

OBVARA in TUSCANY

Evelyne Schoenmann

In 2014, a 30-member group consisting of members of the Potters Council, USA (a subsidiary of the American Ceramic Society), made its annual trip to Europe as they have done for many years. Tuscany was the starting and finishing point, and their programme included visits to the studios of artist friends and trips

to museums – I would especially like to mention the MIC ceramics museum in Faenza, where well-known ceramist Antonella Cimatti took the Potters Council group on a guided tour. It also included a stay lasting several days at the well-known school of ceramics, La Meridiana in Certaldo. This visit was used to ob-

serve the clay preparation and throwing technique of ceramist and founder of La Meridiana, Pietro Maddalena. The participants then produced work of their own which was to be fired on the specially reserved obvara day.

Obvara? Many of the participants had never heard of this method of treating the pots after firing before. Group leader Prof. em. Marcia Selsor gave a brief introduction to the topic.

What we know about obvara today is regrettably very little, since this knowledge has either been lost or disappeared for a long time behind the Iron Curtain. It is a technique that comes from Belarus region and has been used since the 12th century. People used this technique as a kind of glaze to make their pots impermeable, so that they could be used for eating and drinking. The pots were frequently heated before use, possibly to kill bacteria. The general belief was that using these pots would guarantee health and longevity. It is not known what kinds of clay were used back then. We recommend today using fireproof clays, raku bodies and even certain porcelain bodies.

Textured surfaces produce varied pattern in white, brown and black. On burnished surfaces the results are very varied. The patterns are reminiscent of lichen, fern leaves, clouds or “ghost patterns”. It is interesting that the “glaze” is not applied before the second firing but only afterwards. This makes the technique similar to raku, but the actual reduction only takes place after the pots has been withdrawn from the obvara liquid. In the air, the organic material soon burns into the clay, which is still hot. If the result is not pleasing, the pot can simply be re-fired, the organic material burns out and you can try again. In Turkey, for example, milk is used instead of water. Obvara is



top -
one of the buildings at
La Meridiana in Certaldo, Italy

left
Pietro Maddalena, founder and head of
La Meridiana, demonstrates his throwing
technique to the Americans.

The images show removing from the kiln dipping the red-hot piece in water the obvara liquid is in the bucket beside, the white liquid some results are shown at the bottom

exciting and it's fun. And because there is no smoke involved, it is suitable for an urban environment.

Mix the ingredients, breaking up any lumps of flour by hand. Leave this liquid to ferment for three days in a covered vessel in a warm place.

The recipe for the obvara liquid:

10 litres lukewarm water
1 kg flour
1-2 sachets dried yeast
1 dessert spoon sugar

Stir 3-4 times a day. The container with this mixture should be large enough to move the pots around in.

Like in raku, everything must be prepared in advance before starting to unload the kiln. The container with the liquid is next to the kiln. A second large container with cold clear water is also needed along side it. Tongs are also necessary to draw the pots from the kiln as well as a smooth, non-flammable surface on which to place the pots to cool. Any helpers need to know exactly what to do. Further recommendations include flame resistant clothing, no bare skin, sturdy shoes. Clear the area of any tripping hazards.

The bisque objects are fired in a raku kiln to at least 980°C. They are then removed from the kiln one at a time and immersed in the obvara liquid for a few seconds. At this point it is possible to influence the way the liquid burns into the body slightly, thus altering colour. Then the object is immediately plunged into cold water to shock-cool it. It is possible to leave the pots in the water or to take them out after approximately 30 seconds and leave them to cool on a level surface.

Nowadays, pots made like this are no longer used for practical purposes but as decorative or artistic items. Colleagues like Marcia Selsor, Jane Jermyn, Janice Chassier, Chad Dykstra and José Ramos will certainly help to keep this ancient technique alive.

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