



“Frankoma”

Pottery’s Big Wheel

THE JOHN FRANKS HAVE GIVEN THE STATE
A POTTERY INDUSTRY WHOSE FAME HAS
SPREAD FAR BEYOND OKLAHOMA BORDERS

By Carol J. Robinson, '59journ

A modern version of the old potter’s wheel, this apparatus “jiggers” or spins the “slip” or clay mixture into shapes familiar to pottery buyers.

A FORMER University of Oklahoma art professor and his wife have parlayed imagination, ingenuity and an eye for the beauty of the Oklahoma prairie into one of the nation’s most thriving pottery businesses. The professor is John Frank, his wife is the former Grace Lee Bowman, '33, and they call their pottery “Frankoma.”

The characteristically western patterns—Wagon Wheel, Lazybones, Plainsmen Aztec—with the pottery’s distinctive art glaze have been bringing the flavor of the great Southwest to dinner tables all over the world, making Frankoma of Sapulpa, Oklahoma, an internationally known trademark.

The past year has not been a booming one for tableware manufacturers in general, but Frankoma continued to prosper even during the slump period. There must be a reason—and John Frank attributes it to the fact that Frankoma created its own niche in a market previously untouched.

Frank was never interested in getting into the china business. “Frankoma from its very conception in 1933, set out to make an everyday workingman’s table service,” the potter explains. “Working people understand ‘pottery,’ not ‘china.’ We knew if

we could make a good earthenware, we would have an enormous market.”

And Frank did come up with a good pottery at a price that made it the first colored earthenware to gain widespread popularity in the United States. A unique one-firing technique in which the glaze is sprayed on by hand before entering the kiln eliminates an entire step from the standard double-firing process, leaving a harder, oven-proof finish at a reduced production cost. The single firing and the glaze itself have become the keys to Frankoma’s success.



John and Grace Lee Frank

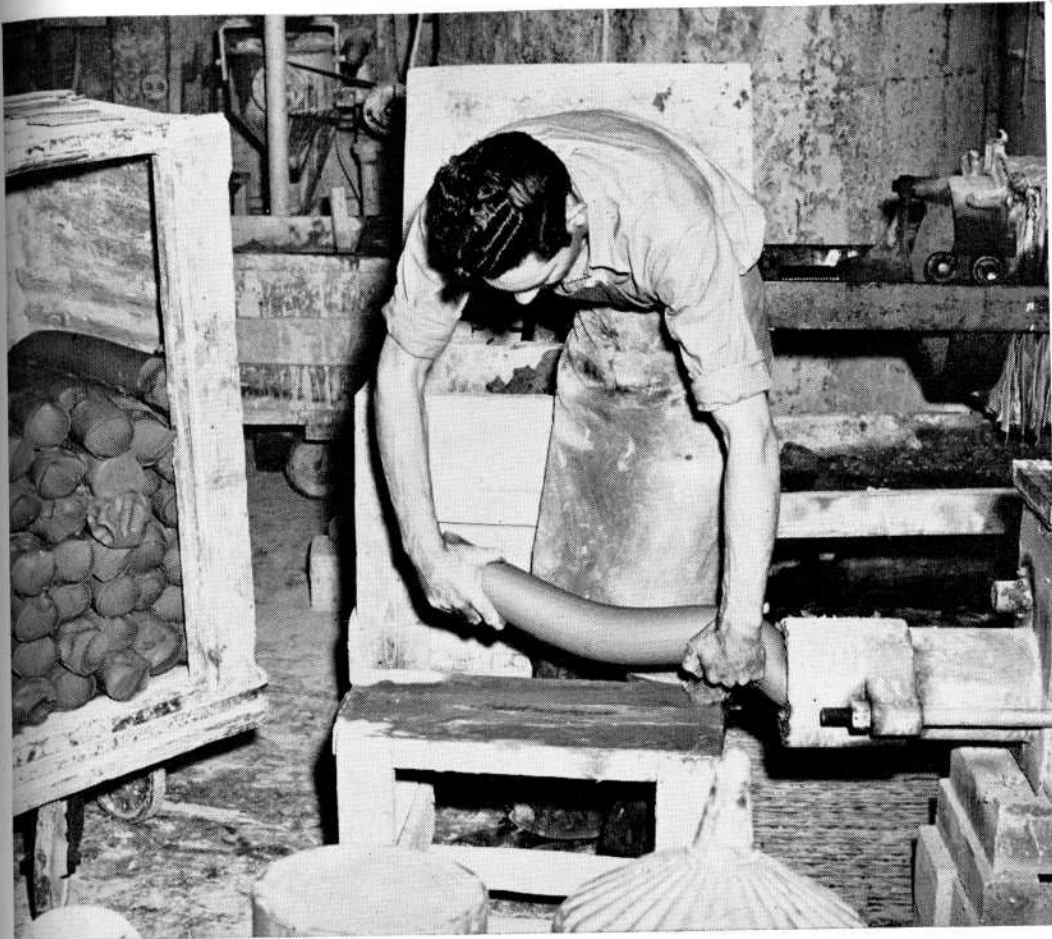
Achieving success was not a simple matter for the Franks, however. Four times their pottery venture met with failure before they hit the winning combination in Sapulpa following World War II.

John Frank came to O.U. in 1927 from the Art Institute of Chicago to teach ceramic art. He became interested in developing a line of ceramics from a native Oklahoma clay in patterns which would reflect the spirit of his adopted state. He found the red clay in Ada and in 1933 opened a small pottery in his garage in Norman. Without equipment to make plates, Frank concentrated on pitchers, mug sets and a line of sculptured pieces, many of them designed by fellow O.U. art professor Joe Taylor.

Oklahoma’s first full-scale pottery plant opened in Sapulpa in 1938. Lack of materials during the war forced Frankoma to shut down for a year but did not force the Franks to give up on their experiment. By 1943 they were back in business.

Both John and Grace Lee Frank are artists. They couldn’t understand why people who spend so much time eating shouldn’t enjoy it more. They felt that eating from dinnerware that was both beautiful and

Continued on Page 16



The "slip," a plasticized clay mix which has been filtered, blended and aged, is taken from the "pug mill" where it has been readied for "jiggering" (spinning) or "ram pressing" into shape.

After the "slip" has been "jiggered," the excess clay must be carefully trimmed from the molded piece before it can be passed along to the glazer for the final step in preparing it for the single firing in the kiln.

Properly glazing the pottery to achieve Frankoma's characteristic "blushing" effect is a delicate operation. The glaze applied must be of correct thickness to allow gases to escape during firing.



Frankoma Pottery Continued



A loaded car enters the kiln to complete Frankoma's unique one-firing pottery process. Standard operation requires firing both before and after glaze is applied, adding to production cost.

colorful would appeal to the growing American casual-living set. Frankoma made a break with tradition, and the break paid off.

Frank has developed a philosophy of ceramic art—a philosophy which has made his pottery a standard of comparison. He recognized the change in public attitude over the past few decades and geared his designs to this change. People had begun to live with wants instead of needs. Frank believed they had become individualists looking for something different.

"We found our place among people who want to drink soup out of a flower bowl," Frank quips. "So we made a flower bowl you can eat soup out of."

Rimless dinner plates and oversized coffee mugs are other examples of Frank's policy of making what the public wants. He has built his pottery around the bent of living for fun. Until a couple of years ago, Frankoma was the only pottery manufacturer using art glazes for dinnerware.

The distinctive "partial glaze" of Frankoma-ware was almost an accident. Mrs. Frank saved her husband from discarding the first try at a special new glaze which did not come out clear and uniform but allowed certain overtones from the red clay to blush through the glazed color.

The men who apply the glaze to the unfired pottery with fine spray guns have been specially trained for years and are experts without equal at their jobs. As with all 80 Frankoma employees, these glazers have never worked in any other pottery, but were trained by Frank on the job.

Frankoma has stuck with its Oklahoma red clay in its efforts to be fully identified with the state. The Ada diggings were abandoned about five years ago for a deposit near Sapulpa which produces about 1,500 tons a year.

Frank found his colors by looking out of windows and picking up the hues he saw there. Prairie Green was the original shade, Woodland Moss the most recent, and there are Desert Gold, Sorghum Brown, Clay Blue, White Sand, Terra Cotta Rose.

A new kiln just installed at the Sapulpa plant will up production this year to 1½ million pieces grossing Frankoma about \$600,000. The ceramic ware is marketed through 4,200 accounts around the world.

"You can't buy a market," Frank contends. "You have to grow into one, and that's what Frankoma has done by creating a field that wasn't there."

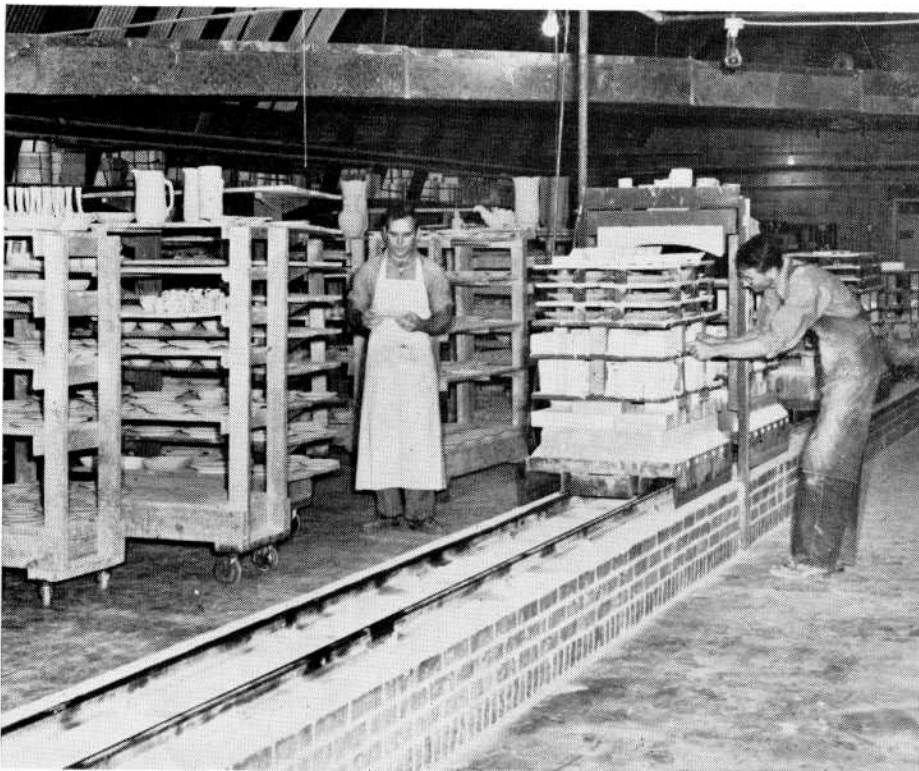
Frank anticipates being joined at the designer's table by his daughter, Joniece, '60bfa, who was added to Frankoma's art department in January upon completion of her study of sculpture at O.U. The Franks' other daughter, Donna, '47-'48, lives in New York City where she is working in television and the theater.

The other half of the Frank partnership takes care of getting the goods to market. Mrs. Frank, with what her husband describes as a natural artistic eye, has been critic and consultant on everything Frankoma has produced.

Frankoma's retail outlet store, a spacious, beautifully arranged showroom occupying the front of the Sapulpa plant, is Mrs. Frank's exclusive domain. More than 300,000 people a year pass through the showroom.

And while Mrs. Frank is selling the pottery, Frank is busy selling the people of Oklahoma on Frankoma's interest in Oklahoma. He has appeared before more than 500 organizations over the state to accomplish what he considers the important job of promoting pride in the state's pottery industry.

"Oklahoma has been very good to us," Frank says. "We have tried to give Oklahomans a pottery to be proud of—and we are doubly proud that Oklahoma is proud of Frankoma."



The steady flow of finished pieces of ceramic art which leave the kiln room daily at the Frankoma plant in Sapulpa represents an industry grossing \$600,000 a year. This year a million and a half items of Frankoma ware will be marketed by 4,200 different outlets in all parts of the world.