

Ceramic Arts Daily Lesson Plan

Pennsylvania Redware

by Denise Wilz. Photos by Lisa Short

Goals

- Research historical Pennsylvania German folk art decorative motifs and pottery forms. Learn the symbolism behind the different motifs, and the uses for specific vessels. Research specific potteries, and take notes on different artistic styles or innovations that interest you.
- Learn to create these motifs using *sgraffito* and *slip trailing* techniques on hand-built red earthenware clay.
- Use slump and drape molds to create bowl or plate forms.
- Design your own motifs in the style of Pennsylvania German folk art and depict either a narrative or a decorative pattern on a set of handbuilt plates or platters, bowls, mugs or other vessels.

Background

Pennsylvania German folk art has characteristic and often used representations of hearts, tulips, birds and the flower urn. And while the Pennsylvania German potters made mostly plain functional ware with local red earthenware clay, the slip-decorated pieces have a beautiful rich red-and-yellow coloring.

There are basically two styles of decorated Pennsylvania Redware: *sgraffito* ware and slipware. For ideas to use for decoration, I find inspiration in the Pennsylvania German decorative arts, such as antique redware, *fraktur* and painted furniture to name just a few sources.

Suggested Reading

Tulip Ware of the Pennsylvania-German Potters

by Edwin Atlee Barber

Folk Art of Rural Pennsylvania

by Frances Lichten

Early Pennsylvania Arts and Crafts

by John Joseph Stoudt

Pennsylvania Pottery—Tools and Processes

published by the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

For more information visit the Pennsylvania German Society website at <http://www.pgs.org>



Pennsylvania Redware platter, 12 inches in length. The design was created using a *sgraffito* technique then bisque fired to cone 04. Selected areas were then glazed with a green copper oxide glaze then overglazed with a commercial clear glaze and fired to cone 06 in an electric kiln.

Terms

- *Sgraffito* is a decorative technique where an image or pattern is scratched through a layer of contrasting slip in the leather hard stage, revealing the clay body beneath.
- *Slip trailing* refers to a surface decoration technique where engobes or slips are applied to the surface in thin to thick lines using a fine pointed dispenser such as a rubber syringe or a commercially produced slip trailing bottle with different sized metal tips.
- *Coggle wheel/ roulette* Small stamp wheel with raised pattern around the rim, which when rolled along a plastic clay surface leaves a band of relief pattern. Usually formed with damp or dry clay and bisque-fired.

Sgraffito Ware

To begin, roll out a slab of clay large enough for your mold (*figure 1*). For this plate I rolled the clay $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch thick using $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch dowel rods on each side of the clay as guides.

To create different-size circles, use a disc cutter that has an arm with multiple holes. Place a needle

tool in the appropriate hole, then swing the arm in a circle to cut the clay (*figure 2*). Lightly wipe the clay with a damp sponge to smooth the surface.

Center the mold upside-down on the clay circle (*figure 3*) and carefully flip everything over, using the interfacing or a ware board to aid you. Avoid bending the clay in the opposite direction. Press the clay to the mold with your hands (*figure 4*); and paddle the clay down as well (*figure 5*). Smooth and press the clay to the mold by wiping the surface with a damp sponge, then allow to dry to leather-hard.

The Pennsylvania German potters used upside down bowl-shaped molds carved from wood with a foot underneath, which resembled a mushroom. My drape molds are made of bisque-fired earthenware and I use bowls that I buy to serve as slump molds.

Remove from the mold and place the leather-hard form upright on your work surface or banding wheel. Apply slip with a 2-inch hake brush (*figure 6*). Brush on two or three thin even coats of slip, making sure the red clay cannot be seen through the surface. Clean the edge of excess slip and use a coggle wheel to decorate the edge (*figure 7*).

Allow the slip to dry to leather-hard before you begin the sgraffito process. I use a calligraphy pen with a rounded scratch nib and a stylus for my sgraffito work. Deciding when to sgraffito the piece depends on how wet you like the slip. I prefer a leather-hard surface but some potters prefer to sgraffito right after the slip has been applied and others like to sgraffito when the slip is bone dry.

You can use other tools like a wire-loop tool, sharpened stick or even a pencil in a pinch. As for getting the design onto the plate, it can be free-handed with your sgraffito tool, drawn directly on the slip with a pencil or transferred using tracing paper. To use tracing paper, first draw the design onto the paper, making sure it will fit the size of the plate you are making. Center the design on the plate and lightly draw over the design with a stylus or pencil (*figure 8*) to leave a slight indentation in the slip as a guide. Then use the sgraffito tool you prefer to scratch the design into the slip revealing the red earthenware beneath (*figure 9*).

The Pennsylvania German potters applied the glaze directly to the green ware and once-fired the work in a wood-fired kiln. There's a lower loss rate if you bisque fire first to cone 04, apply a clear

glaze then glaze fire to cone 06.

Slip Trailing

Another form of Pennsylvania redware consists of red earthenware decorated with lines and dots of slip. Create a form using the same techniques as described above. To make an especially smooth surface to work on, lightly wipe the clay with a damp sponge (*figure 10*). Use a slip cup (see box at left) to draw the design onto the plate (*figure 11*).

I find that standing to decorate slipware allows me to move my entire body with the motion of the slip cup across the plate resulting in nice smooth flowing lines. Of course you can use as many straws as you want in your slip cup. For dots and single lines, I use a plastic squeeze bottle (*figure 12*). The Pennsylvania German potters made their slip cups from small pots that were thrown or pinched with quills inserted as the straws. I've tried making my own clay slip cups but have yet to successfully get the slip to flow out of the quills well evenly enough to look nice, but I'll keep trying.

Allow the slip to dry to the touch then press the slip into the red earthenware with the batter or rolling pin, wiping the tool after each use in case some slip remained on it (*figure 13*). Clean the edge of the plate to remove any slip that has dripped over the side and then decorate the edge with the coggle wheel (*figure 14*).

Next, mold the clay by centering the mold upside-down on the clay circle and carefully flip everything over. Press the clay to the mold with your hands; use a batter to tamp the clay down as well. Wipe the surface with a damp sponge to smooth and press the clay to the mold. Remove the plate from the mold when it is leather-hard.

Glazing

The leaded glazes the Pennsylvania German potters used gave the slip a yellowish tint that ranged from almost white to a deep yellow/orange. Today most potters avoid lead glazes due to the dangers of lead poisoning. Instead, you can safely emulate the yellowish tint by staining the slip, or by tinting a transparent glaze with rutile, iron oxide or stains. And there are potters today who continue the tradition of wood-firing lead-glazed ware. You'll need to experiment to get the look you like.

Denise Wilz is a self-taught redware potter living in Green Lane, Pennsylvania, and a member of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen. For questions or comments or to view her work visit www.wilzpottery.com.





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The Tools

Tools for making Pennsylvania Redware haven't changed much over the centuries. They consisted of a rolling pin, disc cutter and nail, brushes, a sharpened stick for sgraffito, slip cup for slip-trailing, batter, coggle wheel, wooden molds, lead glaze and a wood-fired kiln. Additional glaze colorants included copper oxide for green and manganese for brown/black. And those proficient with throwing used a potter's wheel to create complementary ware and both thrown and handbuilt pieces could be decorated using the same techniques.

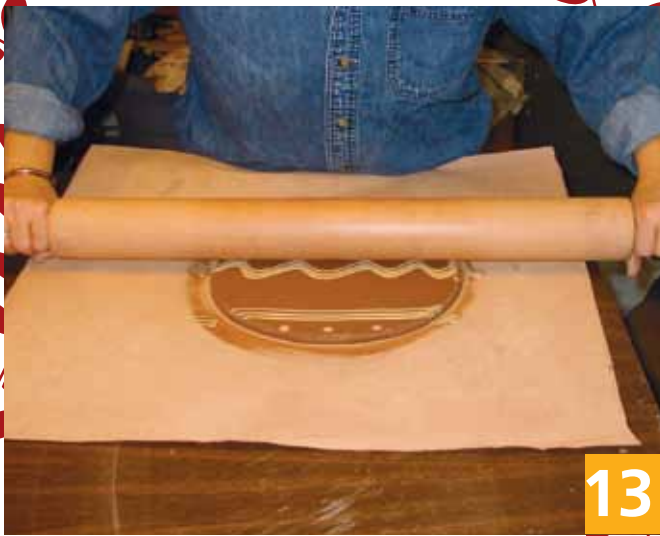
In today's world, we use lead-free glazes, electric kilns and plaster or bisque molds. And the availability of commercial glazes, clays and stains makes it possible to get consistent results.



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The Slip Cup

For multiple lines I use a small plastic container with a tight fitting lid. I cut three small-diameter drinking straws to about 2 inches in length, and insert them in a straight line approximately 1 inch from the top, with about 1/4 inch of the straw inside the container. I apply glue around each hole to seal it and tape the straws together on the outside so they are always the same distance apart, otherwise they'll move while you're using it. Trim the outside straw ends so they're all the same length.

Fill the container with slip that is thin enough to pour from the straws but not too fast. Replace the lid and test the consistency. Make straight and/or wavy lines since both of these designs have been found on antique plates.



An example of slip-trailed redware done in the Pennsylvania German Pottery tradition.