

Hare's Fur Glaze/Short story

I had been introduced to Joe Koons many years ago in conjunction with NCECA and Laguna Clay. Joe was the director of clay research at Laguna.

He was a very friendly and open sort of fellow. When a teacher's conference was in Minneapolis I invited Bill Jones from CM and Steve Lewicki from L&L kilns, for dinner at my home and Joe tagged along with some others.

A few years later at NCECA San Diego, I met Joe again at a potters "greenhouse", it was raining like mad and we were stuck there. We went back in a corner, got some chairs and chatted. He really got excited with me about his project to discover the method of making a thousand year old pottery style called "Hare's Fur", Chinese, made along the Mihn River in central China. He said that millions of people worked to make "dinner ware". The glaze was dark brown with patterns or streaks. It predated the use of color, like cobalt. All the pots were brown. Some had oil spots, some long circles and some looked just like rabbit fur.

Hare's fur glaze was his passion, and he had worked on recipes for almost 45 years. But, whenever he would pass the recipes on to his many college prof friends to fire, the work would come back totally ruined. Total crap pots that he just threw away.

This story is as it happened, as I was the only person doing the making, glazing and firing. I did have help from Susan Karris, as she had a large electric kiln that could fire to cone 11. She too, did some testing for me in total oxidation. My memory and notes are clear on how it happened and what we did and what we accomplished. All decisions on how to glaze and fire were mine. The project was gut instinct; I did not read gobs of notes or articles by others.

The final validation of the project was done by experts in China. Their word was final, and expert. It was their glaze and their ceramic history. We gave them all the systems that we used to make the glaze.

Since Joe had been to my home and studio he said he was really impressed with what I had built, my knowledge of Asian pots and glazes and my ability to make gobs of pots fast. He also admired my stepping up to the plate to moderate Clayart.

Of course he knew that I had done a "real" apprenticeship in Kyoto. Ten thousand pots made, and counted, and multiple exhibits of my work etc.

He asked that day if I understood how a "Dragon Kiln" worked. "Yes, I know and saw real ones in Japan." He claimed that the Chinese Dragons were over one hundred meters long, up a hill, and fired over 12 or more days. Chamber after chamber. Yes, I knew.

He then said "Mel, will you help me fire some pots in your kiln in Minnetonka, and see if you can get 'Hare's Fur?'"

I did stop him with the comment, "this has to be a full blown test of clay and glaze and fire. It has to be at least ten firings of over 600 pieces. "He actually jumped out of his chair and said "can you do it?". " Yup. The pots cannot be fired with other pots, It has to be all one clay, one glaze and fired alone." My thought was, "how can you stick pots into a typical cone 10 reduction fire with ten other glazes and learn anything??"

I said, "we will need samples of the real pots, what is the clay composition and how hot should we fire?" He went into his bag and pulled out a bubble wrapped pot. It was a small, real, an honest to goodness hare's fur pot.

He told me to take it home, analyze it and let him know what he would have to ship to Minnetonka.

I had seen that glaze on pots in the Kyoto Museum, and was already thinking of how to fire them. It was in the back of my head. I became excited as even that first day; I had a clear idea of a few things. And I told Joe that "Kilns shelves were the key." He did not get that at all as he is not a potter .He is a glaze chemist.

Those kilns, like the Ming Kilns fired to very hot, cone 12-13 temperatures. The pots were also fired inside clay boxes. What is the atmosphere inside the box???? And of course they did not have kiln shelves. What is the atmosphere inside the box???? That was the key.



The real Har's Fur bowl

The clay color of the pot was almost purple/brown. It looked like a deeply reduced pot, but was it???? My theory was that the clay was dug with a high percentage of iron and manganese naturally occurring. And that clay was all along the Mihn River. It was used by thousands of potters. The kids made the saggars to house the pots and make them stackable in the chamber and there would be boxes stacked to the ceiling and to the outer walls. Fired to cone 13, and the atmosphere was "Neutral", or no reduction. And if you fire to cone 13 in a oxidized atmosphere, the pots will not warp. It is reduction that messes with over-fired pots.



Joe Koons

So, I had Joe make up at Laguna two thousand pounds of strong stoneware clay, with grog and sand and 12 percent iron oxide. Deep red clay for high temp.

He shipped it, and I put it into my pug mill and added more Spanish iron. I threw 60 bowls the first day. (simple test bowls)

The throwing was the basic hump thrown bowls as I did in Japan. They would be turned with a ring foot the next day. Each of the old pots had a lip near the bottom outside of the pot to catch running glaze.

I made a simple throwing rib, just the right size. I think the Chinese potters may have used a clam-shell as the size maker when throwing bowls of one size. (I did see some of that work when in China.)

Joe had sent 25 lb by 15 bags of dry glaze with his various solutions to the problem. He sent glaze calc for

each glaze and said “pick what you want to fire, have at it”.

I trimmed the bowls the same as the real one, duplicated it, and my Japanese throwing was made for this project. I dried them, and bisque fired them slow and hot.



During the first days of throwing bowls for testing.



Sarah my apprentice with new bowls trimmed.

I had been staring at the real pot for days and I had noticed a tiny orange line at the base of the glaze as it rolled down the side of the pot. It puzzled me, why the line of orange.? The glaze for sure ran, it was fluid but it

came to me...It was 'Two Glazes'. A base flat under-glaze, or slip covered by a rich black gloss temmoku.

I glazed all the pots with glaze no.6 followed by glaze no. 14. All the same. Glaze 6 was matt, glaze 14 was gloss black, and ran.

Joe too had sent some Temmoku with bone ash added. It was a huge surprise. I added some pots that had that glaze with matt under. (it was for fun, not historically correct.)

I had everything ready. I loaded the kiln, gave the pots some room and decided to make my firing totally oxidized. That was hard to do as my kiln naturally went into reduction about 1800F. It was a hunch.

I opened the damper all the way, opened the air ports on the burners all the way. I turned the gas to high and fired that way totally til cone 12 melted. Turned it off and waited. The next day about noon we opened it. And the entire kiln was perfect Hare's Fur. The black top glaze ran, and exposed the soft orange glaze beneath.

The bone ash temmoku was a magnificent deep red.

I called Joe in L.A. and said "we got hare's fur". He was shaken, thought I was teasing, but then Sharlene, my wife got on the phone and said "Joe, Melvin did it." He screamed, and started to sob and cry. He was an emotional wreck, but so were we. I had an early digital camera and took pix and sent a download to him...it was a thirty minute download, they appeared on his computer

one at a time. People at Laguna thought there was a death in Joe's family. NOPE, Hare's fur. We packed up ten of the pots and shipped them that afternoon by ups. He screamed again when he opened the package.



From the first firing. Deep red, oil spots.

As reported, that was a cone 12 firing, totally oxidized and a hour or more down- firing. All of my guesses where correct. Joe's recipes were of course perfection, his research was dead on. But, so many saw the dark clay and assumed it was reduction. That was a bad assumption.

I had been blessed by my time living in Japan, and seeing the old pots, seeing the old kilns and realizing just how hot and big and wild firing those kilns were. Women hauled and split red pine sticks by the thousands, there was an old guy that could read the color of the kiln and know the temp inside, no such thing as cones/kiln shelves. It was a massive community effort to fire a "Dragon". How to re/do that with my kiln was my problem. I think I transported myself to be an old Chinese Potter. I sure know I had to change all of my pre/planned ideas about firing a kiln.



Hare's fur bowl, second firing of the kiln.

I had realized that to add credibility to the study I had to get rid of all the modern equipment I had. Out went the oxyprobe, I removed the temperature equipment and the pyrometer. I even made a hygrometer out of a stick with a rock on the bottom and slashes to mark the density of glaze. I did keep my wheel however. But, the wheel was not the reason we got the job done. It was problem solving at my best. My skin actually crawled with delight.

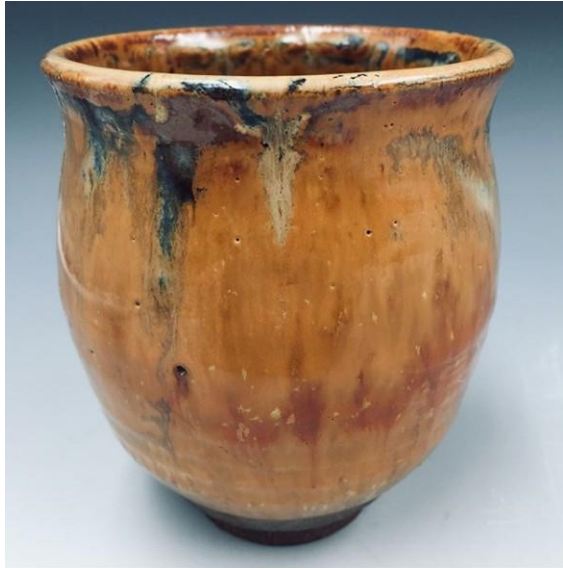
(side story) When Joe started talking about the problem being solved, several well known college teachers complained to him that "why did he let a high school teacher get involved, they should have been consulted."

He told me that the hairs went up on his neck and he told them to "go to hell, Mel may be a high school teacher but he is Japanese trained, makes great pots and he is the one that solved the problem, you don't know shit!")
Yes, I smiled. Loyalty is an honorable thing.

I was committed to making all 600 pieces to complete the study, and have at least six firings. I then made a variety of pots, including Teapots, covered pieces and a complete set of dishes.

As the firing progressed I was getting gold streaks of crystals, actually looking like real gold. I was sure it was the down-fire as the firings were all oxy.

Joe had sent me a five pound bag of a very rare, mined in California yellow ochre. It was really bright. So, on a whim, I made a yellow ochre hare's fur. And of course since we did not reduce, the yellow brightened.





Yellow Hare's Fur from firing 5.

Joe took the yellow cup to Otto Heino the old master potter of Cal. He had sold a yellow glaze recipe to a group of Asian companies FOR One million bucks, the recipe and how to make it.

Joe said, "what do you think of our Hare's Fur yellow?" Otto said "did that damn Mel come up with the yellow?, well tell him he is an asshole," He was smiling. Joe loved it. (without that rare yellow ochre we could not have done it.) but, in keeping with the study, only iron. Ochre is iron.

It is important to bring up the deep philosophical reasons for doing this project. First and foremost, we had no idea or care about "fame". Most Americans have no interest in old Chinese Glaze. I did it to help Joe with a lifelong quest. The pots had no commercial value what- so- ever.

It was all about splitting the cost of production, air-fare, and shipping had to be sponsored by us. Joe supplied the materials, I did the labor and firing. When the time came I had to pay over a thousand dollars to have the pots shipped to Joe in California. There was no reward at the end of the Rainbow. We knew that, but the love of research, the love of making and being a part of a line of potters going back to the year 1` is what motivated us.

Opening that first kiln full of pots was as thrilling as any potter could ever experience. What others thought was not worth anything.

After the fifth firing and Joe was getting a nice collection of the best pieces, he took the pots to show David Armstrong, the man that was building the first real Museum of Art Ceramics. (in Pamona, Cal.) It would become the largest and best Museum of its kind in North America.

David is a lover and expert in American pots and potters. His own collection was vast. He loved the new work, he was thrilled, and wanted to be a part of it. He told Joe, "Let's open the Museum with this work, the first show of AMOCA!!!!" And, we did that.



A partridge feather tea-pot, firing 5.

When opening kiln firing 5, I found a small hare's fur bowl and it had like sapphires in the bottom. I had not noticed it at first. Then going through the entire stack of bowls I found two more. I called Joe right away..."Joe, I am getting sapphire crystals. The phone was dead silent. Joe!!!. "WHAT? SAPPHIRES?" yes, bright blue crystals.

He did freak. He wanted pix, right now. It was actually magic. It was one thing to get hare's fur, oil spot and partridge feather, but what he was hoping for was sapphire blue, that reflected the Lohen Tea Bowls, the most important teabowls in Japanese History. Priceless.

There are three of them, made at the Mihn River kilns. Mine were not as bold as the Lohen, but the crystals were very elegant.



The temmoku bowls made at the Mihn River were brought to Japan by Buddhist Monks travelling from China, and used for tea. They all carried tea, a bowl and often a small kettle.

It is believed that the Hare's Fur bowls were the first ones used for the Tea Ceremony as it flourished in Japan.

(The story is very complex and speculative and debated by historians in many ways, but the Lohen Tea bowls are real. I am not in any position to act "expert in the history", but, I know what I know. I made 7 of them. All with rich sapphire crystals.

There was no question in Joe's mind what those bowls represented to him. Can you imagine, 45 years of study of this glaze, knowing about the Lohen bowls, trips to China when things were really tight and difficult , to discover how it was done? He was obsessed beyond ones belief. One would think I had seen God, and talked to Him. Joe was spinning.

The pot you see below was in our show in Shanghai, China and became a gift to the` Director of the National Museum of China`. (more to follow)



Sapphire crystals, with a perfect Monk's head circle in soft orange. A rare pot indeed. I am more than pleased to say "I made it". It was a re/fire, temmoku glaze only. Cone 12. Oxy.

Only 7 pots turned Sapphire crystal. We do not know how or why. I wish I could say it was me, but alas, I was just lucky to have them appear in my kiln, on pots that I made with a firing schedule I designed. The kiln gives us many wonderful gifts if we wait for them. (more later)

Things were getting very exciting; David was ready for us to ship all the pots to California and pack with great care.

But, before we shipped them we decided to have an open house, show all 600 of the pots to our dearest and most loved relatives and friends. Joe flew to Minneapolis and decided he had to supervise the packing. I was thrilled.

We had a wonderful party, pots everywhere in the house and studio. Joe was in heaven, people to adore the project and praise him to high.

Our friend Donald Jackson, the scribe to the Queen of England (Finest Calligrapher there is.) attended and loved it. We presented him with a small bowl that was full of gold crystals to use as his "Gold Leaf Bowl". He still uses it.

So, we packed for three days. Wheels of bubble wrap. And we had a wooden container, bought boxes that would fit perfectly 8 across and tight. We stacked boxes inside of boxes and then built a plywood wall to tighten the boxes from front to back. Nothing moved an inch. Off it went to Pamona and the Museum. I added a very strong lock and mailed the key to David with a four foot orange ribbon tied to it. Do not lose the key.

I included instructions to unpack. The truck had to sit in the front of the Museum, on a very busy street to unload. The driver swung the container onto the sidewalk and four helpers with drill drivers and two wheel carts unloaded the entire box in about 20 minutes. The driver called me and said. "What an amazing, well organized unload. The best she had ever seen." A good start.

So, from then on, everything was out of my control. David had his staff un-box all 600 pots and store what they were not going to Exhibit.

The Museum was now complete and all arrangements were in the hands of the director.

The date for the opening was picked and Sharlene and I and my daughter and sister in law and brother in law made plane reservations, we picked up our friend Marjie in Denver on the way and arrived for the festivities.

Some other friends planned a vacation in Cal around the opening. So, it was gala.



Opening Night, Mel, Joe, David Armstrong.



Opening night

The show was a big hit, the Museum was a huge hit and all was off and running. We did an article for Ceramics Monthly and it was well received. Basically the project was done. I was rather relieved; it was a big project with a great deal of pressure.

We left all the pots with AMOCA, and we told David that the pots could be sold in the gift shop to help support the Museum into the future. Another effort to do the "right thing".

But then, about a month later Joe got a call from a friend at Hong Kong University that they wanted a small sample of the pots to show. So, Joe picked out some very nice pots and sent them off. Joe got amazing praise and adulation. Again, he was just off the charts happy.

Then when that show closed a gallery owner in Shanghai wanted to know if she could do a major show of as many pots as we could ship.

So, Joe made that arrangement. It meant nearly a sixty more pots had to be sent. Amoca packed the show and sent it off.

Joe called me and said that I would have to go to China and open the show; he had taken too much time off work and could not go. "Now, who pays for that?"...Yup, Melvin.

Joe had decided that all the blue crystal pots had to go to China, and several of the finest pieces. And, they need a great photo to make poster to line the streets in Shanghai. I could not believe it, it was getting out of hand. So, I did the photo shoot and sent the pix.

The pot below was becoming a favorite of everyone. It was almost a duplicate of a pot at the Minneapolis Art Institute in their collection of Hare's Fur Chinese. It is a rather large pot, but the color is perfect. I had copied that pot from the case.

The Gallery used the photo.



A dear friend who was born in Shanghai and migrated to Minnesota to study art had opened a very successful "bridge between China and the U.S." I had helped Po to promote trips to China and Chinese potters to the U.S. He was very grateful.

His wife has a very high ranking job with Intel, yes, thee Intel. So, they both came from China, penniless and made amazing careers.

Po called me and said.."Mel, do you want to go to China?" He had had a trip cancelled, and was going to go anyway to conduct business, and he said "if you can get

to China, I will take care of the rest, and we can both go to the opening of your show in my `home town`."

(it was a bit more complex than I describe, but, enough said. (and another wonderful potter jointed us.) Oh, and one of the blue crystal pots fell into his suitcase.)

winkwink. Po is a wonderful friend and has done wonders for China/American relations. (well needed)And he took care of my visa.

So we traveled literally all over China. We saw it all and met wonderful clayart friends, saw great pots, great potters and had sort of a "visiting fireman" tour. Po had made sure they knew I had done and succeeded in the Hare's Fur study and the show was going to open soon.

The Mayor's of several big cities sent cars to meet us. And we attended many dinner parties. It was truly a celebrity tour. I was more than humbled. And I did the smartest thing. Chinese men, like Japanese men love to drink at parties. I had gone to the University of Minnesota hospital and asked to see a Chinese internist. He gave me all the proper shots, made suggestions like for example. (take pepto bismol every day and you will not have any GI issues. It worked. But, I asked him to give me a letter, on stationery in Chinese, that I had a severe alcoholic aversion. It made me very ill. That piece of paper let me "not drink" and did not embarrass my hosts. The all went "poor Mel, allergic to good booze." At least I never threw up wine like one woman did. All over the dinner table. I was a good boy.

I had no idea what was in store for the Gallery Opening. We had arrived in Shanghai the afternoon of the opening

and just got a cab and showed up. It was top notch, perfect and very high class. The openings happen about 4 in the afternoon as public transport ends about 10p.m.

At 4 o'clock the place filled with beautiful men and women in Armani suits, dressed to kill and long legged incredible beautiful women. It was just like New York. They wanted to buy everything. My head was swiveling off my neck. I could understand no one. Po was a help, but it was beyond him too.

Just about then the owner of the gallery, Caroline Chen said to me. "look who just walked in." How did I know?? It was the `Director of the National Museum of China`, the most important ceramics man in the World. Think of his collection. He walked right up to me holding one of the blue crystal bowls. He spoke only Chinese to Po, and said "this looks like a Lohen Bowl, did you make it?" "Yes sir, and my partner back in America and I would love to give it to you as a gift." He told Po, "I am the Director of the National, I cannot take gifts." I said, 'well sir, may I have it back?'. He said no, and put it behind his back. Word from China has it that it is on his desk and he brags that he has a `Lohen`. That moment was the most important ten minutes of my pottery life. It was more important than Hamada at my opening in Tokyo.

That sentence validated everything I had done with Joe, It Validated Joe Koons. Whatever anyone else had to say was mute. They were real Hare's Fur pots, with all the various patterns, including blue crystals. It was more than good enough for me.

The Director called the "Ceramics Expert at the National and told him to come to the gallery, right now. And then he turned to me and said, through Po, "I will make arrangements for you to meet with Ceramic Engineers at the "National Academy of Research/Science" tomorrow if you will go?" "Yes sir."

I went to an upstairs bathroom and made a satellite call to Joe. I think the word `stunned` is a bit shallow.

As some of you know, Joe "Died" a year later. We had just started a new series of pots. I put everything away and have not picked up the project. It died with Joe. I found two buckets of temmoku and base coat in the barn at the farm. Dry as bone. I fired a few pots with it last summer and got perfect results. And, I have seen large flower pots at Menard's Big Box store with real Hare's Fur glaze. It made me smile.

The trip to the Academy was just fine. They were stunned with who I was, how did I know anything and how did I make them? I explained. They wanted cross section images on a Sim Microscope, so I dropped one of the pots on the floor and gave them the shards. Can you imagine their faces. It was one of the only funny statements I made. "oh, I can make all of them I want, I know how." Then they laughed. Joe and I were validated again. 13 PH.D ceramic engineers, five had done their papers on Hare's Fur. I told them how to do it.

Here is the picture of the poster. They were all over Shanghai. It was a big deal.

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There was some very real heartfelt bowing. The ShayShay's came with grace.

I left China and went directly to Japan and went to Kyoto for 8 days. Walked the streets, visited many friends and found the children of 1972 were now adults and caring for parents. Lots of tears. They cried.. "Melsan came home."

Mel Jacobson/ Minnetonka, Minnesota

2021

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