Finding Aid to the Decora Ceramics Records H2009.18

Finding aid prepared by Jonathan Gillett
Honnold/Mudd Library Special Collection and Archives
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May 2010
Title: Decora Ceramics Records
Collection number: H2009.18
Contributing Institution: Honnold/Mudd Library Special Collection and Archives
Claremont, CA 91711

Physical Description: 3 boxes (19 folders and 7 ceramic objects).
Date (bulk): Bulk, 1946-1953
Date (inclusive): 1946-2009

Language of Materials note: The materials are written in English.

Abstract: This collection contains catalogs, price lists, designs, photographs, and ceramic objects documenting the history of Decora Ceramics, and its predecessor, Ylyne Studio, makers of Smithware and Florencita, circa 1947-1953. The firms were founded and co-owned by Smith Russell (1895-1979), Pomona College class of 1917, and his son Bill.

Creator: Lewis, Lorelyn

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

Processing Information note
Processed by Jonathan Gillett for Archival Studies 311, Claremont Graduate University, Spring 2010. Revised and encoded by Michael Palmer, January 2011.

Conditions Governing Access note
The collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use note
For permission to publish or to reproduce, please contact Honnold/Mudd Library, Special Collections staff.

Preferred Citation note
[Identification of item], box #, folder/item #, Decora Ceramics records, Collection H2009.18, Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University Consortium.

Historical Note
Smith Russell (1895-1979) was born in Lincoln, Illinois, the son of a faculty member at Lincoln University. In 1904, the family settled in Claremont, where Smith's father, William Polk Russell, had taken a position as instructor in mathematics at Pomona College. Smith graduated from Pomona College in 1917. He began his career in ceramics in 1946 by purchasing Ylyne Studio in Los Angeles, whose assets at that time consisted of a single employee, a small electric kiln, a small mixer for making slip, a paint booth, glazes and some molds. Smith began developing proprietary glazes and designed new articles which were painted, glazed and fired essentially one item at a time.

In May 1947, Smith's youngest son, Wilfred "Bill" Russell, purchased Palm Garden Pottery located in Inglewood for its manufacturing facilities. Smith and Bill became partners, and Ylyne moved to the Inglewood location, where the additional kilns and other equipment were put to use. The business expanded, with Smith creating new original products and glazes and supervising production of pastor molds in house from his designs. The products were identified with the trade name "Florencita", after Smith's wife, Florence Mildred (Dodge) Russell (1895-1998), also Pomona College class of 1917.

In May 1949, the partners incorporated under the name Decora Ceramics. The company created decorative household ceramic items such as ashtrays and wall plaques. Decora Ceramics enjoyed popularity nationwide, but by mid-1952 Japanese copies of their products, identical in design, precisely copied, and priced well below Decora's production costs, began to flood the market. Decora's profits plummeted and the partners reluctantly concluded that the company would not be able to remain competitive in the business. Not wishing to endure liquidation, the owners sold surplus production equipment to others in the industry not yet impacted by the Japanese pottery manufacturer's production, other assets were sold at auction, the property was leased, and Decora Ceramics closed in the summer of 1953.


Scope and Contents note
This collection contains catalogs, price lists, designs, photographs, and ceramic objects documenting the history of Decora Ceramics, and its predecessor, Ylyne Studio, makers of Smithware and Florencita, circa 1947-1953. The designs are watercolors of some of the earliest products in the Smithware and Florencita lines. Other materials include posed and candid photographs of the owners and employees of Decora Ceramics, extensive photographs of Decora Ceramics' products, and the pocket book of co-owner Smith Russell indicating the cash amount paid to employees for each item manufactured. The ceramic items consist of three plates, a jelly plate, two butter melters, and a jar for bobby pins.
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Arrangement note
The collection is organized in two series:
Series 1: Decora Ceramics Records
Series 2: Decora Ceramics Products

Related Archival Materials note
Smith and Florence Russell Family Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University Consortium.

Separated Materials note

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Decora Ceramics.
Russell, Florence, 1895-1998
Russell, Smith Lafayette, 1895-1979
Russell, Wilfred "Bill", 1924-
Pottery, American--California--20th century

Box 1

Series 1: Decora Ceramics Records. Circa 1947-1953
Physical Description: 19 folders.

Scope and Contents note
This series contains catalogs, price lists, designs, photographs, which constitute the documentary records of Decora Ceramics, and its predecessor, Ylyne Studio, makers of Smithware and Florencita, circa 1947-1953. The designs are watercolors of some of the earliest products in the Smithware and Florencita lines. Other materials include a history of the company, 1946-1953, by co-owner Bill Russell; posed and candid photographs of the owners and employees of Decora Ceramics; extensive photographs of Decora Ceramics' products; and the pocket book of Bill's father and co-owner, Smith Russell, indicating the cash amount paid to employees for each item manufactured.

Box 1, Folder 1
Physical Description: 1 folder.

Box 1, Folder 2-9
Physical Description: 8 folders.

General Physical Description note: Handpainted water color designs on paper.

Box 1, Folder 2
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
"Balinese Girl" (product #1221); "Pink Petunia" (#1222); "Flower Boy" (#1223); "Radishes" (#1224); "Pixie Boy" (#1225); "Night Glory Flower" (#1226); "Fruit" (#1227); "Russian Dancers" (#1228); "Persian" (#1229); "Autumn Swirl" (#1230); "Blue Leaf" (#1231); "Catalina Island" (not numbered).

Box 1, Folder 3
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
"Anthurium" (product #1311); "Gold Star" (#1312); "Fawn" (#1313); "Hibiscus & Butterfly" (#1314); "Pepper Branch" (#1315); "Wild Rose" (#1316).
Box 1, Folder 4  
**Seashell Bowls (Product #1317-1328). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Flower, fruit, peasant, and fawn motifs. Product #1317-1326, 1328.

Box 1, Folder 5  
**Florencita Desert Dishes (Product #1502-1509, 1654). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Cherry, flower and grape motifs. Product #1502-1509, 1654.

Box 1, Folder 6  
**Coal Oil Lamps (Product #2114-2123). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Cherry, flower and grape motifs. Product #2114-2123.

Box 1, Folder 7  
**Hurricane Lamps (Product #2211-2214) / Lanterns (Product #2301-2305). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Hurricane lamps: flower or fruit motifs (product #2211-2214). Lanterns: flower, pirate or train motifs (product #2301-2302, 2304-2305; "Catalina Island" model features a pirate motif and no product number).

Box 1, Folder 8  
**Smithware Bud Vase, Candlestick Holders, and Salt & Pepper Shakers (Product #6101, 6151, 6251). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Candlestick holders (product #6101); bud vase (#6151); salt & pepper shakers (#6251).

Box 1, Folder 9  
**Smithware Ashtrays (Product #6301-6304). Circa 1947.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.

Box 1, Folder 10-16  
**Photographs. Circa 1950-1953.**
Physical Description: 7 folders.

Box 1, Folder 10  
**Biltmore Trade Show. 1953.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.

Box 1, Folder 11  
**Building and Facilities. Circa 1950.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Scope and Contents note
Features photographs of the slip room, the kiln, the store front, the finishing department, and the casting department. Descriptions are written on the reverse of the photographs.

Box 1, Folder 12  
**Negatives. Circa 1950-1953.**
Physical Description: 1 folder.
Contents:
Black and white negatives of photographs found in folders 11 (Building and Facilities) and 13 (Owners and Employees).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 13</th>
<th>Owners and Employees. 1950-1952.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contents:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual and group photographs of Decora Ceramics owners and employees, 1950-1952. Includes pictures of Smith Russell, Florence Dodge Russell, John Richardson, Bill Ben, Bill and Virginia Russell, Cora Peters, Mary Long, and Eleanor Lorenze. Also features images of the store front, ceramics casting, painting, glazing, mold making, kiln firing, the decorating department, the shipping department, the finishing department. Most photographs have hand written descriptions on the reverse, and most are dated 1952.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 14</th>
<th>Product Photographs. Circa 1950.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Description: 3 folders.</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 15</th>
<th>Photographs with Product Numbers. Circa 1950.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scope and Contents note</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wall plates/plaques, stove savers, decorative wall hanging human faces, ash trays and dishes. Designs feature square dancers, peasants, flowers, fruit, roosters, domestic scenes of a woman ironing, washing dishes, cooking, sweeping, vacuuming, flower picking, grocery shopping and baking, flasks featuring temperance slogans, Victorian scenes of proposal, marriage, and a man tightening a woman's corsette, ash and nut trays with anthropomorphic nuts and cigarette butts, a bank in the shape of a vacation suit case, a razor blade sharpener in the shape of a grinding stone, and individual containers labeled &quot;Buttons&quot;, &quot;Needles 'n Pins&quot;, &quot;Look in Here&quot;, &quot;Safety Pins&quot;, &quot;Odds 'n Ends&quot;, &quot;Bobby Pins&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 16</th>
<th>Photographs without Product Numbers. Circa 1950.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scope and Contents note</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional photographs of many of the items pictured in the preceding folder. Additional items include covered ashtrays and cigarette storage boxes, wall hanging plates featuring a cowboy lassoing and on a bucking horse, and a Chinese woman and man holding chopsticks and a fan.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 17</th>
<th>Color Slides / B &amp; W Negative. Circa 1950.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 18</th>
<th>Price Lists and Catalogs. 1946-1953.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 2 folders.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 19</th>
<th>Price Lists. 1946-1947.</th>
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<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 20</th>
<th>Catalogs. 1950-1953.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scope and Contents note</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Includes Bill Russell's personal 1952 Decora Ceramics Catalog with price lists hand written and typed out.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 19</th>
<th>Smith Russell's Pocket Book. Circa 1950.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description: 1 folder.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Description:</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Contains notes on prices to pay employees per item.</td>
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</table>
Box 2, Box 3 Series 2: Decora Ceramics Products. Circa 1950.

Physical Description: 7 items.

Scope and Contents note
This series consists of seven ceramic items--three plates, a jelly plate, two butter melters, and a jar for bobby pins--produced by Decora Ceramics circa 1950.

Box 2, Item 1 Circular plate with an apple, grapes and plums design (Product #1380). Circa 1950.
General Physical Description note: 6 inches in diameter.

Box 2, Item 2 Scalloped plate with a blonde girl in floral dress design. Circa 1950.
General Physical Description note: 8.5 inches in diameter.

Box 2, Item 3 Scalloped plate with a floral design (Product #1240). Circa 1950.
General Physical Description note: 6.5 inches in diameter.

Box 3, Item 1a-b Bobby Pins Jar with a brunette girl with green bow portrait. Circa 1950.
General Physical Description note: 2 pieces.

Box 3, Item 2 Butter Melter with a Rooster design. Circa 1950.
Box 3, Item 3 Butter Melter (plain). Circa 1950.
Box 3, Item 4 Jelly plate with a purple and red jelly jar caricatures, circa 1950. Circa 1950.
General Physical Description note: 6 inches in diameter.