

Grays like playing in the mud  
Clayworks owners drawn to crafting objects by hand

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Behind the demure storefront, on a sun-scorched stretch of East Sixth Street in East Austin, nimble hands coax mud and minerals ground from the earth into objects of beauty. Clayworks, a studio and gallery specializing in architectural ceramics, makes decorative tiles stamped with images of armadillos, horned toads and bats, sculptural light sconces carved with Texas stars, and colorful mosaic murals, among other creations. John and Chris Gray, its owners and artists, have been here since 1978. An extensive stock and price list is at [www.clayworks.net](http://www.clayworks.net).

American-Statesman: How did you get started in claymaking?

John Gray: When I was growing up in Corpus Christi, my father, a surgeon, collected handmade pots and was interested in pottery. I came to Austin to attend the University of Texas as a history major. I saw an ad (in the Whole Earth Catalog) for kickwheels for making pots. I got one for my father and one for myself. I took pottery courses at the Texas Union and worked for some local potters before starting Clayworks with my wife. Our first big job was Centennial Park. A large portion of the money to build the park was donated by hundreds of schoolchildren, and we created tiles engraved with every contributing child's name.

What attracted you to claymaking?

John Gray: No one tells you growing up that this is a possible vocation, and it doesn't even occur to you. But I was attracted to the romance of it. The practice of claymaking really dates back. Nowadays you can buy tiles and lamps that are mechanized, and I think that's what makes claymaking such a romantic notion, that you can still make these things with your hands -- you start from mud, go through the whole process and create something. It's even more romantic if you can sell it out of your own shop.

Take us through the process of making tiles and sconces.

John and Chris Gray: We begin by mixing the clay from dry materials and adding water. The freshly mixed clay is put through a pug mill, which removes excess air and extrudes it into flat slabs. Tiles are cut by hand from these slabs, or they are set into drupe molds to give sconces their rounded shape. Decorative tiles are stamped while they are still soft. Sconces are pierced with their designs. Glazing

(the process of applying a thin layer of glassy material pigmented by natural minerals) is done using a syringe, brush, spray or by dipping the clay into a bucket of glaze. When the pieces are bone dry, they are placed in the kiln to be fired.

The firing process begins with an overnight "candling" procedure, which maintains the kiln at a temperature below the boiling point of water. Very early in the morning, before the sun comes up, we begin to fire up the temperature until it reaches about 2,000 degrees by the early evening. The kiln is then allowed to cool overnight because it is too hot to open and the cold air rushing in would cause the clay to crack.

What is the style of your creations?

John and Chris Gray: Our style is inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, which first started in England around the time of the Industrial Revolution and rejected mechanized reproduction in favor of craftsmanship. Henry Chapman Mercer, who founded the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works (in Doylestown, Pa.), was a proponent of Arts and Crafts, and his work has been very influential to us. His work was about allowing the materials and their individual characteristics to show through and their beauty to speak for itself. But anytime you take inspiration from someone else's work or a style, you develop it as your own. If you look around our gallery you'll notice our style and palette reflects where we are, and the colors and qualities of our landscape.