

David Roberts

A Passion

for Raku

by Tim Saunders

Making large, controlled, coil-built and raku fired pots is David Roberts' specialty. This distinguished, British-born potter was instrumental in introducing contemporary, unglazed and large-scale raku in the UK and he established this modern interpretation of a 16th-century Japanese process in Britain as a viable and serious contemporary ceramic discipline. For the best part of 50 years, he has been tinkering and improving it, garnering him a reputation as a master of painting with smoke, which also happens to be the title of his successful book, now in its second edition.

"I am trying to transform a long ceramic tradition into a vibrant and contemporary art form relevant to the 21st century," Roberts explains in his straight-talking Yorkshire accent. Even in the very early pieces, he felt that painting with smoke (also called

naked raku) had more potential as an expressive mark-making activity than conventional glazed raku. "Over time, my intuition has proved correct; subsequent experience has proved this process to be ongoing, developmental, flexible, and dynamic."

Mark Making and Landscapes

Roberts' typical monthly output is four pieces, each fired twice. The first is a bisque firing, which ranges between 1868–1922°F (1020–1050°C). Once it cools, Roberts decorates with slips and glazes, which can take days, in readiness for that second firing. For years, he was a cross-country runner, and he is fascinated by the lines in the landscape, which are reflected in his designs created by directing the delicate lines and bands of smoke.





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1 *Large Whirlpool*, 17½ in. (45 cm) in diameter, 2019. 2 *Fractured Landscape*, 19½ in. (50 cm) in height, 2012. 3 David Roberts coil-building in the studio. Photo: David Fulford.

He is inspired by two American abstract expressionists, Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). Newman’s *Zip* paintings in particular fostered an endearing sense of recognition that opened up the whole area of mark making for Roberts.

A slip is poured over the piece, which then dries. “This liquid slip is very important,” Roberts explains. “It separates the clay from the next surface. Once that slip is dry, a simple raku glaze is added that’s then allowed to dry. I can then either leave it like that or start inscribing linear patterns. When that’s done, the piece is placed inside a raku kiln.”

Roberts’ work is large and simple, and compared to throwing, handbuilding is much more user-friendly for him. “If you’re throwing, you make a lot of stuff and have to quickly finish what you’re doing,” he observes. “There has to be an infrastructure; shelving, drying, etc., and it wasn’t well suited to me. So I started coiling and absolutely love the process. I like the slowness. It’s very contemplative, and I like the sense of volume. It’s like a balloon being inflated; the inside being pushed out. I’ve developed my own process and my work is certainly idiosyncratic.”

Becoming an Abstract Landscape Artist with Raku

Roberts’ decoration is a dramatic monochrome black-and-white linear pattern with crackle lines. Black spots are created by the control of the smoking process, which stains the ceramic surface. Sometimes the linear patterns are positioned vertically, horizontally, or at diagonals. For this reason he considers himself more of an abstract landscape artist.

Roberts’ favorite forms are open bowls because they allow the addition of detail. “There’s a lot of work that goes on the inside. It’s not just a plain blank surface, but there’s lots of internal decoration,” he explains, adding that he’s surprised many potters leave the insides blank. “I treat the bases and the insides with the same care as the vessels’ exteriors, enjoying the frisson from paying attention to these things.”

The raku firing process is one of Roberts’ great enjoyments in life, and yet it takes just 30 minutes at low temperature to complete a firing. “There’s a mix of measurement and judgment,” he reveals. “I use a lot of measurement to make sure that the kiln is heating at the right rate, and I’m leaving the pot in long enough for the glaze

to melt evenly, just like baking a loaf. Deciding when to withdraw the pot and stop the firing is very much a judgmental one. Each pot is fired individually. The firing cycle depends on the size and form of the pot. For example, an open bowl form is fired slower to allow its inside [glaze] to melt simultaneously with the exterior. This is because the exterior is exposed to the actual flame of the burners, which heat up the kiln.”

Being Involved in the Process

The fluxes in these low-fired glazes are powerful and they melt rapidly, he says. “Wearing goggles, I look at the piece being fired and through a spy hole shine a torch on its surface where I can easily see the glaze melting. I’m physically involved with the process; not just putting it in a kiln and controlling the temperature with a pyrometer. It’s a very similar approach to wood firing and salt glazing; both processes rely on controlling fire and smoke.”

The low-temperature glaze melts and Roberts removes the piece from the kiln when still hot. “This can be done with metal

tongs, but I prefer heat-proof gloves,” he explains. “The piece is then placed in a combustible inside a container. That container is then sealed with a lid. The piece is red hot and it sets the material (paper, straw or different types of sawdust) off. It starts flaming.”

Replacing the lid starves the fire of oxygen, creating smoke. “That smoke penetrates any kind of mark on the glaze and bleeds into the clay body,” he says. “When all the smoke has disappeared and it has cooled, the piece is removed. The liquid clay [slip] barrier between the glaze and the body of the vessel results in the glaze and the slip just shelling off; like peeling an egg. Dust and an unpleasant surface remains. This is cleaned off with a microfiber cloth and a drop of water.” Subsequently a wonderful black-and-white graphic pattern is revealed. Interestingly, Roberts’ work is not about color, but tones of black and white.

His own glaze is produced using commercial raw materials from Stoke-on-Trent. “It is just three substances; one is a low-temperature glaze frit, the other is a small proportion of china clay to help with the adhesion and suspension. Both are mixed with differing





4 *Fractured Swirl*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, 2021. 5 *Eroded Whirlpool*, 12½ in (32 cm) in diameter, 2020. 6 *Eroded Whirlpool* (interior view).



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proportions of water, depending on the required final result. The materials are simple, but the process is quite complex.”

Initially his pieces were covered with rich crackle and copper-colored glazes, but by the early 1980s, he had become frustrated with their limitations and began experimenting with non-glazed raku surfaces. “Unbeknown to me, several other potters in America and Europe were also investigating variations on this process. It took several years to understand exactly what I was doing. I knew there was potential there and felt this was something I could develop.”

Finding a Passion for Clay

Known for his vessels and bowls, Roberts began his studies as an art teacher at Bretton Hall in West Yorkshire focusing on different media entirely. “Originally, I was going to train in two-dimensional painting and printmaking, which I did for a year. Then we needed to choose a subsidiary subject.” It was 1967, and Roberts did not know what to do, but soon discovered the ceramics department. “As soon as I started, I thought that clay was the most wonderful thing; the most interesting and responsive material, so I never returned to the painting studio.”



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7 *Black Swirl*, 14½ in. (37 cm) in diameter, 2021.

It wasn't long before he would become bad tempered if he was not making pottery, and fortunately he became a pottery teacher. "I moved down to Hatfield, Hertfordshire, and used to bring home clay and work on the kitchen table. I'd sneak it into school and use their kiln to fire it." He soon needed his own studio and, with his wife Jan, discovered that they could afford a dilapidated property and barn in Holmfirth, near Huddersfield, where they have been ever since.

While working as a full-time pottery and three-dimensional art teacher at Holmfirth High School, Roberts carried on making pots in his spare time. By the early 1980s, he applied for a part-time position as ceramics teacher at Batley School of Art and was offered the job, where he remained until 1999, when he became a full-time potter. When discussing this transition, he explains, "My pots were selling and I ran workshops,

DAVID ROBERTS

After college, taught at Holmfirth High School.

1970s

Taught ceramics at Batley School of Art. Encountered American raku ceramics.

early 1980s

Pioneered large-scale raku work in the UK.

mid 1980s

Contributed to international development of painting with smoke (naked raku).

late 1980s

1994

TIME LINE

early 1980s
Vessel, raku fired.

ca. 1985
Large white vessels, to (60cm) in height. Photo: Monty Rakusen.

late 1980s
Large white vessel, 22 in. (56 cm) in length.

ca. 1985
Bowl, 19½ in. (50cm) in diameter. Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.

ca. 1985
Large trefoil bowl, 23½ in. (60 cm) in diameter. Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.

so we could replace my income. I've been supported all along by Jan, and we run the workshops together."

An Honorary Fellow of the Craft Potters Association of Great Britain, Roberts is an exhibiting member of Contemporary Applied Arts and a member of the International Academy of Ceramics. His work is represented in many public and private collections internationally and can be found in private and public collections in Europe and America. You can see more of his work at www.davidroberts-ceramics.com.

Photos: David Roberts unless otherwise stated.

the author *British journalist Tim Saunders writes about subjects including art, travel, and motoring. He is also an amateur potter and artist. For more information: <http://tasaunders.weebly.com>.*



8 *Ripple*, 12½ in. (32 cm) in diameter, 2020.



Monumental vessel, 23½ in. (60 cm) in height. *Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.*

1995



Large vessel with lines, 23 in. (58 cm) in height. *Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.*

early 2000s



Large eroded vessel, 18 in. (46 cm) in length.

2018

late 1990s

Vessels with ellipses, 11 ft. (3.4 m) in height. *Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.*



1999

Started working full time as a potter.

2010

Weeping landscape, 17¾ in. (45 cm) in height. *Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones.*



2021

Large swirl, 19½ in. (50 cm) in height.

