

Paul E. Cox

Newcomb Pottery Glaze Master--Unpublished Letter



Paul E. Cox pottery marked "Cox"

## PAUL E. COX UNPUBLISHED LETTER - NEWCOMB POTTERY GLAZE MASTER

A previously unknown and unpublished letter has been located by my cousin, whose Dad was a friend of Paul E. Cox. This letter is particularly interesting to the pottery lover, since he gives details of his long life, and this is only months prior to his death. Paul Cox wrote this letter dated 1/13/67 from his Canal Street home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He was nearly 88 at the time, and died at 89.

Typed on an old manual typewriter, this letter conveys both the character and life of Paul E. Cox, the ceramic engineer, potter, writer, historian, and one of the first trained by Charles Fergus Binns at Alfred University. He made many contributions to American Pottery during his lifetime, but was modest to the end, always playing down his accomplishments. He contributed articles for ceramic publications throughout the years (Ceramic Age and Journal of The American Ceramic Society and others) <sup>1</sup>, and he also provided information to many who contacted him, as reflected in this letter.

His greatest claim to fame in the pottery world is probably the work he did in the eight years he spent at H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College as a ceramic engineer, although he dedicated more years to his work as head of the Ceramic Engineering Department at Iowa State College and did some outstanding work there. He also owned a pottery in Harahan, Louisiana, for a short time, and his pottery is outstanding—regardless of where he made it. In fact, there is a piece of his pottery from the Newcomb era pictured in one source as a Newcomb piece “glazed and fired by Paul Cox. The piece was purchased by the Smithsonian Institution in 1916.” <sup>2</sup> This photo is not shown in the Kovel’s more recent book on the same subject. (Kovels’ American Art Pottery. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993.)

### THE EARLY YEARS—1879-1910

Paul Ernest Cox was born in 1879 in Crawfordsville, Indiana.<sup>3</sup> His father was a stoneware manufacturer in Gas City, and young Paul grew up with that knowledge all around him. <sup>4</sup> Mr. Cox was the second student to graduate<sup>5</sup> from Charles Fergus Binns’ new program at the New York College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 1905. His degree was in Ceramic Engineering and Technology.<sup>6</sup>

Paul married Jeanne Marie Fortier in 1907 <sup>7</sup>(Spelling corrected to conform to Cox’s spelling of his wife’s name.). Jeanne’s father was born on the Valour Aime plantation “before the (Civil) war began” as Cox tells in this letter. He worked in different ceramics jobs in Indiana and Illinois designing equipment for the plants until he took the Newcomb job in 1910.<sup>8</sup>

In the letter discussed here, written in 1967, he tells of his early years:

“When I had my Bachelors nobody really knew what to teach in ceramics. I had operated a stoneware plant before going to college and in many ways knew more ceramics as to how to do things than any of those teaching at the time.”

There was some concern that his degree was not sufficient at Iowa State College, but he was later given an honorary degree from Alfred<sup>9</sup>, and that seems to be his reference here.

“Such as Agg and Bob.Winfrey used to worry over my lack of degree of Ceramic Engineer forgetting that Iowa State Coellge (sic) graduated with a B.S. and not Engineer. But I with about 25 more were called in for the Professional Degree Ceramic Engineer and by University of State of New York.”

In addition to an honorary doctor of science degree in 1935, he won the coveted Charles Fergus Binns Medal for Excellence in Ceramic Art in 1952.

#### THE NEWCOMB POTTERY YEARS—1910-1918

He went to Newcomb College in 1910 as a ceramic technician<sup>10</sup>, and immediately had an impact on the success and output of the pottery. Newcomb was having a problem with black spots in firing<sup>11</sup> and it was affecting their production. He took responsibility for the technical direction of the pottery in the fall of 1910, and developments during that first year were remarkable. He perfected a matt and semi-matt glaze that got the attention of other potteries, and became award winning. This was the moon over moss or maybe should be moss over moon glaze.

Cox improved the quality of the clay by adding feldspar and flint. He developed a raw lead glaze with a semi-matte texture for underglaze. He found that three firings were needed to get the best effect from this new glaze. The first coat was dipped, with the next two sprayed. His blue and green matte glazes were so popular that the shiny glazes used earlier were rarely seen on pieces after 1910.<sup>12</sup>

By 1913, Newcomb had won a gold medal at the National Conservation Exposition in Knoxville, with Rookwood Pottery second.

## Newcomb Pottery Moon over Moss glaze developed by Paul E. Cox



Jessie Poesch gives Paul E Cox some credit for the survival of Newcomb Pottery at that time. The Arts and Crafts era was ending, and tastes were changing. With the moon over moss matt glazes developed by Cox and the move toward more naturalistic designs at the Newcomb pottery probably helped keep it alive.

Poesch attributes this naturalistic movement "...probably was due partly to Paul Cox's feeling for that which was marketable."<sup>14</sup> She places so much importance on the Paul Cox years that she has a chapter for those years and uses his wording, "A Professional Plant" as the title.<sup>15</sup>

She makes reference to Mr. Cox's 1935 paper on the potteries of the Gulf Coast as acknowledging the influence of the marketplace. Cox said, "It should be understood that the Newcomb Pottery is a strictly professional plant, connected with a school".<sup>16</sup>

Paul Cox left Newcomb to assist in the war effort in France, working with La Compagni Generale Meules, a French grinding wheel factory. He did not return there, but instead, went to Pittsburgh briefly, and in the fall of 1920, began his teaching career at Iowa State College.<sup>17</sup>

Sevres, France drip glaze pottery may have been influential in Cox's glaze development



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## THE IOWA STATE YEARS 1920-1939

Mr. Cox went to Iowa State College (University) as an Associate Professor and acting Head of the Department of Ceramic Engineering (1920-1925). He later served as Head of the Department (1926-1939). While at Iowa State, Cox worked tirelessly to promote the Department of Ceramic Engineering, traveling across the state educating people in ceramics with a potter's wheel and a talk.<sup>18</sup>

"For five years," Cox wrote in the 1925 yearbook, "the Engineering Extension Department has sent out the writer (namely, Cox himself) with a portable potter's wheel and a popular lecture on pottery of interest to Women's Clubs."<sup>19</sup>

He wrote numerous articles on ceramics during this period, too.<sup>20</sup> The Iowa State publication, "100 Years of Materials Engineering," published in 2006, states:

"It's no exaggeration to cast Cox's tenure in terms of performance, for he brought to Iowa State at least as much showmanship as scholarship. In fact, Cox was not a scientist so much as a potter-engineer, known for his expertise with glazes."

"It might not have been science as we'd recognize it, but Cox's turn from engineering and toward the arts did help to keep ceramics afloat at Iowa State. By 1925, the department boasted thirty men formally enrolled in its program—and no fewer than fifty women from other departments working in pottery."<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Cox had Mary Lanier Yancey join the Iowa State organization with him about 1926, and they began selling art pottery that they produced, using the proceeds for the purchase of school equipment for Iowa State. Cox threw the pieces and created the glazes while Yancey did the design work. Their collaboration ended in 1930 when Yancey left to get married.<sup>22</sup>

Once again, Cox saved a fledgling ceramics program with ingenuity and talent.

They did not use the matte glaze he had developed at Newcomb, but instead began to use tin glazes, possibly like he had seen at the Sevres factory when he went to France during World War I. See the Sevres drip glaze pottery shown above.

## Iowa State College pottery by Paul E. Cox and Mary Yancey



Remaining tangible and still visible acknowledgments of his efforts are the murals for the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University. There is information on a website relating to the murals in the Quadrangle Building, a structure originally constructed in 1912. Danish-American sculptor Christian Petersen arrived at Iowa State in 1934, and he and Dean Charles Stange developed the idea of a plaque to depict services of the veterinary profession.

Petersen began carvings for the mural in the spring of 1936. He conferred with Paul E. Cox of the Ceramic Engineering Department to produce 40 small sections in terra cotta with a graham cracker unglazed surface. The panels had to be sized to fit the kiln in the Cox ceramic engineering lab approximately 30 by 30 inches. Cox wanted to incorporate the kiln work as part of his laboratory



teaching. The 44 panels were installed in the fall of 1938, and the panels were moved to a new complex in 1976.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE LATE YEARS—1940-1968

Paul Cox went to Harahan, Louisiana, to start his own company, and he expected to make dinnerware and utilitarian ware as well as maybe building material and Newcomb-style pieces. Production ended in 1942 when he once again joined the war effort as a ceramics engineer.<sup>24</sup> The production from this pottery had a paper label, apparently, as there is a reference to a label with “The Paul E. Cox Pottery, New Orleans, Louisiana, 3 (7) 8 Pine Street, telephone 6401-W.”<sup>25</sup> There was also a round stamp used on some of his pottery from that era.

#### Paul E. Cox pottery from Iowa State College years



After the war, he returned to Baton Rouge where he and Jeanne lived. He helped others in the ceramics field, and mentions some he helped:

“Also I play with a mixture of artist and businessman retired in his tinkering with Montana materials in pottery making.”

“The art writer of Times Picayune of New Orleans is by name Alberta Collier...” is another one he was in touch with. Collier did several



articles on Newcomb for local publications, too.<sup>26</sup> (Collier, Alberta, "She Unveiled Vistas for Others," Dixie (March 14, 1971), 8-10, Collier, Alberta, "The Pottery That Brought Fame to a College," Dixie (August 6, 1972)

Cox writes of his knowledge of George Ohr, his assessment of Ohr's ability as a potter, and the sale of his wares:

"And a chap at Port Jervis, New York, for his thesis called on me about George Ohr, the Mad Potter Of Biloxi. George was eccentric but not insane and I knew him right well by being with him a few times and better from his record in print and so in several ways I could help the Port Jervis man.

"Then a kin of Ohr and Ohr died in 1918, phoned to me asking if I would help a little getting his stored wares out and on sale and did so because I had said and truthfully, that his wares should be sold to collectors and the family get some benefit from a collection that could not be duplicated since Ohr was probably the most skilled man to ever use the wheel.

"Ohr maintained that his wares would sell for their weight in gold if kept long enough after his death. This sounds like nonsense but the man could and did make wares paper thin and very light and I have never known any (sic) other potter or read of one able to do that.

This is the same impression of George Ohr he revealed in his 1935 writing for Ceramic Age, discussed by Evans:

Later, however, Paul E. Cox, who knew Ohr well, wrote, "It is said that Ohr could work on the wheel whichever way it turned. Certainly he could throw wares of considerable size with walls much thinner than any other potter ever had accomplished. It is quite probable that George Ohr, rated simply as a mechanic, was the most expert thrower that the craft has ever known." <sup>27</sup>

Cox continues in this letter with his visual impression of Ohr:

"The guy tho dead is a good subject for a sale because he wore his hair ling (sic) and in a bun on his head with a brass hair pin through. On top was a derby with a dent. His (sic) let mis (sic) moustaches grown very long and hooked them over his ears. He let his beard grow long and would roll it up and poke it into his shirt front when working on the wheel. He had been blacksmith when young and had arms so muscled that the School of Art folks had a plaster cast made of his right arm and used that cast in cast drawing and study of muscles.

There is some indication that Ohr worked at Newcomb, and likely at New Orleans Art Pottery, precursor to Newcomb. The Kovels published in 1974 that Ohr was hired as a potter in addition to Joseph Meyer at New Orleans and

“remained only a short time and then founded his own pottery firm (Ohr Pottery)”.<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Cox refers to his Alfred degree:

“By being a very early graduate from any school in ceramics I know the old timers and their stories. And even wares are sent to me for a statement of probable origin.

He also reports that at that time he may be the oldest living man with a degree in ceramics:

“And unless Frank Riddle of Ohio State and living in Denver Col. had his degree before I had mine at Alfred I am the oldest living man with a degree in ceramics.

His life at 88 was reflected in just a few pages, perhaps a Christmas letter written in January. This letter continues for four pages of single spaced typing, and is really an autobiography in capsule form.

“In Ash Wednesday I shall be 88. I told you folks of my high school mate and wife who lived at Omar, and the man with a fine recird (sic) in managing coal mines. He died after a long illness in early December. This leaves me the only living one of my high school class. One other man of my Company of War With Spain still lives but is also strokes victim as was Brewer and his son wrote me that it was useless for me to write letters to him as he is in coma most of the time. He is in the State Coldiers (sic) Home at Lafayette, Ind. Not from poverty but from being in need of the fine care of that place. Most any day I shall be the last of the company that once had 116 tough as whit leather men.”

The letter he wrote in 1967 is a glance back at his life. He wrote to a fellow professor and friend of more than 30 years, typing on an old typewriter that needed a tune-up, and many of the upper case letters were above or below the line. His points were made succinctly with proper grammar and spelling, except for an occasional uncorrected typographical error. He says:

“In my old age I amuse myself by writing stuff that various actual writers find informative for them. Not much I did helped a Purdue history Prof. do his Ph.D. dissertation but I did know a little that helped him or so he said. And the woman who reports on all art shows in New Orleans, a lady not known to me except from her work bit (sic) she tells me in a letter that I am regarded as an authority in New Orleans on art pottery as result of my 8 years half a century ago with Newcomb School of Art of Tulane University. And so she gets data from me now and then that answers folks who ask her.”

Paul Cox has been influential in his evaluation and review of many of the Gulf Coast pottery giants. One of these is apparent in the AAPA article on Joseph Fortune Meyer by Jean Bragg, where she refers to Cox numerous times, including his writing in Ceramic Age and a letter to Meyer's adopted daughter.

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This was his fun in the last years of his life. His wife of 48 years he refers to as "Mrs. Boss of Me" had been ill for most of those. He said "that surely she should quit being the sickest person in the world as she has never died one single little bit is is (sic) very likely to outlive me."

There is some humor in most of his writing, and he enjoyed what he was doing.

"I do all this for the fun of it as most of the folks could not pay anyhow".

Paul Ernest Cox died in 1968 at the age of 89. True to his word, his wife outlived him.

Thanks to Mary Brown Black for making this letter available to the pottery lovers and to David K. Black for providing the photos of the pottery of Paul E. Cox. It is only through the recognition of this important letter that it became available to us all, and of course thanks to her Mother and Dad, who, in the tradition of George Eliot, saved string too short to save.

Linda H. Richard has been a pottery and glass collector for many years, and has provided photos and information for several books and articles. She is an appraiser, and was a member of the International Society of Appraisers, but has recently been pursuing other interests. She collaborates with her husband, Darrell, who does the photography and layout for her pursuits. They live in Texas, and you may contact them at their [cajunc.com](http://cajunc.com) website.

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, Paul E. *Ceramic Age*, "Potteries of the Gulf Coast," XXV (May 1935) and *Journal of the American Ceramic Society*, "Technical Practice at the Newcomb Pottery," I, July 1918. There is also a bibliography of his writings by Susan Strong, "Paul Ernest Cox, A Chronological Bibliography." Scholes Bibliography #11 (Alfred University: Scholes Library of Ceramics, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Kovel, Ralph, and Terry Kovel. *The Kovel's Collector's Guide to American Art Pottery*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1974, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> The Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred University website. <http://ceramicsmuseum.alfred.edu/exhibitions/students/>

<sup>4</sup> Dana, Steve. Excerpts from presentation at Wisconsin Art Pottery website. [http://wisconsinpottery.org/Programs/2003-01\\_presentation.htm](http://wisconsinpottery.org/Programs/2003-01_presentation.htm) and letter dated 1/13/67. See also Poesch, p. 61, *infra*.

<sup>5</sup> Poesch, Jessie. *Newcomb Pottery: An Enterprise for Southern Women 1895-1940*. Schiffer Publishing, 1984, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> See The Students of Binns Exhibition 1998 at The Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred University website, *supra*. Also Poesch, *supra*.

<sup>7</sup> Dana, *supra*.

<sup>8</sup> Iowa State University archives and website. <http://www.lib.iastate.edu/arch/rgrp/11-12-15.html>. See also, Poesch, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Carney, Margaret. *Charles Fergus Binns: The Father of American Studio Ceramics*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998, essay by Susan Russo, p. 220.

<sup>10</sup> Iowa State University website, *supra*. See also Kovel, *Kovels' American Art Pottery*. New York: Crown Publishers (1993) p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Poesch, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Kovel, p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Poesch, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Poesch, Chapter IV.

<sup>16</sup> Poesch, citing Cox, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Iowa State University archives, and website, *supra*.

<sup>18</sup> Iowa State University archives, and website, *supra*.

<sup>19</sup> Iowa State University archives, and website, *supra*.

<sup>20</sup> Iowa State University archives, *Ceramic Age* magazine.

<sup>21</sup> Iowa State University publication, "100 Years of Materials Engineering" (2006) available on the website, *supra*.

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<sup>22</sup> Dana, supra.

<sup>23</sup> Iowa State University Veterinary Medicine website. Christian Petersen Mural information.  
<http://www.vetmed.iastate.edu/about/art/basrelief.asp>

<sup>24</sup> Cox Pottery production ceased when he sold the pottery to James and Lydia Angell. Poesch, supra. p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Kovel, supra. p. 356.

<sup>26</sup> Kovel, references to Alberta Collier articles, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> Evans, Paul. *Art Pottery of the United States*. Pennsylvania: Feingold & Lewis Publishing Corp. 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Kovel, p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Journal of the American Art Pottery Association, "Joseph Fortune Meyer: Patriarch of Gulf Coast Art Pottery," Vol. 17 No. 2 (Mar. Apr. 2001) p. 20.