

Vince Pitelka, 2016
wpitelka@tntech.edu

Ancient Clay: Alternative Fire-Safe Version Without Bonfiring Five-Day Workshop - Information and Supply Lists for Hosting Venue

Of all the workshops I teach, this is my favorite. It represents the formative level of ceramic technology, and it is very satisfying every time. At UMass-Amherst in the late 80s I noticed that art history survey textbooks pay little or no attention to the ceramics of ancient and tribal cultures other than the red and black figure vases of ancient Greece. I designed this workshop in response, and initially called it "Primitive Ceramics." I quickly realized that "primitive" is entirely inappropriate in reference to this type of work. The circumstances and firing methods may be primitive, but the craftsmanship and aesthetic is often as sophisticated as any art/craft of the modern world.

Without a bonfiring, this workshop requires far less preparation on the part of the hosting venue. Even without the bonfiring, I can promise a rich experience and well-satisfied participants. To speak plainly, people who take this workshop are often amazed by what they are able to create. I taught Ancient Clay every summer for nine years at Michael McDowell's farm and studio in northwest Washington State, and had quite a few people come back and take it repeatedly.

Materials Provided by Host

- Buff claybody containing fine grog. Have on hand 50# per participant and 150# for instructor, plus some extra.
- One gallon white vinegar.
- Two gallons of joining slurry made in advance from the claybody. Cut 15# of clay into thin slices and dry completely. Break up the bone-dry clay into smaller pieces (not crushed) and immerse in water with several inches of water covering the clay and let sit overnight. The clay will slake down to slurry by itself. Next day, drain off all excess water, mix with drill impeller mixer or hand blender until completely smooth with no lumps, add 1/2 cup of vinegar, add water carefully, mixing frequently, until slurry will not pour if you tilt the bucket, but will if you shake it.
- Four standard propane cylinders for a hand-held torch. I will bring several torches.
- If we will be extending the workshop one day to do the blackware sagger-firing, have a large roll of wide, heavy-duty aluminum foil and a trash bag of sawdust.

Facilities and Equipment Provided by Host

- Digital projector and appropriately dark room with screen or white wall.
- Large sturdy work tables for handbuilding and decorating. Heavy plywood-covered tables are best, but sturdy 3x6' folding tables will work, with no more than four participants per 4x8' table and two per folding table.
- A 24" stool for the instructor to use.

- Make a supply of *pukis* - enough to have one for each participant to use, one for the instructor, and some extras. *Puki* is a Southwest Native American term for a small reusable bisque-fired form for supporting the lower portion of round-bottom coil vessels until they are stiff enough to support themselves. Pukis are just heavy-duty bisque-fired bowl-forms with a wide foot and a constant curve like a portion of a sphere on the inside from rim to rim. For our purpose, we should have a variety of sizes of pukis with the radius of the inside curvature of different pukis varying from 3" to 5". If that seems confusing, take a compass and some cardboard or posterboard, draw circles 6", 8", and 10" in diameter, and cut them out. Make some pukis to approximately match the curvature of each cardboard disk (adjusting the total for the expected number of participants). Bisque-fire the pukis in a standard lowfire bisque. Do not fire them above lowfire bisque temperatures.
- Electric kilns for drying wares and for low (cone-018) firing (and 018 cones if not a programmable kiln).