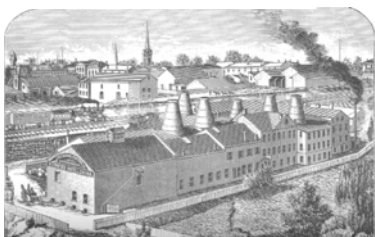


# TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the  
Potteries of Trenton Society



## *Out of the Closet: Vases United at Last*

*By Denise Petti*

*Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the 2010 Annual Report of the Ellarslie Muse and is reprinted here with permission.*

When Trenton Museum Society trustee Bob Cunningham, a collector and noted authority on American Belleek, received word late last year that a rare and long-lost monumental vase – the last of four – had suddenly turned up in an estate sale on the west coast, his interest in Trenton pottery quickly turned into hot pursuit.

Four highly decorated monumental vases standing four feet seven inches tall were created by The Trenton Potteries Company for the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis with the express purpose of showing off what America could do and to claim some bragging rights for Trenton's pottery industry in particular. Despite Ott & Brewer's sensational exhibit of its signature baseball vase, busts, and religious figures at the 1876 World's Fair in Philadelphia and despite the two-decade existence of a decidedly up-scale product line in American Belleek, the prevailing opinion remained stubbornly biased in favor of European porcelains. Though large vases created in Trenton sold at Tiffany's for as much as \$1,400 (about \$32,000 in today's dollars), American potteries were still considered inferior to their European predecessors. In fact,

until President Wilson brought Lenox to the White House, every presidential service had been manufactured in Europe.

Up until that time, Ott & Brewer, Willets and Lenox excepted, Trenton potteries were better known for their functional products – electrical fixtures, hotel china and toilets – than for their contribution to the world's decorative arts. Trenton Potteries Company specialized in bathroom fixtures, so by choosing to create these magnificent vases, they were able to match European quality and beauty and put the old prejudices to rest. It is estimated that in 1904, each vase cost approximately \$1,000 to produce, about \$30,000 in today's dollars. The creation of the vases demanded fine artistry from the design sketches to the molding of the porcelain to the painting of the landscapes to the gilding with gold paste. Each vase was carefully fired several times at precise temperatures, probably one firing for each color, with a final firing at a lower temperature so the gold wouldn't blister and burn.

Enlisting the talents of renowned French ceramic artist Anton Lucien Boullemier, who happened to be residing in the area and working at The Trenton Potteries Company, the vases have a distinctive

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*The Potteries of Trenton Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of Trenton's ceramic past. Officers: President – Patricia Madrigal; Treasurer – Jay Lewis; Secretary – Brenda Springsted. Board: Ellen Denker, Richard Hunter, Meta Janowitz, Jay Lewis, Emma Lewis, William Liebeknecht, George Miller, Brenda Springsted, Rebecca White. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal*

## Vases United at Last

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French design and Sevres style. Boullemier created the large “main” scenes that appear on the center of the vases: three had traditional courting scenes and one had a distinctively American scene depicting George Washington crossing the Delaware River. The “Trenton Vase” provided yet another way for Trenton to call attention to its indelible mark in history.

After these vases appeared at the World’s Fair, three returned to Trenton, but the location of the fourth was a mystery. The Trenton Potteries Company had given the Trenton vase to the New Jersey State Museum in 1956. The Crane Pottery Company, successor to The Trenton Potteries Company, gave one vase each to the Newark and Brooklyn Museums in 1969. The Brooklyn Museum loaned its vase to the Trenton City Museum on a long-term basis in 1997. The fourth was presumed destroyed or otherwise lost forever.

Until October 2009 when Bob Cunningham received an email from

Newark Museum curator Ulysses Dietz, who had received an email from a friend at Sotheby’s featuring a picture of what appeared to be the fourth vase up for auction at Bonhams and Butterfields in Los Angeles, California. The top was missing, and it had been misidentified as a “Monumental Continental Vase,” likely because of its similarity to Sevres vase design. The size and shape of the vase, however, were the first clues that this indeed was the missing “Woodland” vase.

Following urgent discussions among Trenton Museum Society board members about whether the society could purchase the vase and how much to bid (time was of the essence if the vase were to be brought home to Trenton), society president Carolyn Stetson, collections management committee chair Rich Willinger and past-chair Brenda Springsted joined Bob at his home while he represented the museum society as a phone bidder at the auction on November 8, 2009. The bidding began at \$4,000 and quickly rose to \$10,000 then quieted down to a volley between the Trenton Museum Society one one other bidder, with the Trenton Museum Society claiming the final bid at \$16,000 plus commission, a total of \$19,200.

The fourth vase, once lost and but now found, arrived at Ellarslie Mansion the day before Thanksgiving, 2009. Plans are already well under way to put the vase on display, have a copy of the lid made to replace the missing orig-

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*The Woodland Vase, manufactured by The Trenton Potteries Company for the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, now back at home in Trenton at the Trenton City Museum at Ellarslie. Pictured with the Collections Committee: Back row, Richard Willinger, Jean Bickel, Bob Cunningham, Karl Flesch, front row Carolyn Stetson, Brenda Springsted, and Brian Hill.*



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## *Vases United at Last*

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inal, and host an exhibit on Trenton decorators featuring the artistry of factory decorators of American Belleek. In January 2012, the Trenton City Museum will bring all four vases together in an exhibit for the first time in over one hundred years.

The Trenton Museum Society is currently searching for a sponsor and is accepting donations to help offset the expense of acquiring the piece at auction and putting it on display. Bob Cunningham, who is working on a book that will tell the story of the vases, hopes to obtain

more information from the auction house about how the former owner acquired the fourth vase, where it came from, and how it ended up on the west coast.

These vases are considered by some to be the best and most important porcelain pieces ever created in America. Their presence at the Trenton City Museum will surely give the museum significant national exposure over the years and put Ellarslie on the map as a major museum.

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## *Help Needed for the Trenton Museum Society's Research Project on Trenton Decorators*

The Trenton Museum Society (in conjunction with POTS) wants to learn more about the artists and decorators of Trenton pottery. So many are unknown and not named, but their hands have been on most every piece of the decorated wares sold locally and worldwide. We are starting a research project, first to reach out to the those decorators still living. We want to hear their stories. Secondly, we hope to connect with the descendants who may have pictures, plates and papers associated with the pottery companies, large and small.

We welcome any scrap of information, before the memories of the pottery works fade. If you know of someone who was a china decorator, engraver, modeler, gilder or is descended from a decorator, contact the Trenton Museum Society at 609-989-1191 or [TMS@ellarslie.org](mailto:TMS@ellarslie.org) or Brenda Springsted at [bspringsted@richardgrubb.com](mailto:bspringsted@richardgrubb.com). We would love to hear your stories.

## *POTS Membership*

Membership in the Potteries of Trenton Society is open to all interested in Trenton's pottery industry and the ceramic products manufactured here. We welcome pottery workers, historians, archaeologists and collectors. Your contribution is used to support newsletter, lecture, meeting, and conference costs.

Annual Membership \$25

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