

Cultural centre architect designed ceramic art museum

Ideas And The Arts

John Sommer

The architect Keith Wagland designed the Cultural Centre here in our town. He also designed one of my favorite places in Toronto, a severe little building filled with treasures: The George R. Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art.

Every time I go to the Gardiner Museum it's a bit like going home. On the first floor of the museum porcelain from Meissen is displayed, wonderful old pieces from the early years of this first and most famous of all porcelain factories. I grew up not far from Meissen and I remember visiting the factory as a child. I remember a large, lofty room, with its windows open to a fine old park. In this room, what appeared to be an army of porcelain painters, painted with astonishing dexterity flowers and animals and whole landscapes on the white plates and cups and vases before them. This was the beginning of my love affair with porcelain.

Porcelain was invented and produced in China possibly as early as the seventh century A.D. Small quantities made their way to Europe and the 15th and 16th centuries these rare objects were considered to be as precious as jewels. In the 17th century the Portuguese as well as the Dutch and English East India Companies imported

Chinese and Japanese porcelain by the boat load. Porcelain became the rage with the wealthy classes in Europe and a kind of competition was the result as to who would be the first to discover the secret of porcelain making.

Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony (1694 - 1733), a giant of a man who liked to entertain his court by bending horse shoes, employed two men, Walther von Tschirnhaus and Johann Friedrich Boettger at his residence city of Dresden for this purpose. In 1709, after many years of experimenting, the two men finally produced true porcelain and in 1710 the king announced the opening of the Royal Saxon Porcelain Factory in Dresden. Later that same year the factory was moved to Meissen where it has been to the present day.

For some years Meissen had a monopoly and the revenues from it made the court of Augustus the Strong one of the grandest in Europe. Soon the guarded secret passed into other hands, and the monarchs of France, Austria, Bavaria, Russia, Denmark and Prussia had eventually their own workshops of porcelain making, with many small private enterprises in between. All of these early factories are represented in the Gardiner Museum, and the English softpaste factories too.

The continental factories in Germany, France etc. produce hard-paste porcelain, or true porcelain (true to Chinese porcelain). English factories (for instance Doulton) produce softpaste porcelain.

However, the museum does not

cover the development of ceramics from pre-history to the present. It shows the particular interests of George and Helen Gardiner in certain periods of history such as pre-Columbian ceramics, as well as 15th and 16th century Italian maiolica and 17th century English delftware and lastly the 18th century porcelain. The Gardiners collected every piece themselves and eventually donated them to the people of Canada. I can think of nothing better to do for a family

during the summer holidays than to go to the Gardiner Museum.

There is a great bonus too. One admission opens the doors to the Gardiner Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum opposite (both museums are located at Queen's Park, south of Bloor Street). Until Sept. 4 the Royal Ontario Museum runs a fascinating exhibition titled "Let's Play Ball." This exhibition is a tribute to baseball, North America's favorite sport. Discover how balls and bats are made, learn

about baseball heroes like Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio, find out just what makes a curve ball curve!

And since you are in Toronto anyway, have you ever been to Harbourfront where a huge "Antique Mart" competes with film festivals, dance recitals, music and theatre performances, poetry readings and various boat tours around the harbour and the islands?

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