WORKING ALABASTER ON A LATHE

by Wesley E. Pyke

"Could an amateur turn alabaster on a lathe?"

This question has often arisen when beautiful and expensive alabaster articles are being examined in some gift shop. When the writer put this question to Lawrence Loyggerg his query was:

"Well, why not? Many of these things are made by quite ordinary operators. Care and patience are far more important in this kind of work than any highly developed professional skill."

"Some of those things were labeled Italian Alabaster. I'll bet their alabaster is stronger and more easily worked than our native mineral would be."

"I Can't affirm or deny that statement", he added, "but I do know that native alabaster works readily on a lathe. Just recently I saw a complete tea set made from native alabaster exhibited in a specialty shop. The plates were almost as thin and light as fine china and they had been made by an amateur. Work of that type would require skill acquired after considerable practice. However, there are many articles that are not too exacting for the beginner. An ash tray or a small vase are not especially difficult."

"Could any amateur accustomed to lathe work turn out an alabaster vase?"

"I don't see why not", he replied. "A little patience and common sense are all that are required. Alabaster is much less brittle if it isn't too dry. With reasonable care a properly seasoned piece can be turned without danger of fracture."

In the meantime we had arrived at his shop.

"But the tools must be of a special type, expensive and hard to obtain, are they not?" I enquired.
"Most of the tools needed can be made by the operator from old files or other tool scrap", he said with a smile. "This is true especially of the turning tools and groovers. For the initial hollowing an old auger bit of large size can be cut off and ground with a chisel face. Such a tool may be worked in rapidly. If further hollowing is desired a C-chisel will be required, but for simpler projects this will be unnecessary. Let me demonstrate how easy it is".

While he was talking he had fastened a piece of rough alabaster 4" x 4" x 16" in the lathe chuck and started the motor. The belt was adjusted to turn the work about 500 r.p.m. The stock was rapidly roughed into a cylinder. Then a vase quickly took form. It was smoothed out, sanded wet, and then the inside was drilled out. After a few final finishing touches wax was applied and polished by means of a soft cloth. The vase was then cut off and stood ready for flowers. The whole operation had required only about half an hour.