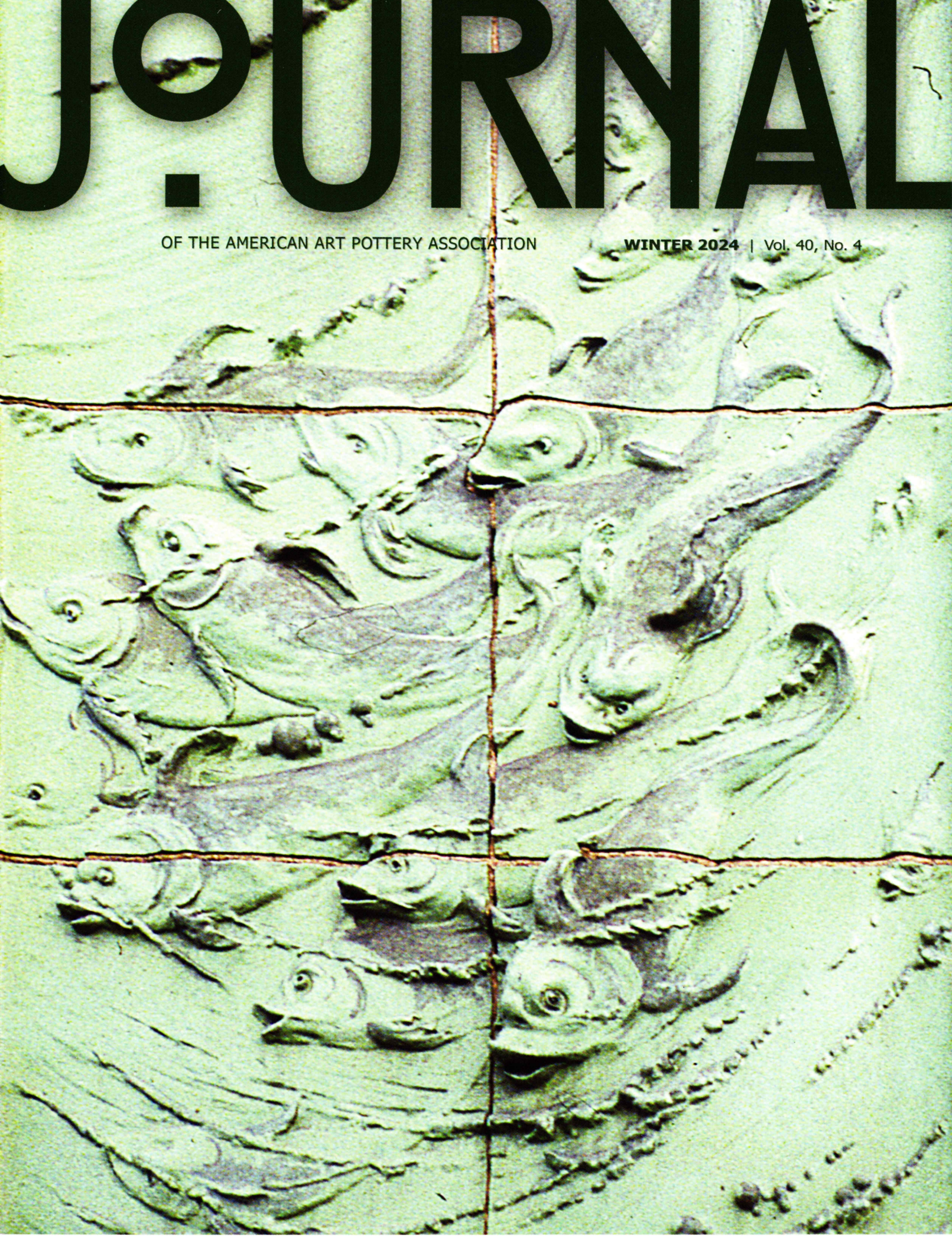


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# S.O.S.: Teco Murals at the University of Illinois Endangered

by Richard D. Mohr

On New Year's Eve 2023, an investigative report by the Champaign-Urbana *News-Gazette* revealed that the University of Illinois, across the next decade, but starting soon, is going to demolish a whole series of buildings on campus and that the first to go “on the chopping block” — to borrow the report's headline — is the Vivarium Building (1915-16) (illus. 1), which is flanked on its east and west façades at the second-story level by two magnificent, near-identical Teco murals depicting roiling carp overtopped by a rolling wave, all glazed in sumptuous ‘Teco green’ (issue cover, west façade; illus. 2, east façade). The murals are set just below the building's gabled roof lines and just above glass conservatory annexes at each end that reprise the shape of the building's brick core. This positioning places the murals out of harm's way and has allowed them to survive one hundred and ten years in pristine condition. In 1916, the two fish-and-wave panels collectively cost the University three-hundred dollars, out of a total building cost of eighty-two thousand dollars — a third of a percent for art.

The murals' design is dramatic, tense, fraught. The fish are disgorged from the pit of the wave, like a tumble of bounty from a cornucopia, even as they are overtaken and consumed by the wave — a cyclical whelm of energy. The 80” by 40” murals are among the most impressive ceramic surfaces in America.

You can help to preserve these murals simply by writing a two or three sentence e-letter to the Chancellor of the University — particulars below



Illus. 1

Vivarium Building (1915–16) at the University of Illinois, photo c.1917 (608 E. Healey, Champaign; James M. White, University of Illinois Supervising Architect). The building's architectural style might be called Collegiate Prairie School and is shared by a couple other buildings on campus. *Photo courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives, Strach Photograph Collection, 2630002\_BUI\_Vivarium.*

— mentioning your membership in the American Art Pottery Association and giving any other credentials hinting at your ceramic knowledge and then saying that in light of your experience with American ceramics, it is hard to imagine any other such works more deserving of preservation. Ideally one mural will remain on campus and one will find its way to a major American museum with extensive decorative arts and Arts & Crafts holdings.

In function the Vivarium, originally a site for experiments with terrestrial animals, has been wholly superseded by other buildings on campus, yet the structure stands on a prime piece of real estate, one immediately abutting the campus' main quadrangles, yet tucked in a commercial district. To the University, the land is viewed — kerching, kerching — as “a possible public-private partnership opportunity” — likely a ten-story housing tower to handle the overflow from the University's post-covid policy of rapidly increasing student enrollments. So, it is unrealistic to think that the building itself, nice as it is, can be saved, but the murals are another matter.

**Here is where to write:**

Robert J. Jones, Chancellor  
<chancellor@illinois.edu>

**Or by snail mail:**

Swanlund Administration Building  
601 E. John Street  
Champaign, IL 61820.

The murals' design dates back to 1905 and represents Teco's inaugural and most persistent effort at combining the artistry of its recently introduced art vases with the cladding projects of its parent company, the American Terra Cotta & Ceramic Company (founded 1881, Crystal Lake, IL). Teco loved the design and so did the critics. The Vivarium murals are the design's fourth and only surviving iteration.

The design first appeared at the March 1905 Chicago Architectural Club exhibition held at the Art Institute of Chicago. The fish of clay and glaze drew extremely positive coverage from both the trade journal *Inland Architect* and the Hearst newspaper *Chicago American*. By January 1908, an example of the design had been installed on the Office on the American Terra Cotta campus, a building that showcased several of Teco's most impressive works. In February of 1912, the design was executed for display as part of a huge American Terra Cotta exhibit to be shown the next month at the first annual International Clay



Illus. 2

The eastward facing twin of a pair of Teco green fish-and-wave terra cotta panels installed on the Vivarium Building. The top and bottom rows of tiles are taller than the middle two rows, the top segments markedly so. This differential generates a slight fisheye effect and emphasizes the monumentality of the wave breaking over the fish. Just on its own, the murals' microcrystalline matt glaze is a technical triumph. Teco was the first American company to achieve such a glaze. And the 'charcoal' haze that spreads across the matt glaze adds to the triumph. The effect is the result of copper floating to the glaze's surface while still molten and beginning to crystallize there. The effect can be expected but not controlled, except for overall intensity — in general, the thicker the glaze the more prominent the charcoaling. The glaze itself is applied with sweeps of a compressor-powered spray gun. Here, as though by magic, the charcoaling appears to be applied as a painterly wash, but it is not. This glaze miracle significantly adds to the complexity, depth, and drama of the design work. *Photo: Richard D. Mohr.*



Illus. 3

One of 50 rondels, executed in exotically glazed, high relief terra cotta, from the façade of the University of Illinois' Stock Judging Pavilion (W. Carbys Zimmerman, State of Illinois Architect, 1913). The façade was demolished in 1958. This rondel, depicting a Yorkshire pig, was crudely 'popped' off the building but then salvaged from a dumpster by a citizen of good taste. Four decades later, it was discovered leaning against a backyard fence in a town twelve miles away. The ten different designs used for the rondels were composed by American Terra Cotta's chief modeler of the time, Kristian Schneider, whom the University forced to visit the campus to see living, breathing stock animals first-hand before it would sign off on his designs. *Private collection. Photo: Thomas A. Freeburg.*

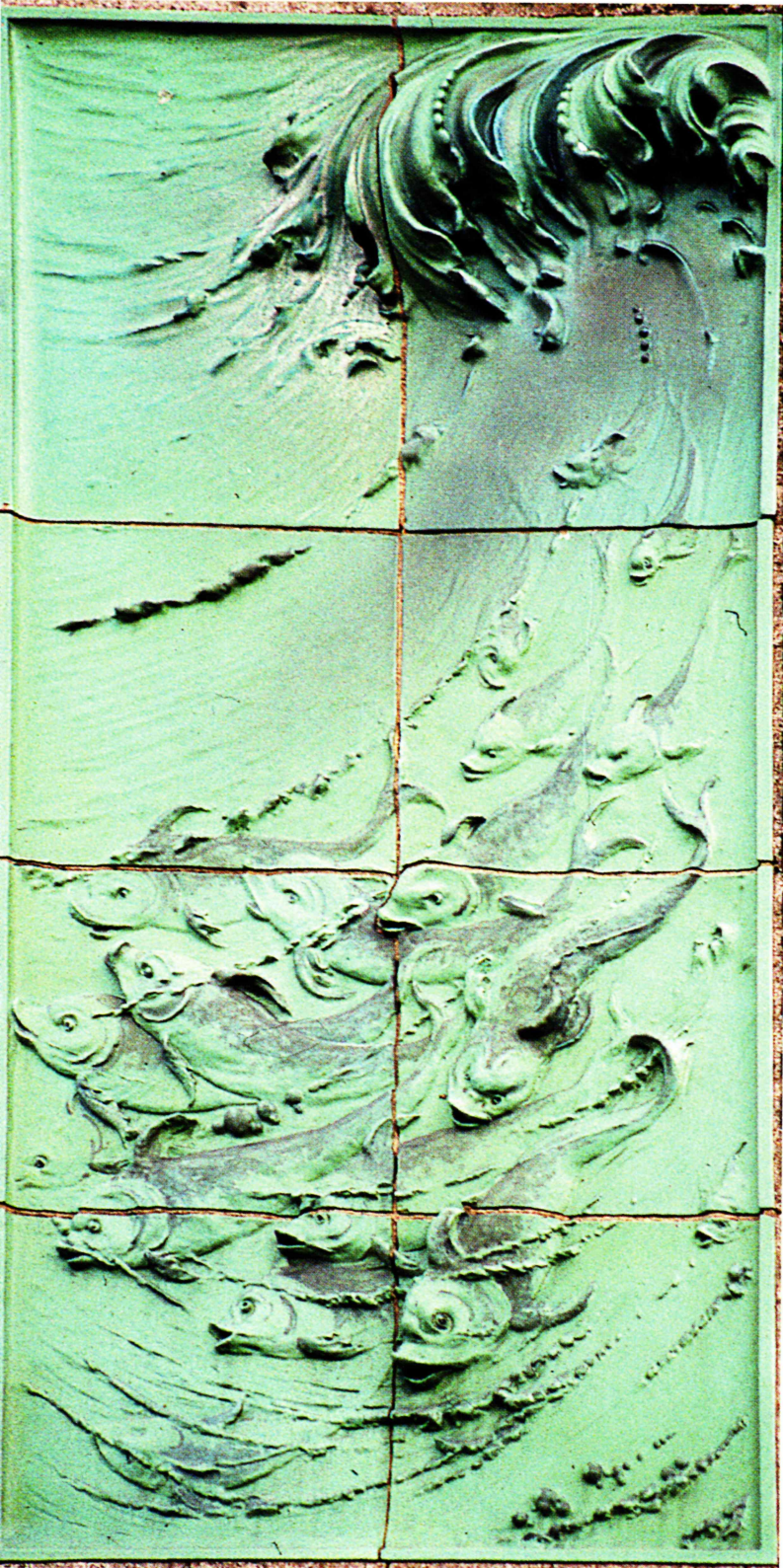
Products Exhibition that was held at the Chicago Coliseum. The Vivarium's murals are the final form of the design.

In her 1911 overview of Teco designs, Evelyn Marie Stuart, for twenty-five years the editor of *Arts and Decoration* (New York), drew attention to Japanese influences on Teco's fish-and-wave murals. The design appears to be heavily influenced by Japanese wood-block prints, in particular the famous breaking-wave print by Katsushika Hokusai titled "Great Wave off Kanagawa" (c. 1831). In Teco's version, a school of fish replaces Mt. Fuji as the object being visually overwhelmed by the great wave.

Compelling circumstantial evidence points squarely at American Terra Cotta's chief in-house sculptor at the time, Fritz Albert, as the originator of the fish-and-wave design. Among American Terra Cotta's staff modelers in 1905, Albert was the only designer to produce Japanese inspired vases (designs 113, 115, 116, 176). In particular, the mural's multiply curling giant wave with its knurled edges and knobby secondary waves is strongly reminiscent of the scalloped base of Albert's monumental, lidded vessel, design 132, with its repeating curled and knurled wave forms. Further Albert is known for both the *staging* of complex animal scenes and the *dramatic posing* of animals within the staged arrangements (lioness playing with cubs, elephant strangling a lion to death). Both of these design tropes — staging and drama — are at play in the fish-and-wave design.

The next year, 1906, Albert left American Terra Cotta to work for the company's arch competitor, Chicago's Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, where he produced many of that company's most exotic designs. This shift of employers may explain why, despite the amount of critical attention the fish-and-wave mural design continued to draw after 1905, no mention is ever made of who created it. American Terra Cotta's owner, William D. Gates, impresario extraordinaire, likely manipulated what critics knew in order to preempt readers from knowing that if they wanted this designer's work, they would have to turn to the competition, well, elsewhere.

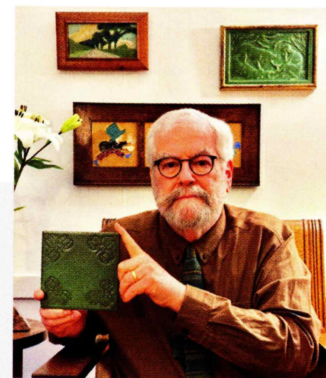
If the Vivarium murals are lost, it will not be the first time the University has sinned against Teco. Five buildings on campus had American Terra Cotta decoration up to 1958, when the original 1913 terra cotta façade of the Stock Judging Pavilion, which anchors the University's south quadrangle and was designed in imitation of a Doric temple, was ripped off the building and replaced by Georgian brickwork and Palladian windows to echo the style of the 1940 student union building at the opposite end of the campus' central system of quadrangles.



One of two Teco terra cotta murals slated to be demolished at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Photo: Richard D. Mohr.

Only in the Midwest, only at a land-grant university: The cornice-level metopes of the Doric design did not depict the usual troops of Greek gods, titans, centaurs, heroes, and other Hellene notables, rather they framed noble, sculpted visages in three-quarter profile of, you guessed it, farm animals. Fifty rondels, each two-feet in diameter, present in rotation designs of ten different stock critters, pairs of bulls, cows, horses, pigs, and sheep, two different breeds for each species (illus. 3). In the makeover to Georgian, the terra cotta rondels were crudely ‘popped’ off the building. Several damaged but still legible ones were plucked from the dumpster and survived. Six decades after the demolition, the University belatedly recognized the error of its ways. In a lame gesture, it reproduced in drab concrete three of the exotically glazed originals and mounted them at eye level on a latter-day extension to the Pavilion. *Sic transit gloria mundi* — thus passes the glory of the world.

Let us help save the University from having to repeat this sort of preservational fiasco. By educating the educators, perhaps we can save the Teco murals. They deserve it. So, garb your cursor and write the Chancellor a note. Again, the address is Robert J. Jones, Chancellor <[chancellor@illinois.edu](mailto:chancellor@illinois.edu)>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard D. Mohr is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and of the Classics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.