

RAKU HISTORY

Raku Pottery was developed in Japan in the early 1500's as the Ceremonial Tea Ware of the Zen Buddhist Masters. The word Raku signifies enjoyment of freedom. It was preferred by the Masters because of its humility, tasteful unpretentiousness, simple naturalness, and its deliberate avoidance of luxury...all very important to the Zen philosophy.

Seldom watertight, Raku is actually a very poor choice for a casserole or a flower vase; it is pottery without utility or function. It is a low-fired ware with lead based glazes, and will only hold water for a short period of time. Raku must be approached with a different criterion in mind, like a painting or a symphony.

According to the Zen Masters, its elusive, subtle, yet vigorous beauty is Raku's only worth. It is valued because it is believed that the Spirit of the Maker is embodied in the form and revealed at the foot, which is traditionally left naked (unglazed). It is believed that if we are alert to ourselves, in contemplating the Raku form, we will recognize in it our own Spirit and Meaning.

RAKU PROCESS

Raku Pottery is earth derived...the firing process is unique and daring, and in the eyes of the Zen Masters, the process truly reflects the most fundamental rhythm of enlightened life.

A once-fired (bisque), unglazed pot is first coated with glaze and placed into kiln. The kiln is then heated to about 1,800° F at a fast rate. It is this first tremendous heat shock which often causes a pot to explode or to develop large "body cracks" in the clay walls. If the vessel survives this shock, almost immediate metamorphosis begins. The entire vessel glows like red-hot coal, and the glaze melts into a sheet of liquid glass.

At this point, the pot must endure a second shock as the potter uses tongs to remove the glowing mass from the inferno. As the cool air outside the kiln hits the glowing vessel, the severe temperature change produces the cracks in the glaze. These cracks are highly prized as characteristic of traditional Raku Pottery -- they are the "proof-marks" of the earthenware's having survived this dramatic trial by fire.

Upon leaving the kiln, the glowing pot is placed directly into an airtight container ("reduction chamber") filled with leaves, sawdust, or the like, which turns the naked clay foot black and highlights the valuable cracks in the glaze.

As if all this were not enough, the vessel (often still over 1,000° F) may then be plunged into cold water to halt the process.

And so the cycle of earth, fire, air and water is complete. Raku is a daring process, and a great many pots do explode during some phase of the firing. Those that survive the ordeal -- the test of fire -- are blessed.

A portion of the Raku history provided by
the Lavey Pottery Studio
<http://pages.prodigy.net/lavey/Default.htm>