

SASKATCHEWAN CRAFT COUNCIL

CLAY

CRITERIA

DEFINITION

This category includes any item made in clay. The range includes both functional items (bowls, plates, teapots, etc.) and non-functional items such as sculptures and wall reliefs.

MATERIALS

There are a variety of clays available; each with their own characteristics:

Earthenware

Soft absorbent, earthy and sometimes rough in texture, it is usually "terra-cotta" in colour, but can also be white. It takes a low-fire and needs a glaze on it to make it water repellent.

Stoneware

Fired stoneware is hard, durable, with added density and strength. Colours range from buff to grey to brown depending on iron content. It is a more highly fired clay and the body of the pot and its glaze have a more "fused" feel to them than in earthenware.

Porcelain

Approaches glass in substance. The clay's translucent quality can, in some cases, be emphasized by the thinness of the walls and consequently an over-all delicacy of form. It is white in colour due to the absence of impurities such as iron. The glaze and the body become one and highlight the gloss, the smoothness, and the lightness of the forms. Porcelain can also be used for "heavy" objects and can have mat glazes. It depends on the intent of the craftsperson.

An excessively porous clay body is not acceptable for functional pottery (not including porous clay bakers).

TECHNIQUES

Clay can be formed by a number of processes. Any of these processes may be used individually or combined.

Handbuilding

A shape can be made by simply pinching and extending the clay, by gradually adding wads or pieces of clay which are smoothed and shaped as the work progresses (a sculptural technique) or to construct the piece by assembling pre-formed coils or slabs. The joining of the coils or slabs should be carefully and skillfully done because it is these joints which take the most stress during firing.

a) Coil Building

Coiled forms, at times, lend themselves to asymmetrical shapes and the form can be pushed to extremes (i.e. pots can sweep out dramatically from the foot). Practically any shape or size can be made and there is much potential variation in the linear quality of the coils themselves – they can be regular, delicate, strong, agitated, limp, etc.

b) Slab Building

Slabs of clay are rolled out, cut or torn and then joined together. Slab-formed objects can be put together when clay is soft or leather-hard. If it is soft, it will retain its soft, flowing character after firing. If leather-hard, it will lend itself more to rectilinear, geometric forms. Textures may be added in either state. Fibres or grog may be added to the clay to make it stronger when building with it. Variations on slab-building include draping over molds, pressing inside molds, or not using molds at all. Clay can be extruded through various dies as well as rolled out.

c) Compression

The form is shaped by forceful beating, rolling or punching a mass of clay with various objects which create the form and surface texture simultaneously. When somewhat hardened, the shape is cut apart, hollowed out, and then re-assembled.

Casting

Cast pottery is made when the liquid clay is poured into a mold (usually plaster) and then dried. The article can be mass produced in this manner. Articles made from molds are acceptable only where the mold is the design and product of the craftsman or where the mold or molded parts are subordinate to the craftsman's creativity.

Wheel Formed Items

All thrown articles are variations on one form – the circle – and any further variations are only in profile and surface detail. The symmetry of the thrown object produces a certain calm resolution to the form and any irregularities or distortions to that form should be for deliberate design purposes. It is also possible to combine and assemble whole or partially thrown pieces to create asymmetrical forms. All the parts should relate to one another and care should be taken with the smaller details and attachments.

If a functional item, the thickness of the lip, the form or handles, spouts, etc. can enliven and add linear elements to the normally compact and centered forms of pots, while lids complete a form and enclose it. The foot can serve as a pedestal for the pot and give a feeling of form suspended in space. A thrown pot is often trimmed to define and sharpen the form, to get rid of excessive thickness and to produce various textures.

There is a “ribbed” texture inherent in any thrown item and it reflects the process. This is either utilized or removed depending on the aesthetic wishes of the craftsman. It must be remembered, however, that not all objects are meant to be functional and aesthetic considerations may be of primary concern.

Standards

Glazes

The fired item can be left unglazed allowing the tactile and visual qualities of the clay to take precedence or it can be given a glaze. The glaze can vary from a dull, rough mat surface to a very smooth, shiny one and makes the surface of the item impervious. It is essential on low-fired earthenware if meant for table use.

1. Earthenware glazes tend to be shiny, can show brushed or slip decoration and are available in a wide range of bright colours. If a functional item, it should be glazed on the interior. Earthenware should be checked for crazing (a network of fine cracks in the glaze) which would be unsightly, unhygienic and permit seepage.
2. Raku is a process first done in Japan. Its unique glaze is created by placing it in a red-hot kiln with tongs for a short time and then withdrawing it suddenly. Westerners tend to follow the withdrawal of the piece with a post firing reduction in a combustible material.
3. Stoneware is usually impervious to water without being glazed and therefore some areas can be left unglazed to offer a contrast if desired.
4. Whatever the glaze, it should enhance and highlight the form and texture of the object.

Certain textures are created in the construction of the form – i.e. surface decoration on a slab built vase, a coiled border, or the “ribbed” texture of a thrown pot. Other decorative features can be added by the following methods:

1. Direct Modeling – such as the addition of feet, knobs, or handles on a pot or casserole.
2. Impressed Decoration – where the decoration is pressed into the clay. Stamps are sometimes used to create these embossed textures, and are acceptable if they are subordinate to the total design.
3. Incised Decoration – involves the cutting away of fine lines or the creating of a shallow relief.
4. Slip Decoration – is the addition of contrasting layers of liquid clay by using a wide variety of techniques. It can be brushed on, sprayed, incised through, etc.

Glaze & Body Faults

The possibility exists of misuse of glazes with toxic substances, but the responsibility for this rests with the craftsman.

Crazing

The development of a fine network of cracks in the glaze. In earthenware this is to be avoided, but in stoneware or porcelain it can be very decorative and so is sometimes encouraged.

Shivering

A separation and breaking of the glaze from the body of the object, usually resulting in the glaze peeling away at the rim or edge of a surface.

Crawling

The thickening of the glaze in some areas leaving other areas without glaze. Carefully controlled crawling can be decorative and is sometimes consciously sought.

Pitting & Pinholing

The development of small, unglazed patches, either like pinholes or small volcanic craters.

Bloating

The development of bulges or bubbles of various size.

General

1. The basic shape of the clay object should be well proportioned and functionally sound.
2. Pottery objects should suit their function and fulfill the usual criteria for good techniques; spouts should pour, handles and lids should fit well and please the hand and eye.
3. Bottoms should be smooth and there should not be rough edges.
4. Pots must be free of cracks and warpage, and relative uniformity of related items is desirable.
5. Irregularities should be controlled unless deliberately used as a part of the design.
6. Mold made items are not acceptable unless the molds and masters are designed and made by the craftsman.
7. Terra-cotta blanks and slip cast forms must have superior designs.
8. China painted patterns and reproductions must be identified on the reverse.
9. China painted items must be labeled if they are not intended for food and drink.
10. Porcelain dolls must be incised (signed) with the name and date of the maker. The doll should carry the mold mark from the original (ie: A.M.341).

It should be noted that some items have as their function "Art" first, and are not meant to be used in a traditional manner. This can lead to innovative use of materials and techniques. Non-functional work should be technically sound, clearly displaying the craftsman's intentions.