

Ceramic Vocabulary

These are some general key terms to know when discussing Ceramic Art.

Air pockets: Enclosed air spaces within clay that must be removed for they may cause ceramic work to explode or crack.

Bisque ware: Clay that has been fired once, at a low temperature. Clay is hard but porous and absorbent.

Bone dry: No visible moisture and no dampness to the touch. Clay is ready to be fired.

Ceramics: Objects made of clay fired to a high temperature, over 1550 degrees F.

Clay: Fine grained earth materials formed by the decomposition of igneous rocks; plastic when wet; strong when dry; and rock hard when exposed to red heat (fired).

Coils: Rolled, snake-like ropes of clay, joined together to build pots.

Embossment: Raised surface design on a clay piece.

Firing: To heat in a kiln (brick oven). Firing is a term used for “cooking” the clay.

Form: Three-dimensional shape and structure of an object.

Glaze: A combination of miniscule clay and glass particles mixed with water; applied to bisque ware before firing. During the firing process this applied mixture adheres to the form, giving it a hard, durable surface. Glazes can be colored, opaque, clear, translucent, or matte.

Greenware: Unfired clay ready or nearly ready for firing.

Hand-building: Construction processes that include pinching, coiling or building with slabs.

Incising: Surface decoration made by scratching, cutting, or carving lines into clay at various depths.

Inlay: Surface decoration created by filling an impression in a clay surface with another clay or slip.

Kiln: A furnace or oven built of heat-resistant materials for firing pottery. Heat is produced by electricity, propane, natural gas or wood.

Leather Hard: Clay is too firm to bend yet soft enough to carve. It is the consistency of cheddar cheese.

Pinch Pots: Starting with a ball of clay, the potter opens a hole with his thumb. Pinching the clay between his thumb on the inside and fingers on the outside, a bowl shape is formed.

Plastic stage: Moist and elastic to the touch; clay that is easily manipulated.

Porcelain: A translucent, nonabsorbent body fired at high temperature. White and hard, it was first developed in China during the 8th century.

Pottery: Pottery is one of the oldest art forms explored by mankind. There are many now-extinct cultures throughout the world that did not use written language. For some of these civilizations the only evidence of their daily lives comes in the form of pottery, which when left behind provides important archeological records.

Scoring: Scratching or roughing-up the clay surface; used in combination with brushed-on slip, scoring is a preparation step for joining two or more separate clay pieces together.

Seam: The crack formed where two pieces of clay are joined.

Slabs: Rolled flat sections of clay. Wet slabs can be draped over or into forms or rolled around cylindrical or square forms. Slabs may be cut into shapes and joined together using the score and slip method. This is most successful when slabs are dried to the leather-hard state.

Slip: Finely ground clay particles mixed with water. 1) Used for joining two pieces of clay; 2) Brushed on (also called underglaze) for decorating purposes (3) May be squeezed or extruded onto the surface for a raised effect. Slip may be colored.

Texture: The quality of a surface.

Three-dimensional: when all three dimensions (length, height, and width) can be touched and felt.

Underglazes: Colored slip or liquid stain applied to leather hard clay or bisque ware, then coated with a clear glaze.

Ware: Pottery pieces in the raw, bisque, or glazed state.

Wedging: A kneading process, manipulating the clay to remove air bubbles, lumps, and excess water.