

CLAY : HISTORY



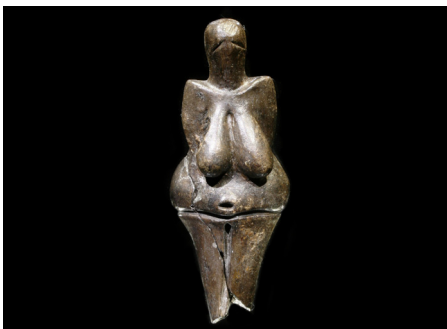
FUN FACTS ABOUT CLAY HISTORY AND TRADITIONS • Clay is one of the most universal materials known to humans. Throughout history and around the world, people have manipulated clay to make ceramic objects also known as pottery. Here are some things you might find interesting.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Pottery oven in Nová budova Národního muzea Prague



Pottery fragments found out walking in Frijoles Canyon. Chris Light

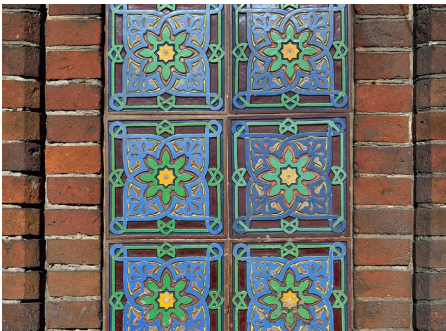


Venus of Dolní Věstonice. Courtesy of Petr Novák, Wikipedia

- Clay is made up of two ingredients, water and earth. It can be shaped into various forms by either hands or tools. Once it is formed, high levels of heat harden it to create a sturdy ceramic object.
- Early pottery was heated by the sun or a fire; later potters developed special ovens called *kilns* (600–1600 °C) to control the firing conditions.
- Early civilizations utilized clay objects for storage, cooking, personal adornment, and objects valued for their beauty.
- There is evidence that clay was used in pottery and functional objects dating back to the Neolithic period, around 9000 BCE.
- Clay has played a crucial role in record-keeping and has served as a medium for artistic expression, cultural identity, and in spiritual rituals across cultures.
- Fired pottery can last for thousands of years, and because of this, ceramics are an important source of information for historians and archaeologists.
- Pieces of ceramics (pottery shards) found in the earth can inform us about ancient cultures and the lives of those who lived in the past.
- The oldest known ceramic artifact is dated as early as 28,000 BCE, of the Paleolithic period. Found in what is now the Czech Republic, it is named the *Venus of Dolní Věstonice* and is an example of the small sculptures of the female form known as Venus figurines.
- The tradition of creating small and large figures of the human form out of clay for use in religious and civic ceremonies as well as for decorative purposes is one that continues through our present time.



Used earthenware pottery for sale in a thriftstore in Vadstena, Sweden



Moscow. The Lopatina House. A fragment of the façade: a decorative ceramic panel with tiles by Semyon Maslennikov.



Potter's wheel. Courtesy of Snehrashmi



Cuneiform tablet: administrative account concerning the distribution of barley and emmer. Purchase, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gift, 1988, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

- Originally used to line baskets for cooking and storage, clay was shaped and dried, and eventually fired to create durable, water-resistant containers.
- The use of ceramics increased during the Neolithic period with the establishment of settled communities. By 14,000 BCE, clay was used for making pottery. Clay-based pots of various sizes functioned as containers for water and food.
- Here again, the tradition of creating pots out of clay for daily use continues today. In most homes, we find clay objects used for dinnerware, cookware, flowerpots, and other functions.
- Before industrialization and mass production, every community had at least one town or village potter—one who created the functional pots for use in their neighbors' homes. In many cultures of the past, and even now, skills in working with clay were passed down through generations.
- Early uses of clay included the production of objects used in construction such as tiles and bricks—another tradition that continues in today's building industry.
- Unfired clay tablets were used for writing and record-keeping, such as those used for cuneiform script around 3000 BCE.
- In various configurations, ceramic beads also were used for record-keeping and counting, as well as bartering material and personal adornment.
- The tradition of bead making continues so that today we find clay beads in a variety of contexts, but mostly in the form of jewelry or other forms of adornment.
- One of the breakthroughs in ceramics was the invention of the wheel in 3500 BCE. The introduction of the wheel-forming technique allowed the production of artifacts with radial symmetry, as well as pots with thinner walls and perfectly round bowls—surfaces suited to painting and decoration.
- In Mesopotamia, Babylon, and later in the Americas, clay was used for creating pots that depicted stories and myths, often used in ceremonies and cultural rituals.
- Using the clay surface of pots of all sizes and shapes for telling stories is a tradition that included the ancient Greek urns decorated with elaborately painted scenes with clay slip.
- As you look around for examples of clay pots today, you will undoubtedly find that the storytelling and decorative traditions have stayed with us over the centuries.

POTTERY TYPES



Tin-glazed earthenware bowl with a Horseman Spearing a Serpent. Late 1300s or early 1400s. Málaga, Spain. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of George Blumenthal, 1941.



Stoneware jar by Anna Pottery, 1873, United States. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. James M. Myers Gift and Rogers Fund, by exchange, 2014



Openwork jar with peonies, late 18th–early 19th century, Korea. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Michael B. Kim and Kyung Ah Park Gift, 2024

Pottery is traditionally divided into three types: earthenware, stoneware and porcelain. All three may be glazed and unglazed. All may also be decorated by various techniques.

EARTHENWARE is glazed or unglazed and is usually fired below 1,200 °C. Basic earthenware, often called terracotta (red-colored earthenware), absorbs liquids such as water. However, earthenware can be made impervious to liquids by coating it with a ceramic glaze (a glassy coating on ceramics, used for decoration, to ensure the item is impermeable to liquids). The glaze process is used for a majority of modern domestic earthenware.

STONEWARE is a broad class of pottery fired at a relatively high temperature (to 1,300 °C), to be impervious to water. It is usually colored grey or brownish because of impurities in the clay, and is normally glazed. It differs from porcelain because it is more opaque. Stoneware is often used for tableware or art ware. American stoneware was the predominant houseware of 19th century North America.

PORCELAIN, also called china, is fired/heated between 1,200 and 1,400 °C. Porcelain has greater strength and translucence, relative to other types of pottery. Porcelain is often used for tableware, decorative ware such as figurines as well as in technology products and industry/laboratory ware. The manufacturing process used for porcelain is similar to that used for earthenware and stoneware, although it can be more challenging to produce. It has usually been regarded as the most prestigious type of pottery due to its delicacy, strength, and high degree of whiteness. It is frequently both glazed and decorated.

Historic pottery of all these types is often grouped as either “fine” wares, relatively expensive and well-made, and following the aesthetic taste of the culture concerned, or alternatively “coarse”, “popular”, “folk” or “village” wares, mostly undecorated, or, and often less well-made.

The tradition of using clay continues today in everything from everyday ceramics to industrial applications like electrical insulators, and even in skincare and health.