

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

Educator Resource Guide



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About the Exhibition

Women, Art, and Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise is the largest presentation of Newcomb arts and crafts in more than 25 years and offers new insights into the Newcomb community's enduring mark on American art and industry. With 180 objects that span 45 years of production, the exhibition examines the role that Newcomb College, Tulane University's former women's college, played in promoting art for the advancement of women and, in turn, New Orleans' business and cultural communities after the Civil War. What began as an educational experiment in 1895 flourished into a quasi-commercial venture that offered an opportunity for Southern women to support themselves financially during and after their training as artists. Many of the works of the Newcomb Pottery enterprise were inspired by the native flora and fauna of the Gulf South, a style that became immediately recognizable and popular with influential collectors, curators, and tastemakers across the country.

This exhibition features important examples of iconic Newcomb pottery and metalwork, along with textiles, jewelry, bookbinding, and archival photographs.

***Women, Art, and Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise*, an exhibition created and organized by Newcomb Art Museum, Tulane University, and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), was made possible in part through the generous support of Henry Luce Foundation and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, Art Works.**



NEWCOMB
ART MUSEUM of Tulane



Preparing for Your Visit:

Educator Resource Guide and Art Trunk Activities

These materials are designed to help educators prepare students for their gallery visit and classroom follow-up discussion. This packet contains this Educator Resource Guide, Art Trunk activities, and art reproductions. Focusing on the exhibition *Women, Art, and Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise*, the Educator Resource Guide highlights works of art from the exhibition and includes questions and activities that encourage your students to look closely and critically. The activities are compatible with Tennessee state curriculum standards for visual arts, language arts, and social studies.

The three Art Trunk lessons are designed to enrich the appreciation and understanding of present and past exhibitions at the Frist Center via mobile art-making activities for use by educators and our community partners. The Art Trunks program provides unique opportunities for participants to become more informed about works of art, their meanings, and the artists who created them. The necessary materials needed to complete the guided lesson plans for three activity sessions are available to community partners who check out the mobile educational kits. Educators receive the lesson plans but not the art supplies.

Curriculum Connections and State Standards

Docent-guided school tours support Tennessee academic standards by introducing ideas relevant to the visual arts, language arts, and social studies curricula. Specific standards are addressed according to grade-appropriate levels. View connections for all grade levels (K–12) at <http://tn.gov/education/topic/academic-standards>.

The following curriculum standards relate specifically to *Women, Art, and Social Change*:

High School United States History and Geography Standards

Post-Reconstruction to the Present

https://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/std_ss_us_history_geography.pdf

The abbreviations at the end of the standards represent content strands:

C = Culture

H = History

E = Economics

P = Politics/Government

G = Geography

TN = Tennessee History

The Progressive Era 1890–1920

Students analyze the changing landscape, including the growth of cities and the demand for political, economic, and social reforms. Students trace the rise of the United States to its role as a world power in the twentieth century.

US.14 Describe working conditions in industries, including the use of labor by women and children. (C, E)

US.18 Describe the movement to achieve suffrage for women, including its leaders, the activities of suffragettes, the passage of the 19th Amendment, and the role of Tennessee in the suffrage effort (Anne Dallas Dudley, Harry Burn, Josephine Pearson, “Perfect 36”). (C, H, P, TN)

US.30 Analyze the political, economic, and social ramifications of World War I on the home front, including the role played by women and minorities, voluntary rationing, the Creel Committee, opposition by conscientious objectors, and the case of Schenck v. United States. (C, E, H, P)

The 1920s

Describe how the battle between traditionalism and modernism manifested itself in the major historical trends and events after World War I and throughout the 1920s.

US.42 Describe changes in the social and economic status of women, including the work of Margaret Sanger, flappers, clerical and office jobs, and rise of women’s colleges. (C, E, P)

Between the Wars and World War II (1921–1947)

Students analyze the inter-war years and America's participation in World War II.

US.64 Examine and explain the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce during World War II and its subsequent impact on American society (such as at Avco in Tennessee), as well as the service of women in the armed forces, including Cornelia Fort. (C, E, P, TN)

Common Core State Standards

This Educator Resource Guide also acknowledges the **Common Core State Standards Initiative** coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. By aligning the goals of this packet with Common Core State Standards, the Frist Center makes off-site learning effective for students and easy for educators. The following Common Core State Standards are implemented in this Educator Resource Guide:

English Language Arts/Literacy Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RF.1.1, W.1.1, W.1.2, W.1.5, W.1.8, SL.1.1, SL.1.2, SL.1.3, SL.1.4, SL.1.5, SL.1.6, L.1.1, L.1.2, L.1.4, L.1.5, L.1.6

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RI.2.1, RI.2.7, W.2.5, W.2.6, W.2.7, W.2.8, SL.2.1, SL.2.2, SL.2.3, SL.2.4, SL.2.6, L.2.1, L.2.2, L.2.3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL.3.1, RL.3.2, RL.3.3, RI.3.3, RI.3.7, W.3.4, SL.3.1, SL.3.2, SL.3.3, SL.3.4, L.3.1, L.3.2, L.3.3, L.3.4

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.4.2, W.4.3, W.4.4, SL.4.1, SL.4.4, L.4.1, L.4.2, L.4.3, L.4.4, L.4.5

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.5.1, W.5.2, W.5.3, W.5.4, SL.5.1, SL.5.2, SL.5.4, L.5.1, L.5.2, L.5.3, L.5.4, L.5.5

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RH.6-8.7

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.6.1, W.6.2, W.6.3, SL.6.1, SL.6.4, L.6.1, L.6.2, L.6.3, L.6.4

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.7.1, W.7.2, W.7.3, SL.7.1, SL.7.4, L.7.1, L.7.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.8.1, W.8.2, W.8.3, SL.8.1, SL.8.4, L.8.1, L.8.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.9-10.1, WHST.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W.11-12.1, WHST.11-12.2

State Visual Arts Standards

This educator guide supports Tennessee visual art standards. Educators may address specific standards in their classrooms according to grade-appropriate levels. View connections for all grade levels (K–12) at <https://tn.gov/education/article/arts-education>.

Introduction to *Women, Art, and Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise*

The American South after the Civil War—defeated, war-torn, bitterly divided—is struggling to reinvent itself. In New York, a widow with ties to the devastated city of New Orleans suffers the loss of her only daughter.

This was the crucible where the Newcomb story began: a time and place of upheaval and revitalization, suffering and self-invention, personal tragedy and sweeping societal change.

In the decades to follow, the Newcomb Pottery enterprise would emerge as a quietly radical experiment—an unprecedented opportunity for Southern women to train as artists and support themselves financially, working as a collective.

Guided by the principles of the British Arts and Crafts movement, the young women of Newcomb developed into hardworking, skilled, independent craftsmen who bore little resemblance to the stereotype of the Southern belle. The enterprise produced a rich body of work—not only pottery, but also bookbinding, jewelry, metalwork, textiles, and other handicrafts.

“If we be discouraged let us never become dull,” said Mary Given Sheerer, the assistant director of Newcomb Pottery and a craftsman herself. As the years went by, the work and the world changed, but the spirit of self-actualization, experimentation, and exploration never left the women of Newcomb and remains the enterprise’s legacy today.

The Beginning of the Newcomb Pottery Enterprise

The Civil War left much of the defeated American South in ruins. Its economy, primarily reliant on agriculture and slave labor, struggled to reinvent itself.

With the **1884 Cotton Centennial**, the city of New Orleans hoped to stimulate the development of a more industrial South and signal to the world that its port was still open for trade. The Centennial first brought together Tulane University, William and Ellsworth Woodward, and the cause of women's education.

When Tulane was founded earlier that same year, the new president recruited William Woodward to serve as the university's first art teacher. Woodward's brother, Ellsworth, came from Massachusetts to help meet the demand for art instruction. The two began teaching evening and weekend classes to women—precursors of the art program at Newcomb College.

Ellsworth Woodward conceived of a “model industry” that paid female graduates for pottery design and china painting, decorative tasks deemed suitable for women. From the start, it was understood that men would be hired to do the heavier work: throwing pots, firing **kilns**, and mixing clays and glazes.

Tulane University approached Josephine Louise Newcomb, the wealthy widow of former New Orleans merchant Warren Newcomb, with the idea of funding a women's college. She decided that she had finally found a fitting memorial for her beloved daughter, Harriott Sophie Newcomb, who had died of diphtheria in 1870 when she was just fifteen.

Newcomb College opened its doors on October 13, 1887. From the beginning, the college had a practical mission. It sought not just to provide a liberal education on par with that offered to men, but also to prepare young Southern women of “good social position” for work without “loss of dignity.”

1890s: The Early Years

The Newcomb Pottery enterprise emerged as part of the rising tide of American enthusiasm for the **Arts and Crafts movement**. Born in Great Britain during the late Victorian period, the movement rejected the alienating conditions of industrial life, with its dehumanizing factories and mass-produced objects, in favor of handcraftsmanship and quality materials.

In keeping with the Arts and Crafts philosophy, Newcomb aspired to develop crafts with a regional sensibility. In search of their own uniquely Southern aesthetic, the faculty and artists explored design styles and techniques from around the world—the blue **underglaze** painting of Delftware, for example, and **motif** treatments inspired by Woodward's Japanese print collection. They also experimented with various methods of application, including the ancient method of **slip decoration**, in which liquid colored clay is applied directly to the pottery's surface in an excised design technique called **sgraffito**.

Under the watchful eye of art professor Mary Sheerer, each of the artists developed motifs based on Southern **fauna** and **flora**, such as crepe myrtle, live oaks, and Southern pines. Even the clay used by the Pottery was Southern: in the early days of the enterprise, ceramicists Jules Gabry and Joseph Meyer went out digging for clay in the nearby hills and experimented with mixtures suitable for firing.

Harriet Coulter Joor (1875–1965)

Drawing, ca. 1900

Labeled “Wild carrot or ‘Queen Anne’s Lace,’ Late July, Ipswich”

Pencil on paper

Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2008.05.158



Sketches like this one by Harriet Coulter Joor were the first step to creating decorative designs for pottery. Students can do a sketching and poetry-writing activity on page 8.



Katherine Kopman (1869–1950), decorator

Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter

Vase, 1897

Daffodil design

Underglaze painting with glossy glaze

Collection of Ruth Weinstein Lebovitz

Esther Huger Elliot (1872–1957), decorator

Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter

Two-handled jar, dated 1899

Bull tongue arrowhead design

Underglaze painting with glossy glaze

Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; purchased through the Mignon Faget Acquisition Fund, 2008.3.2.A



Questions

- Describe the vases. What shapes and colors do you see?
- What similarities let you know that both vases are examples of Newcomb Pottery?
- What were the Newcomb artists' motifs based on? Describe the motifs used on these vases.



Lesson One: Newcomb Pottery

Concrete Poetry

Newcomb Pottery artist Harriet Joor drew sketches while studying in Massachusetts. She used poetic words to describe the landscape, calling it “Tansy town,” delighting in “the glorious wealth of yellow blossoms that bank the roadsides with solid gold during the midsummer months, when the Queen’s Anne’s lace is weaving its white web over the meadows!”

In this activity, participants will go to a natural setting (such as a park or garden) to record what they hear, see, and feel into a concrete or visual poem.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XckFxo35jF4>

Materials:

Pencil

Notebook paper

Suggested reading:

Wet Cement: A Mix of Concrete Poems by Bob Raczka

For beginners or persons with less dexterity:

Go to fristkids.org for our “Inspired by Nature” video and “Adventure Diorama” activity.

Suggested reading:

Little Cloud and Lady Wind by Toni and Slade Morrison

1



Go outside to a natural setting.

2



Look at, listen to, touch, and smell things you find there.

3



Use a pencil and paper to jot down words and create sketches of what you observed.

4



Compose a simple poem that describes your experience.

5



Choose a sketch to enlarge. Copy out your poem in the shape of the sketch.

1900–1914: The Growth Years

The Newcomb art faculty developed a design principle that gathered inspiration from the Gulf South environs. This was part of a larger effort across the country to define and express a truly American aesthetic through arts and crafts. Newcomb artists—whose distinctive styles and talents exceeded the faculty's expectations—pushed Newcomb in new directions and earned the pottery international recognition for its quality and originality.

Their collective talent was first recognized with a bronze medal at the Universal Exposition of 1900 (**Exposition Universelle de 1900**) in Paris. Success brought growth and opportunity: more medals, positive reviews, and purchases from clients near and far. More than 200 students enrolled at Newcomb College in the 1901–2 academic year, including some from farther-off places such as Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, and Missouri. The Pottery moved into its own building on the college campus in 1902.

Harriet Coulter Joor (1875–1965), decorator
Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter
Plate, ca. 1903
Cactus design
Incised; underglaze painting with glossy glaze
Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; gift of Mrs. Arthur L. (Harriet) Jung, Jr., N'40, 2010.9.13



In the early 1900s, cobalt blue and sage green, used in varied tones and hues, became the hallmark colors of Newcomb pottery. Floral and animal motifs evoked the Southern landscape. Designs were painted and/or **incised**, and finished with a glossy glaze. It was up to the artists to take these basic Newcomb tenets and personalize them, producing a rich array of pottery with a harmonious aesthetic.



Gertrude Roberts Smith (1868–1962), decorator
Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter
Pitcher, ca. 1900–1905
Pomegranate and leaf cross-section design
Underglaze painting with glossy glaze
Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Baton Rouge; gift of the Friends of the LSU Museum of Art, 82.26

Anna Frances Simpson (1880–1930), decorator; Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter

Vase, ca. 1925

Moon and pine landscape design

Low-relief carving; underglaze painting with matte glaze

Collection of the Haynie Family

Paul Cox, the Pottery enterprise's first academically trained ceramicist, joined the Art School in 1910. Almost immediately, he developed the translucent, **matte glaze** that was used at the Pottery until it closed in 1940.

At the same time, Newcomb's designs changed from stylized, incised lines to naturalistic low-relief carving. A moon peeking from behind a moss-draped live oak became the public's favorite design, and to many customers the pieces displaying that illustration were the only "true" Newcomb pottery. Although the repetition of the "moss and moonlight" motif began to wear on the decorators, the attraction to its Southern mystery and exotic sense of place lasted into the late 1930s.



Anna Frances Simpson's vase incorporates a landscape-inspired motif. Students can do a landscape-drawing activity on page 12.

Questions

- Look closely at images of the three works featured in this section and describe the colors, textures, and shapes used.
- Describe the design motifs applied to the vase, the pitcher, and the plate.
- How is each decoration different? What do they have in common?
- Explain the difference between the vase's low-relief surface, the pitcher's flat, glazed surface, and the plate's incised surface.

Educator Activity: Create a Newcomb-Inspired Motif

Objective

Students will look carefully at the Newcomb Pottery reproductions, consider the decorative elements, and create a motif reflecting their neighborhood.

Introduction

A key tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement was retaining a regional sensibility, so in Newcomb's early years, Southern flora and fauna were always the focus. Popular motifs included cross-sections of Southern plants, and winged insects circling around a light.

Directions to the Students

Imagine you want to make an art piece that reflects the uniqueness of your neighborhood. Much like Newcomb Pottery, your work can include motifs that tell about where you live. Use a pencil and paper to sketch a motif inspired by your neighborhood. Consider the following:

1. Think of the physical characteristics of your neighborhood. What makes the strongest impression to people? Some examples: a unique mailbox, old maple trees, the architecture, wildlife, etc.
2. Is there a piece of history or personal experience that is special to your neighborhood?
3. How would you present your neighborhood through an art object? What kind of vessel would you use to represent it? What materials would you use to create it?
4. What will you incorporate into your motif? Is it a single object? Is it a landscape image of your neighborhood? Would your motif be a realistic depiction or simplified and stylized?



Lesson Two: Newcomb Pottery

Layered Landscape

Newcomb vases and textiles feature plants, animals, and scenes from the Gulf South. To translate the local landscape into decorative motifs, the women artists used design principles drawn from Japanese art. They simplified the landscape into areas of light and dark and into horizontal and vertical lines to make graphic patterns.

In this activity, participants will record a local landscape by drawing it on three separate layers of paper: a foreground, a middle ground and a background. The drawing can be used to help create a final design for an artistic tile (see Lesson 3).

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9bBO2NZC0E>

Materials:

Tri-layered sketchbook (or three sheets of paper)

Pencil

Eraser

Tracing paper

Sharpie marker (or permanent marker)

For beginners or persons with less dexterity:

Go to fristkids.org for our “Space in Nature” video and “Spacescape” activity. Create a texture rubbing with natural objects such as leaves.

Suggested reading:

P is for Pelican: A Louisiana Alphabet by Anita C. Prieto

1



Go outside to find an inspiring nature scene.

2



Draw the scene in your tri-layered sketchbook. On the bottom layer, draw things farthest away from you, like the sky and sun.

3



On the middle layer, draw objects in between the foreground and background. On the top layer, draw things closest to you.

4



Place tracing paper on top of your completed layers. Create a new drawing by tracing your landscape with a marker.

1914–1930: The Beginnings of Modernism

World War I brought the world to Newcomb, and Newcomb to the world. Graduates from the class of 1918 volunteered to travel abroad to assist in the war relief effort.

The world economy boomed during the postwar Roaring Twenties, along with a sense of freedom and hopefulness. Women's employment opportunities and self-determination broadened. The "model industry" was becoming an anachronism. It was the age of automobiles, radios, silent movies, and washing machines.

The art world embraced abstraction and **modernism**, and took inspiration from the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt. Mary Sheerer traveled to Paris in 1925 to attend the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts (**Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes**), which celebrated technological innovation. She came back advocating for the "right-angled, triangle, and straightened line" of the **art deco** aesthetic.

At Newcomb, the students were excited by the possibilities of the new age and the new style of art. Yet the buying public remained committed to the old aesthetic. Despite the modern trends sweeping the art world, the idyllic South of popular literature was the source of Newcomb's most requested designs. The public wanted romanticism. Newcomb's bestsellers in this period were naturalistic images that celebrated the old Deep South.



Sarah A. E. "Sadie" Irvine (1885–1970)

Plaque with Newcomb Chapel on Washington Avenue Campus, ca. 1917

Newcomb Chapel on Washington Avenue

Low-relief carving; underglaze painting with matte glaze

Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University, C.1982.399.A



Sadie Irvine's plaque is a landscape carved onto a flat clay surface. See page 16 for a student activity inspired by this work of art.

Corinne Marie Chalaron (1900–1977), decorator

Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter

Bowl, ca. 1925–26

Tiered, abstract leaf design

Low-relief carving; underglaze painting with matte glaze

Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; gift of Anne McDonald

Milling in memory of Marie Delery Wasserman and Hilda Wassermann

McDonald, 2010.12.5



Question

- Corinne Marie Chalaron applied art deco motifs in the decoration of her bowl. How is the bowl different from the earlier pottery created by Newcomb artists?

1930–1948: The Closing Chapters

In its final decade, the Newcomb Pottery lost three of its founding faculty members. When Ellsworth Woodward, Mary Sheerer, and Gertrude Roberts Smith retired, in the early 1930s, the college was already questioning whether the “model industry” belonged in the art curriculum.

The crafts continued to sell, however, and the women of Newcomb continued to experiment. “Don’t send us anything but Louisiana oak trees,” wrote a sales agent, even as a new ceramics teacher, Juanita Gonzales, urged her students to abandon realism for more contemporary, simplified designs.

By the time the Pottery enterprise closed its doors, in 1940, the United States was again on the brink of war. A new breed of working women would be glorified a few years later as “Rosie the Riveters,” wearing pants, using power tools, and working in factories.

Like the pottery first fired in the kilns at Newcomb, and the demure long skirts worn by those nineteenth-century decorators, the elements that had brought the enterprise together—the Civil War and its aftermath, the women’s suffrage movement, and the Arts and Crafts movement—belonged to a different era.

More than a hundred women worked at the Newcomb Pottery enterprise between 1895 and 1940. Some, like Sadie Irvine, became faculty members. Others went on to teach at other schools, became studio artists, or used their skills in different professions.

Newcomb Pottery was an educational institution, a professional enterprise, and an artists’ collective. It was also a community of women who broke barriers together and formed lifelong bonds. Many of them married and had children. Some lived alone or with fellow craftsmen.

Years after the Pottery closed, the “educational experiment” continued to inspire Newcomb graduates and their students, families, and colleagues, as well as new generations of women artists.

Educator Activity: Reflecting on Your Personal Aesthetics

Objective

Aesthetics is the study of beauty and taste. It is about interpreting works of art and art movements or theories. The term is also used to designate a particular style; for example, "Japanese aesthetics."

Students will reflect on their own aesthetics and discuss with others what experiences (events, people, websites, etc.) have influenced and shaped their personal aesthetics.

Introduction

As one of the founding members of the Newcomb Pottery enterprise, Mary Sheerer instructed artists to develop motifs based on Southern fauna and flora. Later, influenced by her trip to the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris, Mary Sheerer started advocating for the angular forms of the art deco style. This change had to do with the emergence of different styles and ideas.

Directions to the Students

Search for an image of an object that you find visually interesting or aesthetically pleasing. This can be anything with a strong visual focus, such as a painting, photograph, furniture, or fashion item. Determine when this object was made, and then find images of older and newer versions of similar objects. Consider the questions below and discuss your answers with your classmates:

1. How would you describe your aesthetic?
 - What kind of object did you choose? (Photograph, painting, furniture, etc.)
 - What do you like about this object? What about its design is most interesting to you?
2. Has there been a person, event, book, image, website, etc., that influenced your aesthetic?
3. Observe current and past objects to see how design and aesthetics have evolved.
 - Has this evolution influenced how your taste has changed over the years?
 - How do you think your taste will continue to evolve?



Lesson Three: Newcomb Pottery

Artistic Tile

The Roaring Twenties saw an expansion of the world economy, growing freedom for women, and new artistic styles. Newcomb Pottery bestsellers, however, continued to be romantic, using images celebrating the Deep South, such as the tonal, hazy “moon and moss” motif invented by Sadie Irvine. Designs were either painted or incised, producing a rich array of personalized, harmonious aesthetics.

In this activity, participants will create a low-relief landscape based on their Lesson 2 drawing by incising lines into a clay tile.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ox0TNf8tXOg>

Materials:

Air dry clay, cardboard, roller, tape, landscape outline, pencil, clay tools, and damp sponge

Suggested Reading:

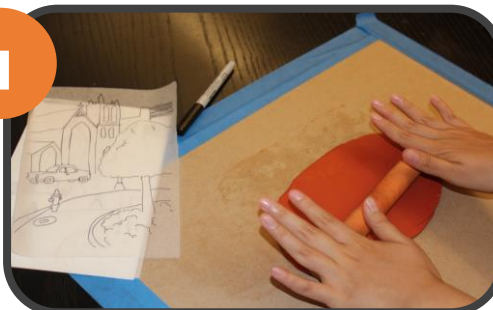
The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930
by Anne Firor Scott
The Awakening by Kate Chopin

For beginners or persons with less dexterity:

Go to fristkids.org for our “Texture in Art” video and “Texture Print Collage” activity. Gather flat, natural materials to press a decorative pattern into your tile.

Suggested reading: *I Could Do That: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* by Linda Arms White & Nancy Carpenter

1



Roll out clay onto the cardboard, forming a rectangular tile, roughly the same size as your drawing.

2



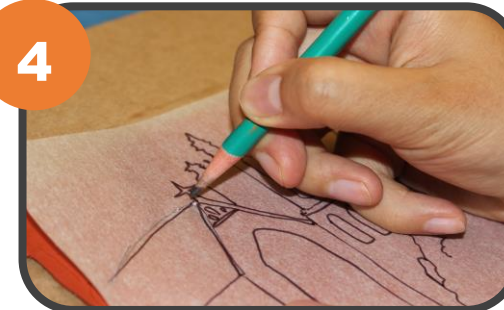
Get the tape and the landscape outline.

3



Lay the outline on top of the clay and tape it to the table.

4



With a pencil, gently trace your drawing onto the clay. TIP! Check your progress by lifting one corner.

5



Using your pencil and clay tools, gently carve out the layers of your drawing.

6



Using a damp sponge, gently smooth over rough surface areas. Let dry in a sunny and sheltered place.

Women of the Newcomb Pottery Enterprise

Listed here are just a few of the artists associated with Newcomb College and the Newcomb Pottery enterprise.

Mary Given Sheerer (1865–1954) (Teacher)

A founding member of the Newcomb Pottery Enterprise, Mary Given Sheerer was born in January 1865 in Covington, Kentucky. Sheerer's father was a wholesale grocer, and as a child she lived in New Orleans with her parents and two sisters in the Lower Garden District. Sheerer later studied at the Cincinnati School of Design and at the Art Students' League in New York City. She began teaching at Newcomb in 1894 and retired in 1931.

Gertrude Roberts Smith (1868–1962) (Teacher)

Gertrude Roberts Smith was employed by Newcomb College in 1887, at the age of 19. She would teach at the Art School for forty-seven years without interruption. While at Newcomb, Roberts taught pottery decoration as well as fiber arts and drawing. Roberts retired from the college in 1934.

Mary Williams Butler (1873–1937) (Teacher)

Mary Williams Butler was born in New Orleans and began her career at Newcomb in 1898 as an art student. She received her diploma in art and worked as a pottery decorator before beginning her academic tenure in 1901. She achieved full professorship in 1934 and was the genesis of the metalwork program at Newcomb Pottery.

Sarah A. E. (Sadie) Irvine (1885–1970) (Pottery Designer)

Sarah Agnes Estelle "Sadie" Irvine was born in New Orleans in 1885. Irvine began her studies as a freshman art student in 1902. She received a diploma in art in 1906, and studied as a graduate student for the next two years. From 1908 to 1929, Irvine was a Newcomb Pottery craftsman, and from 1929 to 1952 she was a paid employee of the college. During her academic career, Irvine won numerous awards for her watercolors, block prints, and pottery decoration. She received travel and study scholarships to the Art Students League in New York (after 1906), Arthur W. Dow's Ipswich summer school (1908), and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (1914). Irvine exhibited with national art associations and in international expositions, including at Jamestown, Virginia and San Francisco. After her retirement from Newcomb College in 1952, Irvine remained active in New Orleans' art education, teaching ceramics at the Academy of the Sacred Heart until 1967.

Miriam Flora Levy (1895–1975) (Metalworker)

Miriam Flora Levy entered Newcomb College as a freshman in 1913. Graduating in 1916 with a diploma in art, she was a graduate art student from 1916 to 1918. Following her graduate work and up until 1940, Levy served as a Newcomb Pottery craftsman, specializing in metalwork and jewelry. In 1938, she designed chalices for the Episcopalian Eucharistic Congress taking place in the city. In addition to her duties for the WPA, Levy did commissions for Hausmann's Jewelry Store in New Orleans, making an assortment of baubles, flatware, and accessories. She remained in this line of work until 1959.

The Making of a Newcomb Pottery Vase

Each ceramic vessel made at the Newcomb Pottery enterprise represents the efforts of a team of skilled artisans who together transformed raw clay into a unique work of art. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was common in the craft industry to assign tasks according to gender (a practice that has since been discontinued). At Newcomb Pottery, male potters performed the technical and physical tasks associated with ceramic production. Female decorators were responsible for conceptualizing and executing the surface ornamentation of the pots, giving the finished product the distinctive aesthetic associated with the enterprise.



Anna Frances Simpson (1880–1930), decorator

Joseph Meyer (1848–1931), potter

Vase with moon and pine design, ca. 1919

Low-relief carving; underglaze painting with matte glaze

Newcomb Art Collection, Tulane University; gift of Clayton M. Perkins from the estate of Carolyn Doan King Perkins, 2010.12.6

The steps below illustrate the reproduction of a Newcomb vase by decorator Anna Frances Simpson and potter Joseph Meyer (ca. 1919; left). The photographs show contemporary Nashville ceramicists Danielle McDaniel and Lyndy Rutledge demonstrating techniques used to form and decorate ceramic wares at Newcomb Pottery.

Step 1: Harvesting the Raw Materials

At Newcomb Pottery, male potters were responsible for sourcing the raw materials needed for ceramic production. When possible, Southern materials were used, including clays found in deposits near Lake Pontchartrain and Bogue Falaya River in Louisiana and Back Bay in Mississippi. The ceramics were made of earthenware, a mixture of clays and minerals fired at relatively low temperatures. In 1910, Newcomb ceramic chemist Paul Cox developed a new clay recipe that was more suitable for dinnerware and vases. To the locally sourced clays, he added Kentucky ball clay, a very smooth and moldable clay, and feldspar, a mineral. These new ingredients made the mixture easier to work and less susceptible to damage during firing.

Step 2: Throwing a Pot

Every Newcomb “pot” (a generic term for a ceramic vessel) was formed by a male potter. The vessel shapes were selected from ceramics manuals by professors Mary Sheerer and Sadie Irvine with the designs of the decorators in mind.

The majority of the pots were wheel-thrown: the potter molded the clay into a symmetrical shape by using the centrifugal force of a spinning wheel to pull the form up from a mound of clay. The photograph at right shows ceramicist Danielle McDaniel shaping this vase on a wheel.



A stock of blank pots was stored in the studio's damp cellar, a cool, humid underground room that kept the unfired pots "leather-hard" (that is, semi-dry but still workable).

Step 3: Decorating the Surface

Sometimes female decorators received special commissions for a particular form, but usually they chose a leather-hard pot from the damp cellar. Each decorator kept sketchbooks full of design ideas drawn from Southern flora and fauna that could be adapted to suit the form and size of the ceramic vessels.

The decorator first drew an outline of the design directly onto the surface of the leather-hard pot with a pencil. Next, she used steel tools to cut in the design, carefully removing clay to create a shallow, sculpted relief.

After the carving was complete, the vessel was sponged to remove fingerprints and stray marks. Sponging also brought fine silica to the clay's surface, which created a misty effect in the finished piece.



Steps 4 and 5: Bisque Firing and Underglaze Painting

After the surface decoration was finished, and the vessel dry, it was then handed over to a potter to be fired in a kiln for the first time, a process called bisque firing. Bisque-fired vessels are completely hard but very porous, which allows colors and glazes to seep into their surfaces.

An underglaze is a wash of colored minerals that is applied before the final glass-like glaze. Newcomb decorators used different minerals to create a range of blue, green, and yellow underglazes that added color to their designs.

The underglaze here is cobalt oxide and copper carbonate suspended in water, which was painted over the whole surface of the vessel with a brush. Though it is soft gray at this stage, it will fire to a vivid blue.

After the first wash of color dried, the decorator evened out the background color with a stiff brush and added an underglaze with a higher concentration of pigment to make the sculpted pine trees and rim a darker shade of blue. The white moon was achieved by blocking the area with wax before applying the cobalt underglaze. During firing, the wax melted away, leaving a negative space.

Step 6: Glazing

After the underglaze dried completely, a potter dipped the vessel into a vat of semitransparent matte glaze, evenly coating the surface. At this stage, the painting underneath is not visible.

“Glaze” is a combination of tiny clay and glass particles mixed with water. It is applied to bisqueware before it is given a second firing (called a glost firing) in the kiln. During firing, the glaze adheres to the vessel, giving it a hard, durable surface.

In 1910, Paul Cox introduced a raw lead glaze with a matte finish to the Newcomb repertoire. Matte glazes absorb light with little reflection, leaving the surface free of shine. The result is a soft, satiny appearance.

Contemporary ceramicists Danielle McDaniel and Lyndy Rutledge used a modern lead-free matte glaze that mimics the one developed by Cox.



Step 7: Glost Firing and Presenting the Final Product

In the final step, a Newcomb potter returned the vessel to the kiln for the second, or glost, firing. Ceramicists then and now carefully control the temperature and the amount of oxygen in the kiln to cause a series of chemical reactions that change the soft clay into rock-hard ceramic ware. During firing, the minerals in the glaze melt to become glass that fuses to the body of the vessel.

In its final state, the underglaze on this vase has turned blue. Cobalt and copper are some of the few naturally occurring pigments that can withstand glost firing without bleeding into the glaze.

Finished Newcomb wares were juried by the faculty to uphold quality standards. If the pot passed their examination, as did the vase this piece is modeled after, it was offered for sale in the Newcomb showroom.

Glossary

1884 Cotton Centennial: A fair in New Orleans that included industrial, artistic, and scientific displays as well as events, lectures, demonstrations, and classes. Here, William Woodward and Tulane University made contact, which resulted in his hiring as the university's first art teacher.

1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes: An exhibition in Paris that highly influenced the design ideology of Mary Sheerer. She returned to Newcomb advocating for the “right-angled, triangle, and straightened line” of the art deco style.

aesthetics: The study of the nature of beauty, art, and taste.

art deco: A visual art style that first appeared in France just before World War I and became popular in Western Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

Arts and Crafts movement: A movement that rejected the alienating conditions of industrial life, with its dehumanizing factories and mass-produced objects, in favor of handcraftsmanship and quality materials.

Exposition Universelle de 1900: A global art exposition in Paris, where Newcomb gained recognition from a last-minute entry. Newcomb received a bronze medal, which opened the doors to more success and higher enrollment.

fauna: Animals of a particular region or period.

flora: Plant life of a particular region or period.

glaze: Typically a glass-like surface coating for ceramics that is used to decorate and seal the pores of the fired clay.

incise: To engrave (designs or writing) into a surface with a sharp instrument.

kiln: An oven or furnace that is used for hardening, burning, or drying something (such as pottery).

matte glaze: A glaze that leaves the surface with no shine and absorbs light with no reflection. Transparent matte glazes were often used as topcoats on pottery.

modernism: A style or movement in the arts that aims to break with classical and traditional forms.

motif: A decorative design or pattern.

sgraffito: A form of decoration made by scratching through a surface to reveal a lower layer of a contrasting color in slip on ceramics before firing.

slip decoration: The use of liquid clay to apply thin layers of decoration on pottery; when fired, the slip darkens.

underglaze: Glaze applied to a ceramic before a final glaze is added. Because the underglaze is covered, it becomes more durable and adds to the overall sheen of the work. This was the preferred method of Mary Sheerer.

Resources and Further Reading

Online

Gardiner Museum exhibition website:

<http://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/exhibition/newcomb-pottery-enterprise>

Stark Cultural Venues. *Women, Art, & Social Change: The Newcomb Pottery Enterprise Official Teachers Guide*. PDF. <http://starkculturalvenues.org/starkmuseum/files/2014/08/SMA-Pottery-Official-Teachers-Guide.pdf>.

Exhibition Catalogue

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Print Resources

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