

# ----- Naked Raku -----

## By Artist Michael Harbridge

See this technique in action! Video recording of the live webinar available at [www.ifiredarts.com](http://www.ifiredarts.com).

### Materials List

Clay shape 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  
Cheescloth

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When I first heard someone using the term “naked raku” I was horrified to think of someone in the buff pulling glowing hot shapes from a kiln. I always do the opposite and 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 I found was white and black. It had no glaze...hence, naked! You’ll see it’s a process where a “shell” cracks away or falls off, leaving the bare surface. I loved the look, but as usual, I looked at them and tried to figure out how I could alter it, make it better or add my own twist. I like color! So it got me thinking back to my horsehair methods and how I added color. I’ll share my experiences and altering ways within this article and tell you what worked, and what did not work so well.

In researching I found many methods used by various artists. I’ve



taken bits and parts from each one, adjusted 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.

Most traditional methods begin with a piece made with clay bodies containing sand and grog. Most raku clays or stoneware often contain sand or grog and can withstand the shock of coming out of the 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 rather than textured work best. Parts of the 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 a bit 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 consuming 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 Mayco UG colors or Duncan Cover Coats. They are 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 are working with greenware and press a little too hard, causing items to crack.

You may be wondering why polishing and burnishing are so important. This process is done after the last coat of color (usually the third coat) is applied and dry to the touch. It can be done using a leather chamois or even a shammy found at many local 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, the color will come off as you rub over the surface. You'll notice a sheen come up as you work the area. The goal is to compress the clay particles and 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 is less porous for the next step. The item gets fired at this point. If you've worked with grog/sand clay bodies you'll fire to cone 04. If you're working with cast ware of 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. And 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 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 below the slip because the glaze would fuse to the clay when fired. A



polished or burnished terra sig or underglaze is not porous, so the slip will not adhere like 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 have my items heated 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 in each firing. When wet clay shapes or cast ware dry, they generally shrink. When they are fired, they shrink again. So what do you think will happen to the slip on the outside of the object? As it dries, it will shrink. Since the shape has already shrunk in drying and firing, it won't shrink. Most likely, as the coating of slip dries and shrinks, it may get some cracks. In the next phase of this process, the object will get fired, causing the slip coating to shrink more, and crack more.

So big deal. The slip coating cracks. Why is that important? Well, like 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 turns a dark grey black color. So when the smoke penetrates the cracks in the slip coating, it leaves dark markings in the pattern of the cracks. Now this is exciting! And I'm sure you're wondering if you can carve designs and patterns into the slip coating before firing to manipulate the pattern? The answer is yes. In fact, you can use things like wax resists on portions to prevent slip from sticking so 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 through chosen method of 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 choice of underglaze to surface, allowing each coat to dry between coats. When the wet, shiny look of the third coat is dry, polish or burnish until it comes to a nice shine. Fire clay with sand/grog to cone 04 and other low-fire clay bodies to cone 06-07.

**Step 3** Heat the shapes to 350 degrees F and remove from kiln using raku gloves. Dip shape in thick slip, remove and allow drips to fall off. Place on paper towel when you set them down to prevent them from sticking to any surface. Wrap cheesecloth around the shape to hold the drying slip to the surface. It does not have to cover the entire surface. The top and bottom of the slip area are most important. The other option is to leave the

cheesecloth off and when the slip is still a little damp, you can use wood carving tools to scratch in designs or patterns. Allow to dry.

**Step 4** Fire to around 1,300 degrees Fahrenheit with a hold so the items will not cool if you don't take them out immediately. You need to get the items hot enough so when removed and placed in combustibles will cause them to catch fire quickly.

**Step 5** 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 6** After about 15 minutes, remove the items 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 7** Use a metal rib to gently chip away the slip coating and clean up the surface once cool. Only use the old credit card once cooled.

**Step 8** Apply a coat of floor wax to protect the finish and add more of a 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 being 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 items should not be used on items that will come into contact with food.



Since my mind tries to come up with other things and ways to expand methods, I wanted to do part of an item with traditional metallic raku glazes and other parts with the look of naked raku. So I tried it! Most raku glazes mature in the 1,700 to 1,800 degree F range so I knew I needed to go hotter than the 1,500 degree range in step 4 of the process. You can see I got favorable results with the metallic raku colors and some good “naked” smoking on the bottoms of the shape. 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 and unable to be used again after scraping away the slip on three vases.

So that made me wonder how a traditional, gloss copper metallic raku glaze would turn out in the 1450 degree range. This blue raku vase had one coat of my Jade Gloss Raku Glaze applied over the coating of slip. You can see, I did get some metallic and nice raku colors. As I scraped away the layer of clay, I decided to leave some of the stubborn areas and 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. I probably had a dozen shapes I created that did not turn out. Some I did not have polished enough and the slip stuck so much, I was not able to chip anything away. Other items like this yellow vase had huge chips of slip chip away as I pulled the item from the kiln, so large areas were infused with smoke.

So while naked raku was not what I first anticipated (thankfully!), it is just as much fun as traditional raku and something that can easily be done in nearly any kiln (even glass kilns).

