

Essay from: **California Tile – The Golden Era 1910-1940**
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ERNEST BATCHELDER (1876-1957) — Robert Winter

Ernest Allan Batchelder was born in Franconia, New Hampshire in 1876. His mother died when he was very young, and, when his father remarried, Ernest was sent to live with his father's brother nearby in the small industrial city of Nashua. His uncle was a carpenter and schooled him in the art of craftsmanship. When he reached college age, Ernest raised enough money to enter the Massachusetts Normal Art Institute in Boston where he studied to become a teacher of drawing and manual training in the public schools.

After graduation in 1899 Batchelder was employed in the Boston area and in 1901 was picked by Denman W. Ross, a professor of art at Harvard, to be an instructor in Ross's Harvard Summer School of Design. Ross was an enormous influence on Batchelder's intellectual development and also seems to have stimulated his ambition, for that same year he moved to California, eventually settling in Pasadena where he got a job at the Throop Polytechnic Institute teaching design and manual training.

It was during his eight years at Throop that Batchelder established his reputation in the field of Arts and Crafts. Always ambitious, he looked to activities that would promote his interests outside the confines of Southern California. Concerned that the Arts and Crafts movement in the southwestern United States was not going to be represented at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904, he organized an exhibit of the work of California and Native American craftsmen. He broadened his knowledge of the work of the British and European craftsmen by going on two European tours. In the summers he was a mainstay of the summer school of the Handicraft Guild in Minneapolis and at the same time began writing many articles for Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman* and for other journals. This writing formed the background for two books, *The Principles of Design* (1908) and *Design in Theory and Practice* (1910), both of which were based on the "pure design" theory of Denman W. Ross. In 1909 he bought property on Pasadena's beautiful Arroyo Seco and built a house and studio where he and a few students from Throop would found a school of handicrafts.

Actually as early as 1910 the school became a shop for the production of decorative tile. Precisely what made Batchelder turn from general manual training to a specialization in tiles is not known. His only avowed source of inspiration was Henry Mercer's Moravian tile, although he never adopted Mercer's high glazes or his sometimes bizarre ornament. Batchelder chose more subtle, controlled imagery.

Batchelder's own decorative vocabulary often involved designs based on the illustrations in his two books—Viking ships, medieval castles, minnie-singers, paired birds and abstractions. The tiles were cast into key molds from which production molds were made. In the early years the clay was hand-pressed into the molds and then air-

dried. Some were bisque-fired, then hand-colored and refired. Others were colored first and then fired. These were the trademark Batchelder tiles with the characteristic matte or engobe finish. In the twenties he used glazes, but these were never high gloss glazes as in the production of his contemporaries.

After 1920 Batchelder's color palette would pick up, largely due to the expertise of Ivan Branham, a graduate in ceramic engineering from the University of Illinois, whom he employed in 1922. Always attuned to the taste of his times, Batchelder also liked Branham's ventures into Spanish-Moresque designs and Mayan glyphs. Branham even added Art Deco tiles to Batchelder's inventory.

As is easily seen in examining the variety of the designs, Batchelder had other hands besides Branham's in the design of his tiles—almost from the beginning. It is clear from testimony from her family that one of his early students, Anne Harnett, was chiefly responsible for the wonderful panels of scenes from Holland that were once the pride of the Dutch Chocolate Shop (1914) on Sixth Street in downtown Los Angeles, and she probably designed many more. Undoubtedly there were others.¹

In the early years of his tilemaking Batchelder bought bags of already-mixed clay. Later his chief source was in the Alberhill-Corona area of southern California. In the twenties he bought raw materials from the Lincoln Clay Products Company in Placer County. He also used clay from Ione in Amador County and a small amount from near Santa Monica. Bentonite came from near Amboy in San Bernardino County.

As noted earlier, the tiles produced before 1920 were not glazed and thus had the understated look appropriate for craftsman architecture. With the coming of the Spanish Revival in the twenties and the accompanying change in taste Batchelder, probably influenced by Ivan Branham, began to use glazes and bright colors but never the gaudy surfaces that characterized the work of the contemporaneous Malibu and Catalina tile companies.

Of the last years probably the finest display of Batchelder's tiles is in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building (1925) on Seventh Street in downtown Los Angeles, but there are many competitors for this title. His largest commission was for the interior of the chapel at St. Catherine's College (1923) in St. Paul, Minnesota. Indeed, Batchelder's popularity extended far beyond Southern California. His fountains, fireplaces, bathrooms, swimming pools and other installations can be found in every part of the United States. One of his most imposing lobbies is in the Marine Building (1929-30) in Vancouver, British Columbia where the theme is properly nautical, though this easily slips into the Mayan Revival augmented by Art Deco elevator doors!

After his business failed in 1932 Batchelder applied himself to many civic duties in Pasadena. In 1938, as the Depression was ebbing, Batchelder, under the influence of a former employee, William Manker, turned to the making of beautiful slip-cast ware. Although successful at this totally different ceramic enterprise, Batchelder's greatest accomplishments were in tilemaking. He designed and produced vast amounts of tiles.

They are not rare in spite of the high prices that the loose ones command today. Their value lies in the fact that they brought beauty to so many American houses and institutions.

Ernest Batchelder's factory, employing at the height of its production almost 175 workers, closed its doors in 1932 and his artistry went unappreciated until 1971 when the antiquarian and preservationist, Elva Meline, having happened upon a cachet of tiles, published an article on Batchelder in *Spinning Wheel*. Her rediscovery of the tilemaker was, however, little noticed until the Arts and Crafts revival of the late seventies when admirers of the woodsy Craftsman style of the turn of the century realized how well Batchelder's brown tiles with muted colors and low-relief figures harmonized with the Craftsman esthetic.

Batchelder never developed a strong talent for business. Presumably that is why he took on Frederick L. Brown in 1912 and Lucian H. Wilson in 1920 as partners. Since Batchelder's factory records have never been found, we do not really know what their duties were, but they seem not to have had any part in the design process or in the actual production of the tiles.

Robert Winter goes into considerably greater detail in his Batchelder Tilemaker (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 1999).

NOTES

¹ Later Batchelder mentioned a "Mr. And Mrs. Ingels" as being "sympathetic" in their interpretation of the designs, suggesting that their involvement may have been more than casual.