

THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ART FORM: ARCHITECTURAL TERRA COTTA
ON CALIFORNIA'S COAST FROM THE EARLY 1900S TO 1930S

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THESIS: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ART FORM: ARCHITECTURAL
TERRA COTTA ON CALIFORNIA'S COAST FROM THE
EARLY 1900S TO 1930S

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Dedicated to my Mother and Sister:

Ruth Jeanette Hardage

and

Lani Hardage-Vergeer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
COPYRIGHT PAGE.....	ii
APPROVAL PAGE.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	2
Clay Mining.....	3
Techniques and Kilns.....	4
Art and Architectural Tile Business	
Visual Analysis of the Elements of Art in Terra Cotta.....	5
Early California Architects.....	5
State of Research.....	7
Terminology.....	8
Central Argument.....	10
2. CLAY MINING.....	11
3. TECHNIQUES AND KILN TYPES.....	15
4. ART TILE AND TERRA COTTA BUSINESS: FROM BACKYARD TO BOOMTOWN.....	22
5. VISUAL ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTS OF ART IN TERRA COTTA.....	32
6. EARLY CALIFORNIA ARCHITECTS: THEIR BUILDINGS AND ICONIC STYLES.....	37

CHAPTER	PAGE
7. THE DECLINE OF TERRA COTTA AND PRESERVATION OF AN HISTORICAL ART FORM.....	47
Conclusion.....	51
WORKS CITED.....	53
APPENDICES	
A: GLADDING MCBEAN ORDER # 1051.....	60
B: GLADDING MCBEAN TROPICO DIVISION ORDERS, 1926-1929.....	62

PREVIEW

LIST OF FIGURES

	PAGE
1. San Francisco's Terra Cotta Skyline circa 1915.....	12
2. Gladding McBean Clay Mining Pits.....	14
3. Turn of the Century Clay Workers.....	15
4. Clay Worker.....	16
5. Beehive Kiln.....	18
6. Setting Plan.....	20
7. Mexican-Themed Cuenca Tile.....	24
8. The California Building in Balboa Park, San Diego.....	28
9. Santa Fe Railway Domed Logo, San Diego.....	30
10. Mayan Theater Exterior Detail, Los Angeles	31
11. Los Angeles Herald-Examiner Building Tiled Dome.....	33
12. Organic ornament and cornice in terra cotta.....	33
13. The Mills Building Detail: Carved Capitols and Perforated Cornices, San Francisco.....	34
14. Eastern Building Color and Texture Detail, Los Angeles.....	37
15. Downtown San Francisco after the 1906 Earthquake. Center/Top: The Mills Building.....	40
16. Julia Morgan's Casa Grande Entrance at Hearst's Castle.....	42
17. Sid Grauman's Million Dollar Theater.....	43
18. Art Tile from the Egyptian Theater Entryway, Los Angeles.....	44
19. Fine Arts Building Entryway, Balboa Park, San Diego.....	47

ABSTRACT

The use of architectural terra cotta was a major trend that escalated in the early 1900s on the West Coast. This study examines the sources of clay, techniques, and early terra cotta businesses. A visual analysis of the elements of art firmly place terra cotta as an important medium in an epoch of architectural art making. Key architects and their buildings are investigated for the legendary work they accomplished. The central argument purports that the fall of the industry was not solely based upon the depression years, but upon a turn away from the medium of terra cotta as style and taste changed and mechanization replaced artistic talent. The significance of this vanishing art form points to the necessity of historic preservation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The West Coast of California bears the imprint of an era wherein form and aesthetics of architectural ornamentation met in a visual display of magnificence. In the early 1900s, the Golden State of California utilized terra cotta in epic proportions for ornamentation. Artisans in terra cotta began from upstart, backyard endeavors and their work grew to a frenzy of output by the 1920s. An array of subject matter was depicted in tile and low and high relief art was regularly created and secured to building exteriors. Stylization and subject matter varied greatly. Methods of creation ranged from simple or complex handmade items to machine mass-production. Multi-step techniques were successfully employed, as a team of individuals played significant roles in completing any project. Architects, artisans in terra cotta, chemists, masons, engineers, crane or elevator operators and shipping lines required cooperative labor. The importance of a passing era of terra cotta raises significant, unanswered questions in the field of architectural sculpture.

Why was terra cotta architectural ornamentation so rapidly and broadly adopted? Why did an element so broadly used also so abruptly terminate? A new look at answers provide informative implications on the West Coast today.

Background

In the 1700s, the California Missions used red-roof tiles, created entirely for function and not decoration. “The Indians at the mission San Miguel Archangel were excellent at making roof tiles. Between 1808 and 1809, they made 36,000 tiles. They would sell or trade the tiles to other missions” (Garretson). The tiles were made by tromping on cut straw with local, naturally reddish-brown clay. The roofing was sealed with adobe, creating a long-lasting waterproof shelter (Garretson). In 1895 a writer for the Los Angeles Times wrote, “The houses of the Spanish people were adobe with terra cotta red roof tiles. The clay used to make the bricks was brown, not white or yellow as in Mexico” (“Southern”). Roofing tile served early Spanish settlers as architecture rather than decoration. The red roof tiles are the earliest written records of terra cotta tile making along the coast. As the West-Coast cities grew, the focus from functional roofing to decorative arts also flourished. Terra cotta was a medium which was durable, fireproof and locally available. The clay artisan was able to make the fired clay resemble granite, marble or limestone, quickly replacing the costly and often imported stone. Terra cotta was practical and cost effective in comparison to stone sculpting, even considering the labor-intensive hand techniques in use.

Clay Mining

Each part of the rapid-growth industry of architectural ornamentation had an impact upon the art form. Clay mining was a big business, large enough to change the face of the geographic regions from which it was extracted. Clay was discovered in Northern California near Sacramento while workers dug roads in Placer County (California, 1: 87).

The town called Lincoln was nicknamed “Clay City” and produced the “richest deposits of kaolin in the west” (21, 85). Out of this huge reserve of clay, the still successful company of Gladding, McBean and Company was birthed (187). In 1926 the Glendale plant of Gladding McBean produced “fifty thousand square feet of tile each month,” evidence for the demand of decorative tile in this time period (187). Many companies mixed clay with sand, as was sometimes necessary with clay found in Amador County (70). The rich reserves of native California clays endowed tile makers with an abundant supply for their production.

In Southern California, John H. McKnight of the California Clay Products found a rich quarry of clay at El Cajon Mountain in 1906 (85). At Aberhill, near Elsinore, California, a 480 acre parcel was mined (“Valuable”). Eighteen-thousand tons were excavated from Cardiff and Oro Grande (near San Bernardino) for the L.A. Pressed Brick Company (“New Clay”; California 2:35). Malibu Potteries specialized in tiles made from local Malibu Ranch clay near Zuma Beach (California 2:43). California mining sites were plentiful enough to supply numerous tile companies that sprang up and demanded terra cotta.

Techniques and Kilns

Terra cotta, or “burnt earth,” was fired in kilns of various sizes. Trash cans in the backyard served as primitive kilns, and as production grew, so did the need for large capacity kilns. Bee-hive and tunnel kilns functioned as the central oven for hardening the clay. The use of natural fuels for kilns was immense, as was their size. Hefty amounts of digger pine and diesel were necessary in bringing about a durable result.

Early hand-built forms varied in technique. Grog, glaze and slip were components of a finished piece. The plaster mold technique was widely used for sculptural forms, as was the layering technique for art tile (Giorgini 133-137). Dust pressing was a machine technique that allowed companies to mass-produce tiles (California 2: 218). Extrusion and perforation were two more machine techniques commonly used (228). As demand grew, the consistency of mass fabrication by hydraulic machinery became the focal point, and the individual creative process declined.

Art Tile and Architectural Terra Cotta Business

Hand-made art tiles began to be in demand by coastal citizens and companies in the early 1900s (Giorgini 16). Tile making flourished until the early depression days. At its zenith, tile makers found their niche in the market and created prolific amounts of decorated tile for both interior and exterior decoration as confirmed by existing buildings and reports of amounts of clay being consumed by multiple companies.