

## Hogwarts in Cleveland: A Visit to the Carnegie West Branch's Rookwood Fireplace

by Richard Mohr

While visiting Cleveland in April 2012 to speak on art tiles to the American Art Pottery Association's annual convention, I toured four Cleveland-area Carnegie Libraries that house art tiled fireplaces. These decorative fireplaces are usually located in the children's reading room of each library and depict children's stories. Professor Mark Bassett of the Cleveland Institute of Art served as my guide on this tile adventure. Nothing had prepared us for what we would find at the Carnegie West Branch (1910). In the children's reading room, the fireplace surround contained eight six-inch tiles by Grueby Faience of Boston illustrating scenes from *Alice in Wonderland*. That was impressive enough, but in an administrative office, not open to the public, we discovered one of the most important Rookwood tile installations in the country. The Rookwood Pottery, one of the world's leading makers of artistic ceramics, produced vases from 1880 to 1967 and tiles from 1902 into the early 1930s.

The Carnegie West frieze or mural, which consists of twenty-one unusually large tiles — 11" by 10" — laid out in a seven-by-three array, was originally set above the firebox in the inglenook of the library's reference room. The Grueby *Alice* tiles are stock items — anyone could order them from a catalogue. But Carnegie West's Rookwood frieze is a one-of-a-kind installation and possibly, given its subject and theme, was designed specifically for this site — holding out an inspirational message from a reference room.

Its subject is England's famous Durham Cathedral, dating to 1080 and looming fortress-like high on a hill above the Wear River. In addition to being a religious institution, the cathedral is home to an important library that includes three copies of the Magna Carta and one of the most complete sets of early printed books in England. Further, the bishop of this cathedral, from its founding into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, held military as well as spiritual power. So in this cathedral, we have the symbolic intersection of knowledge, power, and value — an optimistic message for a reference room to present to the public: learn, become more capable, do good deeds with your new authoritative ideas. Such was the message of Andrew Carnegie himself.

What makes the installation so outstanding, beyond its uniqueness and theme, is its exquisite craft. It is entirely hand-made and very carefully executed, a *tour de force*

of layout and glazing. The overall outline of the design is drawn with what is called a slip-trail technique, in which black-tinted liquid clay is strategically trailed out of a hand-held bulb onto a damp blank tile. The flow from the bulb is controlled by means of a thumb hole. The trail of wet clay forms a slight ridge, which in addition to demarcating the design helps keep differently colored glaze zones from running together. The trailing in this case has been done in a sculptural way, keeping the image from reading like a cartoon. And the glazing here mixes several different colors within a single zone. This is difficult to do well because the glazes take on their true and vivid colors only upon firing; before that, they just look like different shades of pale mud. The blended glazing has a painterly result.

Unfortunately, by 1910 Rookwood had ceased having its tile artists sign their work, so we don't know who designed the mural. There is a slight chance that the architect provided the design, but in that case too, the mural would not carry an artist's mark. If we were to remove one of the tiles and turn it over, we would see that it bears, impressed on its backside, the stamp "Rookwood Faience." All Rookwood tiles are signed this way.

Though the Rookwood fireplace mural is not set in a children's reading room, children may still be interested to know that in the filming of the Harry Potter movies, Durham Cathedral was used as the site of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. So in a way, Hogwarts has come to Carnegie West via some pretty amazing clay and glaze magic in Cincinnati.

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Author note: Richard Mohr is professor emeritus of Philosophy and of the Classics at the University of Illinois. He is the author of an article "Rookwood Faience Tiles" that appeared across four issues of the *Journal of the American Art Pottery Association* in 2010 (vol. 26:1-4).

Caption: Rookwood tile expert Richard Mohr stands – thrilled – next to the Rookwood mural in Cleveland's Carnegie West Branch Library. Photo credit: Mark Bassett.