



The chemical composition of the glaze is crucial. (Staff photos by Harry Mauthe)



The porcelain clay is hand mixed in 32 gallon garbage cans.

Artist in clay

By CORINNE ABATT

FARMINGTON HILLS—Crystalline forms, one of nature's loveliest works of art, can be created in a kiln—given a competent artist and the proper combination of materials and heat.

Mastering the elusive crystalline glaze has been a compelling challenge for Mrs. Phyllis Ihman, potter for at least 10 years. She works 40 hours a week at her art in the ground level studio of her home, 29200 Wellington Road.

She began her professional studies at the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts in 1962 under John Foster, often called the "dean of Michigan potters."

Now, with her works in several nationally recognized private collections, several one-man shows and a long list of exhibition credits behind her, Mrs. Ihman works harder than ever to satisfy her artistic ambitions which surfaced when she was a youngster.

"I just never grew out of the mud pie stage," she points to the 32-gallon containers in which she mixes her clay.

"I just love having my hands in it."

HER WORK is widely recognized for several reasons. Almost as unique as the crystalline forms which characterize many of her pots is her chosen medium—porcelain.

Most potters prefer to work with stoneware. Because it contains granules of already fired clay called grog, it has more stability making it easier to work than porcelain.

Porcelain, which fires whiter with a smoother surface than stoneware, is of finer quality, but less predictable.

Mrs. Ihman takes a cylinder, glob of porcelain from a plastic storage bag and puts it on the potters wheel. She mixes all of her own clay from large bags of ingredients kept in a mixing room off the studio.

She sets the wheel in motion with her foot, grasps the formless cylinder with wet hands and the creative process begins.

After centering the clay on the wheel, the shaping starts, and it is at this point that the porcelain takes on a character of its own.

BECAUSE the texture is so fine, the artist says, "it will set down on you very quickly. You pull it up three inches and it drops back two."

From the demonstration it's easy to

understand how an artist of limited skill could end up with a squatly inkwell instead of a tall slender pot.

THOUGH MORE difficult to control, porcelain has special qualities. It lends itself well to the single fire process which Mrs. Ihman uses and which she learned under Foster. Most potters fire before and after glazing.

In the single fire process, the raw pot is glazed when it is still damp, but dry enough to handle and then fired.

The ancient Chinese potters were masters of the single fire technique, and in order to understand their skills, early in her career, Mrs. Ihman began an exhaustive study of Chinese pottery.

She also mixes all of her own glazes and the results are often breathtaking. There is a subtlety and evenness of color which is reminiscent of highly prized Chinese porcelain.

The delicate crystals which form in the glaze are created through exacting temperature control in the firing.

THE KILN temperature is taken up to 2,400 degrees and dropped 300 degrees where it is held for three hours. The variance must be less than 10 degrees or the crystals won't form.

The total firing takes 28 hours. If the proper temperature is not maintained the glaze may fall off the pot. The final five and one-half hours are critical, and Mrs. Ihman takes constant pyrometer readings and makes temperature adjustments.

When the crystalline pot is removed it could be a small vase or dish, smoky avocado in color with jade blue undertones and designs that look as if a dozen or more snowflakes were imbedded as they fell on the porcelain in a random pattern.

The colors, shapes and crystal formations vary; the mark of the potter and quality are consistent.

MRS. IHMAN also works with satin matte finishes which to the layman are the dull glazes as opposed to the shiny, high gloss texture.

Her work is available through the Habitat Gallery of Dearborn and Southfield, America House in Birmingham and the Detroit Artists Market. She also sells from her home. She and her husband, Kyrn, are avid art collectors often trading Ihman pots for the work of other local artists.

Mexican work is well represented in their collection for one of their favorite vacation retreats is Oaxaca, Mexico, a mecca for artisans.



The pot is checked for symmetry.

