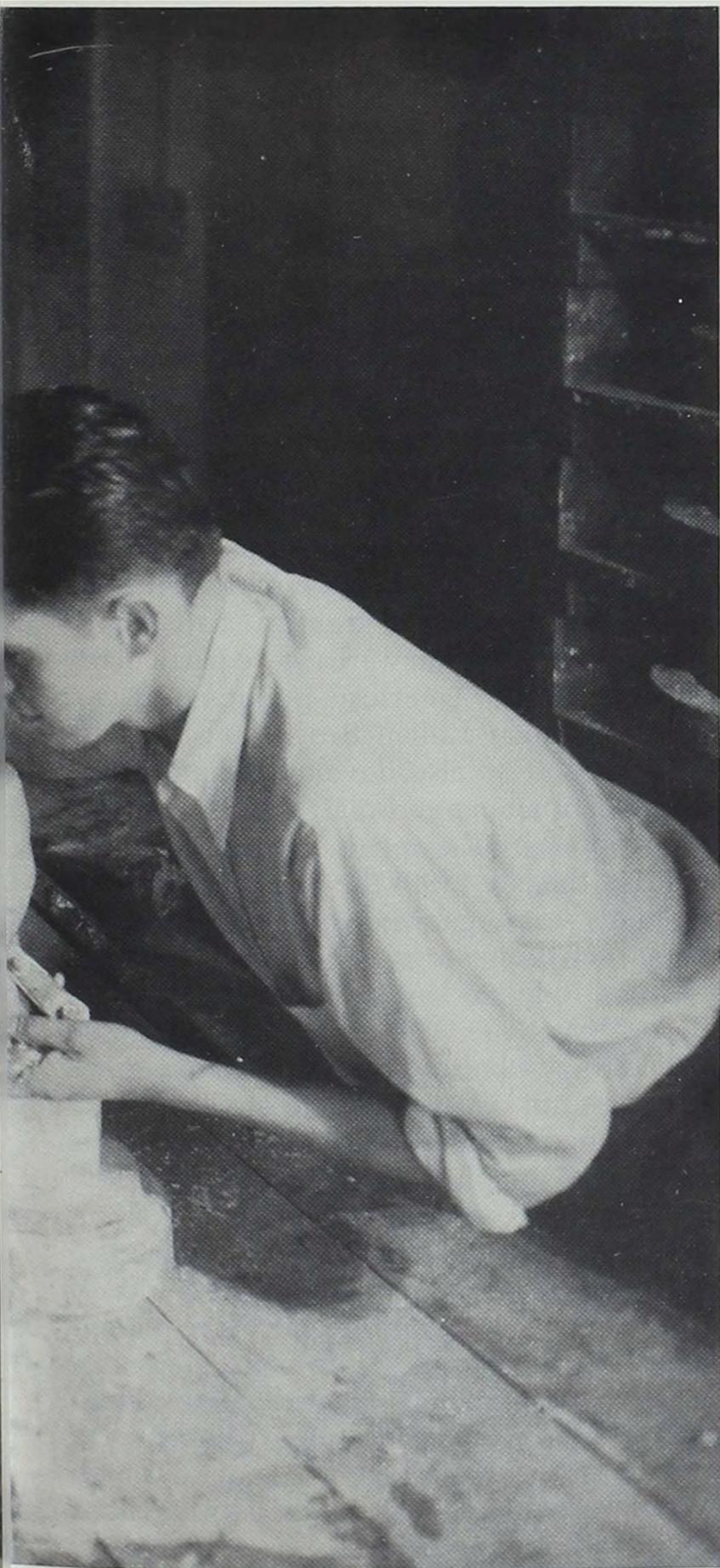




# A Collaboration in Clay

## Iowa State's Prairie Pottery

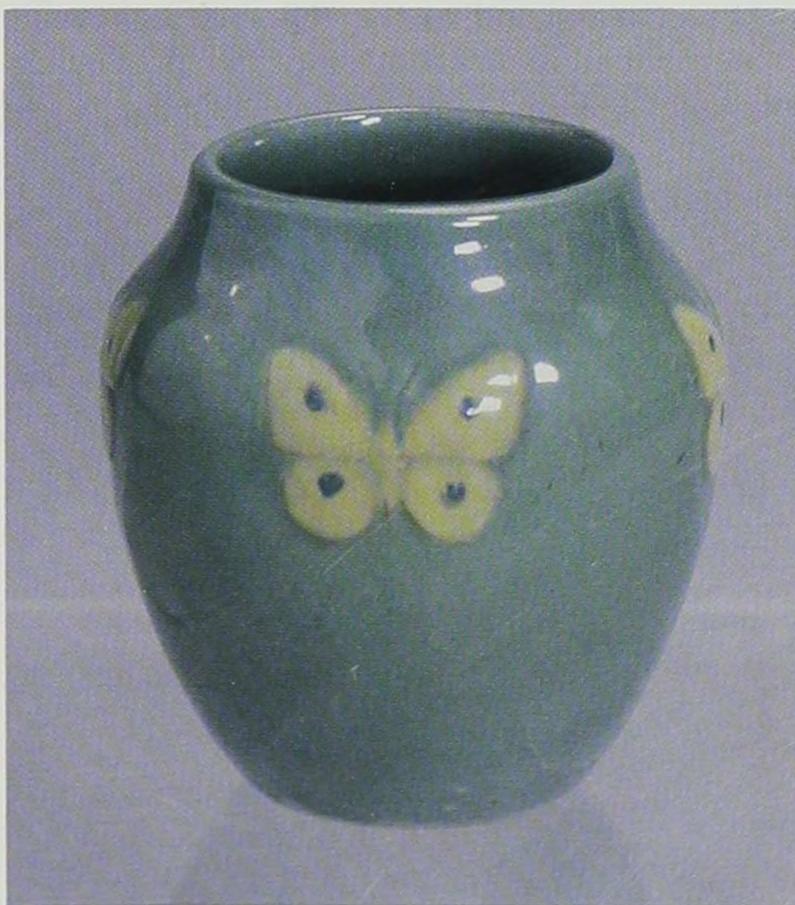
*by Susan Russo*



Paul Cox (at wheel) instructs two potters. In the 1920s Cox and designer Mary Yancey collaborated to create marketable, handcrafted art pottery. Right: Vase, Paul Cox, 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high. All ISC pottery shown here through the courtesy of Brunnier Gallery and Museum, Iowa State University, and photographed by Chuck Greiner, Front Porch Studio.

**F**OR SIX YEARS, from 1924 to 1930, two individuals at Iowa State College in Ames produced for sale hundreds of pieces of art pottery. Paul E. Cox, head of ceramic engineering, and Mary Lanier Yancey, an instructor, were involved in this commercial enterprise not because it was part of their teaching duties (it wasn't; they worked in the studio in their spare time) and not because it brought them extra income (it didn't; none of the profits went to either person). Their involvement — particularly Paul Cox's — was motivated by their own aesthetic philosophies and a need to publicize and promote the ceramic engineering program at Iowa State College and to generate income for purchasing materials and equipment for the program. Cox also hoped to create an awareness of a still largely untapped natural resource — Iowa's clay beds — that might build economic diversity in an agricultural state. His efforts were challenged, however, by the problems of profitably marketing handcrafted art.

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within an ongoing commercial organization. When any aspect of the union of artist and artisan is eliminated, the work ceases to be art pottery. In general, styles and techniques are varied, and the artist's individuality is commercially supported.

**L**ONG BEFORE art pottery ever came to be produced at Iowa State College, strong historical forces had been at work. Because Great Britain was the first European country to industrialize during the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that some of the earliest voices protesting the mechanization of goods came from the British. The International Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London awakened many cultural leaders to the lack of design standards in mass-produced goods. Many English intellectuals, especially John Ruskin and William Morris, called for a return to the simple aesthetic individualism of the Middle Ages, when art and artifacts revealed an authentic craft simplicity based upon a strong and enduring system of values; their writings led to the important aesthetic movement called the arts and crafts movement.

Directly and indirectly, the arts and crafts movement influenced attempts at producing interior furnishings (such as furniture, china, and art pottery) that would once again inspire the mass industrialized society of the West with a sense of beauty and style. As incomes rose for middle and lower classes, so did the demand for non-utilitarian objects for their homes. Art pottery was produced to meet that demand.

Many art potters derived their primary income in the relatively large-scale factories that were established to meet the growing demand. They left their own stamps of individuality on their work — through modeling or throwing, developing new glazes or clay compositions, or decorating. Not all pieces produced in such settings were strictly "art pottery." If a firm produced its artwares by applying industrial techniques and mass manufacture, in imitation of handcraftsmanship,

some would argue this to be "industrial artware" rather than art pottery because the pieces were not handcrafted, a basic tenet of the arts and crafts philosophy.

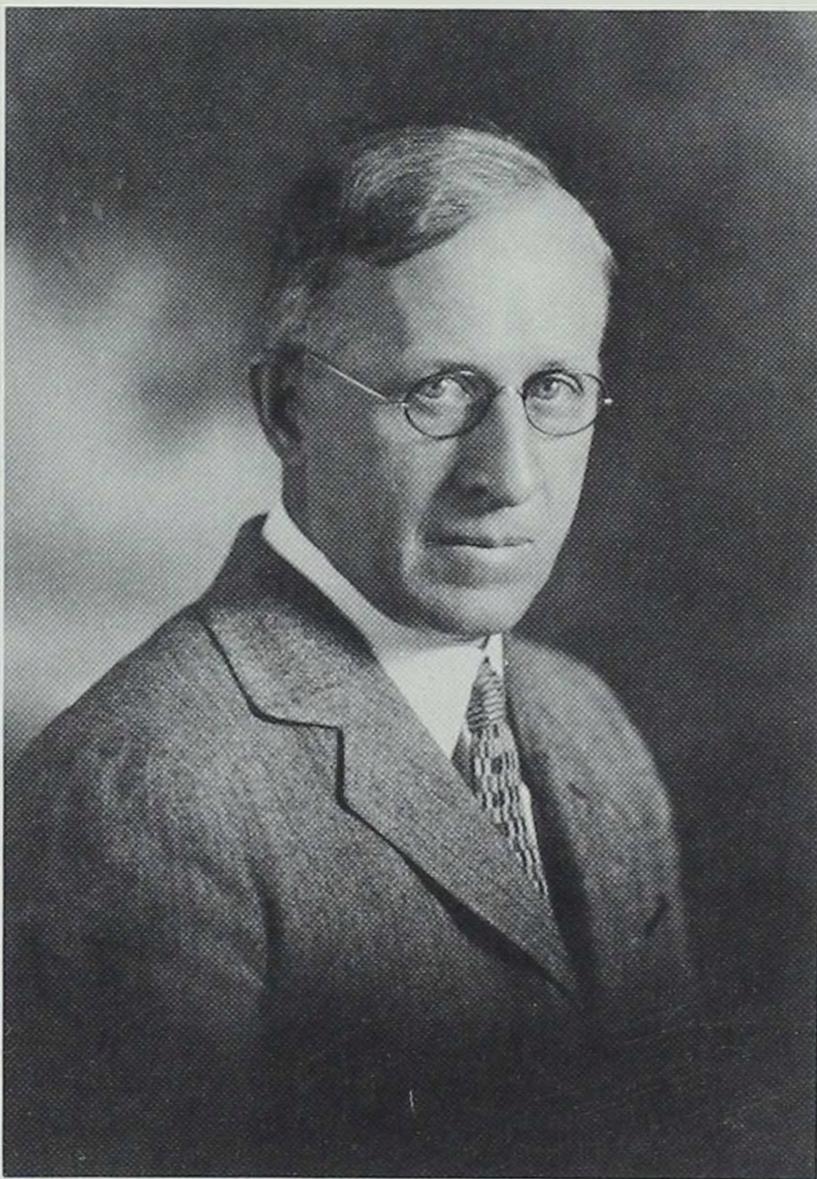
In the United States the art pottery movement began to flourish in the late nineteenth century. American potters largely adapted popular European design trends, such as two-dimensional oriental styles; the energetic, flowing lines of art nouveau; and the often two-dimensional, schematized repeat designs of arts and crafts patterns. To their credit, American designers did seek to create a craft tradition equivalent to Europe's medieval tradition by turning to crafts of the American Indian — weaving, basketmaking, and pottery. The geometric simplicity of design and handcraftsmanship of Indian wares were particularly appealing to the American public. And certainly, as scholar Lillian Bregman has noted, American potters also developed innovations such as airbrushing and matt glazes that were later adopted by European potters.

During the late 1890s the Society of the Arts and Crafts was organized to help potters display and sell their wares, necessary if they were to remain independent of industry. Although the Society of the Arts and Crafts promoted handicrafts as a better alternative to mass-produced wares, it largely failed to establish standards of high quality in America or to develop a methodology or philosophy, perhaps because of the emphasis upon individual creativity. A great deal of outright copying occurred, and no distinctive new pottery forms developed. Many feared that in America the art of pottery design was stagnating. They were especially sensitive to this when American work competed in European exhibitions. Worse, perhaps, was that most of the potters who represented American arts and crafts had little technical knowledge of their field. Blind experimentation was generally the answer if a new clay composition or glaze was needed. In some instances, new research was kept secret. The movement needed an organized effort to define standards and aesthetics and to disseminate technical information. One method of accomplishing this came about through the rise of college and university ceramics programs.

Located in western New York State, Alfred

University's New York School for Clay Working was the first school in the United States to offer a course in ceramic art and design. Under the leadership of English ceramist Charles Fergus Binns, Alfred University fostered in the United States the concept of formally training potters in the aesthetic and technical aspects of ceramics. Binns is regarded by many scholars as the founder of American studio pottery. His personal aesthetic sense, which favored classical simplicity in form as well as decoration, influenced many — including Paul Cox, who in 1905 became the second student to graduate from the three-year-old ceramics program at Alfred and who would eventually direct Iowa State College's program.

**I**N THE SOUTH, another educational institution had already begun a ceramics enterprise that would profoundly affect American art pottery and would directly influence the program at Iowa State. In 1886 in New Orleans, Newcomb College had been founded as part of Tulane University, through an endowment from Josephine Newcomb in memory of her daughter, Sophie. Likely influenced by the woman suffrage movement, Josephine Newcomb wanted to help young southern women obtain a liberal arts education that would enable them to earn a living wage. No doubt the economic circumstances of the area also influenced directions Newcomb College would take. Even though New Orleans was a commercial city, the South's agricultural base did not seem conducive to the flourishing of an art school, particularly because the South was emerging from hindering economic effects of Reconstruction. Many southern women needed to work for financial reasons. The presidents of Newcomb and Tulane decided that Newcomb College would blend the educational ideas of traditional female colleges, such as Vassar and Smith, with those of industrial institutions, such as Drexel and Pratt. Thus, in 1894 the Newcomb experiment in commercial production of art pottery began. As a model industry it would demonstrate the practicality



BRUNNIE GALLERY AND MUSEUM, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

At Iowa State, Cox (above) rejected the matt glazes, often in blues and greens, that he had developed at Newcomb. Below: Two examples of Newcomb pottery. Covered jars by Joseph Meyer (potter) and decorators Henrietta Bailey, 1918 (jar on left) and Sadie Irvine, 1920 (jar on right).

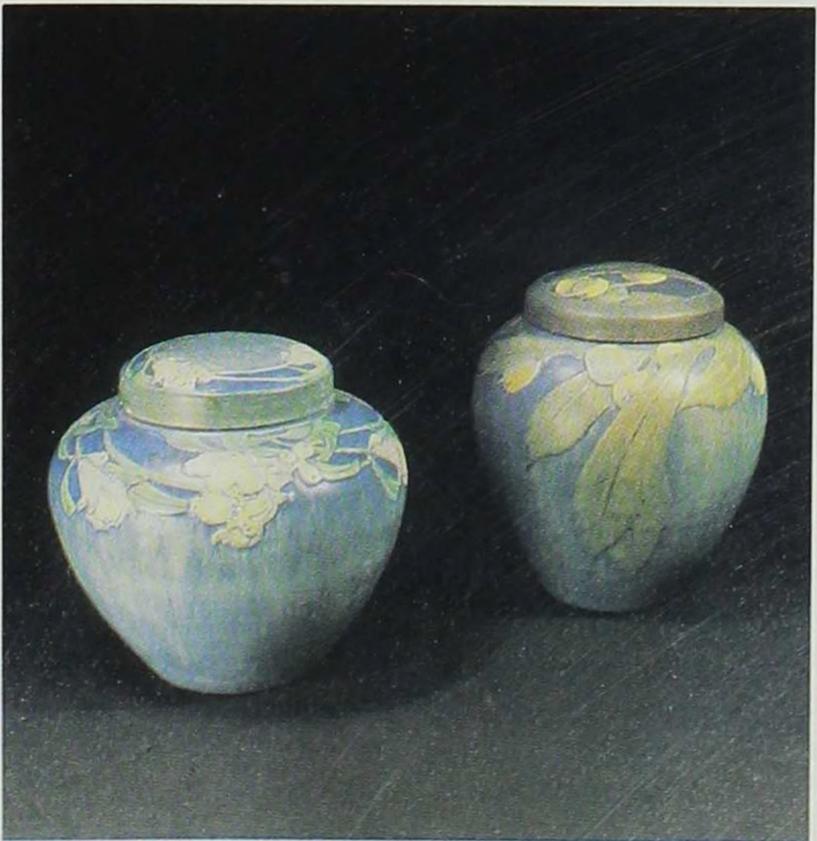
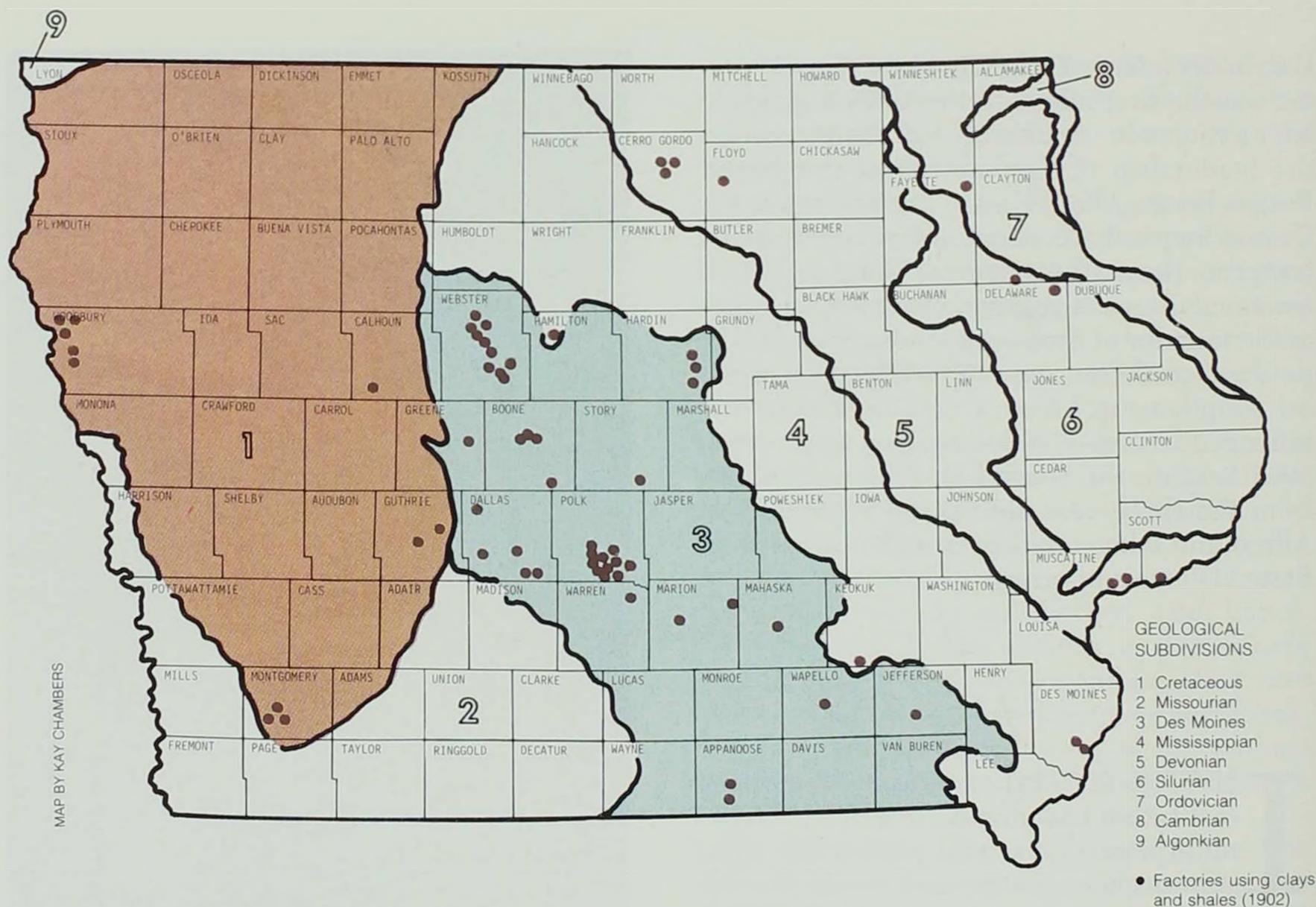


PHOTO BY ALISON J. SCOTT, COURTESY SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



This map, redrawn from a 1902 Iowa Geological Survey map, shows Iowa's nine geological subdivisions and the location (by dot) of factories then using clays and shales (largely to make brick and agricultural drain tile). Most factories were in Subdivisions 3 and 1 (colored). Cox used the original map in his proposals for greater use of Iowa's shale deposits.

of artistic training for women in a commercial venture using local resources.

By 1910 the output was modest at best, producing a few hundred dollars worth of pottery. Newcomb needed a trained ceramics technician who could improve the quality of the wares through controlled experimentation. That fall the college hired Paul Cox, graduate of Alfred University and student of Charles Binns. Cox immediately set out to improve the body composition of the clay by adding feldspar and flint.

The next year Cox tackled the problem of glazes. Elsewhere, other potteries were receiving critical acclaim for duller matt glazes (for instance, Rookwood in Cincinnati for its vellum and Hugh Robertson for his oriental crackle glazes). Despite the waning popularity of high-gloss glazes, they were still used at Newcomb until Cox developed a raw lead glaze of semi-matt texture to be used over the under-

glaze colors. After three firings this semi-transparent matt glaze produced a finish in which the underpainting appeared (as one writer described it) as "through a morning mist." Underglaze blues and greens proved particularly successful and soon replaced the old high-gloss glazes at Newcomb. To the public the blue and green glazes became the hallmark of Newcomb pottery. Cox also improved the technique of underglaze painting by carefully sponging the unfired bisque (unglazed, low-fired ware) to produce an even texture. And under Cox's leadership, incising decoration on the pots in the bisque state became the prevalent decorating technique, rather than painting or spraying a surface pattern.

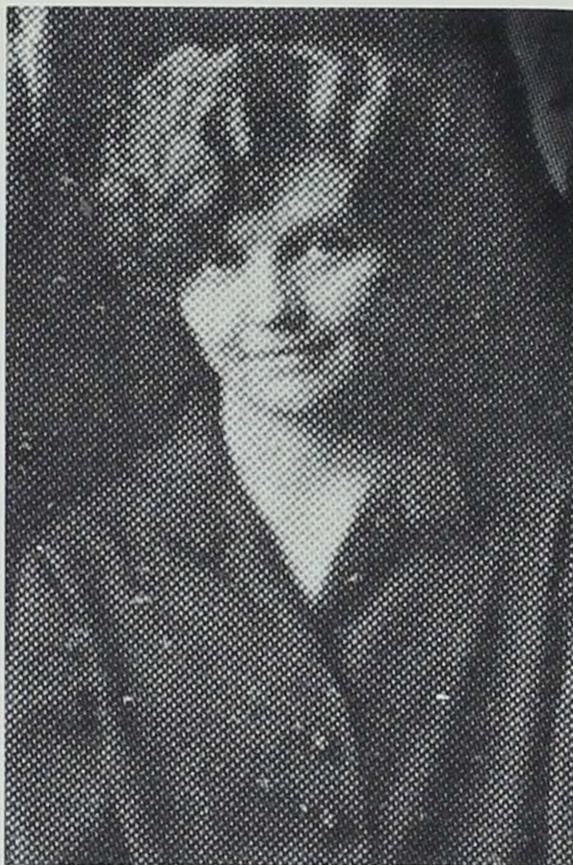
Cox's decisions were often prompted by what he thought was marketable, keeping in mind that one goal was providing a livelihood for the artist. Although certainly backed by artistic principles and good taste, he no doubt

moved toward more naturalistic designs because of what he thought would sell and later noted that when matt glazes were introduced "the pottery became much more popular, with the sales wares increasing noticeably. Large kilns were added and production developed on an improved mechanical basis. Thus, it became worthwhile financially to be a decorator in the Newcomb Pottery. This pottery," Cox would later write, "next to that of Rookwood, became the largest producer of individually designed art pottery in the country." Newcomb pottery would win several awards in exhibitions at home and abroad for many years before the program closed in 1940.

**M**EANWHILE AT IOWA State College in Ames, enrollment in ceramic engineering had increased slowly since its founding in 1906 as a department in the Division of Engineering. At that time, ceramic engineers were employed mostly by manufacturing concerns to make fired clay products, grinding wheels, glass, electrical porcelains, and spark plugs, and to develop machinery and equipment. There were perhaps close to sixty plants in Iowa manufacturing brick and agricultural drain tile.

Seeking ways to attract more students, the department logically recognized that making pottery was a natural sideline for ceramics programs and might pull in more students. In 1915 the first class in modeled pottery was offered, and women from the Division of Home Economics, as well as engineering students, enrolled eagerly. For the next few years the class continually had at least twenty students enrolled.

In 1920 Paul Cox was offered the position as head of ceramic engineering at Iowa State College. Cox accepted the job and soon determined that the task confronting him involved more than publicizing his department and attracting students. Iowa's political leaders sought ways to infuse industry into a cyclical agricultural economy. Cox agreed with manufacturers of clay products that using Iowa's largely untapped shale deposits was one way to



Mary Yancey worked as the designer in the artist/artisan collaboration with technician and promoter Paul Cox.

expand the state's industrial base. Cox also needed to devise a way to buy equipment and materials for a first-rate program.

Paul Cox was perhaps the consummate public relations man. He worked tirelessly to advertise ceramic engineering at Iowa State. As part of an extension program in Iowa, he traveled widely to educate the public about ceramics and its importance to industry and home decoration. At the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines, he set up a potter's wheel under the grandstand. At that time a potter's wheel was a novelty in the Midwest, and he attracted curious crowds. Throwing pots on the wheel and giving them away to the onlookers, Cox talked nonstop about the ceramic engineering program in Ames. He wrote prolifically, for professional journals and popular magazines, and kept the public aware of his department's pottery production, exhibitions, and sales.

With Cox's enthusiasm and drive the ceramic engineering program began to grow. By 1924 thirty men were enrolled in the four-year program, and fifty women from other departments (many from home economics) were in the modeled pottery class. The teaching staff included George Peterson and Ethel Bouffleur. Cox needed someone to take over for Bouffleur as teacher of the modeled pottery class. He hired another graduate of Newcomb — Mary Yancey. Yancey had received a bach-



Bowl, Paul Cox, 5½" h. Day lilies sprawl over the blue glaze exterior. Green leaves match the interior glaze.

elor's degree in 1922 and had taught ceramics and jewelry at a Cincinnati high school.

**T**HAT YEAR Yancey and Cox began their six-year collaboration in producing commercial art pottery. By December, plans were taking shape. Cox wrote his mentor, Charles Binns, "I am carrying a rather heavy load of detail because we plan to produce a pottery on the Newcomb plan and at present I am both potter and research man. I have a good designer from Newcomb but I plan to develop, if possible, a special technique of our own. I wonder if I am man enough to really devise something both good and original."

Cox did not spell out what he meant by producing a pottery "on the Newcomb plan." But there would be many similarities between the Newcomb program in New Orleans and what would be accomplished at Iowa State College. Like Louisiana, Iowa needed to infuse new industry into an essentially agricultural economy. And as in Louisiana, Iowa's deposits of shales were suitable for pottery, and thus held economic potential. And like Newcomb,

Iowa State College would be the principal means of implementing this economic goal.

Pieces produced at Iowa State would be handcrafted and indigenous, as they were at Newcomb. Whereas Newcomb pottery often depicted flora and vegetation of the South, Iowa State College pottery would incorporate prairie motifs and plants native to Iowa. Newcomb used indigenous Louisiana shale; in Iowa, Cox would use shale from deposits near Fort Dodge, Des Moines, Adel, Nevada, and Mason City. He often used the clay in its pure form, washing the shales but adding nothing to them.

Certainly Cox and Yancey's prior training and experiences at Newcomb influenced their Iowa work. Cox was proud of his association with Newcomb and personally ranked Newcomb pottery second in importance only to Rookwood. Established in 1880, the Rookwood Pottery employed a division and specialization of labor in producing its pottery. This approach allowed greater artistic expression and incorporation of new stylistic trends, not to mention greater output. Rookwood's modern manufacturing techniques set an example that was fol-

lowed by most art potteries in this country.

At Iowa State Cox was very conscious of trying to produce a ware that was as technically and artistically good as Newcomb's. Yancey's work is Newcombesque in her precise execution of design motifs that enhance the shape of each piece.

**B**UT COX AND YANCEY did break away from Newcomb in what was perhaps their most innovative decision — using tin enamel glazes rather than the matt finishes that had helped popularize Newcomb pottery. Perhaps here Cox and Yancey acted on their desire to do something original, "to develop a special technique of our own." Cox chose a basic transparent glaze that could be turned into various colors. By adding different amounts of cobalt or manganese or nickel, for example, Cox could produce blues or browns or grays — as well as greens, white, and yellows from other powdered compounds. Blood red was produced by adding chrome tin

pink. The glaze fired well on a variety of clays, ranging from red shales through stoneware clays to faience bodies that use varying amounts of whiting.

Cox threw the pottery freehand on a potter's wheel, and later, while the clay was leather-hard, he turned or trimmed the walls and foot of each pot. Cox threw the vast majority of the work, but Yancey did throw an occasional piece.

Enhancing the form of each piece, Yancey carved or incised a design and decorated it with inlaid painting. She often created abstract or realistic patterns of clover, lilies, poppies, jonquils, tulips, blackberries, maple seedlings, and pine cones and needles. She stamped or painted the bottom of the piece with the college's mark ("ISC-Ames," circled), plus "Cox" and a circled Y for Yancey. (Occasionally a piece is labeled only with the college's and Yancey's marks, but not Cox's.)

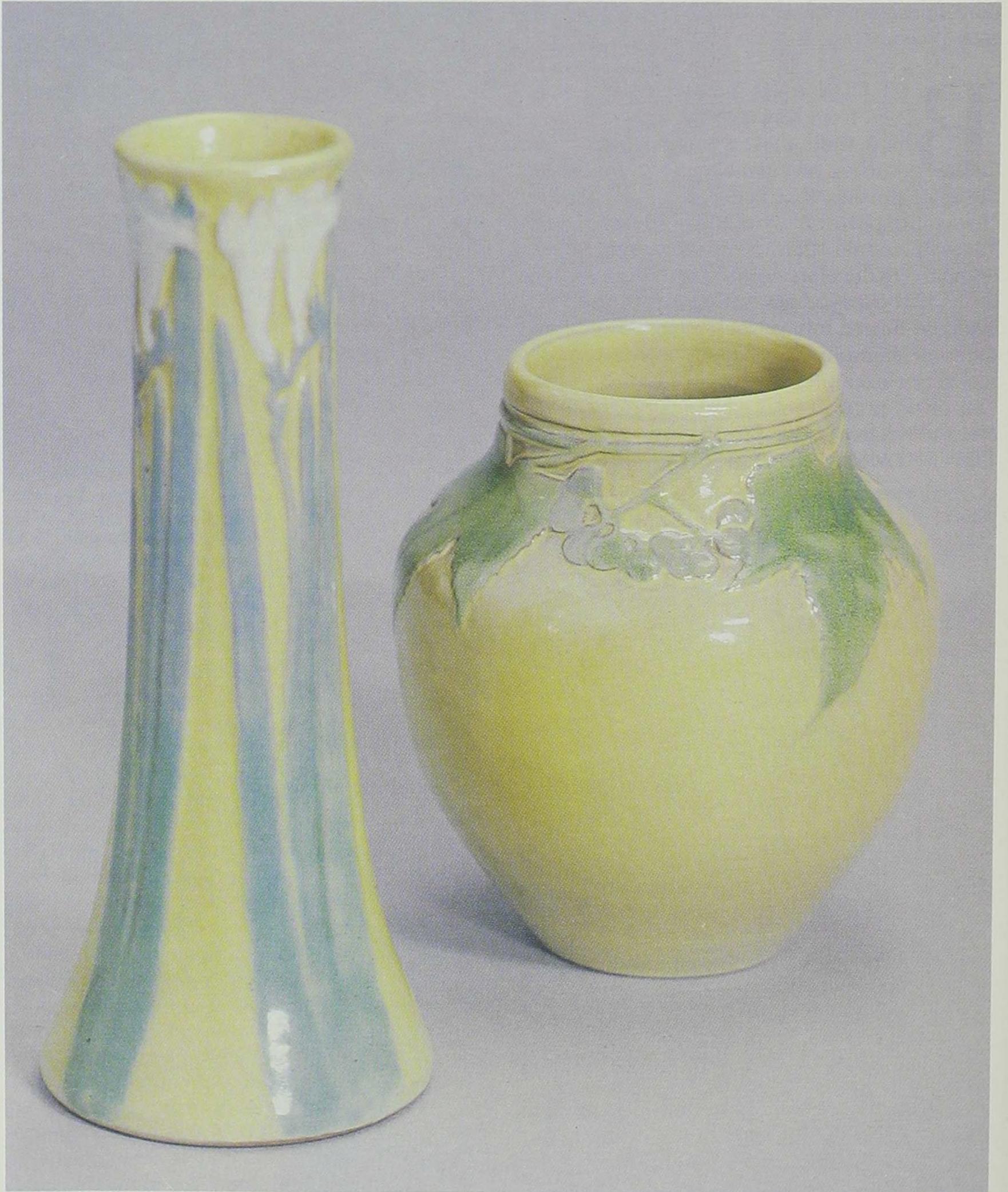
Cox and his engineering students did all the kiln work and mixed glazes. After the biscuit



Green vase, Mary Yancey, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ "h. Blue bowl, 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ "h. Cox added powdered cobalt to a basic transparent glaze to produce blues. Different powdered compounds produced other colors.

Cylindrical vase, Yancey, 8¼" h. Vase in background, Yancey, 5½" h. Yancey often chose Iowa flora as design motifs. Here, jonquils stretch

to the rim of the slender vase, and grape leaves and grapes rest on the neck of the other. Cox supported Yancey's choice to work in lively colors.



firing, Cox dipped each piece in the major glaze. Because the glaze was a commercial type, it required firings of ten or twelve hours beyond the glassy stage (considerably longer than the six to eight hours that hobby potters might fire).

Yancey scraped the color from the design and with a fountain pen filler, brush, or medicine dropper added new colors. Once they were dry, she rubbed the decorative areas level with her fingertip to exactly match the thickness of the base glaze. With a spray gun Cox applied a final, thorough coat of glaze to the entire piece.

ONE CAN ONLY estimate how much pottery Cox and Yancey made — perhaps at least seven or eight hundred pieces. Cox would later state that \$10,000 or \$12,000 worth of art pottery had been made at Ames. Prices ranged from \$2.50 to \$50, with an average selling price of \$10 to \$14. Smaller pieces averaged \$3 or \$4. Cox priced the best pieces between \$20 to \$50 — though these were reserved for exhibitions and were not immediately for sale.

Cox had decided to market the pottery as an exclusive, high-priced ware because it was handmade and every piece was an original. He was annoyed by the “kick-about prices” on handcrafted products, the designs of which were never duplicated. Artistically speaking, he ranked the ISC wares with the best in the United States. Although pricing was generally below that of pottery produced at Rookwood and Newcomb, it perhaps was high for a mid-western agricultural economy falling into a depression. Prices above \$10 or \$12 were probably out of range of the average citizen’s pocketbook. (In 1926, by way of example, \$12 could buy a walnut-finish dresser.)

Cox exhibited the pottery wherever possible in Iowa and around the country. He aggressively contacted museums and galleries to book exhibitions. Pieces were included in the Traveling Exhibition of American Pottery of the Federation of Women’s Clubs, and many were sold as a result of these exhibits. During this time presenting papers on American art pottery was in vogue among women’s art clubs in Iowa. Club women often solicited Cox for

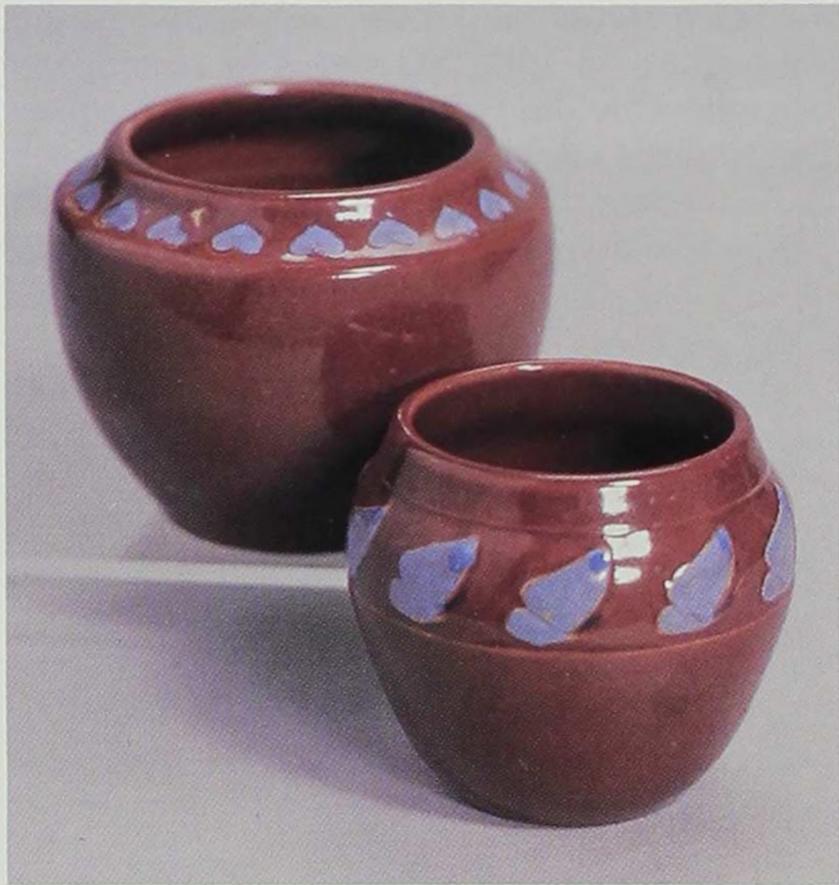
written material, and if the correspondent did not request sample ISC wares to accompany her talk, Cox did not hesitate to offer some. Two or three sales generally resulted from each club meeting. Cox gave the women’s clubs a 25 percent discount off the list price, allowing them to put the savings into a special scholarship or book fund.

The pottery was sold on the Iowa State campus, and several agents in Iowa handled it on consignment, though many had difficulty selling the wares. Reactions to the pottery were mixed. The women’s clubs, often effusive in their praise of the quality of the work exhibited, also expressed their delight that the pottery was made in Iowa. When criticism came, it came in two forms: the pottery was too high-priced, or the enamel glazes were not appealing.

In Iowa City, the proprietor of the Davis Gift Shop wrote Cox that he personally preferred matt glazes to the high-enamel glazes of ISC pottery. In response Cox explained that the composition of Iowa shales lent itself to the making of faience (earthenware decorated with opaque colored glazes), and by tradition faience is tin-enameled. When choosing glazes to apply to Iowa clays, Cox had come to believe that tin enamels increased the indigenous quality of the faience.

Furthermore, he and Yancey were striving for a style that was “lively” and a finish that would always look clean. To Cox, a matt finish looked “shabby” after being on display for a long time, even when washed with a grit soap. He had grown tired of the dominance of blues and greens in American art pottery (even though he had helped start the trend at Newcomb) and now enjoyed the wider color palette available with tin enamels. Cox considered the preponderance of matt glazes on pottery as a waste of other materials if all light was to be absorbed rather than reflected.

In mid-November 1926, a New York antique and pottery dealer named Adelaid Ehrich wrote Cox about the shipment he had sent her. Ehrich did not care for either the glazes or shapes of the pottery. In her opinion, a piece of pottery should be not only pretty, but useful. If craftspeople gave more consideration to the relationship of each piece to its environment,



Bowl with hearts, Cox, 3½" h. Vase with butterflies, Cox, 3¼" h. Cox favored high-gloss tin enamel glazes for their consistently clean look and their greater reflection of light.

Ehrich continued, they would be more artistically and commercially successful. And she stated her own particular grievance against vases glazed in colors that did not harmonize with any known flower.

Ehrich's criticism probably was fresh in Cox's mind ten days later; in a letter he wrote that day he explained, "Mary L. Yancey, my designer, has chosen to work in lively colors and expects the purchaser to use the wares as color emphasis rather than for harmony. We want to do something distinctive," Cox continued, "and Miss Yancey has decided to try out this thought. It is easy to use a piece that blends without effort by the owner, but calls for intellectual effort if the surroundings must be cared for and Miss Yancey is asking for this effort."

ONCE PAUL COX determined the course that art pottery at ISC was to follow, he held to it. What he and Yancey produced in collaboration was to be representative of ISC pottery. Cox did not allow his personal preference for undecorated pottery to influence design decisions. Much like his mentor, Charles Binns,

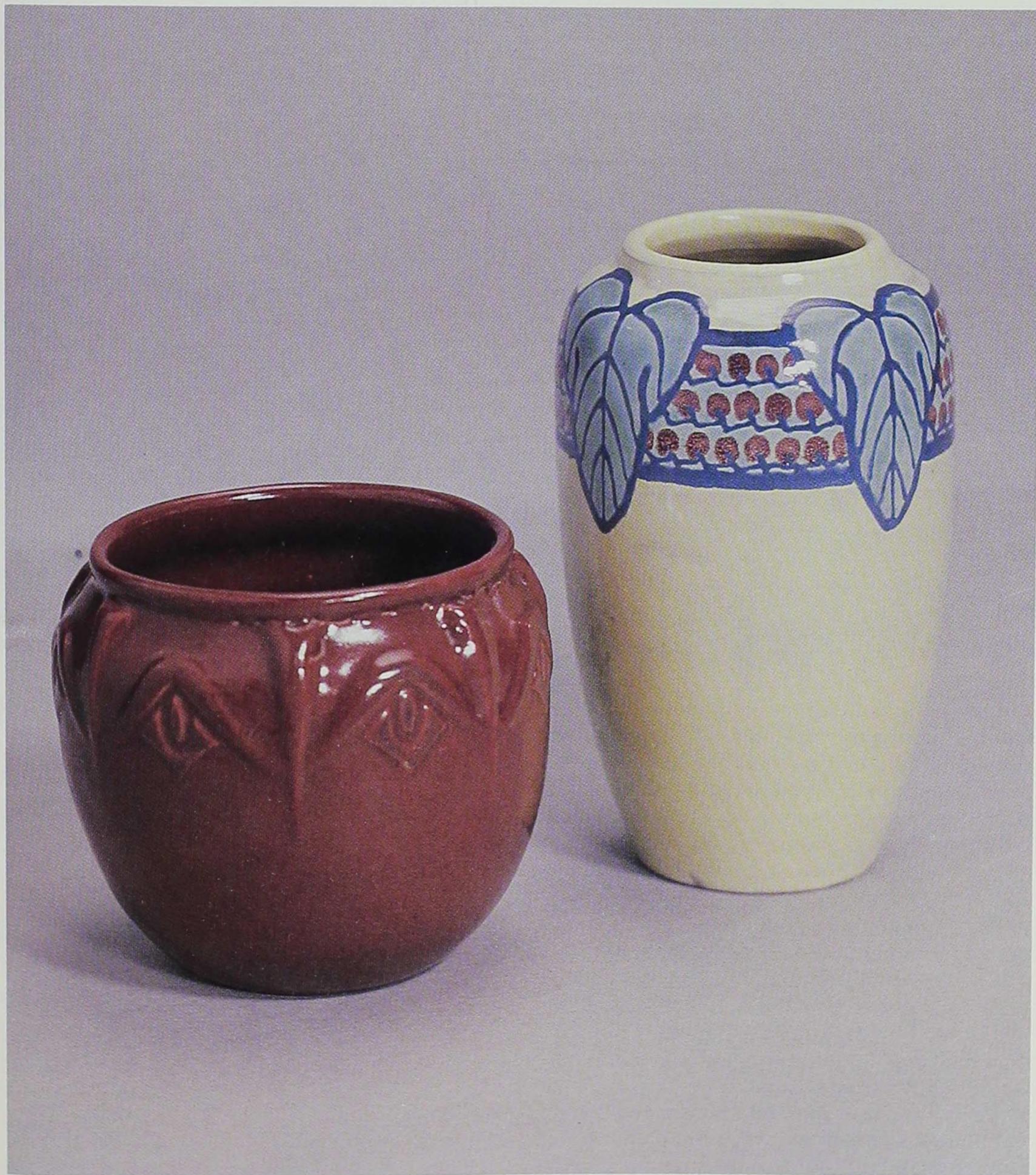
Cox believed that the Greek and Chinese potters in their search for classical simplicity had already given the world the best in ceramic form. But here Cox's sense of marketing held sway over his sense of aesthetics. In a letter to the Davis Gift Shop he confided, "Within our own circle and not for publication, I much prefer my pictures on canvas or etcher's paper, and my pottery without any little flowers, and I prefer to put my flowers into my vases and to have beauty that way. Most decoration detract[s] from the form rather than add[s] to it, but the average person wants to put some sort of design on the pot, and we have Miss Yancey on that account."

From time to time, when sending a shipment of pottery for exhibition, Cox would include a few of his own large-scale pieces that Yancey had not decorated. He did not offer these pieces for sale because he did not want to compete with Yancey's work. But he did want to acquaint the public with the idea of using larger vases and standing ashtrays to decorate lobbies of hotels, hospitals, and libraries.

Cox's personal pieces often received more favorable response than Yancey's decorated items. With irritation, he wrote the Davis Gift Shop that if the owner wanted undecorated pottery with matt finishes Cox was willing to make it because it could be crafted a lot more easily than the pottery he and Yancey produced. There is no indication that he carried through on this. When he received serious inquiries on the production of such pottery, however, Cox generally offered only to share his technical knowledge. He was willing, he said, to help others do the work themselves or to find someone to do it for them.

Would sales have been higher if Cox had followed his own sense of aesthetics in marketing art pottery? Perhaps. Yet Cox often maintained that he did not perceive himself as an artist — a technician and a sound potter of artistic tendencies, yes — but not a true artist. Yancey agreed in this assessment. Years later she would describe Cox's personality as "very direct — curt as opposed to suave. Utterly sincere. Intelligent but not intellectual. Highly motivated. Capable, but not 'artistic.' Appreciative of art achievement and individuality." In their collaboration Mary Yancey filled the

Red vase (Yancey?), 3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"h.  
Yellow vase, Yancey/Cox, 6"h.  
A frequently used blood-red  
glaze was produced by adding  
chrome tin pink to the trans-  
parent glaze. Cox enjoyed the  
wider color palette of tin  
enamel glazes.





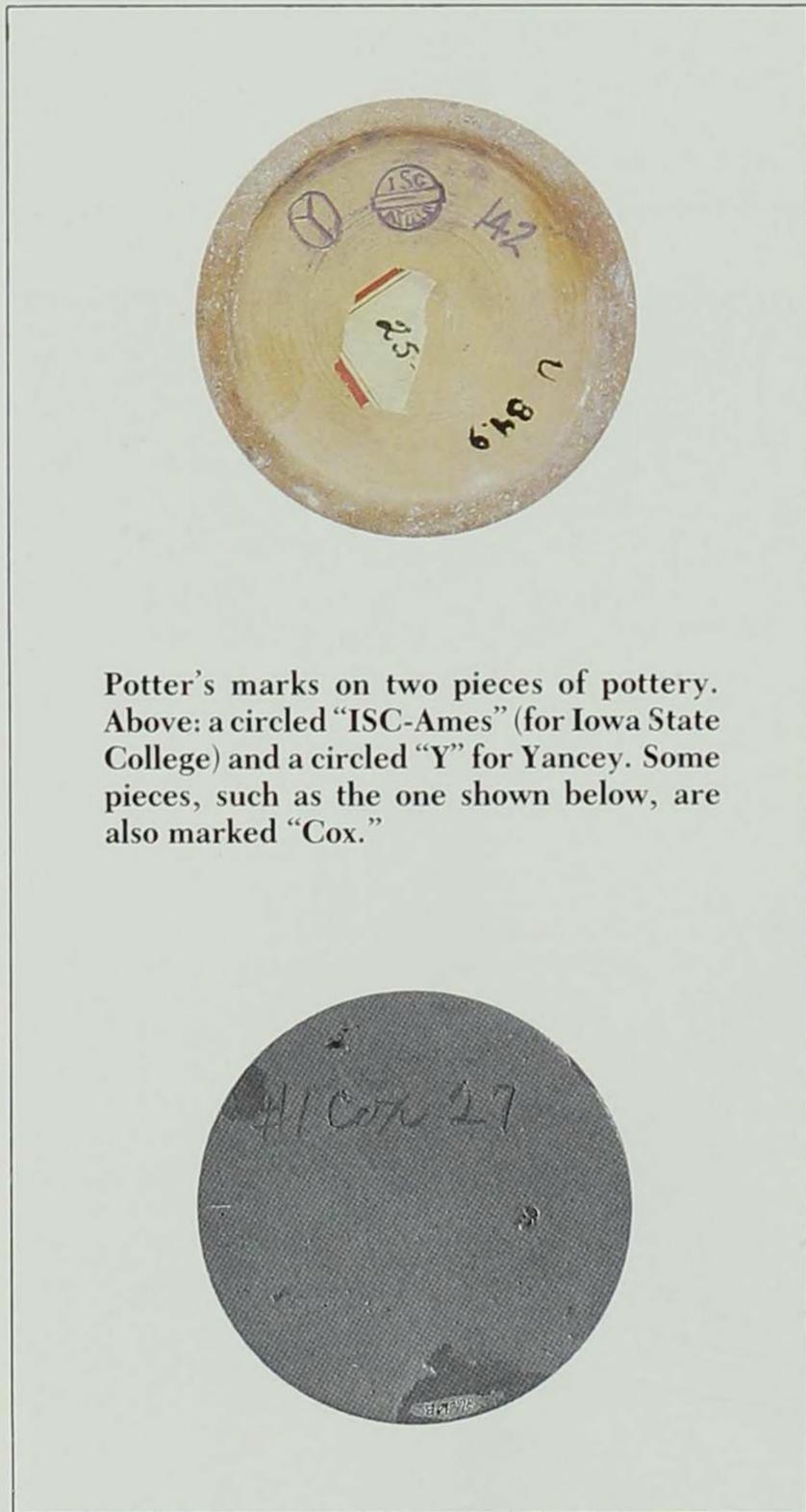
role of artist, and Cox greatly respected her work as a designer for her honest drawing, design, and color. Cox believed that blending their talents was essential for producing art pottery that was technically and artistically successful and commercially marketable.

Cox continually looked for ways to promote ISC art pottery. Cox's students made small ceramic pitchers, tiles, and vases to offer visitors during open house at the pottery. He and Yancey encouraged their students to create parade floats for the annual Veishea student celebration in the spring. In 1926 their float won second place with a towering Wedgwood-type vase reportedly over ten feet high. Cox did not let these publicity opportunities go unnoticed. In 1927 he wrote the dean of the Engineering College, Anson Marston, "It may

Blue bowl, Cox, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ "h. Green vase (Yancey?), 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ "h. A circled Y on the bottom of the green vase suggests that it is Yancey's work, as does its stylized, repeating design (compared to Cox's often more simple designs).

Bowl (Yancey?), 3½" h. Vase,  
Yancey, 8" h. Yancey often used  
a design motif to enhance the  
shape of each piece. Here, dif-  
ferent positionings of similar  
flowers accentuate the shape of  
each piece.





Potter's marks on two pieces of pottery. Above: a circled "ISC-Ames" (for Iowa State College) and a circled "Y" for Yancey. Some pieces, such as the one shown below, are also marked "Cox."

be of interest to you to know that I have been given publicity for the Veishea float in four publications, the combined circulation of which will be close to 300,000 and one of them reaches every crockery dealer almost in America, and even goes abroad."

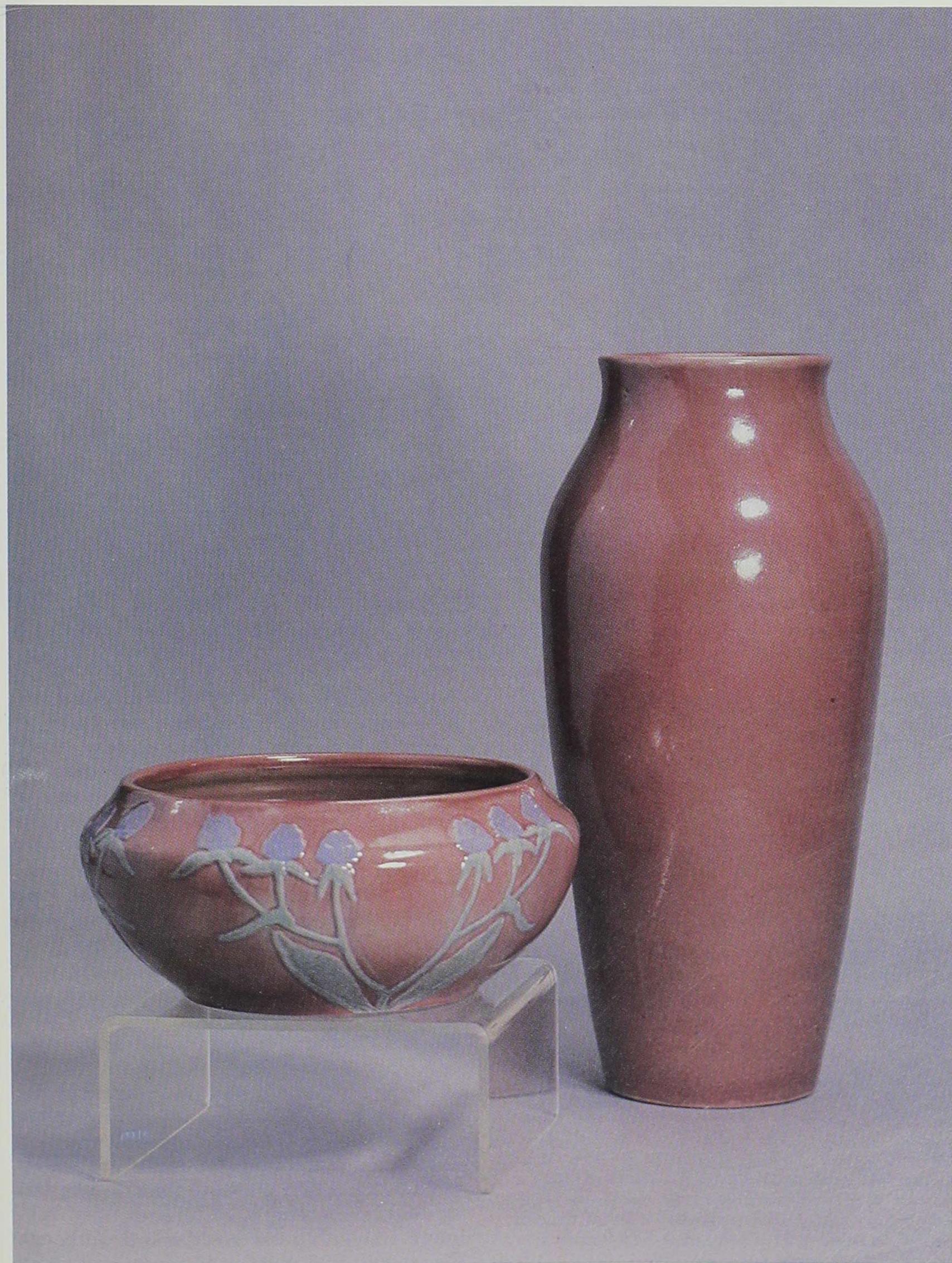
The year 1927 may have been their peak year. Over two hundred students were enrolled in Yancey's modeled pottery class. Cox and Yancey were invited to exhibit six to ten significant pieces in a show of the best work in contemporary American pottery at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York. The ISC pottery was exhibited among the works of the Rookwood Pottery, Adelaide Robineau, Mary Sheerer, Leona Nicholson,

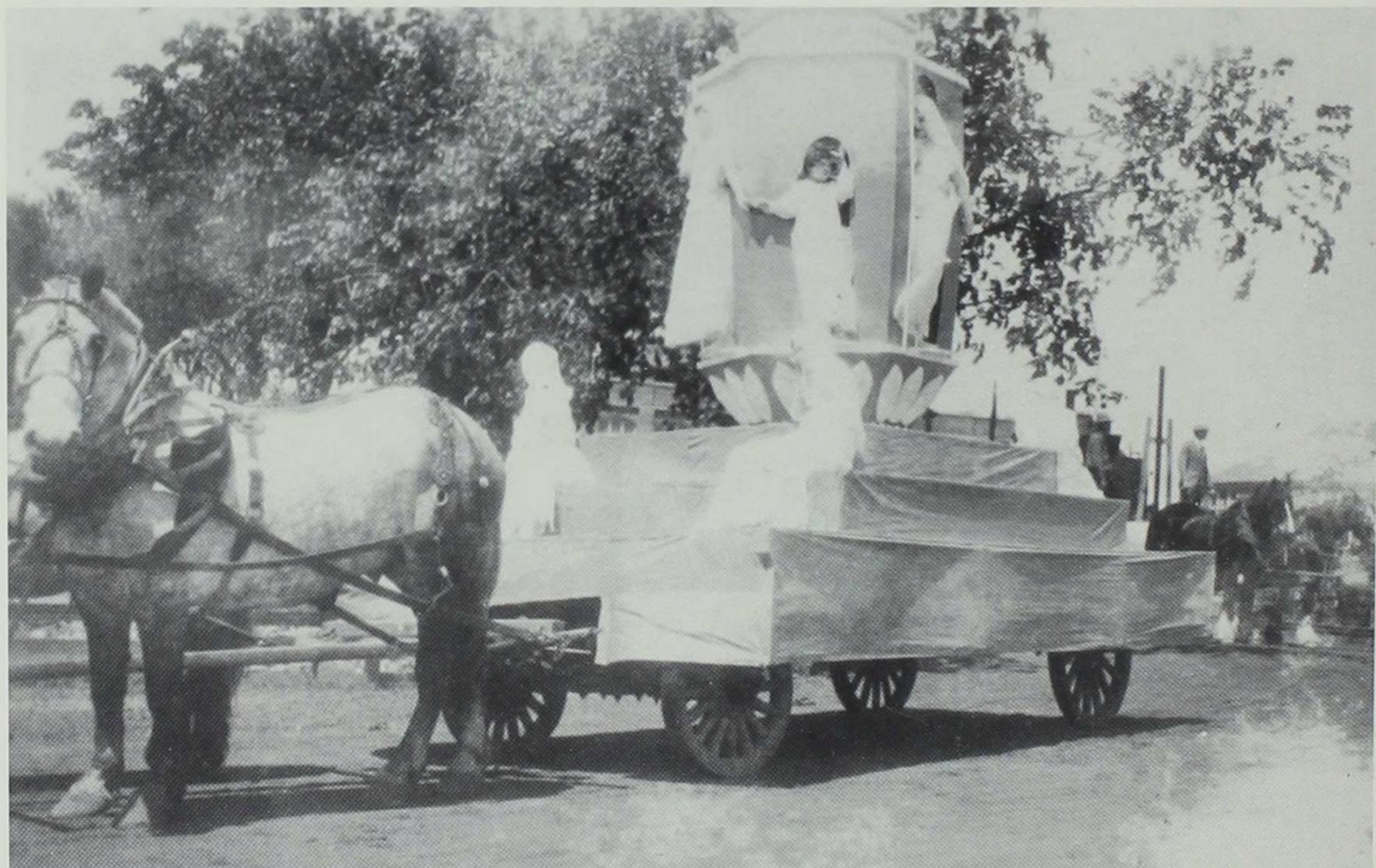
Bowl, Yancey, 4¼" h. Tall vase, Cox, 15¼" h. Personally favoring classical simplicity, Cox occasionally distributed his own larger, simpler pieces to encourage the idea of using large pottery in lobbies and public places. "Most decoration detracts from the form," he wrote, "but the average person wants to put some sort of design on the pottery and so we have Miss Yancey for that."

Charles Binns, and others. Cox also sent representative pieces to national ceramics meetings in Detroit and Atlanta to be viewed by manufacturers and educators. Accompanying the exhibitions was a gleaming sign printed on glass in red and gold that read "Ames Pottery Made from Iowa Clays."

Cox considered their art pottery to be a technical and artistic success and was extremely proud of it. But ever a pragmatic man, he candidly admitted that sales were slow and that financially speaking it was a "fizzle." Even though sales did not go well, Cox understood that such endeavors take time (the Newcomb program had taken over twenty years to develop). Yet by 1928, Yancey was spending less time decorating pottery. She directed her efforts more towards making terra cotta heads, the Veishea floats, and teaching design to advanced ceramic students. Hence, of the six years of production, only four were of much consequence.

**T**HE ARTISTIC collaboration between Paul Cox and Mary Yancey ended in 1930 when Yancey married ISC ceramic engineering student Frank Hodgdon and moved to Massachusetts. When Anson Marston retired as dean of the Engineering College in 1932, Cox lost the administrative support he had enjoyed for the production of the pottery. And the entire nation by then was suffering the effects of the Great Depression. The economic devastation felt in the Midwest and certainly in Iowa throughout the 1920s had spread across America. The generally somber mood was translated into budgetary austerity, in the business community and in the academic community. Although Cox's correspondence does not mention it, surely the economic times contributed to consumers' reluctance to buy ISC pottery. More than once in the 1930s he stated that if





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Yancey worked with students to build Veishea floats promoting ceramic engineering; in 1926 this tribute to Wedgwood won second place. In turn, Cox used such publicity opportunities to nationally promote ISC art pottery.



Tile, 4¼" square. View of Campanile on Iowa State campus. Cox's students produced tiles and small pitchers and vases as souvenirs for guests to the open houses held at the pottery. Cox also set up a potter's wheel at the state fair and, as he shaped Iowa clay on it, he told onlookers about the pottery program.

the depression ever ended and if times became good again, he hoped to make more art pottery.

Cox had hoped that ISC pottery would advertise Iowa's natural clay resources for potential industries, bring beauty to those who viewed and purchased the wares, and promote and help finance a fledgling university ceramics program. The program did influence one or two small plants in Iowa to begin production. There is no evidence that the plants survived the Great Depression, but in a sense Cox did meet his goal to stimulate industry in Iowa. That the pottery was artistically successful is a credit to Cox and Yancey. That it was not a financial success was in many ways beyond their control.

The high pricing of wares — justified by the great amount of time required of handcrafted labor — has been a recurring problem within the history of the arts and crafts movement. What began in part as a movement to create art for the middle and lower classes often produced wares that few could afford. Although the art pottery movement had fared well across

the nation and the major potteries had been enormously successful, the movement by now was declining. Economic pressures following World War I had forced many art potters into academic institutions and industries. Ironically, by 1920 the only means of economic survival for many art potteries was to mass-produce pottery — the very action that the arts and crafts movement had attempted to counteract. Potters who continued to struggle to produce a “pure” handcrafted pottery became the basis of the studio pottery movement, in which the studio potter alone was responsible for a piece from beginning to end. Studio potters worked in small studios with small kilns, or taught at colleges and universities where kilns were at their disposal.

After leaving Iowa State College, Mary Yancey Hodgdon became a studio potter. In 1931 she founded Clay Craft Studios in Massachusetts with three other women. Two years later, she joined the faculty at Fullerton Junior College, outside Los Angeles, where she became a renowned ceramist. She retired from Fullerton in 1962.

Paul Cox left Iowa State in 1939 and never returned to academic life. Instead, he tried his hand at several ventures, including operating a commercial pottery for a few years in Baton

Rouge. After his retirement, Paul Cox remained active in the ceramics world through his monthly contributions to *Ceramic Age*. He died in 1968 at the age of 89 in Baton Rouge. It is ironic—but not unusual—that although the inability to continue producing art pottery at Iowa State College was a great disappointment to him, it has made the pottery quite rare today, and only more esteemed by collectors. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The University Archives, Iowa State University (Ames) and the College Archives, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University (Alfred, New York) hold letters and other materials written by Paul E. Cox that were used in researching this article. The author's interviews with Mary Yancey Hodgdon in 1985; with Dr. David Wilder, head of the Department of Material Science and Engineering (Iowa State University); and with former ceramic engineering students yielded more information. Articles written by Cox that were consulted include “Potteries of the Gulf Coast” and “A Review of Glaze Making Aids” in *Ceramic Age* (1936 and 1948); and “Kilns, Furnaces, Bodies and Glazes for Small Commercial Production and Educational Work,” *Journal of the American Ceramic Society* (Aug. 1928). The story of Newcomb pottery was compiled from Lillian Bregman, “Going to Pottery,” *Nineteenth Century* (Nov. 1982); Jessie Poesch, *Newcomb Pottery: An Enterprise for Southern Women: 1895-1940* (Exton, Penn., 1948); and Kenneth E. Smith, “The Origin, Development and Present Status of Newcomb Pottery,” *Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society*, 17 (June 1938).