



Materials

Clay shape(s) of choice
Clay-based underglaze colors of choice
Raku tongs
Chamois or shammy
Metal trash can
Combustible materials
low-fire earthenware casting slip
Assorted brushes
Raku gloves
Bucket of water or spray bottle
Metal rib
Floor wax

Half-Naked Raku

By Michael Harbridge

The first time I heard someone use the term “naked raku,” I was horrified to think of someone in the buff pulling glowing-hot shapes from a kiln. I always try to be sure every part of my body is protected before I reach into a hot kiln. Plus, it would be awkward and uncomfortable for most people in a workshop setting! But then I researched it and found out naked raku was not what I envisioned.

Most of the naked raku pieces I found were white and black. They had no glaze — hence, naked! You’ll see that it’s a process where a “shell” cracks away or falls off, leaving a bare ceramic surface. I loved the look, but as usual, as I looked at the pieces, I tried to figure out how I could alter the technique — make it better or add my own twist. I like color! It got me thinking back to my horsehair methods and how I added color.

In researching, I found many methods used by various artists. I’ve taken bits and pieces from each one, adjusting them to products we use, and presto — we have half-naked raku. It has color, so it’s not completely naked. So if you are used to naked raku methods, you will see variations here. I’ll share my experiences with these alternate within this article and tell you what worked and what didn’t.

Most traditional raku methods begin with a piece made with clay bodies containing sand and grog. Most raku clays or stoneware contain sand or grog so they can withstand the shock of coming out of a kiln at high temperatures and can be bisque fired to cone 04. Low-fire clay bodies without grog can be used, but work best when the greenware is fired to cone 06 or 07 rather than the most common practice of 04. The ware is slightly softer, but tends to crack less frequently. Additives can be added to low-fire casting slip to turn it into a raku clay body.

Smooth-surfaced items work better than textured shapes. Parts of a shape with texture will work, but because you have to polish or burnish most of the area and you are relying on smoke colorations, flat areas will yield the best results.

I mentioned earlier how naked raku has no glaze. Well, that's where I made some adjustments. Some of what I tried worked great, and other things made it more of a challenge. Most traditional clay artists will mix a clay solution called terra sigillata (terra sig). It's a process where they mix some clay bodies together, let the large particles settle out, siphon off part, and other time con-



suming things to create a clay-bodied solution. They very carefully apply multiple coats for a smooth application. Most will use large, soft hake-type brushes so they have no streaks or brush marks.

I've found it's much easier to use underglazes like Amaco Velvets, Mayco UG colors, or Duncan Cover Coats. They're basically colored clay designed for larger, solid area coverage on greenware or bisque. In workshops, I do this process on bisque because it is more durable. Once the color is applied, it needs to be polished or burnished, and sometimes people forget they're working with greenware and press a little too hard, causing items to crack.

Polishing and burnishing is done after the last coat of color (usually the third coat) has been applied and is dry to the touch. It can be done using a leather chamois or even a shammy cloth found at many dollar stores. I find washing those dollar-store shammys once softens them just enough that they don't scratch the damp color. Make certain the color is still damp but not completely dry. If the color is too wet, it will come off as you rub the surface. You'll notice a sheen come up as you work the area. The goal is to compress the clay particles to create a very smooth surface. Some artists will spend hours doing this until they get a very smooth surface that almost appears to be glazed. Others will use the back of a wooden spoon or smooth rocks to

burnish the shape. You want a smooth area that's less porous for the next firing step. If you've worked with grog/sand clay bodies you'll fire to cone 04. If you're working with ware cast from clay without grog or sand, fire to cone 06-07. This makes the coatings you've applied permanent.

This next part of the process is going to sound crazy. When I first read about it, I had to stop and reread it a few times to make sure I had it right. We're going to cover the shape in low-fire casting slip. You read that right. We're going to apply slip over the top of the surface. This is one of the reasons you want a well-polished surface to work on. It can't be a shiny glaze under the slip because the glaze would fuse to the clay when fired. A polished or burnished terra sig or underglaze isn't porous, so the slip will not adhere as it would to a plain underglaze. I know. You probably still have reservations. Just go with it for now until you've read the entire process and have the opportunity to give it a try.

Some artists brush on the slip while others dip. I found dipping worked best. I also prefer a thicker slip for a thicker coating. I prefer to heat my items to about 200 degrees F before I dip. This causes the slip to dry quickly and bubble a little bit, creating some openings in the slip. I know, it still sounds nuts.

Here is where everything comes together. Think about what you've done and what happens during each firing. When wet clay shapes or cast ware dry, they generally shrink. When they're fired, they shrink again. So what will happen to the slip you've applied? As it dries, it will shrink. Since the shape underneath has already shrunk in drying and firing, it won't shrink. So as the slip dries and shrinks, it may get some cracks. In the next phase of this process, the object will be fired, causing the slip coating to shrink more and crack more.

Big deal. The slip coating cracks. Why's that important? Well, as with traditional raku methods, these items are taken from a hot kiln and placed into a metal trash can with combustible materials. In traditional raku methods, any areas of unglazed ware turn a dark grey or black. So as the smoke penetrates the cracks in the slip coating, it leaves dark markings in the pattern of the cracks. Now this is exciting! And you can even carve designs and patterns into the slip coating before firing to manipulate the pattern. In fact, you can use things like wax resists on portions to prevent slip from sticking so that those areas fire out dark. Now we're talking fun!

But wait. When you remove the item from the trash can, it still has the slip coating on the surface. How do you reveal the smoke pattern? If you've done a good job polishing or burnishing your ware, the fired slip should chip away. A metal rib or old credit card will also work to chip away any stubborn parts. I'll talk a little more about this in this condensed version of the steps.

Step 1: Create your ware using your choice of clay body using your method of choice —casting, throwing, hand building, or puzzling. Clean up imperfections and decide if you want to fire before adding color and polishing/burnishing. If firing first, fire clay with sand/grog to cone 04 and other low-fire clay bodies to cone 06-07.

Step 2: Apply three coats of underglaze in your color(s) of choice to the shape's surface, allowing color to dry between coats. When the third coat is loses its wet, shiny look, but before it's completely dry, polish or burnish until it comes to a nice shine. Let it dry completely.

Step 3: Fire clay shapes with sand/grog to cone 04 and other low-fire clay bodies to cone 06-07.



Step 4: Dip each shape in thick slip, remove, and allow drips to fall off. While the slip is still a little damp, you can use wood carving tools to scratch in designs or patterns. Allow to dry.

Step 5: Fire to around 1,450 degrees F (cone 013). You need to get the items hot enough so that when they're removed and placed in the container with combustibles, the clay's heat will cause them to catch fire quickly.



Step 6: Using metal raku tongs, remove one shape at a time from the kiln and place it inside a metal trash can lined with combustibles. Place the lid on the can for 15 minutes and allow the items to smolder. It's best to really smother the shape with paper, sawdust, or dry leaves to get the best coloring.

Step 7: After about 15 to 30 minutes, remove the item from the can while wearing raku gloves to protect your hands. The items should still be very hot. Gently drizzle or spray water over the slip shell, causing it to crack even more. Be careful not to get the shape soaked with water or you could crack the entire shape. Do not dunk it in water.



Step 8: Use a metal rib to gently chip away the slip coating and clean up the surface once cool. Don't use an old credit card until the shape has cooled.

Step 9: Apply a coat of floor wax to protect the finish and add more shine.

What about glazing the interior of things like vases? You can apply glaze and fire to the 06-07 range. However, due to the stress the items go through when removed from the kiln at high temperatures, there is a chance for crazing or small cracks in the glazes. As a result these items may not hold water. Naked raku techniques should never be used on items that will come into contact with food or drink.





I also tried doing part of an item with traditional metallic raku glazes and other parts with the look of naked raku. Most raku glazes mature in the 1,700 to 1,800 F range, so I knew I needed to go hotter than the 1,500 degree range in Step 4 of the process outlined above. I got favorable results with the metallic raku colors and some good “naked” smoking on the bottoms of the shapes. The biggest challenge was getting the layer of slip to chip away. The hotter you fire the clay, the harder it gets. I was able to remove it, but my poor metal rib was mangled unusable after scraping away the slip on three vases.

That experiment made me wonder how a traditional gloss copper metallic raku glaze would turn out in the 1,450 F range. This blue raku vase had one coat of my Jade Gloss Raku Glaze applied over the coating of slip. I did get some metallic and nice raku colors. As I scraped away the layer of slip, I decided to leave some of the stubborn areas. The result was a stucco-looking design.

Naked raku takes some practice. Don't get disappointed if your first shapes don't turn out perfect. No two will ever turn out the same. About good dozen of the shapes I created didn't turn out. On some, I hadn't polished the underglaze enough — the slip stuck so much, I wasn't able to chip anything away. Other items, like the yellow vase at the top of this page, had huge chunks of slip slough away as I pulled the item from the kiln, so large areas were infused with smoke.

So while naked raku wasn't what I first anticipated — thank goodness! — it's just as much fun as traditional raku and something that can easily be done in nearly any kiln (even glass kilns).

Michael Harbridge has been teaching fired-arts workshops for more than 35 years and is the educational arts manager for Royal & Langnickel Brush and the creator of clay puzzling. He can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 108, Iola, WI 54945, by phone at (715) 281-6450, or by e-mail at info@claypuzzling.com. Visit his website at www.claypuzzling.com.

