



George Ohr: Sophisticate and Rube

Ellen J. Lippert

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The late nineteenth-century Biloxi potter, George Ohr, was considered an eccentric in his time but has emerged as a major figure in American art since the discovery of thousands of examples of his work in the 1960s. Currently, Ohr is celebrated as a solitary genius who foreshadowed modern art movements. While an intriguing narrative, this view offers a narrow understanding of the man and his work that has hindered serious consideration.

Ellen J. Lippert, in her expansive study of Ohr and his Gilded Age context, counters this fable. The tumultuous historical moment that Ohr inhabited was a formative force in his life and work. Using primary documentation, Lippert identifies specific cultural changes that had the most impact on Ohr. Developments in visual display and the altered role of artists, the southerner redefined in the wake of the Civil War, interest in handicraft as an alternative to rampant mass production, emerging tenets of social thought seeking to remedy worker exploitation, and new assessments of morals and beauty as a result of collapsed ideals all played into the positioning Ohr purposefully designed for himself.

The second part of Lippert's study applies these observations to Ohr's body of work, interpreting his stylistic originality to be expressions of the contradictions and oppositions particular to late nineteenth-century America. Ohr threw his inspiration into being both the sophisticate and the "rube," the commercial huckster and the selfless artist, the socialist and the individualist, the "old-fashioned" craftsman and the "artist-genius." He created art pottery as both a salable commodity and a priceless creation. His work could be ugly and deformed (or even obscene) and beautiful. Lippert reveals that far from isolated, Ohr and his creations were very much products of his inspired engagement with the late nineteenth century.

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