LEONARD, PAMELA BLUME. Low-fired Earthenware Pottery. (1976)
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The purpose of this study was to create beautiful pottery with common red earthenware clay. Simple low temperature firing techniques that implemented the deposit of carbon on the ware were used.

Incorporation of the ideals of folk pottery with those of current artists-craftsmen working in clay was found to be an achievable goal.

LOW-FIRED EARTHENWARE POTTERY

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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My pottery in this exhibition is functional pottery made with red earthware clay that is indigenous to the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. I chose this clay for a variety of practical reasons, among them its ready availability and low cost. Also, the high iron content gives a warmth and depth to pieces fired at low temperature in either an oxidation or a reduction atmosphere. This earthenware clay was refined very little; it is rather non-plastic. I chose to work with it without modifying its properties because when I experimented with additions of more plastic clays I found the body less beautiful after being fired.

My approach evolved from an initial acceptance of the glossy glazes and simple shapes of familiar red folk pottery. Gradually, I found that careful cleaning and preparation of each mound of clay, followed by steady coaxing on the wheel precluded the need for foreign clay additions I might have made. I found that with patient forming I could replicate, then surpass, the repertoire of wheel thrown shapes I had previously achieved with stoneware. Admittedly, my predilection for simple pots eliminated many problems that might have arisen.

When throwing I sought to shape pots of beautiful proportion. I did this intuitively, repeating the shapes I found pleasing. I attempted to remain within the limits of cylindrically derived forms pushed out from the inside to create swelling shapes reminiscent of expanded lungs. The associations made with distended forms are life-giving or female, and I felt my pots were enhanced by further traditional female aspects that are brought to mind, such as regard for

order and harmony. At the same time I avoided meretriciously dramatic forms by simplifying the contour of each piece. I sought to emphasize the aesthetic and functional value of pots made more durable when given a strong lip and sturdy foot. All parts of a pot must converge to create a pleasing shape, yet just as important as this internal harmony is the way the pot relates to its support, or more simply put, the way it sets. It must be sturdy, without appearing or feeling heavy, it must set securely without looking flat-footed.

When I chose surface finishes for the pots, I picked techniques that demonstrated the beauty inherent in this particular clay. Frequent use of contrasting slips and oxides, sparing use of glaze, employment of heavy reduction and smoking of unglazed areas were the methods I used. In conjunction with these, I used only one glaze, a low fire multi-cone clear glaze that was suitable for oxidation, reduction and raku firings.

The color and texture of the clay made it especially amenable to smoking techniques. To this end I used both raku and sawdust firings. The methods are somewhat similar, as they both require relatively low temperatures and both involve the absorption of carbon into the pores of the pots; but between them, raku firing is hotter and quicker. This more intense method, though more predictable and thereby more controllable, results in less modulation of surface color than that acquired in the smoldering sawdust fire. The insides of pots placed in sawdust firings were

first glazed in a cone 06 oxidation firing, since the temperature achieved in smoldering sawdust would not consistently melt even low fire glazes. I found that I could rely upon either firing method to make subtle changes of color from salmon to coal black that are so difficult to calculatively apply oneself. That the clay is not greatly refined, and therefore not homogeneous, aids in harmonizing form and surface. The pots rarely remain symmetrical since they tend to warp somewhat in drying and firing. This creates slight irregularities that soften the forms and make them more compatible with the patterns provided by carbon deposits and crakled raku glaze.

I realized early that a big problem was finding exemplary works in earthenware. Making functional pottery is an art of tradition, and I began with a clear image of the forms I sought to make. But the models I admired were porcelain and stoneware, which are prevalent in current ceramics. Though most of the pottery in use around the world was made with earthenware, the craftsmen remained anonymous and their wares were formed according to designs that emphasized utility rather than uniqueness, strength rather than subtlety of stance, and pursuit of quantity rather than a personal interpretation of beauty. Yet I admire the endurance of folk pottery and I have striven to incorporate its standards with mine. After a year of working exclusively with this clay I no longer feel presumptuous in hoping to mesh the old traditions of humble craftsmen and the new individuality of artists - craftsmen working in all kinds of clay.