

Co-Lecture: Wild Clays Yesterday Tomorrow

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1 Searching for wild local clays in sand quarry, 2016 2 Local wild colors of wild clay samples, 2017 3 Example of wild local clay, 2016

Wild Clay

“Wild clay” is the term that is used to describe clay that has been minimally processed and usually obtained fresh from the ground by a potter, and therefore not already ground from a commercial clay supplier. The movement toward wild clay has been driven by several factors, including a desire to try new and different clay materials, as many wild clays have properties that are far different from those found in clay already available on the market today. The use of wild clay brings a local flavor to pottery, as many areas have good clay resources that can be accessed by potters. Another factor is that, as the domestic ceramics industries continue to disappear, so too are common ceramic materials disappearing, including talcs and feldspars as well as clays. By using locally sourced wild clays, an artist can have more control over their own clay supply.

Finding, processing, and using wild clays is obviously not for everyone, especially if an artist is satisfied with the clays and materials they are currently using. Some areas may not have materials available. Sourcing clays and materials for glazes and slips is fairly easy; finding materials in volume for bodies is a bit more of a challenge. Processing the materials — either by grinding or wet processing — can also be a problem for some.

Today, the pottery industry has access to materials that are principally produced for the large whiteware ceramics markets or for industrial refractories. Few companies specifically target the art

pottery market. Cedar Heights Clay would be one of the exceptions and has been supplying art clays for nearly 80 years. Redart and Goldart clays have been standards for decades. For the most part, though, potters have relied on other markets to support the supply to the ceramic arts. The problem with this scenario is that when those markets dwindle, materials are often lost. Another issue with this is that most of these materials are not ideally suited for pottery, but must be refined, fluxed, or colored to get the effects desired by artists.

Tracing the history of traditional ceramics communities, you will usually find that they were built on great clays and materials. These clays were often naturally suited to ceramic ware manufacturing, whether it was turning or casting. And many times the clays were a good clay body that required no additives.

Across the U.S., there were many ceramics centers that were built around distinctly unique clays. Detailing a few, we will start with the Roseville/Crooksville area of Ohio. This area was built around a unique stoneware clay, which matures well at cone 5 or 6 and has a clean, pleasing buff color. It was the basis for glazed cast ware (before whiteware), crockery and birdbaths, stoneware, and tile for well over a century. A true fireclay, it is found over much of the area and is still available in volume. Cedar Heights Clay markets this amazing stoneware clay as “Roseville Clay.”



The Catawba Valley of North Carolina is famous for alkaline-glazed functional ware dating back 150 years or more. These clays are famous for being of a unique plasticity that allows for wares to be thrown tall and thin — a property immediately made evident on the wheel. These clays mature around cone 10 and are decidedly different from any clays that are commercially available. These clays, found along the floodplains of the South Fork of the Catawba River, are typical of river system clays found in many areas. The quality and characteristics of these clays are dependent on the nature of the original sediments. Clays from this type of formation can have extremely high plasticity and often exhibit some other unique properties.

Another area of historical significance in pottery circles is the Edgefield, South Carolina, region. This was where slave potter Dave Drake worked, and where a thriving pottery community has lasted for over 150 years. These clays are found in the vast coastal plain kaolin beds, deposits that span across the southeastern states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. Within this zone are great developed kaolin locales such as Aiken, S.C., and Augusta and Macon, Georgia. These clays, deposited where ancient shorelines of the Atlantic Ocean were located much further inland, vary in character across this region, including some deposits of extreme purity.

Other great domestic ceramics centers developing around local clay deposits were found at East Liverpool, Ohio, and in the Perth Amboy region of New Jersey. The types of ceramic ware and the processes that were normally employed were almost always determined by the properties of the local clays. The New Jersey clay deposits, as an example, were well-suited for architectural terra cotta, and some of the most amazing work in this field was made in that area.

Internationally, great clay working centers developed around the best local clays. The Shigaraki region of Japan has been a thriving ceramics community for centuries. The ancient clay workers learned to work with the native materials and adapted their processes to accommodate these clays. By working in this fashion, the true character of the clay can be preserved. Learning from the traditional Japanese potters, they believed that, to help preserve its natural uniqueness, clay should not be over-processed. Japanese potters call this uniqueness “Tsuchi Aji,” which literally means “Taste of Clay.” The most desirable wild clays would be those that have a good Tsuchi Aji.

Often we try to alter the materials to fit a process, rather than altering the process, whether that is forming, glazing, or firing. With wild clays, many artists choose to leave the clays as intact as

possible, which in some instances means including parts that might be considered impurities. But that is the nature of the original clay. It is always up to the individual, but many embrace this feature of wild clays, while others choose to further refine the clays.

Some other areas famed for their pottery and local materials are the Devon and Cornwall areas of England, and Jingdezhen in China. The clay term “kaolin” originated near Jingdezhen, and was a name given to a local high-purity clay found at a village called Gaoling.

Although some of these areas are so heavily developed today that obtaining clays for personal use is practically impossible, there are many that can be explored. For instance, clays can be found by examining current mining activity in an area. (CAUTION: Always work through the mining company and never enter a mine without talking first to the mine operator.) Brick companies are also good sources clay that has already been mined and accessed, especially if they are using fireclays or kaolins, which are often well-suited for stoneware. Geology books and internet sites are also great sources for locating clay.

Working with wild clay is not for everyone. However, a potter who is interested in finding and using wild clays should not be discouraged, as there are lots of clays and resources out there to be explored.

Steven Blankenkemper has been working with art clays for 33 years and has introduced several new clays to the art ceramics market. He currently works at Taylor Clay, a brick company in North Carolina, and works with the local potters and STARworks, helping to source local materials. He is well known for his work in clay mining.

Takuro Shibata, a ceramics artist, has an academic background (B.Eng.) in applied chemistry. His knowledge of ceramic materials in Japan and the United States landed him a director position at STARworks Ceramics, Star, North Carolina (2005–present). At STARworks, he researches local North Carolina wild clay and materials.

