

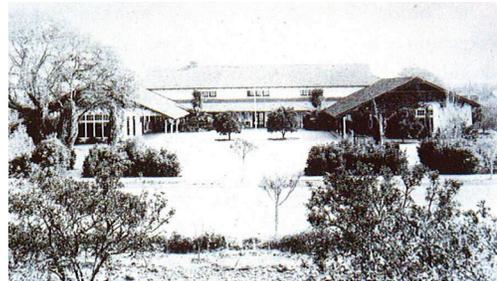


Ernest Batchelder - Master Tilemaker, 1875-1957

"The fireplace is a permanent built-in feature of a room. Rugs, wall coverings, draperies and furniture may be changed...but the fireplace remains a source of perennial satisfaction."--Ernest A. Batchelder, fireplace tile catalog, 1927

Ernest Batchelder was born in Nashua, New Hampshire and educated at the Massachusetts Normal Art School in Boston, from which he graduated in 1899. While in school, he was greatly influenced by the work of Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930), an early Arts & Crafts pioneer, who's Moravian Tile Works in Pennsylvania, is still operating today as a working museum. A reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the Arts & Crafts movement promoted a return to a simpler time of handmade objects, including furniture, pottery and tile.

In 1901, Batchelder moved to Pasadena to teach at the Throop Polytechnic Institute. And, after studying at the School of Arts and Crafts in Birmingham, England in 1905, he taught at the Harvard Summer School of Design, organized the Handicraft Guild in Minneapolis, where he taught summer courses, and eventually became Director of the Art Department at Throop. He published his first book Principles of Design in 1904 and his numerous articles for "The Craftsman" magazine were compiled as the book Design in Theory and Practice in 1910. But, by 1909, he had become increasingly frustrated with academic life and policy changes that would eventually lead Throop into becoming the California Institute of Technology (aka CalTech) in 1921, its focus firmly shifted from art to science.



Ever a proponent of putting theory into practice, Batchelder built a kiln behind his Pasadena bungalow when he left Throop in 1909. There, with the help of former students, he began making decorative tiles of his own design. This enterprise was timely, as Southern California's booming construction industry called for architectural tiles, and his products were much in demand. Builders and architects bought the tiles and designed their own fireplace fronts and hearths. For major installations, Batchelder also designed or consulted with the architect. He moved operations twice due to expansion, with his largest business site occupying six acres in Los Angeles and 175 workers, at its peak.

In the early years Batchelder designed most of his tiles himself. They were hand molded and fired in a kiln which "permitted us to fire nearly forty six-inch tiles at one fell swoop." Under expanded production the hand-crafting of tiles continued. They were "sun dried in a yard at the rear of the shed where cats and chickens frequently walked over them, offering a pleasing variation of texture." Even when he moved to the Los Angeles factory, where conveyor belts took the sand pressed tiles into



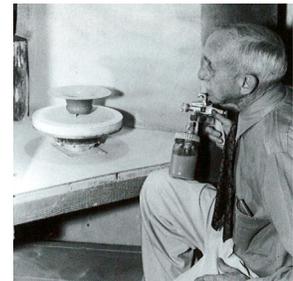
vast kilns, Batchelder's motto was "no two tiles the same." At first he worked almost entirely in brown, with blue glaze rubbed into the indentations in vines, flowers, Viking ships, peacocks and other animals. But eventually his style became characterized by soft, almost washed out shades of blue, gray, tan, green and rose. The most easily recognized tiles feature rustic scenes, animals, historic or musical themes, and characters. One critic also noted Batchelder's delight in the California live oak and said, "Perhaps the most noticeable effect of locality is seen in the landscape tiles which speak so charmingly of California."



These tiles were used in any number of applications, but became most commonly used in fireplace surrounds and hearths. In addition to a wide variety of flat tiles (ranging from minute 1"x1" field tiles up to huge 3'x3' artistic panels), the Batchelder catalogue offered fancifully carved corbels and mantels to complete fireplace and hearth, pavers for walking surfaces, and whimsical fountains for garden use. "Batchelder tiles" can be found in thousands of Los Angeles and Pasadena-area homes. And, uniquely, a small enclave of homes in San Francisco, called Balboa

Terrace. Batchelder's commercial work can be seen nationwide, including in the Hershey Hotel in Pennsylvania, in Union Station in Chicago, the Plaza Hotel in San Antonio, the Lake Yellowstone Hotel in Yellowstone National Park, and the Fine Arts Building in Los Angeles.

Like with many other Arts & Crafts enterprises, the Great Depression forced the Batchelder Tileworks out of business. All of its assets were eventually sold off in 1932. Afterward, Batchelder set up a small home workshop and devoted himself to perfecting the thinnest and finest clay vases and bowls he could make. Ernest Batchelder continued producing pottery into the early 1950's. He passed away in 1957.



My name is Steve Jeffords and, in addition to living in the neighborhood, I am planning to write a book, entitled "The Batchelders of Balboa Terrace". Our neighborhood was developed as a single endeavor in the mid 1920's by Heuter Homes. Some of our houses incorporated the use of Batchelder tile and fireplaces. Eighty years later, these architectural gems have almost been forgotten. It is my desire to document these unique works of art, share my knowledge of them with others, and serve as a neighborhood historical reference...a "local expert", if you will. If you'd be interested in assisting me with my project, mostly by allowing me to photograph and document any Batchelder tilework you might have in or around your home, please contact me at jeffords_steven@yahoo.com, (415) 425-1754, or just knock on my door at 306 Santa Ana.

Sources:

American Arts and Crafts: Virtue in Design by Leslie Greene Bowman, Bulfinch Press, 1992

Batchelder Tilemaker by Dr. Robert Winter, Balcony Press, 1999

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