

Burnishing for beginners

A well burnished and biscuit fired pot is the key to successful naked raku, smoke firing, horse hair decoration and barrel firing. An alternative is to use terra sigillata [TS]. See Tim Gee's helpful guide on making and using TS as part of this pack of help sheets.

Everyone will have their own favourite clay bodies and techniques for burnishing. What follows works for me but I don't claim it is in any way the best way to do it and am always on the lookout for improvements. Have a look at books such as those in the references below if you want to see what others do.

Clay body. Any well grogged clay body which resists thermal shock is usually fine. I use Ashraf Hanna clay from CTM which is very versatile and gives a good white body when biscuit fired.

Preparing the surface. Get the surface of your pot as smooth as you can and then apply a fine grained slip at the leather hard stage. Some people use a porcelain slip. I use a slip composed of 50% body clay plus 50% porcelain as I understand this adheres to the clay surface well. Sieve the slip at 200 mesh to get it as fine as possible and then apply as many coats as you can. I usually put about five coats on the pot.

Burnishing. Allow the slipped pot to dry to nearly bone dry. The actual dryness which suits your personal technique varies from person to person and you can only find it by trial and error. Try on a relatively hidden part of the pot. If your burnishing leaves unsightly indentations, your pot isn't dry enough. If burnishing doesn't produce a shine and leaves the surface dusty, your pot is too dry. See below for a possible way out.

Now you've got the perfect dryness[!], burnish by smoothing the whole of the surface using your chosen tool. I use a plastic spatula from CTM, one that looks like a double headed spear. The rounded side is flexible and that helps me get into difficult curves. Other people use the back of a spoon, some use a polished pebble. This should give you a smooth, polished surface. You can repeat the burnishing to improve it if you wish. It is worth finishing the surface by rubbing it with a thin plastic bag stretched across your finger.

If your pot was too dry you can try moistening it in sections by dipping your finger in water, smoothing that on your pot a section at a time and then burnishing that area. Some people finish their pot by rubbing a thin layer of cooking oil such as sunflower oil over the whole surface, letting it just dry to a grey powder and then burnishing again. I have had some mixed results with this but seen some wonderfully finished pots done this way.

Biscuit firing. Fire you pot[s] to a maximum of 960 degrees. Anything higher tends to destroy the burnish.

Good luck.

John Watson

References:

- "Raku" Tim Andrews. A & C Black
- "Raku. Investigations into Fire". David Jones. The Crowood Press
- "Alternative Kilns & Firing Techniques". James C Watkins & Paul Andrew Wandless. Lark Books. New York
- I am sure there are lots of good U Tube videos.