

CERAMICS

The Morse Museum has almost a thousand examples of American art pottery, an art industry in which the United States excelled and which spanned the years 1870 to 1980. The ceramics industry was one of the first to respond to the Arts and Crafts movement's demand for more individual, handmade objects. The Morse's collection of American art pottery is dominated by Rookwood Pottery (1880–1967) in Cincinnati, but also includes the Grueby Faience Company (1894–1920) in Massachusetts, Tiffany Studios in New York City, and others that together produced internationally recognized work and brought pottery to a new level of artistic excellence. Equally important, their work achieved a status approaching that of the fine arts such as painting and sculpture.

It is interesting to note that Hugh McKean was connected to the pottery industry through his mother's great-grandmother. Her brother, C.C. Thompson, operated a pottery from 1868 to 1938 in East Liverpool, Ohio, not far from where McKean grew up in western Pennsylvania. This may explain some of the McKean's interest in building such an extensive collection of American art pottery.

It comes as a surprise to many visitors that Louis Comfort Tiffany, so famous for his glass, participated in this ceramics phenomenon. In assembling the collection, the McKean's sought out several identically formed ceramic pieces by Tiffany that were distinguished only by their individual surface glaze. This supported an important pedagogical purpose by isolating and illustrating the subtle variations of visual effect produced by glazing. Also pedagogical was their avid interest in acquiring preparatory sketches and archival documents that illuminated the process of a work's creation.