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Ancient Clay: Handbuilding, Terra Sigillata, and Bonfiring Five-Day Workshop - Description and Schedule

Background

In considering the course of history up to the modern age, we often assume that "progress" means a move from un-civilized to civilized, from primitive to sophisticated, from manual to automated, from low-tech to high-tech, from hand-made to machine-made. As a result, 20th and 21st century artists often seek "modern" technology and aesthetic, turning their backs on the wonderful ceramic work of the past. Until quite recently, ancient and tribal ceramic traditions other than Greek black-figure and red-figure wares were generally seen as primitive craft oddities, too-often dismissed from the study of ceramics. But along with the technological leaps of the digital age, we see an impersonalization of craft and a certain loss of individual identity that has inspired a renewed appreciation of our aesthetic and technical roots in ancient and tribal art. Any cursory examination will reveal that these traditions are "primitive" only in the tools and firing processes, while the craftsmanship, narrative content, and design aesthetic are highly sophisticated.

Workshop Description

This workshop gives beginning and experienced clay-workers the opportunity to investigate the techniques and aesthetics of ancient and tribal ceramics. We will focus on simple, timeless vessel construction using pinch and coil methods, exploring the broad diversity of handbuilt form and the range of decorative effects possible without the use of glazes. Slide shows will explore high points in the history of ancient and tribal clay.

We will coat our forms with a refined clay slip known as terra sigillata and hand-rub the surface to a high luster. Traditionally, tribal pottery is fired in a single bonfiring, but this is only possible with a very highly-grogged clay body and a long slow preheat and bonfiring. To allow a quick bonfiring and minimize losses, we will pre-fire the wares in a very low-temperature bisque and transfer them from bisque to bonfire while still warm. The bonfire will be a classic blackware firing, similar to the firings conducted by Native American potters of the American Southwest and many other cultures through history.

A major appeal of tribal ceramics is the lack of modern technology. With our fascination for the latest tools and equipment of our trade, this feature is difficult for many contemporary studio artists to accept. Once experienced, however, a tribal approach to ceramics is tremendously liberating, perhaps most of all for contemporary "high-tech" ceramic artists.

Schedule for Five-Day Ancient Clay Workshop

Please note that this schedule must remain flexible, since every workshop group is different.

- First Day Morning - Introductions, discussion/demo of coil-construction, use of pukis. Work on coil forms. Slide discussion on ancient and tribal clay.
- First Day Afternoon - Demo of pinch construction and slumped-slab masks. Continue slide discussion on ancient and tribal clay. Work on pinch/coil forms and masks.
- Second Day Morning - discussion/demo of whistles and rattles, damp clay decoration. Work on pinch/coil forms and masks. Continuation of slide discussion on ancient and tribal clay.
- Second Day Afternoon - Finish coil forms and masks. Work on pinch forms and whistles. Load coil forms and masks in kiln to dry overnight.
- Third Day Morning - Finish any remaining coil forms and masks and quick-dry in kilns. Slide discussion on figurines and amulets. Work on pinch forms, whistles, figurines, and amulets.
- Third Day Afternoon - Sanding demo. Sand all coil forms and masks. Finish pinch forms, whistles, figurines, and amulets.
- Third Day Afternoon or Evening – (or whenever we decide to do it) Public slide show on Vince's work.
- Fourth Day Morning - Discussion/demo of terra sigillata, polishing, burnishing, sgraffito, black- on-black. Work on sanding, terra sigillata, polishing, decorating.
- Fourth Day Afternoon - Complete all polishing/decorating, load bisque-firings. Prepare for bonfiring.
- Fifth Day Morning - The blackware bonfiring. Slide show on Vince's work
- Fifth Day Afternoon - Dig up bonfire and admire the work.