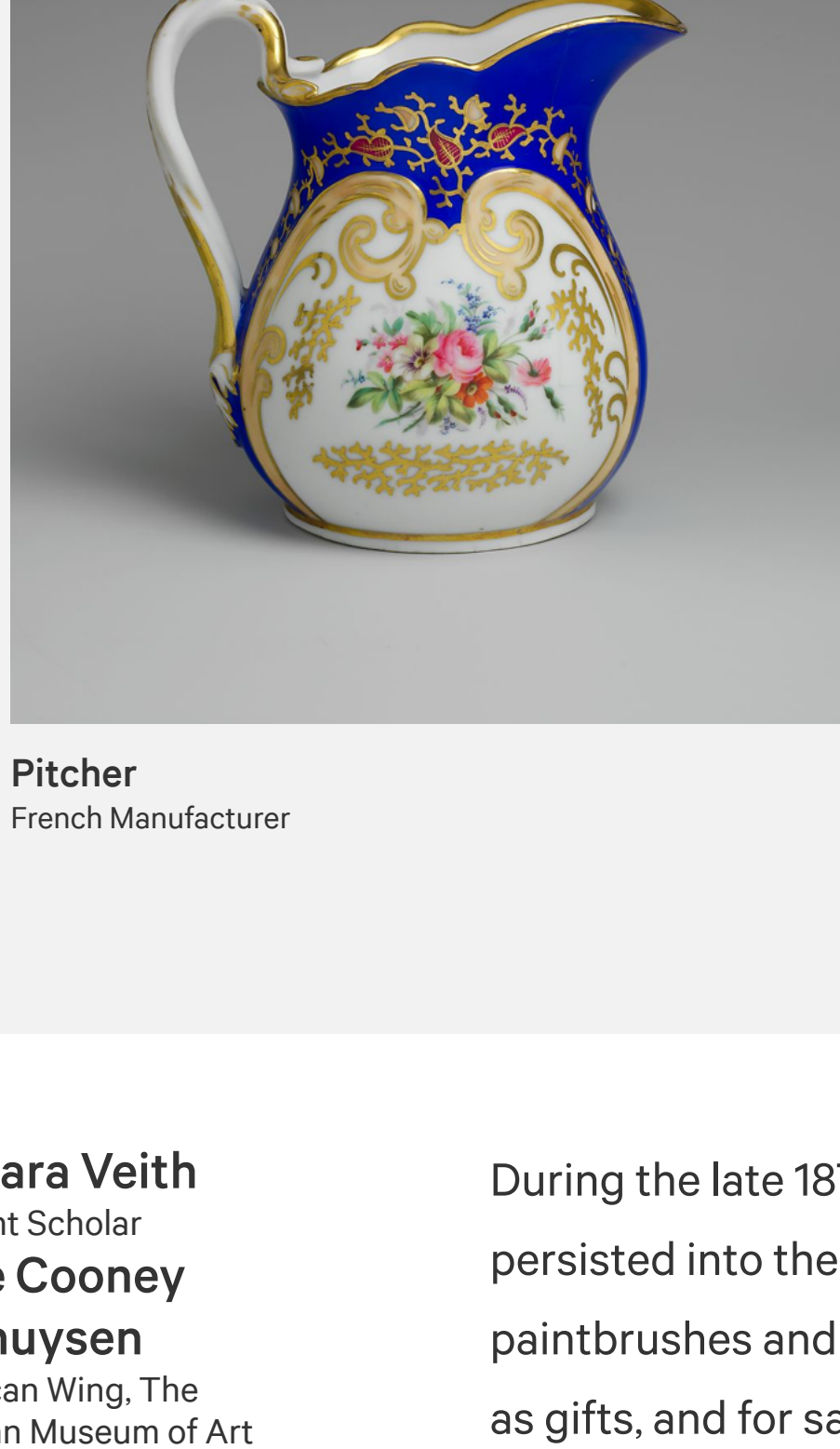
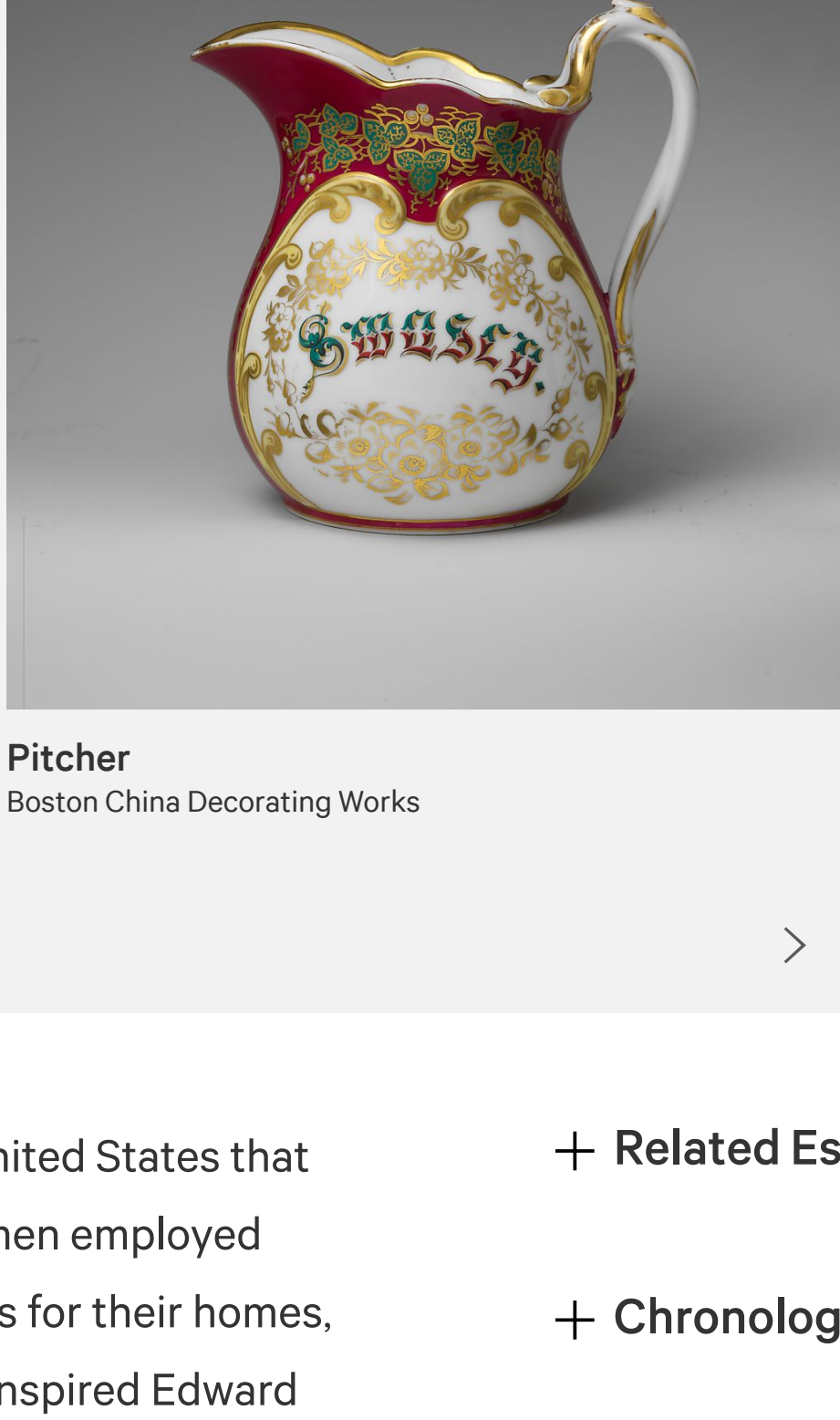


Women China Decorators



Pitcher
French Manufacturer



Pitcher
Boston China Decorating Works



Pitcher
Boston China Decorating Works



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The American Wing, The
Metropolitan Museum of Art
April 2013

During the late 1870s, a china-decorating fervor swept the United States that persisted into the early twentieth century. Thousands of women employed paintbrushes and china paints and decorated ceramic objects for their homes, as gifts, and for sale. Their intense interest in china painting inspired Edward Strahan of the Tile Club, whose members included artists [Winslow Homer \(2003.140\)](#) and [William Merritt Chase](#), to humorously state that this “decorative mania” had caused “the loveliest and purest maidens in the land to smell of turpentine.” Many factors fueled the widespread interest in china decorating. In an increasingly industrial society, prosperous post-[Civil War](#) Americans enjoyed unprecedented leisure time for artistic and cultural pursuits. Major exhibitions, such as the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, introduced Americans to the [exotic cultures](#) of the [Near and Far East](#), as well as to the English Reform and Aesthetic movements, which advocated that art be reflected in all aspects of life. Publications offering advice on home decoration inspired acquisitive Americans to fill their homes with artistic furniture, ceramics, glass, and wallpaper.

China painting was socially acceptable because it allowed women to create artistic objects for the home. Organizations such as the Society of Decorative Art in New York City and, later, the Women's Exchange provided venues for women to exhibit and sell their work. In addition, prior to the 1870s, respectable employment opportunities for working-class women were limited to domestic service and factory or shop work. Art schools such as the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, in New York City, and the Philadelphia School of Design for Women offered training in china decorating and pottery painting to prepare women for careers as artisans or designers.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, most prosperous Americans purchased imported decorated [European porcelain](#). As the nation became more affluent toward the mid-century, the demand for luxury goods and elaborate tableware increased. Entrepreneurial English and [German china decorators](#) immigrated to the [United States](#) to establish businesses decorating imported and domestic plain porcelain blanks for major retail establishments. Professional china decorators and gilders were among the most accomplished artisans involved in porcelain manufacture. Painting with enamels that mutated in the kiln required artistic talent as well as technical skill. They worked in a variety of styles decorating ornate dinner, [tea](#), [coffee](#), and dessert services, as well as more utilitarian wares such as bar pitchers, sink basins, and shaving mugs ([1996.56Q](#), [1986.11Q](#), [1989.219](#)). Because professional china decorators rarely signed their work, their identities remain largely unknown.

The amateur china painting movement made its first organized appearance in the Midwest. In 1873, in Cincinnati, German immigrant and ceramic chemist Karl Langenbeck taught Maria Longworth Nichols, future founder of the Rookwood Pottery, how to paint on china. The following year, Nichols enrolled in the Cincinnati School of Design. Shortly thereafter, Benn Pittman, an art instructor at the Cincinnati School of Design, began conducting china-painting classes for female students. Mary Louise McLaughlin was among his students. A display of the students' work in the Women's Pavilion at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia had a catalytic effect on the nationwide interest in china painting. Over the next five years, Nichols and McLaughlin evolved from amateur china painters into extraordinarily successful artists who designed and decorated their own wares. Serious rivals, they both received widespread critical acclaim and produced vessels considered among the foremost examples of art pottery in the United States.

McLaughlin authored two important treatises on china painting. In her first book, *China Painting: A Practical Manual for the Use of Amateurs in the Decoration of Hard Porcelain* (1877), she describes overglaze decoration, in which polychrome enamels are painted on to a glazed porcelain object and affixed by kiln-firing ([1986.307.3](#)). In her second book, *Pottery Decoration Under the Glaze* (1880), she describes her newly discovered underglaze decorating technique. At the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, McLaughlin was especially impressed by the exhibit of Haviland [faïence](#) (earthenware) from [Limoges](#), France, that was decorated under the glaze with colored slip, or liquid clay. She succeeded in re-creating Haviland-style decoration in Cincinnati, though her technique differed. McLaughlin employed her underglaze technique to decorate two monumental vases for the first annual exhibition of the Cincinnati Pottery Club, of which she was the founder, in May 1880 ([L.1987.11](#)). Not to be outdone, Maria Longworth Nichols produced her monumental counterpart the following year ([1981.44.3](#)). As further testament to McLaughlin's ceaseless experimentation, after a hiatus working in other mediums, in the late 1890s she returned to ceramics and mastered the difficult art of making porcelain in her backyard kiln.

On the East Coast, female artists Cecilia Beaux, Rosina Emmet, and Celia Thaxter were among the first to experiment with china painting during the 1870s. Beaux, one of the preeminent [portrait painters](#) in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, painted nearly lifelike portraits of children on large ceramic plates early in her career ([2002.214](#)). Emmet excelled at portrait painting on china during the 1870s and early 1880s, as demonstrated by a plate depicting a young girl ([1991.25](#)). Essayist, poet, and watercolorist Celia Thaxter is best known for her informal artistic salon and celebrated garden at her home on Appledore, one of the islands of the Isles of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire. Thaxter's china painting frequently combines delicate botanical imagery with painted lines of poetry seen encircling the sides of an ovoid vase ([1997.337](#)).

Initially, amateurs interested in china painting sought instruction from professional decorators. In New York City, English immigrants [Edward Lycett](#) and John Bennett, trained in the Staffordshire pottery tradition, developed individualistic styles. Both artists encouraged china-decorating efforts by teaching classes in their studios and firing amateurs' work in their kilns.

Lycett displayed precocious talent and left London in 1861 to begin a career in the United States. Within a decade, he established a reputation as one of the most talented china painters in New York City. He conducted classes in his shop and at the Cincinnati and St. Louis Schools of Design. Lycett painted overglaze decorations in a naturalistic, highly finished, and minutely detailed style. He reached his creative apogee as artistic director of the Faience Manufacturing Company of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, an art pottery that produced wares of exotic shape and decoration in the Aesthetic style ([1991.58](#)).

The distinctive underglaze-painted wares of Doulton Manufactory, in Lambeth, England, were praised at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial and enthusiastic Americans eagerly acquired those decorated by employee John Bennett. Seeing a market for his work, Bennett left Doulton in 1878 and established a studio in Manhattan, where he taught underglaze painting. That year, the Society of Decorative Art in New York enlisted him to teach. Bennett's technique involved painting directly onto the earthenware body with metallic oxides that were then coated with a clear glaze and fired. Objects decorated by Bennett or under his supervision synthesize Near and Far Eastern influences and naturalistic subject matter in characteristic Aesthetic style, as seen on a covered vase painted with asymmetrical blossoming branches of forsythia and prunus ([1985.168](#)).

As interest in china painting grew, women across the country formed china-painting clubs and societies and invited professionals and fellow china painters to teach classes. While women living in or near major cities were able to attend classes in professional decorating studios and design schools, amateurs who lived far from urban centers relied on instruction books by decorators such as Mary Louise McLaughlin, Camille Piton, and Adelaide Osgood for advice and aesthetic guidance. Home decorating and craft magazines, such as *Art Interchange*, *Art Amateur*, and, later, *Keramic Studio*, helped to disseminate information by providing technical tips and suggestions for designs. Trade catalogues advertised a wide array of porcelain blanks, enamels, brushes, equipment, and even portable kilns available for sale through the mail. The invention of the portable coal or gas-fired kiln enabled amateur china decorators to fire their work at home, transforming their experience. Frequently ladies decorated imported porcelain blanks. Eager to capitalize on the interest in china decoration, American potteries began manufacturing whiteware and porcelain blanks for amateurs. For example, the Ceramic Art Company, founded by Walter Scott Lenox and Jonathan Coxon Sr. in 1889 and predecessor to Lenox, introduced a line of plain white porcelain blanks for amateur decoration, a practice that Lenox would continue. To advertise their wares, the Ceramic Art Company contributed eggshell-thin Belleek porcelain blanks as prizes for an amateur china-decorating contest held in Cincinnati in 1896. The following year, they inaugurated the National China Painters' Bowl Competition in New York City, which featured a three-day display of the contestants' entries, including objects such as a meticulously painted bowl ([1987.26](#)), at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

Two different styles of china painting developed. The naturalistic style was the earliest mode of decoration. Adhering to the principles espoused by English art critic John Ruskin, amateurs studied and drew inspiration from nature. Fashionable [Japanese art](#) typically depicted [natural subject matter](#) as well. Mindful that the design must be subservient to the ceramic form, amateurs decorated wares with carefully observed flowers, fruit, [landscapes](#), and birds or animals ([1991.370.4](#)). Even though many amateurs continued to decorate in the naturalistic style, conventional decoration, rooted in the ideas promoted by Owen Jones in *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), became more popular toward the end of the century. Nature continued to serve as the source of inspiration for amateurs, but flowers and plants were now reduced to stylized, geometric forms in what was seen as a more progressive style ([1987.227](#)).

Though many women continued to purchase and decorate ceramic blanks produced by major potteries well into the twentieth century, others working in art potteries and independently, following the precedent set by Mary Louise McLaughlin and Maria Longworth Nichols, took ceramic decorating a step further by immersing themselves in all aspects of the production process, from conception to creation. The Newcomb Pottery, begun in 1894, was part of the academic and artistic curriculum at H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College, the women's division of Tulane University in New Orleans. China-painting and pottery-decorating classes prepared women for a career in the ceramics industry. As was common practice in many art potteries, Newcomb employed men to throw the pottery, but students designed and decorated the wares, which frequently display distinctly Southern iconography such as the iris or gnarled Spanish-moss-draped trees ([1983.26](#)). The Paul Revere Pottery began in 1908 as the Saturday Evening Girls, an association formed to educate and train young immigrants from Boston's North End. Girls who worked at the pottery were able to earn extra money for schooling and received training for a career in pottery decoration. As at Newcomb, the decorators worked in conjunction with a potter and a kiln man. Though their output was primarily dinnerware, the pottery produced exceptionally large and strikingly decorated vessels as well ([2000.31](#)).

Of all the women working with ceramics at the turn of the twentieth century, none was more accomplished than Adelaide Alsop Robineau. In the course of her career, Robineau evolved from amateur china painter of porcelain blanks, to designer, potter, and technical innovator extraordinaire. Self-taught from china-painting manuals, Robineau moved to New York City as a young woman to continue her artistic studies and eventually became a china-painting instructor. After her marriage to Samuel Robineau in 1899, they began to publish the monthly periodical *Keramic Studio*, which she would co-edit with fellow china painter and designer Anna B. Leonard. *Keramic Studio* provided decorating designs by prominent artists and instruction for designers, potters, decorators, and firers. Leonard left in 1903, but Robineau and her husband continued publishing the successful periodical, which provided them with a steady income and facilitated her ceramic endeavors. Undoubtedly inspired by McLaughlin's experiments, Robineau had turned from china painting to porcelain making in 1901. Her early work features carved stylized naturalistic motifs ([2004.464](#)), but Robineau ultimately employed myriad techniques in the creation and decoration of her delicate porcelains. She excised the clay body of her vessels and filled the carved spaces with colored [glazes](#) that she coated with a clear glaze and fired, creating a translucent [cloisonné](#) effect. She experimented with matt and crystalline glazes. Asian, Egyptian, Native and South American art frequently informed her designs ([23.145](#)). Upon her death in 1929, Robineau was accorded the rare honor of being the first artist potter to be given a retrospective exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art—a befitting coda to a remarkable career.

Citation

Veith, Barbara, and Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen. "Women China Decorators." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/woch/hd_woch.htm (April 2013)

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