Horning finds nature in clay

To Jerry Horning, associate professor of fine and performing arts, pottery is a religion—a way of working and living with nature. 

"Pottery is buried inside of me," he said. "It is creating and making objects which speak for me."

Horning, who has been working with pottery for 20 years and has taught at Creighton for nine, said he began working with clay during his senior year at South Dakota State University.

"As soon as I began molding the clay I knew it was something I wanted to do," he said. "It was a way of getting closer to nature and working with my hands."

Horning, who has a master's degree in pottery from the University of Minnesota, said his pots are made for utilitarian purposes, so people can use them in their homes and on their tables.

"I try to make pots as warm, direct and honest as possible," he said. "I would like to make ego-less pots, where the potter is not important at all. The pot simply exists as a tree or mountain exists."

In order to produce a pot that stands out, an artist has to be decisive and sensitive toward his work, Horning said.

"If a pot is insensitive or indecisive people get tired of it," he said. "When a pot has presence or stance, people like it."

"As you are making a pot you have to let things happen. When throwing or glazing a pot you have to have spontaneity and life. You can't be hesitant when pottery. After all the best pots are made in a few minutes."

A potter must also have trained hands, Horning said. "A potter's hands have to be strong, but also light," he said. "They have to be like a ballet dancer, sensitive and light, but strong."

Horning said because his pots are hand-made they have imperfections, but these imperfections express humanity.

"I try to let imperfections happen because they show the individuality of a pot," he said. "By observing pots with imperfections we can understand people with imperfections."

After throwing and glazing a pot has to be fired in a kiln. It is a critical process, Horning said, and pots can be destroyed easily during this phase.

"It requires a lot of concentration and a feeling of what is going on," he said. "If anything happens in the kiln it is as if you lost some children."

After taking the pots out of the kiln a potter can experience a sense of disappointment, Horning said.

"The ration of good pots to bad pots is still very small," he said. "Everything doesn't work out, but (a good pot) happens often enough to make you feel good about it."

Photos and story
by Monte Kruse

Above, Horning throws a pot. At left, he is flanked by two of his five dogs. The Horning menagerie includes two horned and a clan of cats. Below, he and wife Mary Jo survey their land. Mary Jo is a weaver who has exhibited her work at numerous shows in the Omaha area.