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View from The Overlook



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Viktor Schreckengost:

How Cleveland Heights'
"frightening guest"
became a legend





Schreckengost's famous Jazz bowl was created in 1931 for Eleanor Roosevelt, whose husband, Franklin, had just been reelected governor of New York. Finding himself bored one day, Schreckengost had pulled the assignment for the project out of the Cowan Pottery's assignment jar.

Viktor Schreckengost:

How Cleveland Heights' "frightening guest" became a legend

by Eileen Beal, MA

What do a large ceramic bowl, a new-fangled truck and a way-cool kids' bicycle have in common?

Answer: All were designed by artist, teacher, industrial designer and long-time Cleveland Heights resident Viktor Schreckengost. Mr. Schreckengost created the "Jazz Bowl" for Eleanor Roosevelt in 1931. Later that decade, he designed the cab-over-engine truck, which revolutionized truck design. And he invented the ruggedly sleek Mark II Eliminator bike, which "pop-wheeled" its way into the hearts of American boys, in the late 1960s.

Schreckengost—whose name translates roughly to "frightening guest" in German—was born into a pottery-making family in Sebring, Ohio. In a 2006 interview at his stately home on Stillman Road, he discussed his reluctance to go into the family business. "My father was head of bisque ware firing at French [a China Company] and I learned pottery without even realizing it. But I didn't want to be a potter when I went up to Cleveland to go to school. I wanted to do cartoons." In the mid-1920s, Schreckengost enrolled at the Cleveland School of Arts, which became the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1948.

On the advice of Guy Cowan—who taught at the school and, as owner and head of design and production at the eponymously-named Cowan Pottery in Rocky River, knew a good clayman when he saw one—Schreckengost got a reluctant

minor in pottery. It wasn't until his senior year when he saw an exhibit of modern Viennese pottery at the Cleveland Museum of Art, that he finally embraced his heritage. "That stuff was sculptural, big, different. It really hit me."

"I didn't want to be a potter when I went up to Cleveland to go to school. I wanted to do cartoons."

After graduating (first in his class) in 1929, Schreckengost went to Vienna, Austria, to study at the Kunstgewerbe Art School with the people who made the works he had admired at the Cleveland Museum of Art. In Vienna, he began to refine the organically dynamic (and often whimsical) design vocabulary and production techniques that – whether the medium was clay, metal, canvas, paper or textiles – became his hallmark. In his spare time, he hung out in local cabarets, nurturing his passion for jazz.

When Schreckengost returned to the United States in 1930, he changed the spelling of his name from Victor to Viktor, went to work at Cowan Pottery, and became a part-time instructor at his alma mater. At 25, he was the youngest instructor on staff.

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On the cover: In 1948, working with scrap metal sheets left over from other products, Schreckengost designed a clay model of a toy pedal car that would eventually be produced by the Murray Ohio Manufacturing Company. Note the sketch of an airplane on the wall behind him—you can see an example of the finished product hanging over the bar at Nighttown. Photo from The Cleveland Press Collection at Cleveland State University.

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

Our Mission

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.

CHHS Hires its First Executive Director



Michael Rotman

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is pleased to announce the appointment of Michael Rotman as its new Executive Director. A resident of the city's Cedar-Fairmount neighborhood, Michael previously worked at the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities at Cleveland State University, where he developed content for the Cleveland Historical mobile app and collaborated with teachers to use technology to integrate the region's history into classroom curricula.

As Executive Director, Michael will further the Historical Society's mission of preserving and promoting the diverse history of Cleveland Heights. Look for Michael's hand in extensive updates to the CHHS website. Michael will also collaborate with community members and organizations to help stage periodic local-history presentations and publish future editions of *View from the Overlook*.

2013 Heights Heritage Home & Garden Tour

Each year, Heights Community Congress sponsors the Heights Heritage Home & Garden Tour—showcasing the unique variety of historic homes and gardens in Cleveland Heights. Since 1977, HCC has featured more than 300 Cleveland Heights homes.

This year's events include:

Preview Party: Saturday evening, September 21, 2013

Home Tour: Sunday, September 22, 2013
(12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.)

Call the HCC Office (216-321-6775)
for more information and to purchase Preview Party
or Home Tour tickets.



Designers, potters, ceramic technicians (employees in charge of mixing clays, glazes, glazing and firing, packing and shipping, etc.) and sales associates outside the original Cowan Pottery display room at in Rocky River, c., late 1920s. Schreckengost is not part of the group.

When he collected his last paycheck from CIA in 2003 (with 70 years of full- and part-time teaching and consulting behind him) he was the oldest and longest-serving instructor on staff.

At the school, Schreckengost taught ceramics. At Cowan Pottery, he designed high-priced molded pieces and did limited-edition commissions, which is how he came to create the black and Egyptian blue Jazz Bowl¹. "The white, mold-cast porcelain bowl was glazed inside and out with black slip," he explained. "Then [using the ancient sgraffito method], 'jazzy' designs—Cubist images, star bursts, Jazz-age terms—were scratched into the black glaze. After that, the bowl was mist-glazed with Egyptian blue and

fired. I didn't know that it was for Eleanor [Roosevelt] until she ordered two more."

In 1931 Cowan Pottery closed, but Schreckengost continued doing design work for Guy Cowan, who left Cleveland to become head designer at Syracuse Pottery² in Syracuse, New York. Taking up the slack created by Cowan's departure, Schreckengost became a full-time instructor at the Cleveland School of Art.

In 1933, employing the learning-by-doing teaching methods and the integrated and streamlined design philosophy he had learned in Vienna, Schreckengost launched – and became director of – the school's industrial design

continued

¹ Less than 30 Jazz Bowls were created at Cowan Pottery and originally cost \$50. The Cleveland Museum of Art paid \$121,000 for the bowl it owns. Poor man's bowls—smaller bowls with molded sgraffito work—were also made and sold for about half the price of the larger bowls. In 1993, the Fogg Museum at Harvard University paid \$15,000 for one (<http://www.coldbacon.com/misc/jazzbowl-cleveland.html>).

² The name Onondaga Pottery is/was used interchangeably with Syracuse Pottery.



Above: Less well-known than his Jazz bowls, and less expensive, too, Schreckengost's Jazz plate series (item shown here is "Dance Modern") was produced in the hectically creative year prior to Cowan pottery's closing in 1931.



While Schreckengost is best-known for his cast and mold-built pieces, he also was an accomplished (and whimsical) painter, as the design on this ca., 1931 vase shows.

department. It was the nation's first dedicated industrial design department and quickly began turning out fast-rising graduates, including Giuseppe Delena and Joe Oros who went to work for Ford Motor Company; Larry Nagode, who became principal designer at Fisher-Price; and Cleveland-based John Nottingham and John Spirk, who revolutionized American design and manufacturing technology, and whose design firm, Nottingham Spirk, holds more than 900 patents. "He was a really great teacher, yet so humble and friendly. Everyone was in awe of him. We used to call him Viktor Schreckengod, but not to his face," said John Nottingham during an interview at the company's offices in the former First Church of Christ Scientist on Overlook Road.

In the mid-1950s, Schreckengost also set up a pottery design studio in Sebring, OH. There he produced sculptural—and often huge—works for galleries and art shows, and did



A member of the Crusaders, an anti-Prohibition group, Schreckengost created the mold for this "Crusader Decanter" in 1931 as a sly (and useful) protest against America's ban on alcohol. The Decanter also was entered in the 1932 May Show.

"We used to call him Viktor Schreckengod, but not to his face."

freelance designs for local companies, including American Limoges China and Salem Pottery.

But art pottery and dinnerware weren't the only things Schreckengost designed in his long career. In 1932 he worked with engineer Ray Spiller at White Motor Company to design the game-changing cab-over-engine truck. Beginning in the late 1950s, he began long-term relationships with many Cleveland-based companies: Murray Ohio Manufacturing, General Electric, Harris-Seybold and others. These affiliations gave birth to, among other things, the ruggedly elegant Mercury bicycle (which debuted at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City), a fleet of pedal vehicles, riding lawnmowers, elegant (yet functional) streetlights, and printing presses.

In 1943 – too old for the draft – Schreckengost went down to the local Navy office and registered. "They told me they'd get back to me in three or four months," he said, "but they called a week later and told me to report to the Naval Air Corps Training Station in Rhode Island." During the war he worked on voice recognition and map-making equipment, artificial limbs for returning veterans and a secret radar project. "They could track things with radar," he explained, "but they didn't know how to interpret what they were tracking." When he returned to the classroom in 1946, Schreckengost incorporated the real-world, do-more-with-less insights he'd gained in the Navy into the industrial design program, and with the potteries and companies for which he was doing contract design work.

Move to The Heights

It was while Schreckengost was just getting started as director of the industrial design department at the Cleveland School of Art that he met his first wife, Daisy Nadine Averill. She had come to Cleveland to go to the art school,

and soon after she caught his eye she snagged his heart. They married in September, 1935, and lived in a variety of places before moving, in the early 1950s, into a Cleveland Heights apartment near the intersection of Monticello Blvd. and *continued*



Viktor Schreckengost during a critiquing session on a CIA Industrial Design student's project in the 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Institute of Art.

Noble Road. In 1973, they purchased their dream house on Stillman Road.

It wasn't the house's proximity to University Circle that was the big draw, said his second wife, the former Gene Nowacek, whom he married in 1991. It was the house's back yard and attic. The yard went all the way back to Lamberton Road, she explained, and they both loved to garden. "Nadine grew herbs for vinegars and gave them as gifts," Gene said during a phone interview. "When Vik laid out a garden, it was straight rows and even spaces and very geometric." In addition, she noted, "[the house] had all this wonderful space, including the third floor, which had been specially built so there was northern light, which was important for artists."

Nadine died of a brain aneurism two years after she and Schreckengost moved into their dream home. But Schreckengost—who'd given up most of his non-teaching design work and was headed into semi-retirement at CIA the following year (1976)—stayed in the house. "His back yard was a real oasis for him," explained John Nottingham. Nottingham also noted that with Schreckengost pottery, china, sculptures, paintings and even some industrial design prototypes scattered throughout the huge home, "the house became a mini art gallery."

There were other reasons Schreckengost decided to stay. For one thing, he truly loved children. "He was always showing them things in the garden and sharing his love of nature with them. The kids used to call him Uncle Vik," said Gene. "And when my son was just a boy and delivering *The Plain Dealer*, Vik built him a wagon for his route."

In the Stillman house's attic studio Schreckengost turned his hand to the painting

and print making he'd put on hold for almost half a century. For the next two-plus decades he created large and colorful works—often with a musical theme—as well as sophisticated and often whimsical designs for cards that were produced by American Greetings.

He also "hung out." One of his favorite haunts was Table 20 at Nighttown, from which he usually ordered shrimp cocktail to start and an ice cream sundae for dessert. "And he really liked Gibsons, always with extra onions," said head server Linda Pavlovitch in an interview.¹

But according to Ms. Pavlovitch, it was jazz that Viktor loved. Thus it is not surprising that a huge jazz-themed Schreckengost print featuring a saxophone hangs in the jazz bar section of the restaurant. Or that there's a Schreckengost-designed pedal plane hovering over the bar itself. Or that both Schreckengost's 100th birthday



Photos, left to right: Viktor Schreckengost at 39, 73 (from the Cleveland Press Collection at Cleveland State University) and 100 (from Steve P. Zorc, Zorc Photo & Design.)

¹ A Gibson is basically a martini, with an onion instead of an olive or lemon twist.

(in 2006) and his funeral wake (in early 2008) were held at Nighttown.

Another favorite hangout was Lake View Cemetery. "We used to go and sit by the ponds and have picnic lunches there, especially during daffodil season," said Gene. "That's where he's buried, too," she added.

Schreckengost slowed down only in his late '90s as his sight began to wane.

During our interview, he looked back on a career that spanned almost eight decades, noting that his designs always blended art and utility. "I don't think there is any way to separate the two," he said. Then, picking up the Freeform cup he'd designed and had been drinking from,

he asked: "Is this more ornamental or utilitarian?"

As I gazed at his cup, I lifted my own cup to test its weight and balance. And for the first time, I noticed the indentations on the handle that added visual interest to the cup and made it easier to hold. Thus I realized I was holding my answer. And that I was sitting across the table from a Cleveland Heights legend.

Author's Note: A video was made by WVIZ to accompany Schreckengost's 2000 show at the Cleveland Museum of Art. It provides both good visuals of his works and insights into how Schreckengost worked, thought and created. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9uNc9A1Llw>

Eileen Beal, MA, has lived in Cleveland Heights since 1970. She met Viktor Schreckengost in 1977, when she interviewed him for a paper she was doing on ceramics and art pottery for a history of science and technology class at CWRU. She has been a "Vik" fan ever since.

