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Above Left: Howard Pierce made pewter pins in the 1930s and '40s. Photo by Matt Hinrichs. **Above Middle:** This is a Howard Pierce plaque from the collection of Steven and Sue Sipes. Photo by Christopher McPherson. **Above Right:** This wall mural shows the San Francisco skyline. It measures 26 by 52 inches. Photo by Jerry Pierce.

Howard Pierce pottery has a modern feeling

BY CHRISTOPHER GEOFFREY MCPHERSON

Howard Pierce grew up in Chicago. He and his brother slept on a sun porch and in the winter, he would wake up with snow on his face. He decided to head to a warmer climate. In 1934, the 22-year-old Pierce boarded a train for Pasadena, Calif., where he would stay with his aunt while he attended college.

Pierce became interested in making ceramics shortly after arriving in California. In 1938, he created a miniature ceramic deer figurine which he sold to William Manker, who had a one-man pottery company, William Manker Ceramics. Manker hired Pierce to help out a couple of days a week. Pierce stayed with Manker for the next three years, learning the business.

In 1941, Pierce began casting pewter lapel pins. When the war started, Pierce worked at the Douglas Aircraft Company in Long Beach. Making his lapel pins on weekends, he sold them to his co-workers at the plant. He married his wife Ellen in 1941. Shortly thereafter, the pair settled in Claremont, Calif., in a house that Pierce built himself. The pair began an adventure making porcelains that would last the rest of their lives.

Aside from making his signature animal figures, one of his early lines was a series of vases with openings in the middle. In these openings he would place bisque animals like deer, a giraffe, a horse or a flamingo. He also created Jasperware vases that looked like Wedgwood, but required fewer steps to make. Neither of these lines lasted long as they were labor intensive and did not sell well.

From this point, it is difficult to know just when certain pieces were made, as it appears Pierce kept no records of which designs began production or how many of each piece were produced. For some pieces, an approximate

date can be established because Pierce was represented by the N.S. Gustin Company between 1950 and 1966. It was during this time that some of the most readily found Pierce pieces were made available to the public through his studio or through retail outlets such as Macy's, Neiman Marcus, Marshall Field's, Bullocks and, even closer to home, at the Ruggles China and Gifts shop in Disneyland.

These include a set of three geese, a set of a parent quail and two offspring, a seated monkey and an exotic-looking tall-cat figure. Also produced during this time were less-often found items such as a pair of ermine, a Hawaiian couple, and a monkey totem featuring three monkeys sitting atop one another. Other pieces available to retailers through the H.S. Gustin company were a decoy-duck figure, a pair of seals, a polar bear (odd, because it is brown rather than the usual white), and a frolicking pair of raccoons.

The family moved to Joshua Tree, Calif., in 1968, building a house and studio on a 20-acre spread that provided great views of the surrounding desert.



Left: Howard Pierce Sandra bust, photo by Matt Hinrichs



Above: This is the house trim at the home of Howard Pierce in Joshua Tree, Calif. photo by Christopher McPherson.

In Joshua Tree, Pierce continued making his figurines, and dotting the area around the house with large animal sculptures. He also extended his design work to create custom-made tiles attached to the soffit of his house and studio echoing many of the shapes and plants of the desert.

Although Pierce usually worked alone, he often recruited his wife, Ellen, and his three children – Jerry, Linda and Janet – to help out when he needed them.

"I worked most summers in the studio," Jerry remembers. "(My father) needed labor to pour slip and make the production work. He claimed I was the messiest and fastest person to work with him. We would work together for making slip and modeling clay – it was easier with two people. While we all played a role, it was really a one person operation."

While it is true that Pierce did all the designing and most of the creating himself, there is one notable exception.

"I modeled the little wood duck in the same style as his animals, including the distinctive eye he usually used," says his daughter Linda, the only other person who designed a figurine that was included along with pieces Pierce produced. "It was a wonderful experience to spend those weeks working with my father and learning the trade. It was very interesting for me to know exactly what went into the creation of each piece, from the idea stage to the finished product."

Over the years, Pierce often reworked his designs. For example, he created no fewer than five different versions of rabbits, four different groups of mice, four different pelicans, and innumerable variations of birds, frogs and human figures. Clearly, Pierce was not satisfied with producing a good-looking rabbit figurine and sticking with that one for decades.

During the 1980s, Pierce began making small, flat figures with magnets attached to the back. He explored new animal shapes with these figurines and, in the process, opened up a whole new avenue for sales and collectors. Also during that time, Pierce was making pieces with gold-leaf finishes. These are pieces with a red coat painted on the figurine that was then covered with gold leaf. It seems that such pieces were purchased by a Japanese company and provided to retail outlets (such as Sears) for sale. Many of these gold-covered figures do not possess a back stamp, so they can be hard to identify.

As he got older, Pierce began slowing down production. His business came to an abrupt halt in 1991 when he had a mild stroke. Deciding at that time to cease production of his figurines, he sold his large kiln and destroyed many (if not all) of his original molds. But his health concerns did not keep him down for long, and he purchased a small kiln in 1993, allowing him to go into production once again.

This time, he concentrated mostly on small figures (owing, in large part,

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Pierce

FROM FRONT PAGE

to the reduced amount of space in the new kiln). It is here when Pierce created what many consider to be his best works, including an iconic rabbit figure, a turkey, a turtle and much-sought after buffalo. This work continued through 1993 and into the early months of 1994.

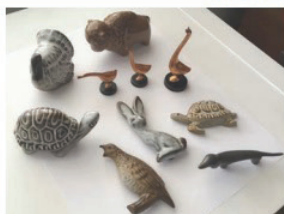
Pierce died in February 1994.

One of the first things a collector will notice is the quality and workmanship of his pieces. His figures are simple shapes, often animals, occasionally pots, ashtrays and vases. Very modern, usually few details, just a collection of general curves and lines that ultimately capture the very essence of his animals. His glazes are just as simple, with two-toned pieces of satin white over brown glaze being the most common.

The next thing collectors will notice is how modern most of his pieces appear. They maintain a timeless quality that makes them look like they just came out of a catalog of modern designs, despite having been made as early as the 1940s. He made some dinnerware pieces that look very modern, too. These were made in small quantities and none were mass produced. Included are creamers, sugars, and bowls of various sizes.

While it can be easy to find Pierce's common pieces and start a collection; finding many of his short production run pieces can be difficult.

The hardest to find in any quantity are the earlier pieces he did (the vases with openings in the middle, and the Jasperware vases) because he did so few of those. Also difficult are the last pieces he did in 1993 and 1994 – because he had just recovered



Above: These items are considered rarities in the Howard Pierce line. photo by Matt Hinrichs.

from a stroke and his output was diminished. Pins and metal items, made in the late 1930s and early 1940s, remain hard to find, but are usually affordable once they are found.

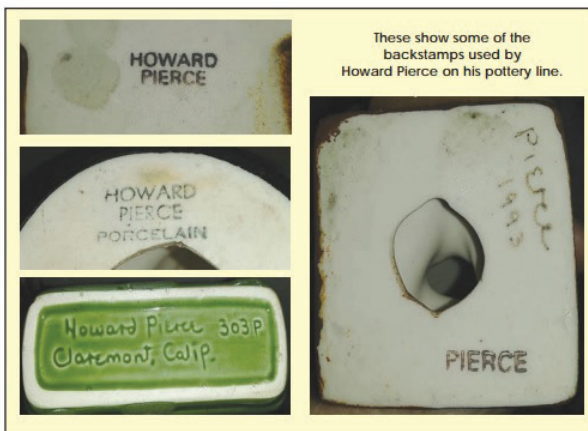
The wide range of designs Pierce created in his nearly 60-year career can make it difficult to identify a favorite piece.

Despite the continuing popularity of his work, Pierce does not make too many appearances in collecting books. In 1998, Collector Books published *Collector's Encyclopedia of Howard Pierce Porcelain*, by Darlene Hurst Dommel which remains the go-to book today for collectors. The following year, saw the publication of *Collector's Encyclopedia of California Pottery* that included a brief entry on Pierce.

It's never really too late to begin a new collection of Howard Pierce porcelains. There are many to be found online, in antique stores and the occasional thrift-store find. Also, pieces continue to turn up all around the country that had originally been gifts purchased at retail shops, or taken home as souvenirs purchased directly from Pierce at his California studio.



Above: Howard Pierce made a variety of animals including this polar bear. Photo by Janet Self.



These show some of the backstamps used by Howard Pierce on his pottery line.



Above: Rare Howard Pierce seagull plaque. Photo by Matt Hinrichs.



Above: Howard Pierce made a variety of magnets, like this grouping from the collection of Steven and Sue Sipes. Photo by Christopher McPherson.



Above: Rare fundraiser piece by Howard Pierce for Copper Mountain Campus in Joshua Tree. Photo by Kate Osteen.

Below: Measuring 26 by 25 inches this deer plaque was made by Howard Pierce. Photo by Janet Self.



Exploring the wonderful world of Pierce

I discovered the works of Howard Pierce in the mid-1990s when noticing the really cool animal shapes he did as I wandered antique stores with my then boyfriend (now husband). I turned over these pieces and sometimes saw his back stamp. One memorable such occasion, I spotted a beautiful green vase with a bisque deer inset feature that I really admired. It was priced at \$75. I said to my boyfriend, and I quote, "Who is this Howard Pierce guy and why is anything of his worth \$75?" Right about that time, Collector Books published the *Collector's Encyclopedia of Howard Pierce Porcelain*, by Darlene Hurst Dommel and I had my answer.

I started collecting Pierce in the earliest days of the internet, before everyone set out to find things to sell online. At this time, I found many common items — including several of the rare pewter pins for \$10 each. Of course, I snagged them.

In 2000, my husband and I traveled to Joshua Tree, Calif., to visit the Hi Desert Nature Museum because we had heard they had a display of Pierce items. After we saw the small display, we asked the workers if they knew anyone who was a Pierce expert. They gave us the telephone number for Steve and Sue Sipes of Yucca Valley.



INSIGHTS

BY CHRISTOPHER GEOFFREY MCPHERSON

Right: Howard Pierce posing with Gertrude the Ram. Photo courtesy of Jerry Pierce.

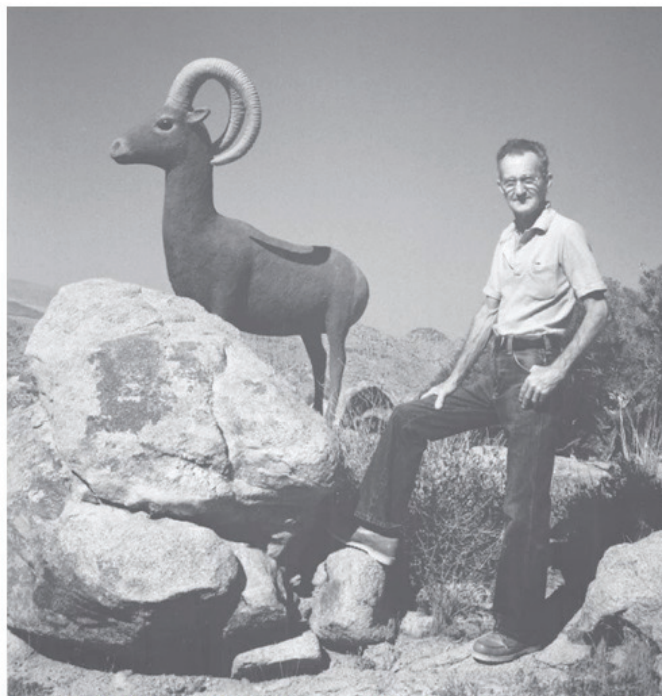
We called the Sipes and they invited us to their house where we were amazed to see a giant collection of many things Pierce. We threw out our travel plans for the rest of the day and instead spent it with Sue and Steve as they regaled us with their many tales of looking for and finding Pierce items.

On that same trip, we drove to Joshua Tree to see the house that Pierce had built. We rang the doorbell and told the new owner why we were there. He allowed us to walk the grounds and take pictures of the home and studio, as well as many of the animal statues that Pierce had created to dot the landscape. It was quite the experience to walk where the artist had walked and touch actual pieces his hand had created.

I have always loved animals of all kinds — real and represented in paintings, illustrations and ceramics. I have a small collection of ceramic animals created by other artists or companies, but there is something unique and special about Pierce's works. I have also long been a fan of mid-century modern design, and I think those two loves of mine coalesce beautifully in Pierce's animals and other ceramic works. I, like so many others, am drawn to the simple shapes, glazes that are not fussy, and the spirit behind the artist and his love of nature.

My collection is broken down into several parts: I have quite a few of the early pewter pins he created in the late 1930s, a set of metal three-dimensional geese (which is hard to find) and his three dimensional dachshund dog — also hard to find. I have a few of his later magnets, and some of the figurines he did in the

Left: Sales brochures such as this one provide a glimpse into various products produced by Howard Pierce.



last year of his life, identifiable by the unique *Pierce* back stamp. My collection also consists of several animals with a beautiful blue glaze created with the use of cobalt. Pierce did not make many of these because the cost of cobalt was prohibitive.

Like with other collectors, I have a hard time settling on a single piece of his that I love the most. The top three would probably include the Sandra bust, which I have in a gorgeous mottled blue glaze; a later "Pierce" buffalo, which is the newest piece in my collection; and a partially complete set of sea gulls which

includes one of the largest pieces Pierce made: A seagull with a wing span of 17-inches. This is probably the rarest set I have, and I am on the lookout for the single gull that is missing.

Along the way, I started a Facebook collector's page in 2007. We don't have a huge number of members, but we have more than 150 people who are interested in this man's beautiful works.

You are welcome to join us on my Howard Pierce page on Facebook. You can find us by searching "Howard Pierce Ceramics" from your personal Facebook page.