

Terra Sigillata

There are two main ways of treating the surface of work to be raked, pit or smoke fired, the first is burnishing and the second is by applying terra sigillata. There is a lot of mystery surrounding this liquid, but it is actually simple to make and here's how!

About 2lbs bone dry clay of your choice

Bucket of water

2-3 tsp Epsom salts (or any flocculant)

1-3 tsp Soda ash or sodium silicate (or any de-flocculant)

Terra sigillata is simply a clay slip made with only the finest particles, a process that has been in use for many centuries. In contemporary ceramics, it is used to produce a fine almost polished surface that, due to its density, resists smoke/carbon from Raku and pit firing. Faster and easier than burnishing, TS can also be used on areas that are impossible to burnish such as texture and edges. T.S. can also be successfully applied to bisque work if used thinly and re-fired.

T.S. can be made from almost any clay with some giving more and better colour than others.

Mix the dry clay with water and allow it to slake overnight; add a little of either of the two de-flocculants and mix well. Separating some of this slip into a glass or plastic tumbler will allow you to observe the process. Let the bucket stand undisturbed for about 48 hours. In the glass, you will observe that the mixture has stratified into three layers (if it hasn't, add more de-flocculant and try again). At the top is clear water, in the middle is the layer of T.S. and at the bottom is a layer of larger particles. Carefully pour or siphon the top two layers into a new bucket and discard the bottom layer. This is a very thin T.S, this next process is to remove excess water.

Add a small amount of the Epsom salts (dissolved in hot water), mix well and decant into glass and bucket, allow to stand for a day or two. This time, you will be left with two layers; carefully pour off the top water layer, what is left is thick T.S., it needs to be about thin cream.

TS can be applied by brush, sponge or spray onto the surface of the nearly dry work. Immediately the shine has gone the work is polished with a thin plastic and padded with an old sock. Additional, layers can be added as necessary to increase the density of the surface, but not too many layers will peel. Various smoke effects can be achieved by varying the thickness of the T.S. across a single piece, also a percentage of glaze stain can be added giving the surface a base colour.