

Belle Kogan and Charles Murphy: Designers at Red Wing Potteries

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With improved glass containers and more access to refrigeration, stoneware sales plummeted at Red Wing Union Stoneware in the 1920's. The Company shifted focus to art ware and dinnerware production. A comprehensive sales catalogue dated August, 1931, prominently displayed glazed art ware, and between 1930 and 1940, the potteries in Red Wing produced one thousand new designs of art ware. These 1000 shapes represented about one half of the art ware shapes produced at Red Wing Potteries.

Salesman and distributor George Rumrill contracted for much of the early art ware production from 1932-1937. After the relationship with Rumrill soured, Red Wing Union Stoneware Company (re-organized as Red Wing Potteries in 1936) enrolled the services of two main art ware and dinnerware designers from 1938 until the plant closed in 1967. This article focuses on the art ware designs of Belle Kogan and Charles E. Murphy.

New York-based Belle Kogan produced her first art ware commissions for Red Wing Potteries in 1938. She introduced the "Belle 100." This glazed ware, in assorted colors of peach, brown, ivory, and aqua, featured many different designs from 14" tall vases with deco styling to ash-trays and whatnots for every day use.



Belle Kogan designed piece from the Prismatique line



Belle Kogan

Red Wing Potteries introduced Kogan's popular Magnolia Line in 1940. The first 24 pieces featured a prominent magnolia flower, often in an ivory glaze highlighted by brown detailing.

Shortly thereafter, on December 1, 1940, Red Wing Potteries hired Charles E. Murphy as resident designer. During his first month at Red Wing Potteries, he developed the Brittany and Orleans hand-painted dinnerware that were introduced at a wholesale show in Chicago during January 1941. Murphy trained two women to paint these dinnerware designs who later trained two more women and so on.

The following summer Murphy introduced designs for figural cookie jars: Chef Pierre; Katrina (the Dutch girl); and Friar Tuck. These cookie jars, often filled with cookies when sold, were popular department store items.

Red Wing's 1942 art ware catalog featured a line of carefully crafted figures. Murphy developed this more expensive line of pottery to market to jewelry stores and other special outlets. This short-lived line had finishes often in matt gray or tan covered with areas of shiny turquoise over glazing.

In 1947 Murphy developed a modernist line of vases, bowls, and candlesticks with square bases. The original glazes for this line were crackled white, crackled turquoise, and crackled chartreuse with bronze-colored bases and interiors. Murphy related that these glazes "separated on firing and the pieces were dipped into India ink, which was then wiped off to create the crackled effect." According to Murphy, he also used the crackle glazes on some other art ware and a few lamps.

Although his annual salary had increased modestly from an initial \$3600 to about \$4000 in 1948, Murphy left Red Wing for a better paying job at the Stetson China Company in Lincoln, Illinois. He worked there from 1949 to 1953. Among his designs for Stetson were several lines of dinnerware and a centennial plate for the city of Lincoln.

During Murphy's absence, Red Wing Potteries again commissioned Kogan. She designed a series of figures and several lines of pottery that epitomized early 1950's styles. The shapes were often amorphous and curvilinear with "Red Wing" and a shape number impressed on the bottom of these pieces. Kogan added the B- prefix to many of the shape numbers of this era, noting her designs for Red Wing Potteries.



Charles Murphy Designed pieces

For various reasons, Murphy returned to Red Wing in 1953. The company's new president Harry Barghusen had put several salesmen in more of a management role. Murphy sat with the sales team and reviewed designs that Red Wing Potteries would market. Murphy returned not as a full-time employee but on retaining fees and royalties. He now lived in Minneapolis.

Murphy designed several hundred more art pottery shapes for Red Wing, often adding an M- prefix before the shape number on the bottom of his designs. His specialty lines included carved Sgraffito, pastel-colored Garden Pottery, Hobnail Ashtrays, the classic Doric Ensemble, color-ringed Chromoline, and the beautiful glazes of the Decorator Line.

The impressive Decorator Line appeared in Red Wing's spring catalog of 1959. Among the most distinctive examples were modernist bottle shapes with crystalline glazes. Their rich luster sometimes gave the containers a highly glossy finish, almost metallic in appearance. Murphy said: "When I designed these, my purpose was not only to design a container but an art piece as well. I consider the one with partial figures rather 'arty.'"