

STORIES of New Jersey

After 50 hours the mixture, now of a thick, cream-like consistency, is forced through a fine wire screen by air pressure. This process, which lasts for two hours, eliminates all the large particles and results in a fine-textured fluid called "slip." Electro-magnets remove all iron atoms from the "slip," and it is then allowed to age. No one knows just why ageing makes the clay easier to handle, but from ancient times all potters have found it helpful to let the "slip" stand for several days.

The clay is now ready to be shaped. This is the point at which in the old days it would have been placed on the potter's wheel and molded by the craftsman's sensitive fingers as the wheel spun. The modern equivalent of the potter's wheel is called the jiggering machine. It is turned by an electric motor, controlled by an operator whose trained fingers guide the moist clay into a plaster mold. He knows to the minute just when the clay is in workable condition.

The work is so fine that an expert craftsman can produce only a few pieces each day. It is a fascinating process, because the spectator can watch beauty created from an ugly lump of clay. Not all pieces are formed on the jiggering machine. Some intricate shapes are cast in plaster molds. When the shapes are complete they are put aside to dry. They are then carefully gone over with a camel's hair brush to make sure the surface is absolutely smooth.

When dry and ready for firing, the pieces are gently packed in coarse clay containers (called saggars) and carried to the kiln, which is 14 feet wide and more than 14 feet high. From time immemorial it has been the custom for workmen to carry saggars on their heads. This ancient method still prevails in the Lenox pottery.

Saggars in the kiln

You may catch your breath as you watch a workman climb the ladder with a load of saggars balanced on top of his head. But the artisans say that never has a single piece been lost by falling. When the great oven has been filled completely the doors are sealed and the fires started. For 30 hours the delicate china is baked. The heat is increased gradually and carefully until it reaches 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Considering that it takes only 350 degrees to bake an ordinary cake, this gives an idea of the terrific heat used for these delicate vessels. In fact, the heat is so intense that if it were not for the steel bands with which the kilns are bound they would burst.

When the pieces are removed from the kiln they are carefully examined for any imperfection or warping. Imperfect specimens are immediately destroyed. Those that pass inspection are subjected to a fine sand blast to remove any clinging particles, bubbles or ridges.

