DESIGN REVIEW

Reclaiming the Luster Of Hungarian Ceramics

By GRACE GLUECK

About ceramics you don't often think Hungarian. Yet for more than 150 years, Hungary has had a highly productive art ceramics factory, the Zsolnay Manufactory of Pecs. If it has not always produced the most beautiful pottery in the world, the factory has managed to stay in business since 1853, making significant contributions to the country's artistic and economic well-being.

The factory, started by Miklos Zsolnay and run by his family for decades, has from the beginning shared in Hungary's political ups and downs.

The travails and triumphs of the factory, as it was affected by the shifting currents of modern history, is the subject of a finely tuned show, "Hungarian Ceramics From the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001" at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture.

"Hungarian Ceramics From the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Oct. 13.

Offering a glimpse of Zsolnay's artistic output since it began that part of its operation in the 1870's, the show presents some 200 objects, from monumental vases to a portrait of Lenin painted on white earthenware. Some are lovely, some engagingly eccentric and some downright ugly.

Starting out as a small affair making stoneware and earthenware, the Zsolnay Manufactory gradually branched into art pottery, architectural ceramics, industrial goods and other fields. It became known for its technological prowess: it invented many special types of clay, like porcelain faïence; glazes, like its eosin metallic luster; ornamentation techniques; and a ceramic material called pyrogranite for architectural use, which was resistant to weather and pollution.

By the 1870's its art division was making ornate and sometimes awful decorative objects, blending historical motifs along with those of nature and peasant art. Examples in the show include the classically shaped vase designed in 1881 by Vilmos's daughter Terez and adorned with folk-art flowers, and a wonderfully homely base for a kerosene lamp (1880), crawling with snails, lizards, moss and ferns that are sculptured in lifelike relief after the style of the 16th-century French potter Bernard Palissy.

Sheldan Collins/Bard Graduate Center

A Zsolnay bowl with a panoramic view of a small forest lake (1899).

The great days for the factory's art pottery production came at the turn of the 20th century, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was still in bloom, and Zsolnay, affected by international trends, shifted from its traditional native and historical designs to the innovative Art Nouveau style. Starting around 1897 it began to produce sophisticated works that won acclaim throughout the Continent.

A profusion of wonderful pieces from this period includes vessels embellished with landscapes and still lifes, like the gorgeous 1899 Japanese-style bowl that is decorated inside and out with landscapes in opaque and metallic eosin glazes. They are adapted from a design titled "Lake in the Forest," first used for a tapestry by Otto Eckmann.

Vases in wild patterns and with colors both muted and brilliant accost the eye. A favorite shape was a kind of hourglass curve that suggested the female form, somewhat bulged at the bottom.

One of a brilliant pair of vases in this style from 1900-1 has a transparent green eosin glaze with a raised design of water lily leaves and flowers. The other, aquatically themed in lustrous purple glazes, depicts a raised enamel frog sporting at the bottom.

Two exotic flowerpots would certainly overwhelm whatever might be planted in them. One, designed in 1901-2 by Mihaly Kapis Nagy, is a squat bowl in shimmering purple and orange luster, encircled at its rim with large cut-out butterflies. The other, dated 1908 and also designed by Nagy, has a tropical scene painted in brilliant blues, oranges, yellows and greens with a pair of elephant heads for handles.

At the end of World War I the Austro-Hungarian Empire was shattered. The factory lost its access to raw materials, its markets and, to a certain extent, its identity. After World War II its artistic voice was stilled under nationalization by the Communist regime. The family, seen as catering to bourgeois tastes, was ousted and persecuted; the plant, renamed the Pecs Porcelain Factory, became part of a state conglomerate turning out industrial products.

But by the 1950's Zsolnay regained creativity as the Communist dictatorship loosened its hold. In the decades that followed artists who left Hungary under duress began to re-establish ties.

Victor Vasarely returned from Paris and made a sculpture from Zsolnay tiles in 1974. In 1983 Eva Zeisel, an internationally known ceramist living in New York, visited her homeland and did a stint at the factory designing vases, candleholders and other containers, using the eosin glaze.

The art pottery produced by Zsolnay in our own time is not — at least aesthetically — up to the standards set by the factory during its Art Nouveau heyday.

One jokey gibe at the Communist regime, sculptured in pyrogranite by Gyorgy Furtos in 1983, shows two feet in one boot and surpasses all in whimsical kitsch.

Unfortunately, Zsolnay's picturesque contributions to architectural ceramics over the years are mostly shown in photographs. But some of them, all of projects in Budapest, are impressive, particularly tile inlays for the ground floor foyer of the Hungarian National Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (1904-7), the exquisitely tiled dome, roofs, facades and interiors of the Museum of Applied Arts (1893) and an incredibly elaborate, jewel-like mausoleum for the Schmidl family, from 1903.

Today the factory is still largely under state ownership (members of the Zsolnay family, compensated for their loss by the government, have set up a small new enterprise in Pecs) and is struggling to re-establish its former luster. It has created an art pottery studio to produce limited-edition objects. And it is making architectural ceramics for contemporary buildings.

Provincial though some of its output may seem in contrast with that of more elegant European ceramics makers, Zsolnay has had a vital past, one that merits the painstaking show and catalog that Bard has given it.