

Professor Robert F. Bussabarger: "I'm not trying to teach a set of rules or methods so much as a spirit of doing things."

Photos by Battaglia

## Bussabarger and ceramic art

By Arthur B. Pine

If you can give students a purpose, says Prof. Robert F. Bussabarger, they'll go to great lengths to do their best—but you have to create for them a need to learn.

Each morning, while his ceramic art classes look on, Bussabarger dons a clay-stained apron, puts his hands on a spinning potter's wheel and tries to create both a purpose and enthusiasm. By the time the next class bell rings, his students have been molded by correct fundamentals, fired with enthusiasm and glazed with plans for their next projects. And, above all, almost all of them have an honest desire to learn.

Making education the student's own job is part of Bussabarger's personal idea of teaching: "I'm not trying to teach a set of rules or methods so much as a spirit of doing things," he says. "Students need a feeling for what they're doing. Many of them learn nothing but superficial aspects of art. But the only way to learn art is to feel it."

"I try to convey that spirit to them on a person-to-person basis," he says. "In another division of the

University, you can take a test—either you know the material or you don't. But in the art department, we're working with the individual person. A student will follow you only superficially if he has no purpose. In the beginning, he needs that more than all the proficiency in the world."

Bussabarger carries both his enthusiasm and his proficiency beyond the classroom. Winner of several prizes for his ceramic exhibits, he has just received a \$50 merit award in sculpture for his work, "Warriors," recently shown at the Springfield, Mo., Art Gallery. He also has won prizes in painting: for oils, in St. Louis, and for water-colors, in San Antonio, Tex. Both Stephens College and the Wichita Art Association have purchased his sculptures. And his paintings hang proudly in the homes of some of his most fervent supporters: his friends and colleagues in Columbia.

To his friends and students, Bussabarger is a short, rusty-haired man with a bright reddish moustache and blue eyes that seem to be sculpted into a permanent warmth. *(continued on page 3)*



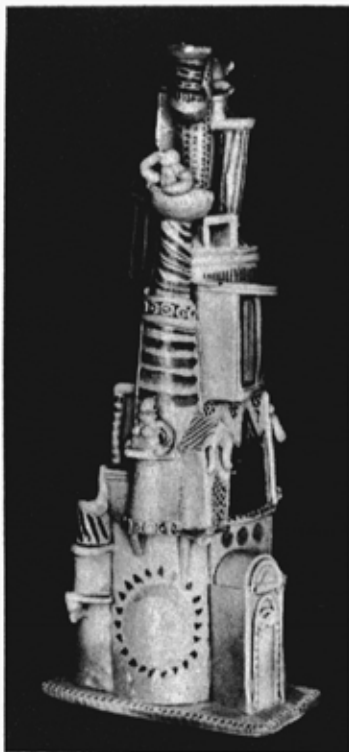
## Bussabarger *continued*

Bussabarger wears the moustache—an object of controversy among his students—for two reasons: “First,” he says, “it’s for color. Because my face is so pale, I’ve often heard that it’s hard to see me from a distance. Then, I wear it to avoid looking too much like a student. I chaperoned a dance here once and had a hard time convincing the housemother I was on the faculty.”

The same reddish color that stands out so well on Bussabarger covers his office and classroom, in another form: dust from the clay he uses for pottery. A sink, several magazines, a desk and chair, an old discarded tuba that Bussabarger plans to use as a model for a still-life, and rows of tables with potter’s wheels all are coated lightly with clay dust. But the clay is evidence of people turning ideas into objects of art.

“Ideas,” Bussabarger says, “evolve in a poetic way. You can be shaving or walking or shoveling snow and all of a sudden you start thinking of something. You start with the basic idea and just go along, trying it out. Sometimes you don’t even know until you’ve finished an object exactly what you want it to be. The idea develops more as you work it out.”

An example is the idea he got for a sculpture he  
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*Some of Bussabarger's ceramic sculptures include, above, a castle-like structure with a whistle (not visible in photo) on top; right, "Brass Duet," a commentary on the pomp and circumstance and militarism of brass bands, spoofed by the informality and poor posture of the figures; opposite page, a composite photo showing a knight, a Mediterranean relief, a head, a trio, and the "Quartet of Musicians" which is this month's cover picture.*



did recently of a building with an actual whistle on top of it. "The whistle idea wasn't necessarily directly related to what I was first trying to do," he says. "I had an idea of building a castle-like structure, in a kind of satirical way, making fun of human beings who were conglomerated together. These human beings, I thought, would be doing things in different ways, inside of tall buildings. All of these things were to represent the fact that architecture today is a problem. To me, one of the basic problems existing today is how to insulate one's self from everyone else and yet contribute something to society.

"I added the whistle at the top as kind of a last touch. I had been fooling around with sculptured whistles and also had been working with groups of figures in clusters. These were to stand for people being bottled up together, having problems, of which architecture was one of the biggest. You may think, I guess, that the whistle almost puts a final mockery on the entire plight."

An artist, Bussabarger says, isn't conscious of his audience as much as a writer or an actor. "I don't care whether you understand the message I try to convey in something. There always will be a basic essence in the work, though, that will convey the idea to the audience. But the artist doesn't try to be understood."

If he does not worry about his "art audience,"

Bussabarger makes a special effort to please his "home audience"—his wife, Mary, an assistant instructor in English at the University, and their children, David, 10, and Wendy, 13. Besides trying to be a good husband and father, Bussabarger is active in Columbia civic affairs. He just completed a year's term as president of the local P.T.A., is adviser to the Columbia Art League and is a "dugout participator" in the Cub Scouts, Campfire Girls, school and playground activities and family events that the Bussabargers enjoy sharing.

In their pre-Civil War Georgian home, one of the oldest in Columbia, the Bussabargers enjoy a blending of both old and new art and furniture. "Our taste is for anything we think is good," Bussabarger says. "I like complete honesty in art. Perhaps that's why I'm not too at home in commercial areas, although I guess they probably have a greater fight to be honest in business. In art, unlike in business, honesty has been so idealized. I want to be avant-garde by not being avant-garde; do you see what I mean? So many artists are concerned with superficial things. But honesty is seeing things for what they are."

Bussabarger's admiration for honesty began in his childhood. Born in Corydon, Ind., in 1922, he lived close to farm areas until he was six. As a Lutheran minister, his father traveled quite a bit, and when Bussabarger was six, his family moved to Springfield,





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## Bussabarger continued

O. After further traveling, Bussabarger was graduated from Covington, O., High School, and enrolled in Wittenberg College, Springfield, O. From the beginning he knew he wanted to teach art in college. "That's the only way an artist in America can survive," he says.

As a member of the Navy V-12 college program, he was transferred to Denison University for midshipman's school. He received an A.B. in art in 1944 and was commissioned an ensign in the Naval Reserve. Aboard ship, he continued his art, making sketches of battle scenes and Navy life.

"My Navy experience was a good thing," he says. "When I got out of midshipman's school, all the discipline I learned fell apart. Life actually wasn't as spit-and-polish as they had taught us. That made me more realistic. It showed me how 'the system' permeates the atmosphere of our living—how an individual survives through all this. I'm kind of a fanatic on individualism; I conform very slowly."

In 1946 Bussabarger married Mary L. Sterling, a girl whom he had met in Chicago. Together, they moved to Michigan State College (now Michigan State University), where Bussabarger enrolled as a

graduate student. When he received his A.M. in 1948, he was an assistant instructor.

After teaching for a year at Benton Harbor, Mich., High School, Bussabarger enrolled for more graduate work, this time at Ohio University—one of the nation's leaders in ceramic art. There, he said, he first discovered and fell in love with ceramics.

From 1951 to 1953, Bussabarger taught at Stephen F. Austin State College, in Nacogdoches, Tex. In 1953, he came to the University of Missouri as an assistant professor.

"Teaching ceramics," he says, "is a good deal creating a situation. There's no real separation between what an artist creates and what he believes. That's what students must be shown."

Combining fundamentals with purpose, desire to learn and feeling, Bussabarger hunts for new ways to express ideas *with* his students, not *to* them. Someday, he says, he'd like to see pottery raised from its relatively low position in public prestige and unseat painting as the most popular form of art.

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