Introduction

Potters who burnish are often asked, ‘what glaze is that?’ by curious admirers of their work. Non-potters naturally assume that all pottery is glazed, and the glossy surface of a burnished pot seems like a different and intriguing sort of glaze. Though glazed pottery can be brighter and more colourful, a burnished pot has a glow from within and a warmth that glazed pottery doesn’t possess. The difference which non-potters sense without knowing it – and which fascinates potters – is that the surface of a burnished pot doesn’t wear a coat hiding the clay itself from view. Glaze is glossy and reflective, but the reflecting surface consists of a millimeter or so of glass covering the clay. Underneath this layer of glaze the rough stony clay is always perceptible, even if not always visible.

A burnished pot can have a surface just as glossy and reflective as any glaze, but behind this glorious surface there is no hidden roughness. Even the feel of a burnished pot is seductive: while a glazed pot feels hard and cold, a burnished pot seems warm and almost soft to touch.

Potters who burnish get used to seeing their customers handle the pots, turning them in their hands and stroking the surface. This is a common and unconscious response to the sensuousness of burnished pottery.

While nowadays most pottery, certainly most functional pottery, is glazed to make it sanitary and non-porous, throughout history potters all over the world have taken advantage of the beautiful possibilities inherent in clay itself when not covered with glaze. When the use of clay evolved into the making of pots, the first pottery was unglazed. While in some places potters gradually developed the technique of coating pots with glaze, in other parts of the world the traditional unglazed surface is still used today.

Burnishing an unglazed surface is for these traditional potters a technological advancement over leaving it rough, as a burnished surface is somewhat more watertight than an unburnished one. Today, of course, a potter or ceramic artist is free to choose from a wide range of surface finishing techniques to find the one most suited to his or her artistic vision. Those who seek bright colour, durability or vitrified ware, will choose to use glaze. Others, who want a hard, stony surface, may leave the clay bare of glaze and rough-textured. Those whose vision demands a more organic look and a softer surface, may choose to burnish.

Burnished pottery doesn’t need to be fired in any particular way, except that a burnished surface cannot endure the high temperatures necessary to melt glaze without changing, and becoming dull. In cultures where burnished pottery is still made in traditional ways, the work is often fired in a bonfire, leaving marks from the burning material on the surface of the pottery. Such random smoke-markings so enhance and enrich much burnished pottery that many modern ceramic artists
Pit-fired Torso by Sumi von Dassow, 2006. 30 x 20 x 15 cm (12 x 8 x 6 in.). Wheel-thrown and altered from B-Mix clay (white stoneware); terra sigillata sprayed on and bumished with a chamois-leather; bisque-fired to cone 010; pit-fired with salt, copper carbonate and salt-soaked materials. A guitar string wrapped bandolier-style around the torso left traces such as the diagonal line on the collar. Photo by Sumi von Dassow.
who burnish use some form of smoke-firing to finish their work. At the same time, since pit-firings and sawdust firings must generally be done with unglazed pots, many potters find burnishing to be the best way to give a finished look to pots fired with these techniques. Thus the marriage between burnishing and smoke-firing is a match created from mutual attraction, not necessity.

The aim of this book is to examine the partners in that marriage. Many images of burnished pottery have been included to allow you to savour and appreciate the versatility of this technique. Various methods of burnishing are presented so that you may choose the most appropriate technique for your particular application. And several approaches to pit-firing, saggar-firing and other types of smoke-firing are described and illustrated to offer a springboard for creativity. My hope is that potters and non-potters alike will come to a greater understanding and appreciation of both burnishing and smoke-firing by reading this book.
and thus more suitable for food and water storage because the burnishing process compresses the surface and packs the clay particles closer together. A burnished surface is also attractive, sensuous to the touch, and provides a smooth ground for painted decoration. Thus it is hardly surprising that burnished pottery shows up all over the world, and that the archaeological remains of many civilizations bear a familial resemblance – ancient pottery from China or the Mediterranean region almost seems more closely related in form and decoration to native African or American pottery, than to modern pottery from those regions. But now that modern pottery has come full circle to rediscover the beauty of burnished pottery, the history of unglazed pottery around the world is of interest to the modern ceramic artist.

China

China’s legacy of skilfully crafted and decorated pottery dates back to at least the 5th millennium BC. Neolithic Chinese pottery is handbuilt, though by the 3rd millennium BC the wheel came into use. Even at such an early date the ware was apparently fired in something more closely resembling a kiln than an open pit or bonfire, and it was often burnished and painted in slip with geometric designs. Other early burnished Chinese pottery was reduction-fired to blacken it, a technique used to great effect in the production of the famous Pueblo Indian black pottery from the American Southwest. In fact, it appears that in refining their kiln design to improve the quality of this black ware, Chinese potters embarked upon the path that led to the eventual development of reduction-fired glazed stoneware. Glazes began to appear some time in the 2nd millennium BC, and from that point on Chinese potters never abandoned the pursuit for higher temperatures and more refined glazes. Sadly for admirers of burnished pottery, Chinese potters ceased to make unglazed work after AD 500 or so, though in other parts of Asia handbuilt and unglazed pottery is still made and used.

The Mediterranean

Ancient Greece was producing some of the world’s most famous unglazed pottery just at the time when Chinese potters were beginning to turn away from unglazed ware. The process of making Greek red and black pottery involved a sophisticated use of very simple materials, and a carefully controlled firing schedule. Pottery production, including the use of the wheel, was well developed in the Mediterranean region by about 3000BC. Handbuilt and wheel-thrown pottery, elaborately decorated with geometric patterns or stylized representations of animals or plants in painted slip, was produced throughout the region, including North Africa, the islands of the Mediterranean and the Greek mainland. For several hundred years, beginning around 1000BC, slip-decorated Greek pottery was a highly valued art form, traded widely throughout the area, and advancing technically through that period of time until it became highly refined in technique and artistic merit. Though the glossy black of this pottery is often referred to as a glaze, it was actually a fine slip made from the clay body used to form the pot, applied over a
burnished clay surface. Beginning with the technique used also by the ancient Chinese of firing in reduction to produce black ware, the Greek potters discovered that, by allowing air into their kilns as they cooled, they could cause unslipped portions of their ware to reoxidise to the clay’s original red colour.

Unfortunately, as the population of the region grew, so did the demand for more easily produced, less highly decorated pottery, and the heyday of Greek painted pottery came to an end by 200 BC. Because the firing was simpler, potters began to make red-slipped ware and abandoned black painted decoration and reduction firing. Today, we refer to the type of slip used by potters of this region as terra sigillata, though originally this term referred to Roman pottery decorated with stamped figures and coated with fine slip. The growing population of the Mediterranean world demanded mass production of pottery for everyday use, and terra sigillata ware was easier to produce in great numbers than the painstakingly decorated pottery which preceded it. The production of this ware persisted until as late as around AD 1000 in North Africa, but then glazed ware – even less porous and easier to clean than terra sigillata – won the battle throughout Europe and the Mediterranean region.

Africa

Other than in the cities of North Africa, where the culture was and is intimately connected to that of Mediterranean Europe, traditional pottery in Africa remains unglazed and fired in open bonfires to this day. This is largely because until the modern era the population of southern Africa never grew so crowded as to demand the mass production of pottery. Thus, in many parts of Africa pottery is still produced by individual villagers who work on a small scale. In some places, each woman makes her own pots, but usually the potter creates the vessels needed by the members of her tribe or village during the dry season, tending her fields the rest of the
evaporative cooling effect that keeps the water inside at a pleasing temperature. In North America, Pueblo Indian potters have developed their traditional methods of production to the point where their world-famous vessels fetch thousands of dollars, rival the work of any modern ceramic artist in skill and artistry, and are featured in major museums everywhere in the world.

In the modern era, when handmade pottery is an art-form rather than a necessity for most of the peoples of the world, handmade pottery traditions form a valuable reservoir of techniques and ideas from which artists all over the world draw inspiration. The line between traditional pottery and ceramic art has become blurred: as traditional pottery-making techniques grow impractical for more and more of the world’s population, they become all the more attractive to the artist precisely because they are an antidote to sterile mass-production methods. The sculptural forms of pre-Columbian Incan and Aztec pottery, the stylized animals and geometric patterns decorating Mimbres or Anasazi pottery, and the voluptuously burnished surfaces of Pueblo pottery, would all fit in better with any exhibition of contemporary ceramic art than would most people’s wedding china.

Burnished Black Pottery Jar. Ht: 20.5 cm (8 in.). Germanic, later 3rd century AD, Coil-built, burnished, and fired in a bonfire smothered with turf to blacken it. Though the techniques used to make this pot are native to the region, the pot shows the evident influence of Roman culture, imitating the form and sheen of a metal jar. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Not Just An Empty Vessel by Sumi von Dassow, 2004. 33 x 23 x 20 cm (13 x 9 x 8 in.). Coil-built from red stoneware (Navajo Wheel Clay from Industrial Minerals Co.), burnished with a stone, decoration painted on using terra sigillata, and smoke-fired. Photo by Sumi von Dassow.