The Hungarian ceramics factory was also famous for its iridescent tiles, both for architectural use and for furniture decoration. These examples of the latter are about three inches square.

Hungarian Ceramics From The Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001

BY KAREL KLEIN ALBERTSON

NEW YORK CITY — In recent years, the Bard Graduate Center on Manhattan’s West Side has presented a series of exhibitions designed to focus attention on important aspects of decorative arts history neglected elsewhere. The current exhibition, “Hungarian Ceramics from the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001,” on display through October 13, reveals a magnificent tradition of porcelain and pottery from Eastern Europe that rivaled and at times surpassed production in the West.

Olga Valle Tetkowski, Bard’s curator of exhibitions who served as project coordinator on the New York end, points out, “One of the things we have done here at Bard is to bring to light some person or, in this case, a manufactory that is not well-known in the United States. Real ceramic gurus know Zsolnay because of the iridescent glazes they used during the Art Nouveau period, but even within these ceramic circles few realize the range of this company’s production. Many people don’t know that Zsolnay is still a working company.”

Inspired by what they saw on visits to Budapest, Bard administrators and staff have been planning the Zsolnay exhibition for a decade. Writing for the catalog, Director Susan Webster Soros emphasizes, “The exhibition and catalog reflect the goal of The Bard Graduate Center to encourage scholarly investigation into valuable, but often neglected areas of the decorative arts. “Hungarian Ceramics from the Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001” presents for the first time examples from the entire range of the Zsolnay production, beginning with its popular versions of historic pieces from the Nineteenth Century, made as the factory contributed to the development of a national style, and ending with works made especially for this exhibition,” she continues. “The manufactory’s magnificent award-winning Art Nouveau creations, with their extraordinary, fluid forms and lustrous ‘eosin’ glazes formulated by the Zsolnay manufactory, represent the peak of the manufactory’s art production. The exhibition and catalog also broaden the range of scholarly exploration by focusing on the factory’s architectural ceramics, which have contributed greatly to the beauty of the city of Budapest.”

Appropriately, Bard turned to the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest — an institution opened in 1897 during Zsolnay’s heyday and physically adorned with the company’s lustrous architectural ceramics — for the expertise it needed to organize the ambitious exhibition. Eva Csenkey, who is in charge of (continued on page 68)

The interior and exterior painting on this 1899 bowl, adapted from an earlier design by Otto Eckmann called Small Lake in the Forest, looks forward to Deco and modernism in spite of its early date.

Zsolnay reached the apogee of its success with the Art Nouveau pieces made during the early Twentieth Century, winning top prizes at Paris, St Louis, Milan and London. This lidded container with snail-shaped feet, 1912-13, is decorated with the shimmering eosin glazes designed to compete with contemporary French luster ceramics and American Tiffany glass.

Using iridescent eosin glazes, Zsolnay artists created a pulled, Tiffany-type overall decoration on this leaf-form earthenware cup and saucer, 1898-99.

Art Nouveau floral themes were interpreted in various innovative ways by Zsolnay artists. Here a wall plate designed by Henrik Darilek, 1899-1900, shows a female head peering from a forest of fire lilies.
Zsolnay was very much a family concern. Vilmos Zsolnay, who took over the concern in 1866, had help on the business side from his son Miklos and used the artistic talents of daughters Terez and Julia, shown here in a self-portrait on a wall plate painted in 1882.

After years of experimentation, Vilmos Zsolnay developed a metallic luster glazing technique he called "eosin," which was ideally suited to the Art Nouveau style popular at the turn of the Twentieth Century. This vase, designed and painted in 1900 by Geza Nikeszky in the style of Walter Crane, is decorated with an outdoor scene of trees, maidens, and flowers acid-etched on the base glaze.

Hungarian Ceramics From The Zsolnay Manufactory, 1853-2001 is a must for the collector, if only for the off chance that one of those examples shipped long ago to an American World's Fair might turn up unexpectedly for sale. As always, Bard has provided a "keeper" catalog ($65, hardcover) with every ounce of information one could hope for on the manufactory and its production. The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture is at 18 West 86th Street. For more information or catalog orders, 212-501-3000 or www.bgc.bard.edu.

The background of this vase with red poppies - perhaps the quintessential Art Nouveau flower - is richly patterned with tiny glaze-painted dots and radiating bursts of iridescence.

A simple cylinder vase, 1900, is enhanced with a gleaming iridescent surface fashioned to resemble hand-hammered metalwork.
Hungarian Ceramics

This writhing ewer in the Art Nouveau style, 1899, features tulip bulbs and leaves in relief colored with two types of opaque eosin glaze. A period photo, circa 1900, shows other vases and goblets with similar fluid forms displayed for an exhibition.

'The exhibition reveals a magnificent tradition of porcelain and pottery from Eastern Europe which rivaled and at times surpassed production in the West.'

This covered inkwell, underplate, and pen were created for the use of King Ferenc Jozsef I during the inauguration of the Museum and School of Applied Arts at Budapest in 1896.

Twentieth Century production at the factory included some small ceramic sculptures, such as this woman holding a vase.

Comprehensive Exhibition
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