

Chapter Five

With a highway now running through the Malibu Rancho a large labor force from Santa Monica became accessible as did the transportation to and from rail and shipping centers in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, and San Pedro.

Frederick H. Rindge had always wanted Malibu to reflect the Mediterranean architecture and flavor absorbed from his European travels. The abundance of good quality buff and red clays and the plentiful water supply, coupled with a strong demand for decorative ceramic tile needed for the Mediterranean and Spanish style homes being built in that day, contributed to the establishment of Malibu Potteries by Mrs. Rindge in 1926.

The 44,000 square foot plant was constructed along 1500 feet of beach front, 1/2 mile east of Malibu Pier and had a production capacity of 30,000 square feet of finished tile per month. Three large kilns 18 feet in diameter were fired by oil trucked in on the newly opened highway. The finished products were sent to the warehouse and display room at 119 N. Larchmont Boulevard in Los Angeles via the same highway. In 1927 the Potteries employed approximately 125 people. They were architects, chemists, ceramicists, engineers, designers, illustrators, grazers, draftsmen, artists, salesmen, and administrators. Rufus B. Keeler, the plant manager, was an expert ceramicist who formulated the secret glazes which are renowned for their color and clarity. He resided in South Gate but lived in an army tent adjacent to the pottery during the week. He is remembered as a caring manager who was concerned with the health and welfare of his employees. Swimming during lunch hour was promoted.

William E. Handley designed the cuerda seca Persian tile rugs in the loggia of Merritt and Rhoda (Rindge) Adamson's beach house (now the Mal' bu Lagoon Museum). Inez Johnson von Hake, a designer and illustrator, designed a larger cuerda seca Persian tile carpet for May K. Rindge's Mediterranean castle-like home she was building in Malibu Canyon on the site of today's Serra Retreat. She also designed a tile-top table for the entry hall of the Adamson's beach house. Margaret Curtis, also a designer and illustrator, designed the medallion-type disc for the south wall of the east patio of the Adamson home.

The tile produced at Malibu Potteries was not destined solely for the Rindge's private homes. J. Donald Prouty designed 23 large "neoclassical modern" tile panels in 1928 which still can be seen today in the Los Angeles City Hall. Kingsley Sopp was a salesman who called on architects, while carrying a 35-pound suitcase of samples, to acquaint them with Malibu tiles. He researched historical archives to assist in designing the two 6 foot by 8 foot tile murals (depicting William Henry Dana's ship, The Pilgrim, in San Pedro Bay in 1834) which were installed at the Dana junior High School in San Pedro in 1928. Simon Rodia, another employee at Malibu Potteries, reportedly often rode home in his car pool with pockets bulging with tile fragments. Later he was to become famous as the builder of the Rodia Towers (commonly called Watts Towers). So it is not surprising that Malibu Potteries tile found their way into this California landmark too.

The talented artists and craftsmen of Malibu Potteries produced an amazing variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and designs. Products in their catalog included wall tiles, floor tiles, fountains,

vents, step treads, tables, fireplaces, murals and decorative panels, furniture, swimming pool tile, and many other items.

Malibu Potteries, -though only in existence for six years, distributed tile world-wide. A mural was shipped to a bank in Shanghai, but most of the tile with its Saracen, Moorish, and Spanish designs was destined for Los Angeles homes and buildings constructed in the late 1920s.

The most comprehensive collection remaining today is at the Adamson home. There one can see the many-layered terra cotta tile roofs, richly decorated exterior and interior walls, floors, and ceilings. Elegant fountains, faience jardinières, and beautiful and rare tiled-top tables grace the gardens.

A fire which started in the clay preparation room destroyed a large area of the Potteries in 1931. Temporary repairs were made so present orders could be filled. Reportedly, Mrs. Rindge planned to rebuild. The world-wide depression, however, with an accompanying building slump greatly reduced the demand for ornamental tile. In 1932 the pottery closed never to operate again.

Malibu Potteries, under the guiding hand of Mrs. Rindge, left us with a marvelous legacy of beauty and an inspiration for present-day ceramicists. The tile-wherever it is found today with its brilliance, clarity, and lasting grace-is a testimony to the unique secret glazes, to the craftsmanship of the grazers, and to the artistic genius and versatility of the designers who worked in their idyllic factory beside the sea.

TECHNICALITIES FOR MAKING MALIBU TILE

The materials and methods used were almost the same as those used in Medieval and Renaissance times. Raw clays from the local hills were ground to flour-like texture and mixed with water to form a plastic consistency. This it was aged for six weeks.

Most of the tile was molded in plaster, molds or by hand. These lay products were dried slowly "in areas of controlled humidity to prevent warping or cracking. After five days, dry are was placed In "saggers" (a box with an open top made from fire clay and previously burned. These were placed in a kiln and heated gradually over, four days to 2300 degrees F. They ere the. cooled for two days producing a bisque or biscuit product to which glazes were applied.

Mr. Keeler's glazes were applied by three basic techniques. The cuerda seca, (dry line) technique involved tracing the outline of the design. with a manganese and oil mixture. During firing the oil burned leaving a charred black line which kept the glazes from running together.

The uenca (little valley) technique was started while the clay was d.@,p and surfaces could be sculpted or impressed so that ridges formed and provided barriers between the glaze colors.

Underglazing, the third method, was produced by stenciling designs on flat surfaces, spaces created by design were filled in with glaze and an overall glaze applied. The glazed ware was returned to the kiln. for the second, or "glost" firing. Loaded o. trays it was stacked in the kiln and fired with carefully controlled temperatures for about 42 hours. After reaching 1750-1900'F

the temperature was held constant for two hours. The fire was shut off and the kiln cooled for two days. The beautiful finished product emerged.