A Reputation in Mud

Ceramics Students Mold Clay Into Objects of Beauty

By George Milburn, '30

It is time a good word were said for Oklahoma's mud. Housewives have maligned it and good roads committees have made its name what it is today. But there are a few perspicacious people in the state who have long known about Oklahoma mud's finer qualities.

It is almost two years now since the University of Oklahoma first began demonstrating that Oklahoma clay is no common clay.

That department of the university engaged in shaping Oklahoma mud into its own reputation is tucked away in so unpretentious a place that it is not to be found without a search, and its existence on the campus is not generally known. Enter the crenelated brick shed that is the armory. A long indoor drillfield, smelling of saddle soap and gun grease. Sheeted French 75's ranged along the walls. Through a pine board partition in the southwest corner of the building filter sounds of a strange activity. Back of the partition is installed the ceramics division of the university's school of painting and design.

Directly from a spacious classroom where college students are being taught with expensive death-dealing equipment how most effectively to reduce their fellows to the parent clay, one steps into the crowded scene of another primitive industry where college students are being taught to mold out of that clay objects of beauty.

In one part of the room whirling jugs rattle. A "kick" wheel whirs. A churn dasher slogs away at the liquid clay. At a long table sit students, working out their own designs. In the far end the kiln glows, ready for the firing. And there, lining the walls, are the products of the University of Oklahoma's pottery—delicate vases, colorful tiles, gleaming jars, vitreous boxes and trays, fragile bowls, amusing figurines—such fine examples of the ceramic art as to win an approving nod from old Josiah Wedgewood himself.

JOHN FRANK, under whom the work of the ceramic department proceeds, and himself not long from the Chicago Art Institute and Alfred university, the New York state school of ceramics, tells of his department's work, its handicaps, its aspirations.

"The students learn every step of the potter's art," Frank points out, "Instruction includes elementary pottery building, decoration, glaze theory and firing, and architectural decoration, such as fireplaces, fountains, tile work and figure work."

"They make their own molds, cast their own pottery, work out their own formulas for the glazes and do their own glazing and firing."

Only perfect pieces from the university kilns bear a Sooner trademark. This design, a teepee interwoven with the letters "O. U." is stamped on the bottom of representative pottery. The ceramics department does not rely on this insignia alone to make its pottery distinctive. From clay to final design every ef-
fort is made to produce an object essentially Oklahoman.

"Dr. C. N. Gould of the Oklahoma Geological Survey is helping us by reporting clays that can be utilized in our work," said Frank. "At present we are getting the bulk of our clay from a pit seven miles southeast of Ada. We have also been experimenting with Oklahoma red clay."

"There are vast deposits of clay valuable for ceramic purposes here in Oklahoma," Frank went on. "The main difficulty now is that, since the value of these clay beds is not realized, the clay is not dug on a commercial basis. This makes it almost impossible for us to get clay of consistent quality."

Pottery making is an ancient industry, and the ware from the Sooner kilns is being produced by means of age-old methods. The ceramics department does not boast modern equipment. Many of its devices for preparing the clay are the crudest improvisations. An old-fashioned butter churn is used for mixing the clay and two ordinary jugs partially filled with pebbles are used for grinding the glaze. The kiln itself is an experimental one, neither capable of high temperatures nor large enough to accommodate the output of the ceramics classes.

"As we improve our equipment and are able to dispense with some of these antiquated devices," Frank said, "we will be able to turn out pottery comparable to any being produced today."

"Here, for example, is what can be done by combining two clays." He held up a small bowl around which shaggy brown bison moseyed against a creamy background. The effect had been produced by superimposing the bison in red clay on the bowl of white clay. It was a fine specimen of the ceramic art.

Another student had worked out a striking design modeled after one of African negroes, in making a tile-topped coffee table. A second had caught on the glassy surface of a table-tile his impression of an Antwerp night club. A third had modeled in clay two inebriated home-comers, arm-in-arm and fairly happy.

The University of Oklahoma ceramics department makes no effort to train commercial potters. Individuality is the keynote in the training given. The course is a strenuous one, and only students interested in expressing themselves through the medium of permanent clay survive it. Out of the mud these students not only are shaping beautiful objects for themselves—they are contributing to the University of Oklahoma's growing reputation as a cultural fountainhead.

Already these objects of art are finding their way out into the state, and the time when the O. U. teepee impression on a piece of pottery will contribute as much to its value as the stamp of a Wedgewood or a Rookware is somewhere in the future. When it arrives Oklahoma's mud will have finally come into its own.

President Bizzell Colorado Speaker

President Bizzell, recently named chairman of the state textbook commission, was the commencement speaker at the University of Colorado exercises at Boulder June 10. Doctor Bizzell spoke on "Our Changing Intellectual Climate."

Doctor Bizzell said in part:

"The psychological effect of our changing intellectual climate is the development of a critical-minded attitude toward our social institutions. There is no institution today that is too sacred or whose ideals are too pure to come under the searching eye of the publicist, literary critic, scientist or philosopher.

"Our schools and colleges, perhaps, have come in for more criticism than any other of our social institutions. The public has come to believe that too many students are entering our colleges and universities, that college sports have been commercialized, and that the expenditure for education is out of proportion to the results accomplished. It is freely admitted that our educational system is not perfect, but many of the broad generalizations that are directed at our schools and colleges are usually exaggerations of actual facts and conditions.

"It seems to me that our intellectual uncertainties grow out of a loss of perspective. Knowledge in the modern world has accumulated so fast that we have been unable to appraise its relative merits. There is always danger in the accumulation of more knowledge than a people can assimilate. The martyrdom of Socrates is the classical example of this truth.

"It is for this reason that I have not become alarmed about the increase in the enrollment in our colleges and universities. It is quite apparent that we must either close our laboratories to research workers or open wide our doors to classrooms and lecture halls. It is as necessary that people have the moral purpose to use the intellectual instruments of power for useful ends as it is that they possess the knowledge of it at all. Knowledge is power, but power for what uses? That is the question that must wisely be answered."

Sooner to Oxford

Feigin Hood, a senior government student of Norman, left for the University of Oxford, England, in June, to take up a six months scholarship awarded him by the Carnegie foundation. Hood and a group of other American students will spend one term at Oxford and the rest of the time in a study of international relations in Europe, including a visit to the Hague conference. Hood plans to take his master's degree in government next year and then enter the diplomatic service.

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