

AXEL EBRING 1869-1954

Production Dates: mid-1920s to 1954

Types of Work: Functional earthenware

Preferred Kiln Type and Firing Process: Woodfired

Preferred Clay: BC native clay near workshop in both Notch Hill and Vernon

Signature/Mark/Chop: Much of Ebring's signature style shows the "where" rather than "who." His mark, often incised into the base, is about where he made the pot. Notch Hill work is dated 1925-1935. Vernon works are dated from approximately 1935 to pre-1954

Biography adapted from Studio Ceramics Canada

Axel Ebring was born in Kalmar, Sweden, in 1874. At the age of 12, he immigrated to Canada. He worked as a labourer for many years before pursuing pottery as profession, Axel Ebring was an individual who typifies the development of the Canadian west: he brought his European-learned pottery skills, but firstly tried various lifestyles in farming and mining. He finally established a pottery studio and business, dug out his clay materials, produced his ware, and developed his markets.

Ebring, like Peter Rupchan, but unlike Emily Carr was a true western pioneer potter. Like many in these early years he was an immigrant, from pottery roots in Uppsala Sweden. His father and grandfather were potters. Via a circuitous route through the United States, the prairies, and the Yukon he set himself up in the BC interior. At first, he tried his hand at working on the railroad, mining, and prospecting, and then farming in Terrace, BC.

He started producing pots in Terrace BC and then moved to Notch Hill, BC, in the mid-to late-1920s. The discovery of clay nearby inspired him to continue his pottery and to construct a kick wheel and brick kiln. By 1939 he had moved to Vernon to set up his studio in an old brick yard. It was when he moved to Notch Hill that we know he began to seriously, professionally create pots. There was a steady market for his wares, and he was able to work for about ten years.

After about ten years his clay deposit possibly played out but fortunately a Vernon rancher, Morris Middleton, brought him some workable clay. There is also the

possibility that it was Mrs. Middleton and other Vernon women who were interested in Ebring's move to Vernon. On the ranch was an old brickyard where Ebring purchased two acres and set himself up anew in 1937. With clay accessible behind his workshop, with a supply of wood conveniently available – opposite on the road from a lumber mill – and an established market, Ebring was back in full operation. The local clay was a glacial earthenware grey-green gumbo that other potters found hard to work with, requiring a lot of grog. He was to stay in Vernon until his death in 1954. His glazes, however, were purchased commercially. He always used kick wheel, wood-fired his kiln, and only used his eye to gauge the temperature of the kiln and the progress of the firing.

His work is mostly functional, wood-fired earthenware. His preferred wares were bowls, vases, and jugs. Buyers especially appreciated his glazes, especially his blue glazes. In his later years arthritis forced to him to work more on producing figurines.

His work was widely appreciated, purchased, and collected, from Vancouver to Calgary. Like many of the potters of this period his works are hard to date. Most museum collections simply list a 1939–1954 time frame, his most productive period in Vernon, although this might also include works from his Notch Hill phase.

What Others Have Said About Ebring

Ron Candy, Director, Vernon Museum and Archives, quotes from an extensive June 19th, 1947 article in the Vernon News about Ebring and his work. The article is interesting in the amount of technical detail the reporter mentions, including aspects of his technique and equipment.

"...In the small hill at the back of his plant is the clay...There are at least seven different types (clay), all excellent quality for their various purposes. Dug from the veins, it is put to soak in tubs of water until about the consistency of cream then put through a sieve with 80 mesh to the inch. After three or four months of standing to cure in a vat, the clay is ready for use. Mr. Ebring pulled a handful of clay out of the vat, took it into the workshop, kneaded it on the bench to work out air bubbles and lumps then plopped it on the wheel. 'You have to work with hands, feet and head, explained Ebring. With his foot he revolved a large disc connected by an axle to the wheel rotating above the work bench. With his hands held about the blob of clay he brought it into cylindrical shape. With his head he directed responsive fingers to the proper point and pressure which hollowed out the cylinder and made the sides rise in the beautiful curves of his mental plan. The shaped vase was complete in about 15 minutes. It was then set off to dry. It could be set in the sun the next day and dried in about 24 hours, but Mr. Ebring is not in a hurry. His workshop is lined with forms drying slowly as they await the kiln.

The kiln, as all other tools of his trade, he built himself. When he has sufficient articles to fill the kiln – a brick oven of about four feet square and high – he is ready to give them the first fire. Then, for about two days, Mr. Ebring must go without sleep. The fire must be built up very gradually, to an eventual temperature of about 2,200 or 2,300 degrees. 'I have no thermometer. They use them in factories, but the best thermometer is an old man with enough experience.' This experience includes controlling the fire even to the point of allowing for the variable drafts caused by the breeze blowing at the time. All the work is wasted if the gradual building up and dying down of the fire is not delicately graduated.

There are several processes of colouring, too complicated to explain to a newspaper reporter. Mr. Ebring made it clear that he did not go out and get colours from leaves and roots. He buys mineral oxides from commercial producers. Mixing them to get the exquisite colours in his pottery is a secret only because it is a combined art of sensitivity and long experience.

...Colours may be put on before the first firing, before the glazing, or even with the glaze, by processes already mentioned as too complicated to describe. The glaze goes on as the objects are dipped in a sand-coloured liquid coating containing quartz, flint, and feldspar, which dries on the object. Under the next firing, the minerals melt and form the transparent glass surface, revealing the delicate hues which until then had been drab blobs of dull colours."

Article from Vernon Museum

A MASSIVE KILN AND AN EVEN BIGGER LEGACY

As a Vancouver Sun article relates, Axel Ebring's kiln was about 20-feet square and 8-foot high, with walls that were two-feet thick. After forming his creations, Axel would decorate them with naturally-produced dyes made from roots and berries.

Axel would take to break down chunks of scavenged quartz to form a glaze. Once decorated and glazed, the pieces were placed in large, heat-resistant crocks called "saggars," which were then stacked on top of each other in the kiln. The pieces were fired twice for sixty hours, with a cooling period in between, and then were ready for sale.

Axel remained in Vernon until 1954, when he passed away. His legacy was marked in the naming of Pottery Road, near where his kiln and shop were located. Many of creations are preserved in both the Vernon Museum and the R.J. Haney Heritage Village & Museum, as well as in private collections.