



Japanese TEA BOWLS

Stephanie Hodge

Ceramics is a half-year elective course where I teach. I attempt to cram as many techniques as I can into the limited time I have with students. The first two assignments of the course focus on learning two basic techniques: pinch pots and coil building.

I recently had the opportunity to provide my students with a unique experience. I took my classes on a field trip to a local pottery studio, Studio Sales Pottery in Avon, New York, where they were able to

participate in a hands-on workshop, learning the process of raku firing.

The Raku Process

The process of raku firing differs from other firing methods in that the pots are removed from the kiln at their

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maximum temperature. This is made possible by the use of an open clay body in which the porosity of the clay body acts like a shock absorber, preventing the body from immediately breaking apart when the pot is removed from

the kiln. Raku glazes often have a fractured-looking texture which is referred to as *crazing*. These glazes are enhanced by the post-firing smoking of the raku pots that embeds carbon into the crackles of the glaze.

In this process, when the pots are heated to 1800°F, the kiln is opened and each super-hot glazed pot is removed with a pair of tongs. The extremely hot pots are immediately placed into containers of sawdust, straw, or other natural materials, a process that produces thick black smoke. The carbon from the smoke is wicked into the porous clay body, blackening the clay and accentuating the crackle pattern of the glaze.



When the pots have cooled enough to touch, they are removed from the smoking chamber and doused with water. The soot-covered pots are then scrubbed clean to expose the crazed surface and reveal the unusual patterns created by this firing process. Because of the porous aspect of the clay body and crazing of the glazes, these raku pots are not watertight. Their function is in their beauty.

Preparation for the Field Trip

After we discussed the process of raku and the traditions that are associated with it, I gave students free reign to create their own tea bowls. Most of them took the assignment in the literal sense and used their previous knowledge about pinch and coil to create their own unique tea bowls.

To save time, I fired the finished greenware pieces and students glazed them prior to leaving for the firing. When we got to the studio, students received a lesson from owner Mike Carroll on how to fire their pieces. They were very eager to jump right in

and we spent the remainder of the day firing pots.

Local Resources

I cannot thank Studio Sales and my school enough for providing my students with this experience. I encourage you to search out local potters in your area and discover the strengths of their studios and how they might enhance your program. Although it required a little effort to make connections, obtain materials, and coordinate transportation, the experience will remain with my students forever. 🙏

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use.

WEB LINK

www.studiosalespottery.com

History of Raku

Raku is frequently associated with Zen Buddhism and the Japanese tea ceremony. The tea ceremony was developed in Japan in the sixteenth century as a highly ritualized practice in which drinking tea became a means of acquiring purity of thought. The coarse clay body from which the tea bowls were made did not conduct heat quickly. This was a plus, since part of the enjoyment of the ceremony was the gentle, slow warming of the hands by the hot tea served in bowls.

An influential tea master, Sen no Rikyu (1521–1591), preferred to use the simple rice bowls of Korea for his tea bowls. Others began following his lead and soon there was a demand for these bowls. Each piece of raku expressed the character of the master potter who made it. The bowls were pinched from a solid lump of clay and carved into their final shape. This method produced a bowl with no joints and was done for practical as well as aesthetic purposes.