Ceramic Arts Handbook Series

Firing Techniques

Raku, Pit & Barrel

Edited by Anderson Turner
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My earliest art memory is making beads and small pots out of clay with my mother, sister and several of my mother’s friends. We wrapped each piece in newspaper and buried them in a metal trashcan with sawdust and larger scraps of wood. I think Mom actually dug a pit in the ground to put the can in, though I’m not sure why she felt this was necessary. I remember they had some difficulty keeping the thing burning. However, with a handy drill and an awl, airflow was established and the pieces started their long can-in-a-pit firing. I think we still have some of the beads from this firing on some of the jewelry my daughters use for dress up. I always know the pieces because of their blackness and their ultra 1970s four-year-old kid’s handmade aesthetic.

Mom and I reproduced this process a few times throughout the years. We would buy a small metal can that would fit in our fireplace and then either buy clay and make things, or purchase greenware of some kind, find some sawdust, then fire away. It’s really a straightforward process and some of our best gifts for friends and loved ones came out of these little firings.

As I’ve read through these articles I’ve often thought of that first pit experience. It’s made me realize how lucky I am to have the family I have; also it’s been a great re-energizer. There’s just something about fire that I think every person who loves clay relates to because it speaks to the soul and excites the mind. In undergraduate school I did room-sized installation pieces out of little clay parts that I elected to raku. I can’t believe my professor put up with that!

Regardless of whether or not you’ve had similar experiences in your history, raku, pit and barrel firing are exciting ways to fire and create interesting surfaces on your work. Not only are the processes romantic ones that allude to a different place and time, but they’re also variable, with results that often occur with a degree of chance. Even the most skilled professional can only control what the results should be like, not exactly what they will be like. Because of this fact I believe that these processes are also some of our best educational tools. I know several beginning throwing or handbuilding classes that require students to only raku their pieces. However, whether you’re a beginner or an established ceramic artist, I know you’ll find something in these pages to inspire and energize you.

Anderson Turner
It is rare indeed when a lifetime of work in any discipline is assembled for viewing. It is even more rare to be able to view a body of work that reflects nearly all the works produced in that discipline around the world today. Such an event took place November 27–December 30, 2004, at TRAX Gallery in Berkeley, California, when raku pioneer Hal Riegger was honored with a retrospective show featuring a lifetime of work.

Riegger, a gentle giant of a man, brought a rigorous discipline to the study of raku, a study that, for him, began in the spring of 1952. He discovered an account of Japanese raku practices by Warren Gilbertson in an old (February 1943) issue of the *Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society*. After reading about the technique, Riegger built a small kiln and began firing. His first attempts met with limited success, but he became increasingly involved and, in 1958, taught raku for the first time at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine.

To say his was an ordinary life of clay and academia would be to grossly misstate the facts and underestimate the man. After earning his bachelors degree at Alfred University and completing his resident work on his masters degree at The Ohio State University in 1939, his pottery life was both interrupted and enhanced by World War II. Riegger was a conscientious objector, morally opposed to war, a stance he attributes to the education he received at the School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, where students were allowed to pursue their own interests in their own time, which allowed their deepest interests and abilities to come naturally to the surface. World War II conscientious objectors were organized into work camps and were required to pay to stay there. Riegger was assigned to a camp in northwestern North Dakota, where he helped organize a pottery program for the men in the camp. The program gained national attention for the quality of the work produced, and an exhibition of assignees’ work toured veteran’s hospitals to encourage physical therapy.
Riegger’s work over the years has influenced everyone who has worked making raku. It is a tribute to his rather shy and unassuming nature that he felt he really hasn’t influenced anyone. Others disagree. Former student, Yolanda Samuels, remembers how taking classes from Riegger at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1956 changed her entire outlook on clay. “I started my clay career working with Marguerite Wildenhain, and her approach was very strict. Hal, on the other hand, had us experimenting with everything. He was so open, it was like I could finally be really creative.”

Berkeley potter and TRAX gallery collaborator Robert Brady remembers his first meeting with Riegger. “I was very impressed with Hal, his work, house and lifestyle. Hal lived very simply, somewhere between a Zen Buddhist and Shaker sensibility. He did not surround himself with more than he needed. His wardrobe
was very simple; khaki shorts, white tee shirts and work shoes. His pots were much the same—beautiful, simple volumes, economically made. They were very light and struck a chord with my own sensibilities.”

A traditionalist when it comes to raku, Riegger’s study of the Japanese tea ceremony, the purpose of the teabowls and the method of their making, helped him to realize that he had a deep affinity for Japanese culture and an innate understanding of what was behind the making of ceremonial ware.

His exposure to, and assimilation of, Japanese raku led him to believe that the creation of raku without an underlining understanding of why a piece is made lacks the human intent which makes work come alive. This is an attitude that was reinforced by his days in the camp.

For Riegger, raku refered to those pieces made specifically for the tea ceremony, and executed with the precepts appropriate to things of fired clay made for the ceremony. All other work is not raku, but done in the raku style. “I don’t like much of what is being made in the name of raku today. It’s too loud; it hits you in the face. Raku pots should be quiet. You should have to search them out,” he said. “In fact, I don’t think a person with a big ego could make a raku pot.

“People come to see me make raku,” Riegger said. “There really isn’t much to see. You pull the pieces out of the kiln, put it in sawdust, cover it with a can, and walk away. Then you come back later and there is the pot. People are so disappointed. They think there should be some kind of party going on!”

“In American ceramics history,” said Riegger, “raku followed stoneware, and became an alternative to stoneware’s earthy color palette because bright, lustrous colors could be obtained. The exciting finishes obtained have led to people grabbing any old pot and putting glaze on it with no thought to how the glaze fits the pot.”

Riegger noted that post-firing reduction was not part of Japanese raku. So where did the reduction come from? Herbert H. Sanders, in his World of Japanese Ceramics, explains that, when the clay was bisqued in a wood or charcoal kiln,
the clay was reduced in certain areas. These spots of reduction remained in the clay, under the glaze, when they were glaze fired. These pots were highly sought after and greatly prized.

Riegger’s asymmetrical shapes show a quality of freedom and abandonment. Pots made this way show a quality that is human. He believed that smaller is more powerful. For instance, a black glaze applied to a pot with just a spot of luster makes for a strong and beautiful piece, as opposed to a loud, brightly colored piece.
Hal Riegger: Teacher and Friend

by Steven Branfman

I first saw raku in 1974 as a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). My introduction was less than elegant. In fact, it was crude. A few students were huddled around a small kiln with the door half open. They were reaching in with long-handled tongs and removing pots in a most haphazard, random fashion. One of them asked, “are they ready?” Another replied, “I have no idea.” Within their dubiousness was an excitement and spontaneity that attracted me. Alas, RISD was focused on high firing. If I wanted to pursue raku, I was on my own. To the library I went and there I found *Raku: Art and Technique* by Hal Riegger. That night I read it cover to cover. The highlighted passages and notes left in the margins by previous readers spoke volumes to the book’s importance and influence. The next day I bought a copy of my own. That book became my bible and Riegger became my teacher.

Riegger taught me about the origins of raku, its intent and the philosophy that surrounds it. He taught me about clay, glazes and kilns. I learned the difference between crude and primitive. He had a profound influence on my work and my eventual decision to pursue raku exclusively.

Fast forward to 1989 when I was writing a book on raku. Where better to begin than with the person whose book started my career. Finding Riegger wasn’t difficult, despite the fact that his name and identity had all but vanished from the clay scene. I telephoned him, and there began a friendship that I wish had begun sooner. We spoke by phone, then by letters as his hearing began to fail, and then, one day, I received an e-mail. This 80-something was not one to sit idly by as technology whizzed past. At first we talked about clay and pots and, of course, raku. Soon, conversation included experience, family, friends, accomplishments, delights and disappointments. We exchanged gifts and artifacts. I learned of the people with whom he’d crossed paths and soon realized how important an individual he was (not through his boasting or even suggestion). He criticized me and I questioned him. I took it as a badge of honor when I learned that at a workshop he used a small vessel I had given him as an example of a misguided application of raku. As the years went by, our friendship grew, our bond became stronger, and our respect for each other greater. Our conversations became focused on purpose, life and legacy.

A new raku facility was built at his alma mater, The New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in New York, and named in his honor. A presidential citation and plaque recognize his lifetime devoted to clay and celebrate his formidable contributions to the history of American ceramics. I was proud to accept it on my friend’s behalf. His quiet, humble approach to his work and life are the very personal qualities that delayed this honor for so long.