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Developing Ceramic Surface - Five-Day Workshop Description and Schedule

Skill Level - Previous experience in handbuilding and/or throwing required.

Background

A simple unembellished ceramic form dipped in glaze and fired may turn into an exquisite piece. A simple coat of glaze on a smooth surface can be an elegant solution, but there are so many other possibilities in ceramic surface design. Making fine pottery or sculpture with a minimal command of surface decoration methods is like trying to speak a foreign language with minimal command of the vocabulary and grammar. In both cases, your chance of effective communication is severely limited.

Much of the evolution of ceramics through the millennia displays the human inclination to experiment, to seek new surface and form. Part of this comes from innate human curiosity, part from the desire of artists/artisans to develop their craft, and part from the drive to create something original that stands out from the crowd. As an individual craftsperson, your best shot at reaching the latter has a lot to do with the foundation of design theory and the vocabulary of decoration materials and methods you can draw from. Becoming fluent in the “language” of creativity and ceramics gives you a far better shot at originating a unique personal style and direction and orchestrating the desired outcome in your work.

Workshop Description

This workshop explores decorating techniques employed through the ceramic process on both thrown and handbuilt work from wet clay to bisque-fired forms. We will pack a lot of information into five days. My intention is to keep things entertaining and enjoyable, but if you want to absorb as much technique and information as possible I recommend a good sketchbook for drawing and note-taking.

Abundant workshops address glazes and glazing, but few deal with surface design and decoration in the earlier stages of the ceramic process, and this will be our focus. We will make and fire bisque stamps and rollers, explore the use of various tools and materials in impressing, carving, and abrading clay, investigate simple slip-decorating techniques such as sgraffito, mishima, wax-mishima, and slip-layering, and briefly explore the use of engobes and patinas on bisque-fired forms. We will have several simple clear and opaque cone 6 glazes to apply over these effects, and will do a glaze-firing on Thursday night.

We will have a series of slide shows surveying decorating techniques and effects used in ceramic work past and present. This will be an informal survey providing good coverage of design concepts and the range of possible surface design effects. The slide shows and discussions will include the following essential concepts:

1. Whenever possible, a ceramic piece should be designed to accommodate the intended surface decoration, rather than postponing decisions about surface design until the piece is leather hard or bisque-fired.
2. The potter or sculptor must approach each piece as a designer, and never just as a decorator.
3. The surface of a pot is like a canvas. Would a painter ever place a small image, icon, or symbol in the center of a canvas and leave the rest blank? As in a painting, the objective is to address the entire surface of a ceramic piece in a composition that makes use of positive and negative space, focal points, symmetrical or asymmetrical balance, and rhythmic or non-rhythmic repetition of visual elements. That in no way implies that the entire surface is covered with pattern or imagery (although sometimes it is), but rather that the decoration is designed and placed in consideration of the entire surface.

Some of the most interesting and effective ceramic works feature multiple surface decoration methods added at sequential stages of the ceramic process, resulting in a richness and depth unavailable through any single technique. We will have only minimal opportunity for such layered effects in a five-day workshop, but will discuss the possibilities and see examples in the slide shows. Throughout the five days of this workshop we will maintain an ongoing dialogue about surface design and ways to achieve particular aesthetic and utilitarian effects and outcomes. I encourage you to bring samples or images of your work to share with the group, giving us the added opportunity to talk about surface design in reference to your own work. You will leave this workshop with a significantly-expanded vocabulary of surface design possibilities.

Workshop Schedule - Five-Day - Developing Ceramic Surface

This schedule serves as a general guide, but must remain flexible. Every workshop group is different, and the schedule always evolves to suit the needs and productivity of the participants.

- ***First Day Morning*** – Introduction to the workshop, general information about the studio and our work schedule. Discussion/demo of bisque-stamps and rollers. Make bisque-stamps and rollers. First surface design slide show.
- ***First Day Afternoon*** – Discussion-demo of impressing, texturing, and carving methods. Demo use of foam slump molds. Finish bisque stamps and rollers, work with modeling tools and other tools/materials, investigating markmaking on damp clay. Bisque-fire bisque stamps and rollers.
- ***Second Day Morning*** – Discussion/demo of carving/abrading methods on leather-hard clay. Experiment with pattern, texture, and other markmaking on damp and leather-hard clay using bisque stamps and other tools. Work on projects. Second surface design slide show.
- ***Second Day Afternoon*** – Discussion/demo of handles and feet for slumped trays, plates and bowls. Work on projects. Make tiles and other small forms with carved/impressed pattern/texture/marks to be bisque-fired for experimentations with engobes and oxide patinas.
- ***Third Day Morning*** – Discussion/demo slip-decoration processes including slip painting, sgraffito, mishima, wax mishima, and slip layering. Work on projects. Third surface design slide show.

- **Third Day Afternoon** – Work with slip-decoration processes. Load bisque-firing.
- **Fourth Day Morning** – Discussion/demo of use of engobes and oxide patinas on bisque-fired ware. Work on projects. Slide show about Vince’s work.
- **Fourth Day Afternoon** - Continued working on projects, glaze wares. Load glaze-firing.
- **Fifth Day Morning** – Finish projects, unload glaze-firing, discuss outcomes, look at samples or images of work brought by participants.