

Salt glazed stoneware, by David Ballantyne

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My introduction to salt glaze came with a five foot pot made by one of my students, that could only be fired at a drainpipe works. It was decorated with areas of clay slips stained with blues, yellow, pink purple and green underglaze colours, scored through with a knife. The result was an extraordinary admixture of styles – iron particles in the ballclay/fireclay body swam to the surface of what was for all practical purposes a batch-type alkaline glaze, and crystallised as with stoneware, but crazeless, though fired at a mere 1140 degrees C; the colour acquired the opalescence typical of alkaline glazes where the oxides come out of solution on cooling, and of course the tints of the Persian ceramic palette, streaming along the edges of the grooves. Here was a new conception of colour offering rich rewards to the pioneering ceramist. I made several large pieces for firing at the works, then resolved to burn my boats and commit my oil-fired stoneware kiln to salting, for good or ill.

Alas, despite the lavish use of borax to reduce the formation temperature of the silicate, and despite a salt consumption far in excess of normal practice at the works, the development of the opalescent polychrome technique still remains an experimental ideal. The vital factor is not temperature but time – time for the glaze to build up on the surface droplet by droplet. The kilns at the works took up to five days to peak temperature; mine proved too efficient and it was all I could do to extend the critical range of the last 200 degrees to two hours. This forced a quality varying from thin sheen to heavy orange peel to be the limited aim, depending for its overall richness and maturity on temperatures of 1280-1300 degrees C, but the compensations were gratefully noted – in the more successful pieces the glaze did exquisite things to the clay surface, the slightest variations - relief, and ridges formed by engraving, turning, stamping and fluting – being flatteringly heightened, and rendering the monotony of tan, rust and red-brown as irrelevant as that of monochrome prints to the dramatic content of photographs. The marks of casual handling – finger prints, sponge streaks and other surface effects which can be ignored when the biscuit form is to be clothed with a jacket of viscous glaze, cannot escape the searching intensification of the salt glaze.

This emphasis on clay form – on finish – makes one nervous at first – nervous of spoiling the cleanness of tooling when a slip glaze is swilled round the interior; nervous of breakage in handling and packing in a kiln where sodium circulation is so important, of unstable shelves, and above all of fusion of foot-ring to shelf, the most serious and unpredictable fault. A general nervousness pervades the workshop: a cup is thrown away because of a hair-line at the handle-joint; certainty of design must precede the making of everything, since there is nothing for the glaze to do but finish what has been largely done before firing. Habits of care, precision and contemplation in time become embedded in one's personality, and it is natural that one's ideas should evolve not only in sympathy

with the exigencies of the technical discipline one has accepted but with phases of traditional craftsmanship whose qualities are closely akin.

England lies (ceramically speaking) at the tip of the Mediterranean tail, and has ended by wagging the dog many times. Since Roman times there has developed consistently that feeling for proportion – that true elegance achieved by the containment of ebullience by severity so characteristic of all the best English pottery, beneath which, be it ever so elaborately concealed, lurks a hint, or more than a hint, of humour. As long as the popular tradition lasted – until, that is, the striving for technical improvement led to the employment of academically trained artist designers, the English craft continued its growth towards the vortex of its creative energy in the Staffordshire of the 17th and 18th centuries – that banquet of invention overflowing with vitality, sweetened with almost flawless sensibility, charmingly naive in its sophisticated moods, otherwise noble without pretension. Salt glaze takes many of the honours, and though the supplanting of this technique by cream-glazed earthenware was inevitable it left indelible traces on the minds of later potters who could not deny their feeling for the sharp incisiveness of profile inherited from their Roman antecedents and translated into pre-industrial English by the turning lathe, despite the debasement of post-craft economic pressure towards a soulless perfectionism.

The more completely did I commit myself, and my kiln, to salt-glaze, the more I came to admire, and love, the spirit of this English tradition, whose consummation before the industrial clouds began to gather came to suggest, in a much more limited field, a real renaissance comparable to that of the T'ang Dynasty. I would give to Leeds and Sunderland enamel painting a status, in terms of sensibility if not variety, to Ming. So why not be English, and proud of it? Despised and rejected of craft potters since Leach, 18th Century Staffordshire embodies all those qualities most unassimilable into the vernacular of naturalistic, tactile, even tachist qualities associated with felspathic glazes that so clearly set contemporary craft pottery apart from the Industrial. It must be admitted that the difficulties, not least the devastation wrought by salt on the kiln itself, would lead to agonising reappraisals if a living had to be made out of this attempt to bring the dry bones to life again. With a more scientific approach than mine it could be done; meanwhile, the possibilities, and their directional effect on design, provide an ever-increasing compulsion to press on in homage to those who attained such subtlety, grace and power in what, after all, is a refined form of drain-pipe.