“Whacked--but Terra-Cotta Tragedy Averted” is the title of a Chicago Sun-Times article of November 2003 which describes the adventures of a chunk of terra-cotta, approximately 41.5" long and weighing perhaps a pound, which fell from Chicago’s forty-story Mather Tower, hit a man, bounced off him, and hit his young son. Built in 1928, Mather Tower was, in 2003, undergoing renovations. While the exact reason for the chunk’s fall is unclear, the falling terra-cotta resulted in a father and son receiving injuries resulting in a sum total of 20 stitches and a broken nose between them. Because the father claimed both victims considered themselves lucky not to have been killed, the story—bloodshed and all—framed terra-cotta as an agent of tragedy that did not occur. This paper argues that this use of terra-cotta is characteristic. Terra-cotta has proven itself malleable in a wide variety of applications, both actual and metaphorical, throughout history, hiding and revealing itself in Art Worlds, depending on the social and historical context of terra-cotta’s uses. This paper focusses on architectural terra-cotta’s most recent period of popularity in the United States, from the mid-nineteenth century to the Depression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the sociological literature, we first see the dance of a disappearing object in Marx’s analysis of commodities. He points out that:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties... It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. [Marx, 163]
Marx weaves a vast and complicated web, and he emphasizes valorizing the worker’s labor in the industrial economy, and insisting on the laborer’s right to that value. I am more interested in the metamorphoses he indicates when discussing changes of form from commodity to money to commodity [Marx, 198-220]. In a way that metaphorically seems to pave the way for Einstein’s Relativity Theory about the equivalence of matter and energy (and also allows for the existence of a toxic fallout), Marx traces the disappearance of money into commodities and the re-emergence of money from commodities with the residual profit accruing to the bourgeoisie. Marx also sees evolving from this process “a whole network of social connections of natural origin, entirely beyond the control of human agents.” [Marx 207]

In a manner that resonates with Marx’s analysis, Howard Becker in Art Worlds analyzes patterns of “cooperation and assistance through which work gets done.” [Becker xii] Becker argues that the “complexity of the cooperative network” makes art “happen.” [Becker 1] He calls these “art worlds” which he says “consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art.” [Becker 34] This differs from popular culture view of art production which celebrates the heroic solitary struggling artist, and omits discussion of the many others who help.

It is less useful to focus on the issue Becker identifies as the “problem to decide which of all these people is the artist.” [Becker x] Rather, one thing that emerges from the architectural terra cotta data is that a wide variety of characters in different roles appropriate for themselves the notion of the artist, or creative force, and that movement of agency, that appropriation is part of how a work of art gets created.

Harvey Molotch argues in Where Stuff Comes From that “nothing stands alone.” and uses the concept (attributed via Bruno Latour to John Law) of the “lash-up” [Molotch 1-2] to describe how stuff comes to be. Evoking in this reader’s mind the movie cowboy roping “bad guys” together and then to some stationary object until the Sheriff comes, the “lash-up” concept does indeed posit that a wide variety of objects and forces (such as people, geography, politics, the media, display, corporate
organization, etc.) must come together so that a thing like, for example, architectural terra cotta, comes
to be, for a time, a successful product in the marketplace.

METHODS

I drew my data from several sources: literature on terra-cotta, including books and advertising
brochures from companies which manufacture and manufactured it, original records from a terra-cotta
manufacturing archive, and database records compiled in the process of archiving those original records.

In 1982, when the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company (hereafter NYATCC) office
building in Long Island City, Queens, was designated a landmark, it was discovered that more than six
thousand files (covering the period from 1911 to 1920) containing failed architectural bids and
miscellaneous correspondence and ephemera including trade catalogs, photographs of terra-cotta
samples, and construction records from three buildings, were sitting, covered with dust, in an attic crawl
space of the office. The Friends of Terra Cotta (led by Susan Tunick), with the financial support from
the NEA and the New York State Council on the Arts, saved, cleaned and catalogued the records,
which are now housed at Avery Library at Columbia University.

Excited about the possibility of statistical analysis, I made inquiry regarding the use of the
database. The art and architecture graduate student interns who catalogued the records used a
computer program called Works. According to Curator Janet Parks, Avery library now uses Excel,
and no longer has computers that can use the Works database program, so the only accessible part of
the students’ monumental labors are three binders, one of which organizes the failed bid records by
architect, a second which organizes the records by state where the bids were submitted, and the third
which organizes the records by building type (i.e. bakery, bathhouse, civic, fire house, garage, etc.)
Each database record has the following fields: the Job Number (NYATCC’s original number), the date
of the job, the architect, the name of the project, the client, the contractor, the city, the state, the
address, the outcome, and the building type.

I used these binders to look at two things. First, based on my interest in terra-cotta’s “identity,”
and its frequent use as a “hidden” material (disguising itself as, for example, granite or brownstone), I
was interested in the actual competition from other materials. To what extent did NYATCC’s bids fail because other materials were used to ornament buildings? The question of the efficacy of terra-cotta’s ability to disguise itself as stone is part of my general research question.

In the 6,248 failed bids in NYATCC’s files, the majority list either the name of the company to which the bid was lost, or the words “abandoned, dead, or unknown” appear in the card entry. According to records, “abandoned” usually means that the originator of the project decided not to build it [NYATCC, box 154, “agents” file]. The exact meaning of “dead” is not yet clear (but it does not look good for NYATCC). “Unknown” presumably means that the outcome wasn’t known to NYATCC. However, for just over 800 bids, we know that the outcome was due to losing to competing materials such as stone, concrete, wood, metal, stucco, or other materials unknown. I charted those bids by year and by material.

Related to the concept of lash-up, I also had a general questions about terra-cotta production, use, and popularity: I was interested in where terra-cotta buildings were built in the United States. I guessed that mapping the failed bids might show up both a pattern of information about the geographical reach of the company, and an overall look at the extent of the popularity of the material. What this map (Table 1) shows is where NYATCC believed their reach could extend. Perhaps the failures might indicate the distribution of the successes (those records are not extant).

Archivist Julie Tozzer randomly chose an archival box to sample the files against the records in the binders. To estimate the accuracy of the computer print-out record, I sampled six files (23100-23105) from box 17. Of the six files, four were accurate in all eleven fields. In the fifth file, the fact that two projects were bid upon was not recorded (the files sometimes contained more than one bid for more than one project,); in a sixth file, the date was not accurate. In other words, any conclusions reached using this data should be considered approximate. Despite the now-known limitations of the computer database printout, I chose to work from it because of the fragility of the thousands of papers, and the time it would take to re-create the massive effort that undertaken by those who came before.

Some (the author sometimes among them) may consider manually counting thousands of records on spreadsheets arduous; I usually chose to reframe this work as “meditative.”
DISCUSSION

Architectural terra-cotta is one of many ceramic products, which are glazed or unglazed baked clay products. Ceramic finds its way into more contemporary products than can be counted, the most apparent of which are floor tiles, and everyday pottery used for food service and for gardening. The properties of architectural terra-cotta are distinctly different from architectural products made from uncooked earth, such as adobe buildings and mud huts.

What exactly is terra-cotta? The word’s duration in the human vocabulary is a testament to the continuous usefulness of baked earth materials. Originally from the Latin words terra coctilis—“terra” (meaning earth) and “coctilis” (meaning baked, of bricks)—terra-cotta has been continually useful, and intermittently fashionable, since the days of ancient Rome. The English usage, terra-cotta, comes directly from the Italian word “terracotta.” The English merely separated the Italian word into two words to make “terra cotta” English, but the word seems to be moving closer to fusing again, as witnessed by the most recent Merriam-Webster’s dictionary claim that proper usage is the hyphenated “terra-cotta.” The Italian translates as cooked, burnt or baked earth. In English, “terra-cotta” had come to mean both baked earth and a specific brownish-orange color [Merriam-Websters, 1217]. It is important to note that terra-cotta clay comes in as many colors as the earth does (in fact, Canada was a significant market for white United States terra-cotta because their clay pits only produced red clay.) Part of terra-cotta’s identity problems reside in the consumer outcry, “But it’s not red!”

Unlike brick, terra cotta is a “mixture of anywhere from two to six kinds of clay, each with certain properties of its own, added for a certain reason.” [Terra Cotta] Recipes for terra-cotta are closely guarded secrets, and the recipe for Coade Stone, often considered the most resilient of terracottas, died around 1821 with the death of its maker, the spinster Mrs. Eleanor Coade [Berryman 27]. Born in 1733, she went into manufacturing to support her mother after her father’s bankruptcy and death in 1769. Despite, or perhaps because of the enormous success of her venture, she hid the fact that Coade Stone was terra-cotta.[Architectural, 32] This hiddenness has bearing on terra-cotta’s identity problems. Another factor has to do with the fact that “there is no agreed international
terminology ... definitions of manufacture vary according to regional preferences and artistic taste”

[Architectural, 7].

Humanity’s relationship to clay and terra-cotta products goes back to the earliest known human history. Because of their durability, terra-cotta products—from Etruscan pot-shards to an entire full-sized Chinese army of terra-cotta men on horseback—are found at nearly every archaeological site. Like Marx’s money disappearing into commodities and then re-emerging again as money, terra-cotta seems to weave its way in and out of popularity throughout human history. Terra-cotta experienced one of its intermittent popularity periods during the Renaissance—one of its great practitioners was the sculptor della Robbia.

While terra-cotta products have long been known to have been in use in the United States—for example, pipes for smoking were made as early as the seventeenth Century—terra-cotta’s use as an American architectural building material has a distinct historical trajectory as a hand-crafted “mass-produced” industrial product.

The popularity of terra-cotta as an inexpensive building material in Europe influenced Americans to begin using the material in the 1840s and earlier on a small-scale to imitate carved brownstone. Never uncontested, terra-cotta encountered early resistance from mid-century stonecutters and masons in New York who claimed it was a threat to their livelihood and were among the first to argue that the material was not durable. [Tunick 5] Architects and manufacturers persisted in making and using it. An early extant example of architectural terra-cotta was recently discovered during restoration of Manhattan’s Cooper Union Building (1853-1858) where terra-cotta was found on “arches, keystones, capitals, and window surrounds of the fourth and fifth stories,” painted over to resemble brownstone. [Shackley and Tunick, 207].

However, it was not until the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Boston Fire of 1872 that terra-cotta caught on as a useful building material. The Fires taught building professionals that their faith in the fireproof nature of stone and iron was misplaced. They learned that cast-iron structures required the protection of a brick or terra-cotta sheathing [Tunick 7]. Thousands of buildings would need to be rebuilt, and terra-cotta would help secure them against disaster. From that point on until about the time
of the Great Depression, terra-cotta became an extraordinarily popular material for architectural uses (with the “lash-up” help of, for example, a 1886 Chicago ordinance that required all buildings be fireproofed, a terra-cotta genius from England by the name of James Taylor, assiduous advocates for terra-cotta’s merits, the winds of fashion in ornamentation, and the successful use of the materials, among other things).

It’s important to tease out some of the additional complexities of that lash-up. It was not inevitable that sheathing metal building frames would necessarily create a market for the ornamental use of terra-cotta on buildings’ surfaces. “There’s a symbiotic relationship between terra cotta and Queen Ann and Romanesque architecture” [Terra Cotta, 4]. The decorative surfaces of those architectural styles were part of a system of belief in decoration which also manifested itself in the clothing fashions of that period, “in the eyes of most people a building without decoration was nothing, it was naked, an undressed and rude structure ... architecture without ornament was ungracious and vulgar, without refinement or sophistication” [Barnard].

Terra-cotta met the needs of the Zeitgeist. Despite the time required to produced appropriate durable terra-cotta materials, it was relatively cheap to produce--because labor at that time was cheap. Both America and Canada had a large population of European immigrant craftsmen who were accustomed to ornamentation in their architecture.

In both the physical or “real” sense, as well as in the metaphorical sense, terra cotta, was made to order. It satisfied the construction industry’s need for a fashionable, sophisticated building “skin” that traditional handcrafted methods could not supply in sufficient quantity. As an added bonus, it exhibited at least two qualities highly prized by the burgeoning middle class: it was relatively inexpensive and was capable--as was no other building material--of expressing ornamentation with a sharp, even, crisp edge. [Terra Cotta, 2]

The media sometimes heralded terra-cotta as a fashionable savior. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle wrote “Terra Cotta will lift us out of the uninviting uniformity of brick and mortar and brownstone, give opportunity for tasteful embellishment and contribute greatly to the beauty of our city.” In a continuum to

1 Terms used in terra-cotta production evidence the time it takes to make the stuff. “Blunged” for example means to stand lumps of clay “in heaped layers for a season or two so that the frost and rain would break down and mix the materials.” “Sour” means to “stand” the materials “for some months under water.” [Architectural, 7]
this panegyric, the 1881 Long Island Historical Society in Brooklyn, clad in terra-cotta was called “a poem in red” [Safford, 155]. Because apparently nothing is ever inevitable or uncontested, the media also had critics of architectural terra-cotta. In 1881, The New York World wrote that “terra cotta does not give the eye the sense of strength and power which seems to be inherent in stone”[Safford, 155-6].

Terra-cotta could not keep its place as a viable building material if it depended on the demand for a specific architectural fashion, “within twenty years the brick darkened by chimneys, with their cheery colours dimmed, their sharp details blurred, the prematurely aged Romanesque and Queen Anne marvels of the 1880s and the 1890s were passe.” As advocates for terra cotta often do, this writer anthropomorphized terra-cotta, claiming that rather than blaming coal for the problem, “society blamed the victims” the buildings [Terra Cotta, 8] Nor could terra-cotta keep its place as an insulator of building’s structures. By the early Twentieth Century, reinforced concrete had taken on a significant role as the material covering steel beams for architectural support [Berryman 2].

It’s important to note that the United States terra-cotta business went from $1 million in 1890, to $2 million by 1900, to $8 million by 1912 [Safford, 159] The lash-up between terra-cotta and technical innovations helped keep terra-cotta in the building production picture. With the invention of elevators and steel-frame buildings, tall buildings became a useful possibility for dealing with the exponential growth of North American cities [Ferriday]. Terra-cotta, hollowed out for firing, is half the weight of stone. This allowed for the possibility of putting a relatively lightweight skin on those potential tall structures. It is co-incident that terra-cotta’s plasticity made possible the embellishment of those tall buildings. In 1910, a building magazine, Contract Record argues that, “The tall building was made possible, feasible, a reality and not a dream, by the invention of fireproof tile,” a terra-cotta product, to which a contemporary author, Patricia McHugh, adds, “We might add that tall buildings were best dressed in architectural terra cotta” [Terra Cotta] By 1911, more than half the buildings in New York City were terra-cotta [Tunick]. The lash-ups involved in terra-cotta also contributed to growth

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2 New York’s Woolworth Building has 7,500 tons of terra cotta on its facade.
of terra-cotta use outside the big cities. Terra-cotta “made it possible for small towns to receive powerful and sophisticated buildings.” [Terra Cotta, 136]

The art deco period allowed for another life for architectural terra-cotta. “Art deco invited color in” [Ferriday], and terra-cotta was uniquely well-suited to take on the multi-colored glazed projections of the wildest of architectural imaginations: “Released from the grim realities of WWI, Americans of the 1920s allowed free play to their fantasies during a free spending decade” [Darling]. Look up more than one story on almost any block in uptown, mid-town, or downtown Manhattan and you might still see eagles, hawks, rams, gnomes, or owls created in terra-cotta during that period. The City has a curious life above “eye-level.” More than a story up from the street, on many older buildings, is a veritable menagerie of fantastic creatures and colors. Almost a hundred years later, they continue to gaze down as most of us rush by, oblivious. By 1930, terra-cotta had been used in over 250,000 buildings. In 1990, it was estimated that half of those buildings were still in service [Terra Cotta, 37].

While many point to problems in manufacture, installation, and maintenance of terra-cotta as significant causal factors in the decline of terra-cotta’s popularity, and terra-cotta’s problems, including “whacking” people, are legion, it’s important to acknowledge that all man-made building materials have had problems in manufacture, and all building materials have suffered from poor installation and maintenance [Architectural, 11-14].

It might be more accurate to say that it was not just terra-cotta, but rather the entire hand-crafts industry in building production lost out, after the Depression. It could be argued that the mechanization implemented during the two World Wars destroyed mass-produced hand crafts. The machine-finished mass-production implemented as a result of arming for the Second World War, brought with it a corresponding shift in the Zeitgeist. When manufacturing resumed for World War II, architectural terra cotta manufacturers found only a tiny foothold in the war economy, building ceramic fake bombs filled with flour or powdered plaster which pilots used to check “the accuracy of bombing location devices” [Tunick, 114] In the post World-War-II period, economic factors were said to “overshadow” artistic considerations, but also the appearance of modesty had to coincide with this new appearance of economy, frugality, and modernity. There are shades of Weber’s Protestant ethic in this shift. After all,
creating the semblance, the appearance, of economy is itself an art. Onto concrete, brick, and steel, were projected the identity of humble “modern” materials. Additional lash-ups occurred with changes in building codes and zoning laws restricting the possibilities for terra-cotta’s uses [Safford, 161].

LASH-UPS TO SOME LOCAL DATA

About eight years ago, I was riding my bike along Vernon Boulevard beside the East River in Long Island City, Queens, and as I approached the Queensboro bridge, I noticed in its shadow a beautiful old boarded-up ornamented brick building, with a roof that descended in steps to the brickwork below it. Among the strange features of this building was that it stood alone, and all that lay between it and the river was more than a hundred feet of brick gravel, clearly the dust of the remains of many other buildings which had been torn down around it. Why this charming building still stood and the others did not, and what function this building had served, remained mysteries to me until I read *Terra-Cotta Skyline* by Susan Tunick, a marvelously illustrated book about the history of terra-cotta production in the United States, and its impact on New York City’s architectural ornamentation.

From *Terra-Cotta Skyline*, I learned that my brick building had once housed the offices of the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company (NYATCC) which manufactured the architectural terra-cotta for many well known New York City buildings, including the Hotel Lucerne on West 79th Street (whose ornament more resembles fudge frosting on a brick cake than anything else), Carnegie Hall, and the late Plaza Hotel (now in the process of becoming luxury apartments). Founded in 1886, by Orlando Bronson Potter and Asahel Clarke Geer, with some help from a terra-cotta production-and-distribution genius named James Taylor, the NYATCC became among the largest terra-cotta manufacturers in the United States. What distinguished this company from the forty-seven other major terra-cotta companies during the peak years of American terra-cotta production was Taylor’s decision to place it near the New York City where the need for architectural terra cotta would greatest, rather than near the clay pits where the materials were found. If Manhattan needed architectural terra-cotta it was just a boatride or trainride away across the river (NYATCC had its own dock and train stop). In 1913, the NYATCC had twenty operating kilns. The largest kilns could hold 35 - 45 tons of fired
terra-cotta, which is the equivalent of two full railway cars of terra-cotta [Tunick 46]. By 1932, a victim of the Depression and changes in architectural fashions, the Company was bankrupt, as were many of the other architectural terra-cotta companies. The building site was purchased by other terra-cotta concerns, but by the early 1970s the factory buildings were torn down, and only the office building remained. It is now the property of Citicorp.

Art Worlds have a geographic sprawl and geographic constraints. NYATCC built over 2,000 architectural terra-cotta projects. The Table 1 reveals something not-unexpected: of the over 6,200 failed bids recorded here, most bids centered around the New York Metropolitan Area. NYATCC had one branch office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which helped extend the reach of the company into the Ohio Valley area.

Art Worlds are also Money Worlds. The beautiful facades of terra-cotta buildings give no clue to the fierce financial competition that contractors engaged in in all aspects of building projects. On December 20, 1912, a Mr. Stewart writes a characteristic tip to NYATCC regarding getting a job: “we think it advisable for one of your men to go direct to Pittsburgh and camp on these people’s trail until the contract is awarded.” Frequently, after NYATCC had sent several letters modifying their bids, the contractor would send back a list of what four or five other companies bid on the project, and suggest lowering the bid still further [Box 17, files 23100-6]. The complaints against the high cost of NYATCC’s projects echoes through these files. However, it’s important to remember that NYATCC survived just as long as most of the other companies, and that the extant record is by historical accident largely failed bids.

Several times, the “old boy” network goes into play as a letter suggests one fellow or another is the point man to see. It was a business run by many of the old boys: “De Forest Grant, like many executives in the terra cotta business, was a Yale graduate, a member of numerous distinguished societies, hunted big game in Africa, had a summer residence in Winter Harbor, Maine, a winter residence on East 54th Street in Manhattan, and a business address on Park Avenue.” [Safford, 160] This is not the sort of resume that could be claimed by an ordinary immigrant.
NYATCC did not have a small fixed client-base. They bid on buildings designed by an enormous number of different architects. In the 6,248 bids recorded, only about ten architects received bids for more than twenty of their buildings: Groenenberg & Leuchtag (apartments), Kreymbor Architectural Co. (apartments), Thomas Lamb (theaters), McKim, Mead & White, Mowbray and Uffinger, Neville & Bagge, Schwartz & Gross, Snyder C. B. J. (public schools—the largest number of failed bids to one architect, over 50), Starrett & Van Vleck, Warren and Wetmore (hotels and apartments).

WHO IS THE ARTIST?

Within the recent historical frame of its use as an architectural product, terra cotta moves from being a not-very-successful competitor to brownstone, to being hidden in the fireproofing to the external cladding of the sky scraper, similarly, the role of the artist or the role of agency in the making of an architectural work of art moves. Terra-cotta companies functioned as units in an Art Worlds involving architects, clients, and contractors and others, and the terra-cotta companies themselves also functioned as a hierarchical Art Worlds themselves.

Terra cotta has positioned itself not as art, but as part of the materials that help create art. Sometimes, as it was in 1913, terra-cotta is claimed to be “light weight, mass producible and infinitely variable—the ideal canvas on which the architect could realize his designs” [Terra Cotta, 3]. The architect often claims the corresponding artist’s role, living beyond the boundaries of ordinary mortals. Architect Stanford White’s behavior epitomized this [Lessard]. However, as shown in this report of White’s visiting the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company, the art had already been created by others before White gave it his nod of approval:

He would breeze into the modeling department, hastily view the clay models, and invariably pronounce them “Terrible!” “Occasionally he would fall on one particular model with his hands to make a line more sweeping or depress relief, but in general he was secretly pleased and passed the models without change, still saying ‘Terrible!’” [Tunick 38]
Architects provided rough sketches and references to the period within which the work belonged. It was modeler’s job to execute the ideas of the architects, and within the terra cotta manufacturing shop which could employ hundreds, the few modelers were the highest paid workers, earning $2/hour to the other workers $.60/hour. Many of the modelers were trained European sculptors. Given the objects of extraordinary beauty they created, it is hard from the vantage point of the present not to see them as artists. The promotional materials of the American Terra Cotta describe one of their modelers, Kristian Schneider as “an artist to and in the tips of his fingers, always anxious to give you what you want, and not what he thinks in his own opinion what you ought to want.” [Tunick 32-6] That is a curious definition of artist, going against the grain of popular culture stereotypes, and adding a new bend to this Art Worlds puzzle.3

In contrast to emphasizing the romantic loner role of artist, 1912 promotional materials for the Atlantic Tile Company offer a collaborative approach to art-making "If desired, our service includes suggestions on modeling and treatment in colors” [Box 154, file "Atlantic Tile Company”].

Terra cotta companies’ publicity departments themselves had artistic pretensions, using elaborate metaphors and promotion materials to sell their materials. Here a description of Atlantic Terra Cotta Company’s pride and joy, the Woolworth building:

Imagine the tower at night emerging gradually from the black mass of the main building, increasing in brilliance as it rises. There is no seeming solidity, no sense of support; just a graceful shaft of delicate tracery fantastic against the night sky. [Atlantic]

Perhaps I am the only one who sees a rising erection in this description? It is curious what the art of advertising envisions as an artful way to sell a product.

A project could be well underway when, for many reasons, the client could demand a role in the making of the art work. In this case, the building didn’t correspond to the client’s sense of their own

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3 One of the things that I have wondered as an admirer of American pottery from the late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century was how America suddenly came to make extraordinarily beautiful pottery, and then just as suddenly stopped. Obviously there are lash-ups to the Arts and Crafts movement, but one of my startling finds during this project was that some terra-cotta companies, not wanting to lose skilled craftspeople during architecture’s quiet building months in winter, would employ their workers in the making of pottery.
importance. An agent wrote NYATCC that a 1912 train station project was held up after NYATCC placed multiple bids (this means that the project was already well-underway, architectural plans had been drawn up and contractors for all parts of the jobs had been solicited for bids). Why was the project halted? "On account of the citizens of Canton, who demand a much larger and finer station than the present contract calls for." Once the plans were re-drafted satisfy those citizen, in 1914, NYATCC again bid the project and lost [Box 17, File 23104].

In 1899, one terra-cotta manufacturer in Canada, Michael Hynes, completely removed art from the equation: "Terra Cotta is mixture of clay and brains: the manufacturer supplies the clay, the architect the brains." [Terra Cotta, 12]

TERRA COTTA--DON’T TAKE IT FOR GRANITE

Flexibility is not always a long-term asset. *Terra Cotta, Don’t Take it for Granite*, the title of Susan Tunick’s guide book to New York City’s terra-cotta buildings, indicates several problems which have faced terra-cotta, among them its ability to make itself resemble other materials, and the fact that it has indeed been taken for granted. Within the frame of its use as an architectural product, terra cotta has also moved from being hidden to being celebrated for the unique qualities terra-cotta can bring to a building’s surface. More often, terra-cotta use was hidden. In 75% of the projects where terra-cotta was used, it was used as a substitute for stone [Tunick 63]. Champions of terra-cotta argue that this very flexibility helped lead to its demise, that it is “a victim of its own success;” an adaptable chameleon, terra-cotta is “the perfect servant: silent, unassuming, and never requiring acknowledgment.” Also architects, contractors and producers-- Mrs. Coade among them-- “seldom gave it the credit it deserved.” [Terra Cotta, 7]

The records of the NYATCC might provide some insight into these and related issues. Because architectural terra-cotta entered the field in the Nineteenth Century as a competitor to stone work, I expected that the numbers of bids lost to stone would decrease over time. Because terra-cotta production fell so rapidly after the Depression (along with production of everything else), and in subsequent recovery years, terra cotta lost its place in the architectural surfaces field to materials considered more “modern” such as brick, concrete, and glass, I would have expected the pattern of the failed bids to show a gradual increase in the popularity of those materials over the nine-year-period for
which records were preserved. Instead the competition is fairly consistent throughout. The chart below maps the bids by year and material.

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**TOTALS** 206 417 93 4 19 33 7 30 809

The most commonly used term is at the top of each list; “other” includes combinations of brick and tile, stone and brick, stone and tile, and stone and metal as well as tile, plaster, raritan clay, and litholite.

There are many unknowns related to this example. The most serious is that hundreds of entries marked “unknown” could not be figured into the calculation. However, it is noteworthy that, among the known outcomes, stone work remained a significant source of competition well into the Twentieth Century. While it is obvious from this data that World War I period correlated with a significant decline in American building production, terra-cotta was clearly on the rebound along with other materials in 1919–1920.

Today there are only two terra-cotta companies in the United States, Boston Valley in Orchard Park New York and Gladding Mc Bean in Lincoln, California. Much of the recently founded Boston Valley’s work is restoration of extant buildings from earlier eras. Boston Valley’s motto is “Recreating the Past and Building the Future.” Gladding Mc Bean is the only terra cotta manufacturer that has survived from the Nineteenth Century. Although they have produced over 8,500 orders of custom made architectural ornamental terra-cotta, perhaps a contributing factor in their survival is the fact that their foremost emphasis has always been the production of sewer pipes from four to forty-two inches in
diameter. Tastes in art and architecture may change, but fashions in sewer pipes apparently remain fairly constant.

Ornamental terra-cotta is still produced. I have in my apartment two life-sized terra-cotta greyhounds, both seated. Probably made in the 1950s or 1960s, one is glossy white (his broken off tail, covered by some child with a real-life band-aid, earned him the nickname of Stumpy), and the other is covered in gold paint or glaze (named Golde). Both for many years lived at my late and much-missed grandmother’s McKim, Mead and White house. Now they reside, quite happily at my Queens studio apartment.

Bibliography


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The outline for the map of the United States was retrieved on April 16, 2006 from:
http://geography.about.com/library/blank/usa3.jpg

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