

Made from Clay: Cooking & Craftsmanship

Mary L. Kwas (Arkansas Archeological Survey)



Pottery was one of the first synthetic materials made by humans, and because of its great versatility, it proved an exceptional advancement in human technology. Pottery could be made into many different kinds of objects—pots for cooking, plates and bowls for eating, and jars and bottles for storage of food items. The same properties that make clay so easy to fashion into many shapes also provide a surface that can be decorated in an infinite variety of ways. People all over the world decorate their pottery in wonderful patterns and designs, and change those designs regularly. Those changes allow archeologists to identify different cultures and time periods based on their decorative choices. A more formal term for pottery used by archeologists and artisans is *ceramics*, and different shapes of pottery objects are called *vessels*.

When was Pottery First Invented?

The methods to make pottery were probably discovered by many different people at different times. Pottery appeared in Japan about 10,500 B.C. In the

Near East, pottery was developed about 6000 B.C., and spread from there throughout many parts of the Old World. The Chinese developed ceramics to a high degree, becoming renowned for their work in porcelain—a very fine-grained, translucent ceramic ware. Around the beginning of the 1700s, the ceramic industry in England developed commercially, with large factories and wide-ranging distribution of their products through trade. As the English potters tried to improve their wares to compete with the Chinese, they experimented with different compositions of clays. This process eventually developed into our modern ceramics. The English became so successful that the dinnerware they produced can be found throughout the world.

In the New World, pottery was first developed about 3300 B.C. in northern South America. It appeared in the southeastern United States about 2500 B.C. during the Archaic Period in Georgia, South Carolina, and along the coast of northeastern Florida. These early ceramics were thick-walled basins and



open bowls that had vegetable fiber mixed with the clay to provide temper. The Savannah River pottery was decorated with incised lines or punched indentations. By the Woodland Period (ca. 1000 B.C.–A.D. 1000), the use of ceramics was widespread throughout eastern North America.

How is Pottery Made?

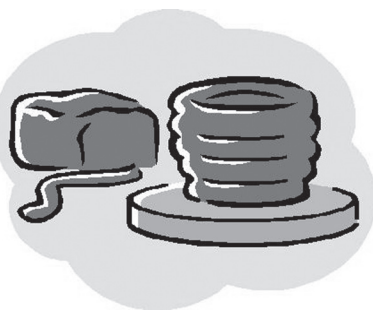
Pottery is made through a several step process. The raw clay is dug from the earth and may be used as is or pounded into fine particles. Temper is then often added to the clay. Tempering is a method in which materials such as fibers, sand, or crushed shell are added to give strength and body to the clay, and prevent cracking when the pot is being dried or fired. Water is added to the dry clay to make it pliable, and the clay is kneaded and pounded to evenly distribute moisture and remove air pockets.

Forming the clay into desired shapes can be accomplished by various methods. Hand modeling is the simplest, and might begin by taking a lump of clay and starting a bowl shape by pushing the thumb into the center. This is called a pinch pot. Native Americans commonly used

a technique called coiling, in which long, snake-like coils were rolled out and then placed one atop the other to form the shape of the pot.

Further shaping with a wooden paddle was often done to smooth the coil lines. Decorated paddles would leave a pattern on the surface of a pot. Later techniques for making individual vessels included the potter's wheel and pressing the clay into a mold. Wet molding, in which a liquid mix of clay is poured into molds, is a method used in the factory production of ceramics.

Decoration of the pot may be done at this stage, while the clay is still fairly moist. Different effects can be achieved by drawing patterns in the clay with a sharp tool, pinching with the fingers or fingernails,



poking spots in or out to form punctations or nodes, and stamping with patterned paddles. After the pot is dry, designs can be carved into it. After it's fired, the pot can be painted, printed, or glazed.

Before firing, the pot must be allowed to dry thoroughly, so it won't crack. Baking the dried pot is called firing. When the clay is heated to more than 500°C., the molecules of water in the pot are chemically bonded to the clay, transforming the clay into a hard, durable substance. Firing can be done simply by surrounding a stack of pots with a ring of fire, which was the method the Southeastern Indians used, or by using a specialized oven, called a kiln, which is used by modern potters.

How is Pottery Used?

Because clay is so versatile and can be formed into almost any shape, the kinds of pottery vessels made by different cultures reflect their needs for cooking, storage, eating, and other uses.

Native American Uses

The Native Americans of the southeastern United States, including Arkansas, made pottery vessels in the shapes of bottles, jars, pots, bowls, cups, and pans. Many of the objects served multiple purposes. Bottles and jars were used for storing liquids and small dry foodstuffs, such as grains, seeds and nuts, but could also be used to serve such foods at meals. Round or conical bottomed pots might be used to store larger quantities of dry foods, but were also used for cooking. Smaller bowls and cups were used for eating, and probably also for food preparation. Large flat pans seem to have been used to collect and process salt.

The Native Americans of this area had a wide variety of foods available to them. Deer provided much



of the meat, but smaller animals, birds, and fish were also enjoyed. Bear was favored for its oil. Hickory nuts and acorns were an important staple of the diet, especially during the Archaic Period (8500–1000 B.C.). All sorts of plants, grains, and seeds were gathered. By the Woodland Period (1000 B.C.–A.D. 1000), many seed-bearing plants were grown domestically by the Native Americans. They included local plants such as maygrass, little barley, knotweed, marsh elder, and chenopodium (quinoa), as well as sunflowers, squashes, and some corn. By the Mississippian (A.D. 1000–1541) and Protohistoric (A.D. 1500–1700) Periods, large quantities of corn, beans, and squashes were being grown by the Indians.

When it came to food preparation, the Southeastern Indians were particularly fond of soups and stews. Meat, beans, corn, and grains were generally cooked by boiling. Hominy, made from corn and cooked about four hours, was a hospitality food, always kept on hand for visitors. Meals were made by boiling meat and fish with vegetables, shredding dried meat into soups, or boiling beans with meat. Even cornbread was boiled to make a type of dumpling. Many of these meals became staples of traditional Southern American cooking. Hominy is still eaten; a dish called sofkee became grits; boiled cornbread is similar to hush puppies; and succotash, a mixture of boiled beans and corn, is still enjoyed by many Southern families.

The pottery that Native Americans made well suited their cooking methods. Large pots with round or conical bottoms could sit on a fire all day while the soup or stew slowly simmered. A small bowl or cup was perfect for scooping out a portion from the cooking pot. Jars, bottles, and larger pots could store seeds and grains or beverages. Bear fat was melted in earthen pots, and the resulting oil stored in other earthen pots. Cooking pots didn't



have lids, but another pot turned over the top served the purpose. Hot coals piled on top of the pots worked like a Dutch oven.

In addition to meal preparation and food storage, some pottery was crafted to be placed in burials with deceased family members. Beautifully crafted pots, in the shape of human heads or animal effigies were made by the Mississippian peoples. Lots of effigy and decorated pots were placed in graves, but it is very uncommon to find anything inside them. Most of the burial pottery was made specifically for the grave, rarely showing any prior use.



Euro-American Uses

The first Europeans who came as settlers to North America had a limited supply of pottery. Their redware vessels consisted largely of drinking mugs, plates, and bowls—items used for eating. Stoneware crocks were used for storage of foods. Cooking utensils were made of iron. Over time, more immigrants settled in this country, bringing a variety of skills with them. Potters set up shop, supplying their communities with redware plates and stoneware jugs and crocks. These simple ceramic vessels adequately met the needs of pioneers and farm families.

As the country became more settled, businesses grew and people became more prosperous, with more money to spend. In the meantime, the commercial ceramics industry in England began to develop. Factories for ceramic production were built, and large amounts of attractive dinnerware were supplied to merchants in Europe and America. Ceramics found on settlements dating from the late 1700s/early 1800s are of the type called creamware and pearlware, with their hand-painted decoration or dark blue transfer prints. By the Victorian Period of the 19th century, whiteware dinner services were lavishly decorated with a great



variety of transfer prints, while after the middle of the century, the restrained relief-molded patterns on classic white ironstone became popular, at least among less ostentatious families.

People of the Victorian era were fond of lavish designs. Their houses were decorated with heavily patterned wallpapers, overstuffed furniture covered with doilies, and great numbers of knickknacks and souvenirs. Their dinners were social occasions as well as times to display prosperity. In response to this, dinner services expanded to require separate plates for different courses and to include all sorts of specialty vessels.

A typical Victorian dinner service might include a dozen each of dinner plates, breakfast plates, tea



plates, soup plates, and custards, two sauce tureens, sauce boats, and soup tureens, four covered vegetable dishes, seven meat platters, two deep serving dishes, and a pud-

ding dish, butter plate, and gravy dish—nearly 100 pieces. Wealthy families might have dinner services that consisted of several hundred pieces. In addition to the dinner service, special sets for breakfast, tea, or dessert might also be owned. A tea service could consist of a teapot, sugar bowl, creamer, waste bowl, butter plate, two cake plates, and a dozen each of cups, saucers, cup plates, tea plates, and preserve plates. New foods, such as bananas and oranges, were introduced to Victorian diners, who devised special receptacles to hold them as well.

In addition to the table, ceramic items were also used in the bathroom. Toilet sets might consist of a wash basin and ewer (large pitcher), shaving mug, covered soap dish, toothbrush holder, hair holder, and chamber pot with lid. Ceramic items also served more utilitarian functions, as furniture and doorknobs, electric insulators, vases and figurines, and even buttons.

What Kinds of Pottery did Early Arkansans Use?

The way pottery is decorated can tell archeologists much about the people who made or used it. With Native American pottery, different decorative styles can help identify different cultural groups or tribes, as well as pinpoint the time period when a site was in use. Pots modeled in the shapes of birds, animals, or fish—called effigy pots—suggest what animals might have been important to a group, either for food or in their religious beliefs. Pottery that was marked with cord or fabric impressions can tell archeologists about the methods of weaving and kinds of cloth available to ancient peoples. By making molds of the impressed marks, archeologists can closely study the weaves and knots used to make the cloth.

Euro-American ceramics, especially by the late 18th century, can provide archeologists with clues about the economic prosperity of a family, their social status, and their personal tastes, and how those might relate to other families in the community. Therefore, studying the ceramics found on archeological sites in Arkansas can tell us something about the lives of early Arkansans.

Pottery of Arkansas Native Americans

Arkansas is a land of considerable diversity, ranging from the low delta lands in the east to the mountainous uplands in the west. Like the land itself, the prehistoric Native Americans of Arkansas displayed great diversity in their cultures, producing very different pottery forms that showed many decorative techniques and motifs.

Based on evidence from the adjacent states of Louisiana and Missouri, the first pottery in Arkansas was probably made around 1500 B.C. This early pottery contained plant fibers, such as switchgrass and big bluestem, that served as temper. Pottery shapes included straight-sided jars and bowls. Because the pottery was fired at very low temperatures and used plant fibers for temper, it wasn't very durable, which accounts for its rarity.



Early Woodland Period. Throughout the greater Midsouth, pottery manufacture and use increased markedly around 600 B.C., in the Early Woodland period. In eastern Arkansas, early Woodland ceramics were untempered or tempered with small fragments of dried clay. Plain surfaces were common, but decoration could include individual cord-impressions, fabric-marking, stamping, incising, and red-filming. Some pots had four small modeled feet, but many had flat bases. Common Early Woodland forms included open bowls and flowerpot-shaped beakers. Although decorated wares are found in the Ouachita Valley, most of the Early Woodland ceramics of southwest Arkansas had plain exteriors. The pots were tempered with clay particles and burned bone. Bone-tempered vessels often were slipped on the interior. Forms included globular and flat-bottomed jars, while bowls were rare.

Middle Woodland Period. Tempering and firing technology improved in the Middle Woodland period (ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 300), producing pottery that was generally harder and thinner than before. The pottery generally was tempered with particles of fired clay in eastern Arkansas, but in some parts of the region, sand was used for temper. In southwest Arkansas, burned bone and clay particles continued to be used as temper. Eastern Arkansas pottery forms included open globular bowls and cone-shaped jars, while globular and flat-bottomed jars persisted in the southwest. Plainwares remained popular in the southwestern counties, while pottery in the Mississippi delta often was decorated with impressions from cord-wrapped paddles. Examples of pottery with elaborate decorative motifs are sometimes found throughout the state. The motifs include incised geometric designs and highly stylized images of birds.

Late Woodland Period. During most of the Late Woodland period (ca. A.D. 300–1000), pots were rarely decorated. In the delta counties, surfaces usually were plain or cordmarked, while in southwest Arkansas, surfaces were mostly plain. Throughout the state, Middle Woodland tempering practices contin-

ued, though Late Woodland ceramics were generally harder than earlier wares. Around A.D. 600, surface decoration became a bit more common, with incising and punctations in the east, and red-filming in the southwest. Bowls, jars, and large, low pans were made in eastern Arkansas.

Transitional Woodland-Mississippi Period. The period A.D. 700–1050 often is called the Terminal Late Woodland-Early Mississippi. Throughout much of Arkansas, the most distinctive pottery decoration associated with this time period is the use of incised lines parallel to and immediately below the lip of jars and bowls. Clay- and sand-tempered ceramics continued to be made in eastern Arkansas, but around A.D. 900 crushed mussel shell started to be added. This important technological hallmark may have appeared 100 years earlier in the Ozarks, but never became as important in southwest Arkansas as it was in the Mississippi Valley. Hooded bottles were a new vessel form in northeast Arkansas at this time, while in southwest Arkansas, large globular jars were constructed using clay- and grit-tempered pastes.

Early & Middle Mississippi Periods. A marked contrast between eastern Arkansas and southwest Arkansas is seen during the Early and Middle Mississippi periods (ca. A.D. 1050–1350). Surface decoration in eastern Arkansas was fairly rare and usually was confined to simple designs on the rim. Pottery forms in this area included jars, bowls, plates, salt pans, and hooded and regular bottles, made with shell temper. In southwest Arkansas, among the prehistoric Caddo, there was a proliferation of decorated types, with often complex designs covering much of the vessel. Decoration included incising, engraving, and punctuation, though plainwares continued to be produced.

Late Mississippi-Protohistoric. Ceramics of the Late Mississippi/Protohistoric era (ca. A.D. 1350–1700) are known mostly from vessels found in graves. The utilitarian vessels of this period were plain jars, bowls, bottles, and large pans, sometimes with a narrow band of incising.





ing or punctations around the rim. In eastern Arkansas around A.D. 1350 a profusion of decorated types appeared, often with complex designs covering much of the vessel. Buried with the dead were bowls and bottles, often modeled into effigy figures such as fish, birds, bats,

shells, and humans. Painting, using red or a combination of red and white, was common. Southwest Arkansas Caddo area pottery of this time is remarkable for its artistic and technological skill. Especially characteristic are intricately incised and engraved geometric designs on thin-walled bowls and bottles. Even many utilitarian jars are highly decorated.

Pottery of Arkansas Euro-Americans

The kinds of 19th century historic ceramics found in Arkansas are much like those found anywhere in North America, simply because the English ceramic industry was supplying most of it. Nonetheless, we can learn about the tastes and preferences of Arkansans of the 1800s from the ceramics they broke and discarded. Because Arkansas was settled later than the eastern states, not many of the earliest ceramics—such as Spanish wares—are found here. At Arkansas Post, which was founded in 1686 and served for nearly 200 years, there are examples of early ceramics in creamware and pearlware, as well as bits of Spanish and German wares. Most of the historic ceramics found at Arkansas historic sites, however, date to the 19th century.

Studies of the town of Washington, Arkansas, provide an interesting glimpse into the lives of Arkansans during the middle 19th century. Washington was established as the Hempstead County seat in 1824. The town prospered through the 1840s and 1850s, becoming a center of business and commerce for the area. In 1863, it served as the Confederate capital of Arkansas. After the railroad bypassed the town in 1874, it began a steady decline as a commercial center.

Archeological studies of various house sites and business sites have been undertaken at Historic Washington State Park. By looking at the ceramics found at the Block house, for example, we can get a good idea of what sorts of dinnerware the people of the town were buying and using. Abraham Block was a very prosperous merchant with a mercantile business in Washington. He had a large house built for his family in 1832 and occupied it through the 1850s. A great variety of broken ceramics were found in the excavations of his yard. Many of the pieces probably represent items the family chose for their own use, but some may have been remnants of unsold stock.

Lots of identifiable transfer-printed dinnerware was found at the Block house. Transfer printing was a technique that allowed engraved designs to be inked and permanently transferred to ceramic objects. The designs could be quite intricate and varied, representing landscapes, historical scenes, romantic views, and floral patterns. Transfer printing was first used in the late 1700s. The first color available—which remains popular even today—was blue. By 1830, other colors were added, including black, red, green, brown, and purple.

The transfer-printed ceramics were made by a number of different English manufacturers, but several patterns found at the Block house were made by the Davenport company in the 1840s and 1850s. Manufacturers' marks—called *backmarks* by archeologists—were often printed or impressed on the backs of plates and other items. In addition, large wholesalers sometimes identified themselves on products they carried. Quite a few pieces from the Block house have a backmark showing that the importer was the firm of Henderson & Gaines of New Orleans. So it is obvious that Abraham Block bought the ceramics for his store from these New Orleans wholesalers.



Images on the transfer-printed dinnerware were quite diverse. They included a scene of sheep shearing in a deep blue color, a black pattern called “Sea Leaf,” which looked like seaweed or coral, and “Ruins” of a gothic building in black. A small bowl in a pattern called “Rose” showed a pinkish-red print of wild roses. A purple floral pattern called “Water Lilly” proved very popular with the Block family, as many pieces were found, including full dinner plates—although the flowers didn’t look much like water lilies! Another purple pattern called “Chinese Pastime” consisted of a series of scenes—the one recovered (“Hoop & Pinwheel”) showed two boys at play.

Illustrations for transfer prints were often taken from books of the period. A light blue plate was found at the Sanders house with the image “Scott’s Illustrations: Legend of Montrose” showing a scene from a Sir Walter Scott story with two Scotsmen engaged in a sword fight. Perhaps someone in the family enjoyed Scott’s stories. Illustrations of well-known buildings and houses were also popular at that time. A fragment of a plate was found at the Block house that illustrated a manor house in Hoboken, New Jersey. Might this indicate that someone from the family or town had moved from that area?

Besides transfer-printed pieces, ceramics with other types of decoration were also found at the Block house. A fragment of a large bowl, possibly for use in

the kitchen, was decorated with a hand-painted folk design. The broad leaves and stylized flowers, somewhat like what we think of as Pennsylvania Dutch, were brightly colored in green, brown, blue, yellow, and orange. Two handleless teacups were also hand painted, but with a fine, delicate style known as *sprig*. The flowers or berries and leaves were colored in green, blue, and yellow. Such delicate ware was most likely part of a tea service. Another hand-painted piece was a small mug or cup, possibly meant for a child, decorated with a folksy cottage in a shiny, metallic pink *lustre*.

As can be seen, many kinds of ceramics were available to the 19th century residents of Washington. We can gain some insight into their tastes and interests by studying the kinds of ceramics they purchased over the years.

Conclusion

Archeologists love ceramics because they provide so many clues about people of the past. The versatility of clay allows the potter to make a great variety of shapes and to decorate those shapes in an infinite manner. The finished products can be used for cooking, storage of foods, eating, decorative purposes, and many other kinds of utilitarian items. Even when broken and discarded, the tough potsherds survive for hundreds or even thousands of years, and provide a direct link to those many people who lived before us.

Credits

Dr. Robert Mainfort and Dr. Frank Schambach of the Arkansas Archeological Survey provided the information on prehistoric pottery styles of Arkansas Native Americans.

Larry Porter of the Arkansas Archeological Survey drew the illustrations. The images represent the following: (page 2) a Late Caddo engraved bottle; (page 3 left) a Late Caddo engraved jar; (page 3 right) a Late Mississippi human effigy headpot; (page 4) a European slipware bowl; (page 6 left) a Late Mississippi red-on-white painted bottle; (page 6 right) a European hand-painted pitcher.



Ideas for Classroom Activities

Buy some self-hardening or low-firing clay and let the students make small pots using the coil technique. Bring in pieces of rough fabric, strings, and cords, and decorate the pots by pressing the fabrics and cords into the damp clay. Or using pictures from books, copy the patterns used by Arkansas Native Americans onto the pots.

Take a class trip to a modern potter's shop. Watch the process of how clay is transformed into a object and then fired to hardness.

Display different styles of pots, jars, and plates—either real examples or pictures from books. Have students write how they think each was used. How were they made? How is the decoration similar or different?

Learn about Native American foods. Try preparing some dishes in the traditional way, and then sampling them. Study what a complete table service consisted of in Victorian times. How was each dish used? What do we use today?

Buy some inexpensive flower pots, plates, mugs, etc. of different colors and styles. Smash the objects into pieces called sherds. Mix the sherds of 3 different objects together in a bag and give to a team of 3 students—to make it more difficult for older students, leave a few pieces out. Let the students sort the sherds by type, then try to reconstruct the object, either with masking tape or glue. Have the students write up how they determined which pieces belonged together, and what they thought the object was before and after putting it together.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Ceramics Glossary

As in any field, archeologists use specialized words to describe what they study. Because ceramics are so varied, there are many descriptive words for the different wares and decorative methods. Below is a list of terms used by archeologists to describe ceramic artifacts.

Ceramic Wares and General Terms

Ceramics – Objects made from fired clay. Informally called pottery, crockery, or china.

Vessel – A general term used by archeologists for almost any ceramic container, such as those used for cooking, storage, eating, or use in the bathroom.

Firing – The baking of dried pottery in a fire or a special oven (called a kiln), which transforms the clay into a permanently hardened material. Temperatures needed to fire pots range from low temperatures (above 500°C for redware) to high temperatures (over 1500°C for porcelain).

Clays – The various ceramic wares described below are made from different kinds of clays and combinations of clays with other materials. Clays come from different geological sources, range in color from various reds through yellows, browns, and whites, fire at different temperatures, and exhibit different properties after being fired. Strength, durability, and porosity are some of those properties.

Terra cotta or Redware – Pottery made from low-firing red clays, including prehistoric pottery, early historic plates, and modern pieces such as tiles and flowerpots.

Stoneware – A heavy, durable ware used to make crocks, churns, and other storage vessels. The clay bodies are usually grey or brown. Often glazed with salt, which produced a shiny, orange-rind texture. Early English dinnerware, however, was made of a fine-grained, white stoneware.

Earthenware – A relatively fine-grained, light-colored ware. Refined earthenware includes the cream-colored or white wares used for making dinner services, as described below.

Brownware/yellowware – Brownware is an early 19th century utilitarian earthenware; yellowware, which appeared after 1840, was more refined than brownware. Both were used for utilitarian kitchen items, such as mixing bowls and milk jugs.

Creamware – A yellow-tinted, refined earthenware used by English potters to make tableware, most commonly in the last half of the 1700s.

Pearlware – A light-weight, whitish ware, with cobalt in the glaze that gave it a bluish tint. Made by English potters in the early 1800s for tableware. Meant to look like then-popular Chinese porcelains and often decorated in Chinese motifs.

Whiteware – A fine, white-bodied earthenware, which grew out of improvements from pearlware, and continues into present times. Began to be made in the 1820s by English potters, and was eventually made by American potters too. Commonly used for tableware.

Ironstone – A type of whiteware that is thick and heavy in weight. Classic ironstone, which dates from the late 1840s to about 1900, was uncolored but decorated with relief-molded designs, commonly of flowers and agricultural products such as wheat. Called by many names by the manufacturers, including white granite and stone china.

Porcelain – A very fine-grained, highly fired, and translucent ware. First developed by the Chinese. Used in many products, including fine dinnerware, figurines, buttons, insulators, and dental crowns.

Prehistoric Decorative Methods and Terms

Coil-pottery – A technique used to make pots prior to the use of a pottery wheel. The pots are built up with successive layers of snake-like clay coils, which are then smoothed into the finished product.

Paste – The combination of the clay with its natural mineral inclusions, plus added temper, to produce the body.

Temper – Materials such as crushed shell, sand, or grit added to wet clay to improve its strength.

Appliqué – Separate pieces of clay added to the pot before firing to produce a relief decoration. Appliqué pieces may include ridges of clay, small bumps called nodes, or effigy figures.

Filming – An imprecise term that can imply either a painted or slipped surface. Used in technical type names, such as Larto Red Filmed, which is painted, and Varney Red Filmed, which is slipped.

Slip – A suspension of clay in water that is applied to the surface of a vessel and then fired, improving the color and texture of the vessel. Slips usually can be recognized by the color contrast with the paste.

Painting – Applying pigment to the surface of a pot, but distinct from a pigmented slip. Red, white, and black are the most common colors.

Punctuation – Indentations made in the wet clay, using a tool such as a pointed or shaped stick, hollow cane, or fingernail.

Stamping – The method of adding a surface texture or design to the wet clay by pressing or stamping with a tool, such as a paddle with carved designs. Dentate Stamping consists of square impressions made with a narrow stamp or stick with notches cut in it.

Impressions – Depending on the material used, the technique is called fabric-impressed, cord-impressed, or cord-marked. Pieces of fabric, nets, or twisted cords were wrapped around a wooden paddle and pressed into the wet clay to form a surface



texture, usually a by-product of smoothing the coils. Individual cords were also pressed in decorative patterns. Archeologists can learn about prehistoric textiles by taking molds of the impressions on clay pots.

Incising – Lines and decorative patterns drawn on the wet clay with a sharpened tool, such as a stick or bone. A different effect is gained depending on the tool and whether the clay is fairly wet or leather hard.

Engraving – Decorative patterns cut into the surface of the pot after the clay has dried but before firing.

Effigy figures – Small figures of birds, animals, and humans formed in clay and added to pots, often as handles. Some pottery vessels were also made in the shape of animals, such as fish bowls, or humans, such as head pots or full human-effigy figures.

Polishing – Adding a shiny surface to a pot by rubbing with a tool, such as a smooth stone.

Historic Decorative Methods and Terms

Backmark – A maker's mark or registration mark on the back of an object, often a dinner plate. Marks may be impressed or transfer-printed. They usually give the name of the manufacturer and sometimes the name of the pattern. Registration marks provide dates on when patterns were registered or copyrighted.

Glaze – A glass-like surface applied to a ceramic object, which helps to make it non-porous.

Hand-painting – When under the glaze, it is called hand-painting; when over the glaze, it is called enameling. Delicate floral designs are called sprig; large floral folk designs are called broadline.

Shell-edge – A molded and/or painted pattern at the edge of a rim, usually seen on plates, most often in blue, and sometimes in green. The cheapest of the decorated wares, common from about 1775–1860s, and used on creamware, pearlware, and whiteware. The lines at the rim may be straight or curved, and the rims may or may not be scalloped. Meant to look like the texture of seashells. Often mistakenly called feather-edge, which is a different and distinctive molded design found on creamware and salt-glazed ceramics.

Sponge Decorated Wares – Includes spatter (a pattern of very small dots), sponged (a pattern of larger dots), and cut-sponge stamping, in which a design is cut into a sponge root and used as a stamp to apply a pattern to a vessel. Popular in the first half of the 1800s, often on inexpensive tea wares.

Slipware – Sometimes called annular ware or mocha ware, although the latter correctly refers to only one specific pattern. Bands of color made of slip, a watery mixture of clay, are applied to a vessel as decoration. The bands are slightly raised. Using special pots to apply the slip or adding other ingredients produced patterns called cat's-eye, earthworm, marbling, fanning, and mocha (a fern-like pattern). Introduced in the late 1700s and used through the 1800s. Often seen on mugs and jugs.

Lustre – A metallic oxide film applied to the surface of an object, which produces an iridescent appearance. Lustre may cover either a large portion of the surface or be applied on details. The most common lustre colors are copper, silver, and pink. Appeared in the early 1800s.

Transfer-print – The application of an inked, engraved image to tissue, which is then transferred to the body. Transfer-printing allowed for very detailed images, including landscapes, buildings, animals, and vignettes. The earliest transfer-prints were in blue; later colors included black, brown, red, purple, green, and multicolored. Used throughout the 1800s.

Relief-molded – A decorative motif molded with the body of the vessel and raised above the surface. Classic ironstone shows relief-molded patterns, usually flowers, leaves, or grains.

Gilding – A bright, metallic gold painted onto the surface of a vessel. Usually seen in accents or along rims.

Flow-Transfer – Printed or painted designs in which the colors flow or bleed from the decoration into the surrounding areas. Most commonly seen in blue, thus the term flow-blue, but other colors were also flown. Introduced in the 1840s, and revived in the early 1900s. The revival flow usually includes gilding on the rims.

Decal – A turn-of-the-20th century decorative technique, applied over the glaze and distinguished by its many colors. Decal is a short-hand name for the proper term of decalomania.

