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## Raku Pottery: Origins, Process and Method

Raku pottery has a mysterious and somewhat murky history. A practice of fast firing and cooling low temperature wares appears to have been used by itinerant Chinese potters well before the 16th century. It was likely this approach that took hold in Japan around the year 1600 that eventually evolved into what became known as Raku. It was a making, glazing, and low temperature firing method prized by tea ceremony masters for its subtle, unpretentious but aesthetically pleasing appearance, soft surfaces, and its embodiment of the Japanese ideals of wabi-sabi. The ware was rapidly fired one piece at a time in a small charcoal fueled kiln. When ready, the piece was removed from the kiln with tongs and allowed to cool naturally. Many Japanese potters and pottery families produced ware by this method. However, one family rose to the forefront and took the moniker of the Raku Family. Now in its 15th generation, the family continues to make tea ceremony ware following traditional practices.

Raku pottery was first introduced to the west by Bernard Leach after he participated in a “Raku party” while in Tokyo in 1911. In the mid 20th century, Western potters, most notably Warren Gilbertson, Hal Riegger, and Paul Soldner, became attracted to the method and began to experiment with its technical aspects. In its contemporary incarnation, Raku involves the rapid firing of ware in a small, easily controlled kiln. The ware is observed through peep holes in the kiln for glaze melt, and upon maturity, the pots are quickly removed from the kiln using tongs or gloved hands. With the ware exposed, post firing techniques may involve the rapid cooling of the pots, or some other handling such as additional glaze application, the spraying of other materials on the surfaces, partial cooling, and the most frequent being the cooling of the ware in a closed container in an atmosphere created by the burning of combustible material. The single most important element of the process is the speed and clarity at which you operate.

**Forming Technique** All of my work is wheel thrown and Raku fired. My pots are about volume and communicating shape through interior space and the pressure within. I approach the surface of my pots as a skin containing and defining the form. My throwing technique involves pulling a cylindrical shape, applying textures through carving, incising, pressing, combing, and the additions of dry clay mixtures. The form is then expanded from the inside with one hand without touching the outside. The shoulder, neck, and rims are finished in the conventional way.

**Glazing and Firing** I use a variety of glazes including so called “raku glazes” stoneware glazes, commercial low fire glazes, slips, engobes, stains, underglazes and overglazes. Glazes are applied by brushing, pouring, and spraying often with multiple thin layers of as many as 15 glazes. I fire without the use of cones or pyrometer, observing the glazes as they melt and removing the pots when the surfaces have melted and flowed to my satisfaction. Post firing is a process all its own and requires the precise combination of forced cooling and smoking. Smoking is carried out in metal cans using coarse sawdust, wood shavings, and pine needles.

**Handling Raku Ware** Due to the firing process, Raku pottery is fragile and not waterproof, the glazes are soft, and the ware should be considered decorative in nature. However, because of the association between the Japanese Tea Ceremony and Raku ware, the issue of function becomes confusing. Common wisdom allows for the use of Raku fired chawan (tea bowls) in the tea ceremony because of the infrequent, ceremonial, and gentle use. Appendages, necks, and rims of pots should be handled with care. **Do not lift ware by the neck or rim.** Cleaning with a damp sponge or soft cloth is appropriate.

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