AN ANCIENT ART GROWN MODERN - by W. E. Pyke

Handicraft in Alabaster for Young and Old

Seasons like spirits move us. The elements mold our moods, our desires, our activities. While the open road calls we answer. When the sky drips or driving snow chills us to the bone we hole up, turn our hands to other pursuits. Hobbies may change as the seasons or may fit into any season.

Did you ever covet the alabaster vase you saw in a gift shop? Has this art of the ancients ever tugged at your heart strings? The working of alabaster is not difficult, nor is a supply of the mineral hard to obtain. Alabaster is a variety of gypsum, so widely distributed that it makes our water hard. Plaster mills live on gypsum. They are found scattered here and there in nearly every state. Where these mills are situated abundant supplies of gypsum are available. The fact is, outcroppings of the material are prevalent where no mills are located, in hillocks, often dubbed land plaster. Such exposures are usually badly weathered on the surface, but if a little of the top material is removed, a supply sufficiently decorative and workable is available. When the surface has been cleared away, wedges driven into old frost cracks serve to dislodge large chunks from the face of the rock. These, broken and dressed, to a convenient size to handle, may be loaded into the car or trailer and our supply of raw material is accumulated. The call of the open road is answered.

Our supply must be stored so that it does not weather or become too dry. It may be placed in a corner of the garden under a mulch of grass clippings, straw or some other covering or stored in the basement.

The stage is set. The shop beckons. Plans for articles we intend to make have been taking shape and in some cases have been drawn to scale. Our blocks of alabaster have been retrieved to be sawed to approximate size and shape. An old cross-cut saw will do. If one is purchased, a second-hand one or an inexpensive article will serve, because its finer edge will be ruined. The cutting is slow but not difficult. The rock powder should be collected and disposed of so that it cannot be blown about.

Our first attempt, we decide, shall be a pair of book-ends. Only plane surfaces are involved and the simplest tools will suffice. The plan is drawn in such a manner that a minimum of labor is required. First a block is sawn out to dress down to 4" x 4 1/8" x 4 5/8" with 1/8" ample allowance for smoothing. After cutting, the faces are roughly dressed to plane by first a coarse and then a finer wood-rasp. Then the oblique cut is made. If a vise or mitre box of proper size is not available, one may be improvised by the use of cleats tacked to the worktable to assist in steadying the block while sawing. All sawmarks should be rasped out before proceeding with the polish.

The initial step in the finish is to find a plane, hard surface upon which the pieces may be rubbed wet until smooth. A flat piece of 1/4" boiler plate 18" square may be obtained from any machine shop or if a plane slab of fine sandstone or cement is available it will serve. The pieces are drawn back and forth while wet until perfectly smooth and true. The use of powdered abrasive in the water may be avoided if the sawing has been carefully done. If abrasive is used it must be entirely washed away toward the end so that abrasive scratches may be rubbed out.
We are now ready for the finish coat. This may be of wax or colorless linoleum lacquer. The wax finish is simpler. Although not quite so lustrous it is durable and more easily retouched later. Beeswax, a high grade of furniture wax or a commercial preparation of suspended carnauba wax all give distinctive finishes. The latter gives the hardest and glossiest finish of the three. The polish may be brought out with a soft cotton cloth or a buffer attached to a small motor may be used.

As a second project a trinket box is suggested. This may be fashioned from leftovers from the book-ends or another small (Cut No. 4. Plan for the Trinket Box.) piece of stock may be chosen. After the experience with the book-ends little explanation will be necessary. A rat-tailed file will be needed to work out the grooves in the cover. The inside of the box is removed by means of a drill bit in an ordinary brace. After a series of holes not less than 1/2" in diameter have been bored to proper depth, the portion to be removed is carefully cut and broken out and roughed to size by means of an old chisel, rasps and file. The interior bottom may be smoothed by the end of a whetstone. Finishing is essentially the same as with the other articles.