soderholtz's scarab trademark impressed on the side (Soderholtz)

While in Europe photographing ancient works in Spain and the Mediterranean —a project that required up to three assistants to carry the heavy glass plate negatives used in that time. He was especially drawn to the simple forms of ancient utilitarian pots.



The Soderholtz studio in West Gouldsboro, Maine

Garden Potter

Shortly after returning to America, he was commissioned to photograph a garden in New Jersey. He was stuck by the beauty of a pair of turned concrete pots he saw there. He measured and copied them for his own doorstep at West Gouldsboro, where the thin rocky Maine soil made gardening on the ground difficult. Landscape architect Beatrix Farrand, visiting from Bar Harbor, was immediately taken with this first effort and asked Soderholtz to make copies for a job that she was working on. A new career was born, and almost overnight Soderholtz's simple, beautifully textured designs were in such

demand that he semi-retired from photography and opened a small factory studio to manufacture these beautiful objects.



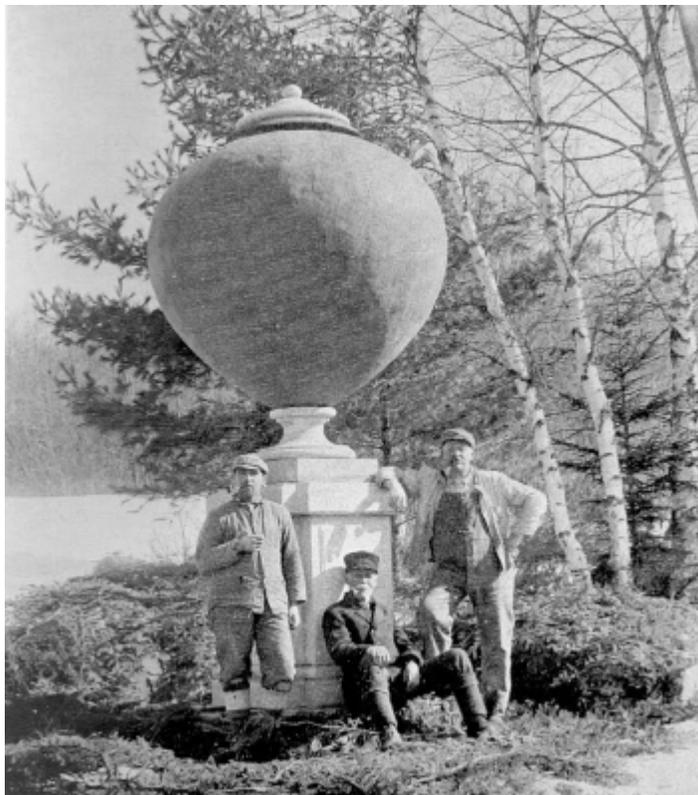
Two of Soderholtz's earliest works, in his own garden in Gouldsboro. He referred to these as 'Arabian' oil jars.



3-part wooden form used to model the jars above.

He experimented with shapes, techniques, and finishes. Pieces were manufactured using various techniques, including molding on a form, and pivoting against a template. The finish layers were applied by hand on a turning wheel. Powdered brick dust mixed in the concrete gave a particularly beautiful finish, and various other materials, from coal dust to mica chips were used for various colored and textured surfaces. Stamps were used to impress designs on some of his pieces, My favorites being inspired by Persian and Greek forms. Eventually the business grew to encompass architectural elements

also—gateposts, columns, friezes and more custom work embellished several of the major Bar Harbor residences of the era, and can be found as far south as Dumbarton Oaks, Farrand's design for the Robert Blisses in Georgetown, D.C.



Workmen with a copy of the Boboli urn at the studio. This may have been finished with powdered brick dust tinting the concrete.

In addition to Soderholtz's custom work, he had retail operations on site in Gouldsboro, and at the Malvern Nurseries, adjoining the fashionable Malvern Hotel in Bar Harbor.



Soderholtz wares on sale at the Malvern Nurseries, Malvern Hotel in Background.

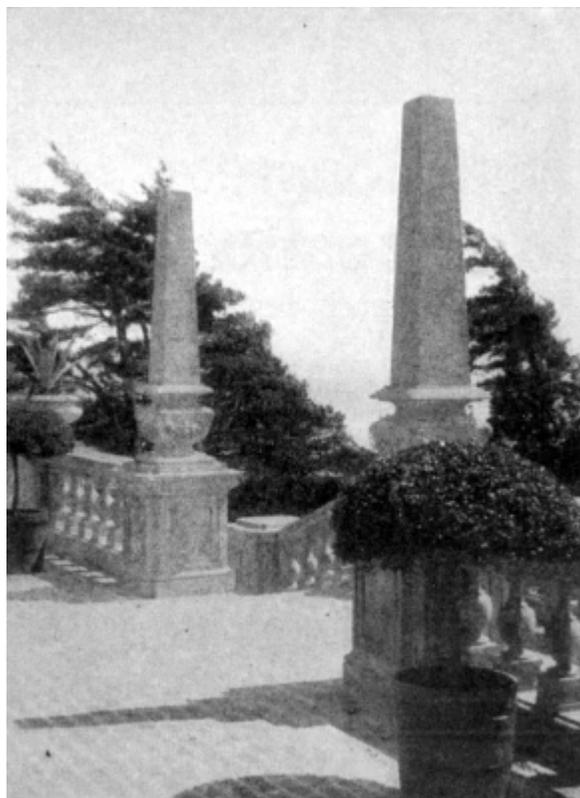
With the coming of the great depression, business declined, and the studio was closed. 35 years ago, one could still see the giant wooden forms that had shaped many of his pots, strewn about the grounds of

his home in West Gouldsboro. With a resurgence of interest in landscape design over the last couple of decades, Soderholtz's pots, identified by their distinctive scarab chop mark stamped in the wet concrete, are once again much in demand, and collectors include Martha Stewart, who has several at her Skylands estate in Seal Harbor. Prices are commensurate with rarity and demand.

Architectural Elements by Manufactured by Soderholtz



Soderholtz balustrades and urns fronting the driveway at 'Greenway Court' designed by Andrews, Jacques & Rantoul for F. Burton Harrison at Bar Harbor. In the distance across Frenchman's Bay can be seen Gouldsboro, where Soderholtz lived. Incidentally, 'Greenway Court' was later owned by the Charles Pikes of Chicago, who also owned a spectacular David Adler villa in Lake Forest.



A pair of obelisks manufactured by Soderholtz on the ocean terrace at 'Greenway Court'. Soderholtz took both pictures, which appeared in an article in *Country Life in America* in 1911.



The 1903 Bar Harbor villa of Standard Oil heiress Anne Archbold, designed by Miss Archbold in concert with sculptress Janet Scudder & local architect Fred Savage. The circular lily pool with dolphin fountain, modeled after a 18th century French original, and all the decorative concrete work were executed by Soderholtz.



Fountain in the garden of 'Hauterive', the Miles B. Carpenter estate at Bar Harbor, photographed by Soderholtz for *Country Life in America*. The curved concrete bench embracing the 17th century Italian fountain was fabricated by Soderholtz to the designs of landscape architect I. Howland Jones. (And just to tantalize you, the house itself, for a future post, also featured a lacquered dining room decorated by Baron de Meyer, and an 18th century French drawing room supplied by Lord Duveen.)

In addition to my own clip files and memory on this subject, I have also relied on information from the following sources:

1. Soderholtz, E.E. "Indestructible Home-Made Garden Furniture", *Garden Magazine*, June 1908, p. 276. This fascinating article tells in Soderholtz's own words how he created his pots, . It can be viewed on Google Books by [clicking here](#)
2. Crane, Jonah. "Garden Potter", *Down East Magazine*, _____, 1959, p. 26
3. Chasse, Patrick. "Eric Ellis Soderholtz, Maine's Craftsman in the Garden" essay from "A Place to Take Root: The History of Garden Pots & Flower Containers in North America", an exhibit presented

at the Blum Gallery of the College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, 2004. [Click here](#) for the complete text and photographs of this fascinating exhibit.



Amphora, made & photographed by Soderholtz



About downeastdilettante

A Down East Dilettante---an antiques dealer, a bit ADD, whose enthusiasms jump around architecture, design, landscape, style, history, arts, and more. Occasionally amusing, more often amused.

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thoughts on “Concrete Beauty: E.E. Soderholtz”

1. *said:* [ArchitectDesign™](#)

[May 26, 2010 at 6:27 pm](#)

I always learn something new here. If they pass Martha's approval, surely they pass mine as well!

REPLY

2. *said:* [The Down East Dilettante](#)

May 26, 2010 at 8:00 pm

Stefan, I actually thought of this because of your post about Mr. Mercer's amazing concrete house. I meant to post a picture of one on Martha's terrace, but plumb fergot.

REPLY

3. *said:*The Ancient

May 26, 2010 at 11:40 pm

TDED –Great, great post.Best, etc.

REPLY

4. *said:*La Petite Gallery

May 27, 2010 at 6:45 am

Great post as usual. I had two of those oil jars at the foot of a sprial staircase leading to the water, on Palm Island in Miami beach. The house was built 1920.yvonne

REPLY

5. *said:*magnus

May 27, 2010 at 7:48 am

Wonderful post (as usual). I love Anne Archbold's house, although I've always thought of Mediterranean architecture as more Palm Beach than Maine. I suppose though that the house was only used for the late summer months, so perhaps it was an appropriate choice of styles. Has anyone done a book on the houses of Bar Harbor? All of the posts that you've done of houses there make it clear that it was quite a place in its hayday.

REPLY

6. *said:*Toby Worthington

May 27, 2010 at 9:34 am

Fabulous, those monumental garden pots.Restoration Hardware, eat your heart out.

REPLY

7. *said:*Turner Pack Rats

May 27, 2010 at 11:08 am

i thought that first big round pot looked familiar. spent many hours at Thuja in the past. i love all these garden accesories – a refreshing departure from some of the estates. and thanx for including the links to more info. magnus asks a great question. except for the "Lost bar harbor" book, has a comprehensive book every been written on all the estates pre 47?security word def – "undeou" – referring to your employess

REPLY

8. *said:*[home before dark](#)[May 27, 2010 at 2:32 pm](#)

OMG! I do love garden delights on steroids.p.s. my word def: bairiers. something that gets in the way of a Jersey girl.

REPLY9. *said:*[The Down East Dilettante](#)[May 27, 2010 at 9:22 pm](#)

Ancient, thank you!Magnus, thank you (as usual). There is no really good book out about the Bar Harbor houses—several simple paperback with single pictures and minimal text about some of the houses, like the aforementioned Lost Bar Harbor, and a recent book, Bar Harbor's Gilded Century, but no comprehensive, serious critical pictorial analysis cum social history. That would be why the Dilettante is working on a book proposal, and these Bar Harbor posts have been trial balloons to gauge interest.Yvonne, Palm Island, how nice!Toby, thank you, of courseHome Before—Scale is Everything!

REPLY10. *said:*[little augury](#)[May 27, 2010 at 10:13 pm](#)

the boboli urn is heavenly-i love that perfect-that bulbous shape! The deceptively simple pot, and because it is so- it is too heavenly. The photographs you have assembled are wonderful too-especially love all the pots sitting about at the nursery. Gorgeous post . pgt

REPLY11. *said:*[Anonymous](#)[May 27, 2010 at 10:20 pm](#)

I've wonder about these giant italian style vessel things (shown in so many american gardens of a certain period) for decades! You are a such a genius of a design bibliophile. AMAZING just amazing-Thank you.

REPLY12. *said:*[home before dark](#)[May 28, 2010 at 10:27 am](#)

Came back to glaze upon the valley of the giants and found buried in the comments that TDED is in the midst of book proposal. YES!!!! I don't know the proper salutation such as "break a leg" for the stage, but whatever it is hope all of it comes your way...for our sakes!word today: ocings...as in icing on the cake when near oceans.

REPLY13. *said:*[Rachel](#)June 14, 2011 at 11:19 am

>This is a great post. I learn something every time I read this blog! I love Mr. Soderholz work! It really is inspired—I love his landscape design—did he live in any foreign country because his work resembles something from the Eastern culture. I really would love to get some of his pots in my backyard. Thanks for the pictures that you posted, they all captured what you were trying to show about Soderholtz.

REPLY14. *said:*[Jeanne @ Collage of Life](#)June 13, 2012 at 4:22 am

In a search for pots...from Vietnam...the trail lead to you. Just the inspiration I was looking for, thank you!

REPLY15. *said:*[Leigh Williams](#)March 26, 2020 at 4:13 am

Here I am, some ten years later, discovering the pleasures of this delightful blog. I do hope the book was realized, my dear Dilettante! I would very much like to see it, if so.

Meanwhile, I'll occupy myself here.

REPLY

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