

by Elizabeth Smith

The small sign by the side of the road says "Shaw Pottery Studio". It is not an eye-catching sign. One would certainly have to be looking for it to notice it. Yet John Shaw later said that he sells most of his pieces in the studio. This indicates how popular Shaw pottery is becoming.

Outlets throughout Canada are constantly demanding more shipments to replenish their supply of Shaw pottery, but Mr. Shaw has given up trying to satisfy these demands. He says he is not interested in the financial aspect of potting, but the artistic part; although he has been making his living solely from potting since 1967.

"When a person starts selling well his work suffers. The quality goes down when you are trying to keep up with all the orders. I'll never be a production potter," he explains.

He goes on to say that many potters just do five or six things, but he believes this is not the art of pottery making. Factories easily mass produce pottery, but when people buy hand pottery they want it to be unique. Every piece of Shaw pottery is one of a kind. John Shaw makes no attempt to duplicate a popular piece, even when asked.

It is very difficult to copy another piece, especially to try to get a similar glaze. The glaze is put on a pot before the second firing and is greatly affected by the reduction of oxygen in the kiln, a thing which is very difficult to control. Mr. Shaw explains that he could get the same glaze at each firing by making a detailed record and strictly adhering to



photo by DeFrietas

John Shaw is putting the finishing touches on a plant holder for his exhibition in October.

John Shaw, Potter

it, but he thinks this hinders the art of hand pottery. It is an essential part of the art that each glaze is unique.

One especially hard colour to get from a glaze is the copper-red colour. A copper glaze can come out of the kiln in a wide range of colours from pink to green, from clear to red. Very often a piece will come out multi-coloured.

In the fine-arts room of the Harriet Irving Library there is a small selection of porcelain pieces from Shaw's own collection of his work that are this hard-to-obtain copper red colour. None of these pieces will be for sale.

John Shaw was born in Toronto and studied commer-

cial and fine-arts there, at Central Technical School. He learned photography, design, art history as well as several creative arts and discovered that he much preferred pottery.

"Pottery is the only medium where you use your hands, get right into the work with your hands. With sculpture there are tools between you and the clay. There's not the same involvement with your work even with painting, unless you roll on the canvas."

After graduation, Mr. Shaw was offered a teaching position on Prince Edward Island, so in February 1966 he moved to Charlottetown. The winter was miserable and he found Charlottetown "a clannish sort of place - hard to get to know anyone" and although the summer was "tremendous" he decided to move on. On his way "somewhere else" John Shaw passed through Fredericton, liked it, and stayed.

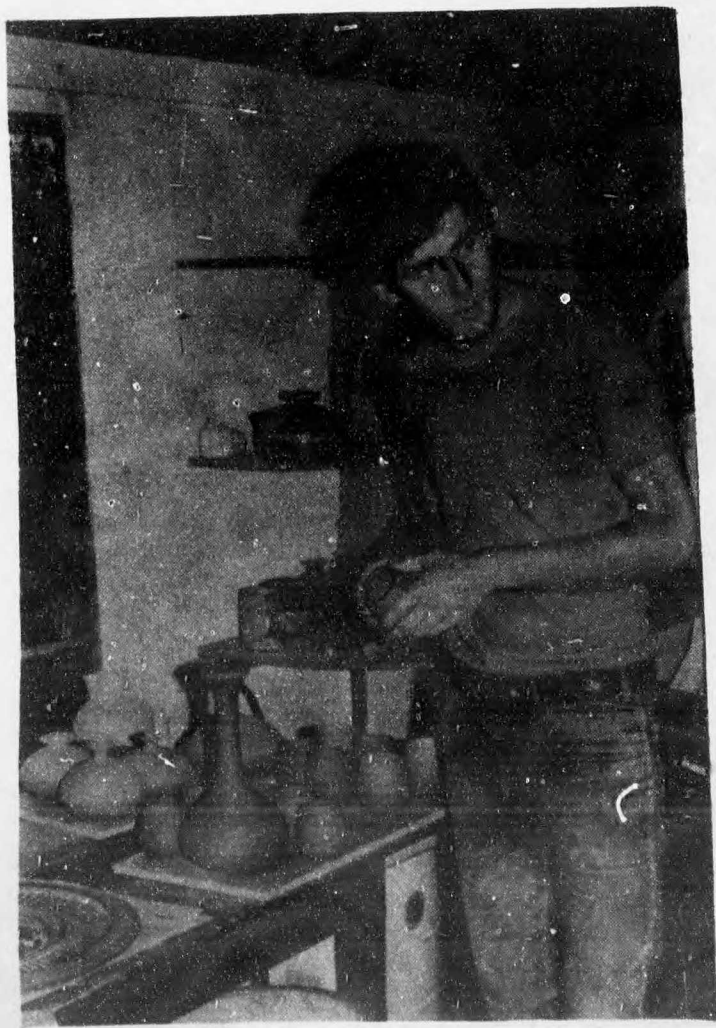
He and his wife, the former Joan Nielsen of Fredericton, are restoring an old home on the Woodstock Road. They have salvaged many things from old houses being torn down in the Fredericton area, including two beautiful stained glass windows.

Detached from the house is the white, low-lying, large-windowed studio. Mr. Shaw has done most of the work on the studio himself, including building the two kilns.

The first section of the studio is a large bright room containing the potter's wheel and dozens of pots in various stages of production.

He is working on pieces for his one-man show at Sir George Williams in Montreal in October. On the table are three very modern containers for dried plants or cut flowers, a completely original design. There are many bowls and platters of a more classic design.

photo by DeFrietas



Local potter, John Shaw, displaying some recently completed vases.

Mr. Shaw's large kiln is 100 cubic feet and is heated by propane gas. Kilns can be heated by electricity and oil, but propane is cleaner and cheaper.

Outdoors, behind the large kiln, is a small arched kiln that Mr. Shaw built this summer mainly for the old German technique of salt-glazing. This technique, developed in the fifteenth century consists of throwing salt in the heated kiln so that a vapor glaze forms on the pottery.

After a tour of the studio, John Shaw offers to demonstrate from the beginning how a pot is thrown.

He unwraps a piece of clay from its plastic protection and slaps it down on one of the clay slabs lining the window next to the kiln. His motions have been slow and easy all morning, but there is almost violence in the way he hurls himself into kneading the clay. It is too stiff, so he slices off a chunk of another, softer, clay, and kneads the two together.

When the clay feels right he slaps it into a conical shape and carries it in to the wheel. He places its flat surface down on the centre of the wheel and lubricates it well from a pail of mirky water beside him. As the wheel turns he shapes the clay roughly bowl-shaped. It is not easy and takes a lot of physical exertion to get the clay moving as he wants it to.

"I think I'll make a water pitcher. I've got a fascination for them. I like putting on the handle and spout," he says as he begins to pull the clay up higher and higher.

He hollows out the clay, carefully leaving the bottom about a quarter inch thick. Then as the shape of a pitcher begins to form he mutters, "Don't know whether its going to make it or not. It's starting to wobble like crazy, I've got it so thin."

Suddenly it is finished. A tall, erect vase. Mr. Shaw forms the spout by bending the mouth of the vase a little.

"This is sort of a Greek bronze shape. It will be ready for the handle tomorrow", he says.

Mr. Shaw bends over his selection of tools to choose one appropriate for the design he wants. From among the spatulas, toothbrushes, and pieces of scrap wood, he chooses a slender stick and begins the design. He does not map out the design first, but does the whole thing freehand. He says he prefers the intricate designs he favours to be a little asymmetrical. Again stressing the importance of the individuality of each pot.

Fredericton is a growing community of potters, most of them young men trying to establish a business. John Shaw is only twenty-seven but he has already made his name. Perhaps it is because he lets his artistic sense control his business sense.

Mr. Shaw points out a wall sculpture he has just completed. It is still wet clay, drying for the first firing. Small round vases with big eyes and long, fat tongues hanging from their openings are grouped close together on a tray. The inspiration developed from a tray of pots cracked during firing that Mr. Shaw had glued together and fastened to the wall of the studio.

Another eye-catching piece is a large planter at the back of a shelf. Mr. Shaw says this is one of several he is doing for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton.

"I did seven of those in one day. I just about died. It is a tremendous physical exertion to throw a pot that size". ("Throw" in potter's terminology means to shape on a potter's wheel).

Two of these seven pots cracked during the first firing, which is to be expected with pots of a large diameter.

Adjacent to this room is another containing the huge brick kiln plus a bathtub and several washing-machines, filled with shiny wet clay. The bathtub is used for straining the clay and the washing-machines, for mixing it.

The recipe for a clay mixture is secret and personal to each potter. John Shaw mixes a certain percentage of prepared clays from all over Canada, and some from the United States. He just doesn't have time to dig his own clay, besides New Brunswick clays are earthenware, that is they melt at a low temperature.

The stoneware clay used by Mr. Shaw is fired to 2500 degrees fahrenheit in the second firing. The firing process takes seven days to complete. Each article is first fired gradually to 1700 degrees, then cooled, glazed and brush decorated before the second firing reaching 2500 degrees.