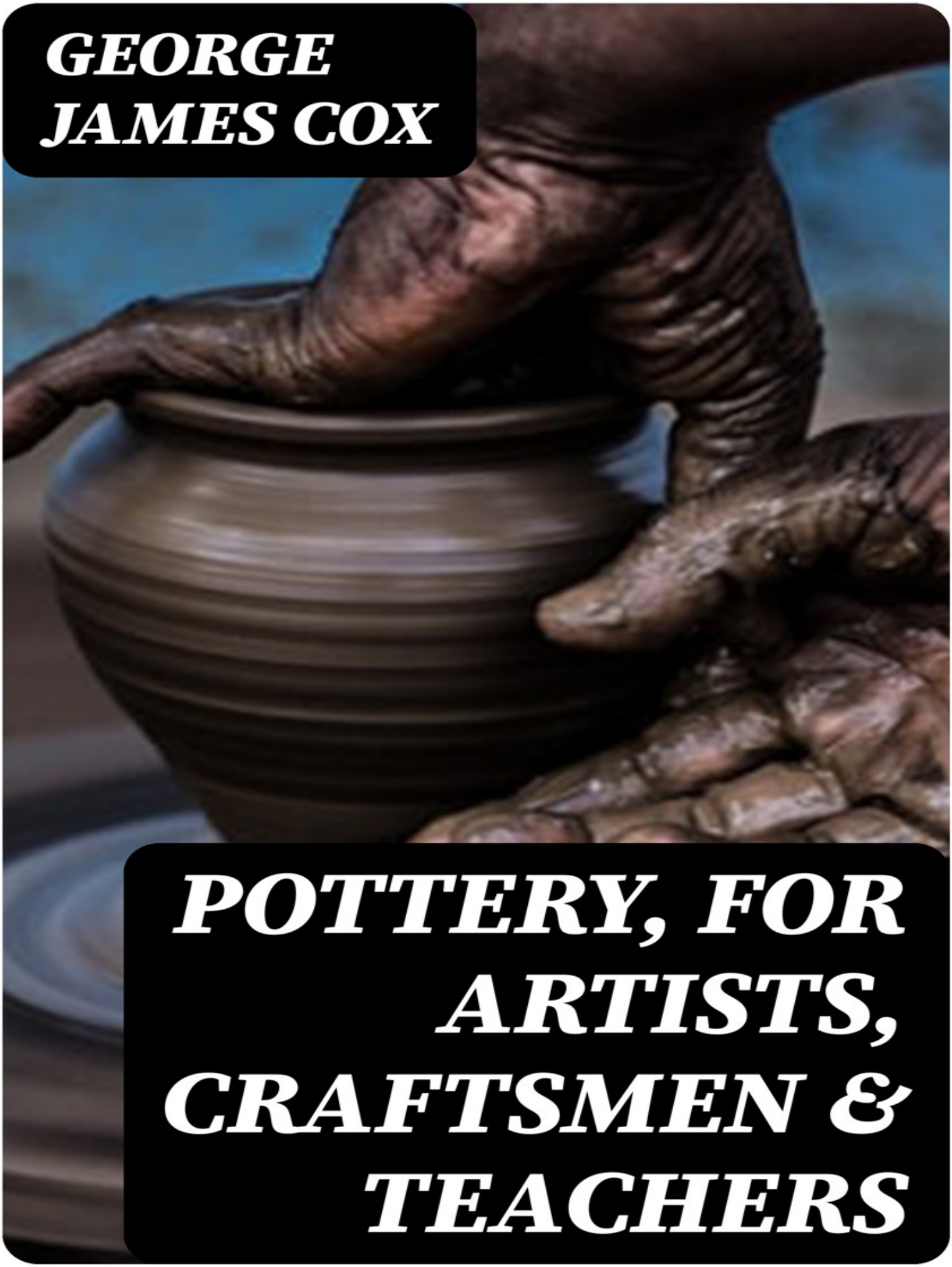
GEORGE JAMES COX



POTTERY, FOR ARTISTS, CRAFTSMEN & TEACHERS

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CHAPTER I

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HISTORICAL SUMMARY

> “After this he led them into his garden, where was great variety of Flowers. Then said he again, Behold, the Flowers are diverse in stature, in quality, and colour, and smell, and virtue, and some are better than some.”

—BUNYAN.

Without attempting a history of pottery which, however brief, would be somewhat out of place in a Craft Book, a short summary of its evolution, emphasizing those periods in which it was most beautifully developed, seems essential to help the beginner in the selection and appreciation of good form, colour, and decoration. These are very vital matters and easily overlooked in the struggle to acquire a craft that is full of fascination from the first fumbled shape upon the wheel to the finished product of time and art and craft.

Too much stress cannot be laid upon the importance of close study of the best work, both ancient and modern; for it is a truism that however handily a craftsman may work, his output will be worthless if he has not, with his increasing powers of technique, developed a sound judgement and refined taste. To-day, these alone can replace the lost traditions of the old masters.

The Potter’s Craft had a coeval birth in various parts of the earth, but the obscurity is such that no clear idea can be

gained of its antiquity. It was, probably, the first form of handicraft, if we except the fashioning of flints and clubs. Accident or the funeral pyre may have suggested the extraordinary durability the clay shape obtained when burned, and doubtless siliceous glazes were first the result of chance. All early work was built up by hand and for that reason possesses wide mouths and simple forms. The introduction of the wheel is lost in a mist of time, but drawings from the tombs of Beni Hassan show the potter at his wheel substantially as he works in Asia to this day. The wheel-made or thrown shape is distinguished by far more grace and symmetry than the built shape, and by an infinitely greater variety of form.

In burial mounds from prehistoric Egypt are found many bowls and platters rudely scratched, and the earliest examples from mounds, lake dwellings, and tombs show the quick development of the pot, not only as an object of utility, but as a vehicle of art. The first kinds of decoration were incised lines followed by strappings and bandings, painted stripes and scrolls and hieroglyphs, with later additions in slip and modelled clay. Primitive wares from their method of production exhibit an interesting similarity of shape and style in such widely divergent countries as China, Egypt, and Peru.

It was only when the craftsman had acquired considerable dexterity that we find his nationality influencing his shapes and producing the wonderful variety in form and decoration that characterizes and distinguishes the pottery of all nations. Once established, the prevalence of type is strong. This traditional style is particularly

noticeable in Egypt, much modern work being identical with that of the early dynasties.

Before turning to more sophisticated work it would be well to learn the lesson of simplicity and fitness here taught by primitive folks. The simple beginning leads to the simple, strong, and satisfying end. Much of this primitive work is inspiring for its freshness or naïveté; its unspoiled innate taste allied to downright common sense. Properly approached, it should be a sure corrective to any desire for unsightly *new* shapes or extravagance in decoration. A few careful studies will do much to drive home this valuable lesson in fine, simple line and spacing.

In Egypt the thrown shape was not distinguished by any extraordinary beauty or variety. Nevertheless their small *Ushabti*, glazed gods and demons, show a very advanced knowledge of coloured enamels, and their fabrication of a hard sandy paste for glazing shows the first great step in the science of pottery. Their glaze was purely alkaline.

The Assyrians appear to have been the first to use coloured tin glazes, and although few pieces of pottery survive, the enamelled friezes from Korsobad and Sousa are striking evidence of their proficiency in tile-making.

From Egypt and Mesopotamia the craft spread east and west to Phœnicia, Attica, and Greece; through Persia and Arabia to India. Here it mingled with currents from China, then invading Korea, Japan, and Siam, the united floods rising until the potter was a power in every land.

Phœnician pottery forms, with Cretan and early Grecian, a beautiful sequence from the primitive work of early dynasties to the refinements of later Grecian wares.

It will prove an interesting and instructive study to trace the developments that led finally to the zenith of Greek pottery. The primitive Hissarlik ware leads through Mycenaean, Dipylon, Phalæron, Rhodian, and Corinthian right up to the wonderful figure vases of about 300 B.C. Although limited in paste and colour, with a thin transparent glaze or lustre, these vases were exquisitely fashioned. Large and small shapes of wide diversity were decorated in black, red, and white, ornament and figures both drawn straight on to the body with a sureness of touch and refinement of line that excite the envy of a master. Many of their forms are strongly influenced by contemporary bronze work and for that reason are not the best guides for shapes. Their incomparable terra-cottas known as Tanagras form a link between Pottery and Sculpture.

Again, from Phœnician work one may see dimly by way of Samian, Rhodian and old Cairene wares the lineage of the royal wares of Persia, and recent investigations point to Old Cairo as the birthplace of lustre.

From Persia come some of the finest pottery, painted in colours and lustres, that the world can show. Their wares stand pre-eminent in that class wherein the chief beauty is the painted decoration. Their one-colour pieces, whilst not comparable with the Chinese, nevertheless reach a high standard. Their lustres have never been surpassed or rarely equalled. Their shapes are true potter’s shapes, and a delight to the eye. The finest pieces were painted in simple blues, greens, reds, and faint purples, with black pencilling. This appears to have been done on an engobe of finely ground flint, and covered with an alkaline glaze giving a

broken white ground. This would account in some measure for the extraordinary freshness of both drawing and colour. Later on raised ornament, finely conceived and used with restraint, is seen along with pierced decoration having translucent effects.

Rhodes and Damascus produced a somewhat coarser ware, but bold and free in brushwork and varied with a bright red. Syrian pottery abounds in virile individual shapes. Turkey also was not without a fine and vigorous style.

Much time can be most profitably spent studying the masterpieces of Persia. A representative collection like that at South Kensington will show vases, bottles, bowls, pots, and tiles in bewildering variety and of infinite freshness. They are directly painted, with free renderings of flowers within geometric forms and often with an inscription in rich Arabic characters. The exquisite Moore Collection in the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, is smaller but is remarkable for the unusually high standard of taste shown in its acquisition. At its purest period human or animal figures were rarely or never represented and those shapes or tiles with such decoration belong to a more decadent but still fine period.

Again we have the eternal lesson of simplicity and fitness. Again it will be borne in upon the student that originality does not mean weirdness, but rather a fresh spontaneous treatment of simple, well-known natural forms, with, above all, a fine appreciation of good line and space. No sincere student can fail to develop here a respect and

veneration of a craft and of craftsmen capable of producing such glorious works.

From this teeming home the craft spread to Arabia and west across the Mediterranean to Spain. Here in the twelfth century the Moors were producing their famous Hispano-Mooresque lustred wares. Their large plaques offer a wonderful variety of pure brushwork ornament with spirited heraldic additions. Sometimes the backs of these dishes are as beautifully lustred as the fronts.

For a proper appreciation of their purely geometric decoration and its possibilities in pottery we must turn to the Alcazzar at Madrid. Here the use of opaque tin glaze permitted the extensive use of a coarse body for tiles and bricks. The Moors, however, first introduced glazes with a lead base and from that time we begin to lose the fresh *wet* colour always associated with the alkaline glazes of the Persians. Analysis shows that they used lead, but only occasionally and in small quantities, to aid their lustres. The lustred wares of Spain declined late in the thirteenth century, but not before its exportation to Italy by way of Majorca had stimulated the production of Italian Majolica. Della Robbia, about 1415, succeeded in colouring his tin glazes, and his finely modelled but somewhat crudely coloured reliefs usher in the era of Italian Faience. Patronized by the nobles the craft quickly took root and was blossoming profusely at Urbino, Gubbio, Pesaro, Faenza and other cities at the end of the fifteenth century.

Here we break ground and leave the chaste simplicity of the golden age to riot a blaze of exuberant decoration. Scraffito, slip, inlaid, applied, incised, raised, embossed and

modelled and painted embellishments; all are here. This era is chiefly notable for its splendid ruby lustres and the remarkable power and freedom, amounting to absolute abandon, of the brushwork and drawing shown by its artists. They used their lustres to heighten the effects of their painting and the results are in keeping with that romantic age. Alongside of it our best modern work is apt to look spiritless and dull.

Much splendid work was produced in Italy at this period, but in such a wide field there are naturally some places that exhibit technique rather than art. The student must go into it with appreciative faculties alert lest mere splendour should sweep him off his feet.

The wares and the potters of Italy penetrated north into Europe, to France, the Holy Roman Empire and Britain, starting or stimulating what was to prove an overwhelming flood of production. In Europe in pre-Roman times, a coarse, unglazed, built-up ware was general, it being of simple, somewhat clumsy but vigorous form, low-fired and friable. It was used chiefly for cinerary purposes, the Germanic peoples having a decided preference for vessels of horn, wood, or metal.

The Romans introduced the wheel and produced a far higher class of ware. Their importation of the fine red Samian pottery resulted in the fabrication of the vigorous Gallo-Roman and Romano-British pottery. This was good in shape and paste and characteristically decorated with slip, bosses, dots, and indentations. The later Gaulish work shows applied figures and highly finished scroll work. After the decline of Rome, Saxon and Germanic work shows a

distinctly retrograde tendency. It is often built up, strapped, banded, and bossed in imitation of the Romano-British. Though coarse and lacking in finish, it is full of freshness and character.

In Mediæval England, when pottery making was at a low ebb, the monasteries and travelling guilds of potters produced splendid encaustic tiles. These were inlaid with simple yet striking geometric designs, or animal or bird forms, both heraldic and symbolic.

In Europe for many years the domestic pottery remained coarse and primitive, showing still the arresting hand of the barbarian conquerors of Rome. The first signs of the Italian Renaissance are to be found in the rare Henri Deux or Orion ware. Palissy's desperate and romantic search for enamels was the prelude to the development of Rouen, Nevers, Lille, Moustiers, Sèvres, Marseilles, and other less important potteries. In France also early experiments led eventually to the fabrication of porcelain much on the lines of English porcelain, a frit being used instead of kaolin.

In Germany, as early as the fifteenth century, they produced fine stoneware highly decorated with relief patterns and colours. After long research Boettiger, by a lucky accident, discovered kaolin. Porcelain was made at Dresden in 1709, and many of the Dresden figures show a remarkably sympathetic alliance of potting, modelling and painting.

The success of the German ceramists led to a wide patronage of potters by kings and princes which quickly spread the knowledge of porcelain throughout Europe.

Long before this in the early part of the seventeenth century, potteries were established at Delft in Holland. Here was made the well-known ware painted in blue camaien on a fine white ground. This was for a time produced in great quantities, and the process of painting directly on to an absorbent ground led to a surprisingly fresh and skilful style.

In the middle of the seventeenth century English wares commenced to rise from the stagnation in which they seemed sunk since Saxon times. Toft, with his tygs and platters, Dwight, and his bellarmines, and Elers, with turned shapes, started a movement which was eventually to send English wares into all parts of Europe, even into the far Russias, to be known everywhere for its excellent workmanship. And in this flood of production in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was much that was technically unrivalled despite the fact that the Art of the potter is sometimes far to seek. Dwight is said to have produced a fritted porcelain in 1671, before the discovery of kaolin. This is doubtful, but his persistent research eventually led up to the fine pastes of Chelsea and Bow and the unrivalled “fine earthenwares” of Staffordshire.

This European revival gained tremendous impetus from the importation by the Portuguese of the wares of China. The wide scope of its decoration, both painted and modelled, pointed the way to most potters of the West during the heyday of European pottery. The magnificent single-colour pieces were not introduced until later when the break-up of the Empire rendered them accessible to Europeans. It is to them that the student must turn to see the summit of the potter’s art, which, it is logically contended, commences on

the wheel and ends at the glost oven with the potter, the only attendant from the pot's inception to its finish. Painting or modelling is not essential to its perfection and unless applied by a true disciple detracts rather than adds to the beauty of the piece.

In China, where tradition holds that earthenware was first made in 2698 B.C., the art of the potter, in body, shape, glaze, and colour, through centuries reached perfection. Porcelain is said to have been first made about 200 B.C., but this date is conjectural. What we do know unmistakably, however, is that the best work of their best periods is unrivalled. Depending primarily on form and colour, with here and there a subtle decoration in raised or incised line, in crackle or simple brushwork, it stands alone, and despite the omnipotent chemistry of to-day, defies imitation. Their forms are strong, bold, and dignified, yet subtle and delicate, too. Then, added to a wonderful range of colours, was a perfection of body that was for so long the despair of western imitators. It is here at the altar of perfection amidst the chaste richness of Tang and Sung and Ming that the true disciple must worship. And to those who must eat bread as well as make pots it is to be pointed out that these pieces at the time of their production fetched prices that compare favourably with the "fancy" prices given to-day.

To the Japanese also in great measure the same tribute is due. Although beginning later as disciples and scarcely getting so far as their masters, their more limited range of colour and form is set off by their restrained and even more tasteful decoration. The unique collection in the Boston Museum is an amplification of this bald statement. They

were often more concerned with the touch and texture of the pot than the more obvious appeal of decoration. Esoteric as it is to most occidentals it is rich in a pure æstheticism and a deep and beautiful symbolism that is slowly but surely having an influence on western art, just when it seems in some danger of dying out in Japan. The hermit kingdom of Korea, despite its midway position, produced pottery that is strangely beautiful and distinctive and worth much more than a passing notice.

In China the art decadence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coupled with internal revolutions, has sadly dimmed her plots, dispersed her potters, and all but destroyed her priceless traditions.

For the further development of pottery in Europe and America and Asia the student has many excellent books to consult. From the seventeenth century the ramifications are rapid and all-embracing, giving, however, more joy to the collector than to the artist. Modern work has made an enormous advance in the science of the craft. Since the “Eighties” it shows signs of a renaissance in æsthetics. Lustres of all shades, crystalline, star, and crackle glazes with safe methods of oxidizing and reducing in the fire, have been brought to perfection. Yet, with some few exceptions, commerce seems writ large upon them all and their very perfection of finish damns them in the eyes of an artist. Whichever way he looks, he must return again and again to refresh his eyes with the inspiring examples of the best that has survived from the near and far East.

Only an antiquarian humbug would wish to go back to ancient conditions even to produce old pots. But it is only by

seeing in so far as we may in museums and books the works of these ancient yet ever modern potters; by tracing their development, appreciating their qualities and attempting to work as they worked, honestly and unaffectedly, that we shall begin to approach the excellence and originality of their art. This study should not of course obey the direction it all too frequently follows. The slavish measuring by module and fraction of classic styles, the stark geometric analysis of Moorish ornament or the laborious copying of Chinese pattern is at best only art in cold storage. It should be self-evident that where an alien style is consciously imitated the result is sterility for the imitator. In others, it is apt to produce a powerful reaction that results in *Futurism* or some such self-conscious affectation. “The Greeks did not draw from casts nor did the Persians haunt museums,” says the harried student. No. But better than that, they were surrounded, if not by beauty, at least by nature naked and unashamed. They lived not easily maybe, but surely more gracefully, untrammelled by fashion, cult, or craze.

> “The earth his sober Inn
> And quiet pilgrimage.”

Their best work seems ever fresh, spontaneous, and untired. It must have been done with a spirit and real joy impossible to anyone but a true craftsman tremendously interested in his work, we might also add, his environment.

Naturally, present-day conditions must modify the struggle for existence. They may mar our best aim at times. Yet some few have worked wonders even in this age. To mention but two instances, W. De Morgan and the Martin

brothers, is to tell of high endeavour and great achievement. But we must not expect to get rich that way.

Pottery is an exacting and difficult craft, abounding in as many trials and disappointments as excitements and rewards. Its true devotee must suffer. Yet the delightful tale of Palissy's heroic battle should hearten the more fortunate student of to-day. It is good to read of the spirit in which Wedgwood, scientist though he was, approached his work. In a trade catalogue he says, "A Competition for Cheapness, and not for Excellence of Workmanship, is the most frequent cause of rapid Decay and entire Destruction of Art and of Manufacture." "Beautiful Forms are not to be made by Chance and they never were made nor can be made in any kind at small expense." Such sentiments rarely emanate from the modern commercial pottery.

Tradition, except the traditions of flawless glazes, certain soulless results, and commercial cheese paring; seems dead perhaps, but it will surely come to life again. To see the potter "thumping his wet clay," and seated at the wheel of ancient lineage, conjuring forth a wealth of gracious shapes, is to renew one's faith in the ultimate survival of simple honest handicraft even in this machine-ridden age. Masterpieces were never conceived in factories, and when we make pots primarily for love of them, not to sell them, we shall begin to beat back the manufacturer of debauched "Art" pots into that domestic and hygienic realm wherein his efforts are particularly admirable and effective. A craft that teems with such an endless variety of beautiful objects for such countless uses can never remain for all time the hand-maiden of commerce.

Hollowing the Ball

CHAPTER II

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Clays and Pastes

> “It is the Art which gives the value, and not the material.”

—Dresser.

Clay being the chief material used by the potter, it demands a description which, without being too technical, will give from the start a clear idea of the nature of clays or pastes in general use.

It would be a needless complication to enter here into a discussion of the chemical analysis of bodies and materials. Whilst the chemist can and does determine with exactitude the relative quantities of each component, he cannot yet, let us perhaps be thankful, lay down with the same certainty the structural and molecular changes all these compounds will undergo in the fire. The old potters’ rule “of thumb” or, rather, common sense and experience, still count for something.

Clay is the word generally applied to the natural article when used without preparation, or after picking and washing. Paste is the term used for all composite bodies that have been through a complicated process of washing, grinding, mixing, and sieving, or even fritting, according to the desired quality of the ware for which it is required. Natural clays range from the pure white and very infusible kaolin, containing only alumina and silica with a very small percentage of alkalies, to the impure grey, red, or brown