

Glossary of Ceramic Terms

ATS 101 – Foundations of Ceramics

Common Terms

- **Clay**

Clay is a natural material made from fine-grained minerals that can be molded when wet and hardened when fired.

Example: Clay is the main 'ingredient' used to create pottery.

- **Fired**

The process of heating clay in a kiln at high temperatures to harden it permanently. Firing transforms the clay from a soft, fragile material into a durable ceramic.

Example: After the bowl was fired in the kiln, it became strong enough to be used every day.

- **Kiln**

A kiln is a specialized “oven” used to fire clay pieces at high temperatures, making them durable and vitrified.

Example: After shaping the clay, we place it in the electric kiln to be fired.

- **Bisque**

Bisque refers to clay that has been fired once, to a mid to low temperature, but has not yet been glazed, making it porous.

Example: The bisque pieces are ready for glazing once they are cooled.

- **Vitrified**

When clay is fired at a high temperature and becomes glass-like, hard, and non-porous.

Example: After the final glaze firing, the stoneware is fully vitrified and safe to use for food or drink.

- **Compression**

The process of pressing and smoothing clay to align particles, strengthen the form, and prevent cracks — especially in slabs or wheel-thrown bases.

Example: She compressed the slab with a rib tool to help prevent warping during drying and firing.

- **Scoring**

Scratching the surface of clay to create texture before joining two pieces together. It helps the pieces bond more securely when slip is applied.

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Example: She scored the edges of the clay slab before attaching the wall to the base, ensuring a strong connection.

Studio Tools

- **Burnish**

To polish the surface of clay using a smooth object (like a stone or spoon) to create a soft sheen before firing.

Example: Before bisque firing, she burnished the surface of her vessel to give it a natural shine without glaze.

- **Ribs**

Ribs are flat tools made of wood, metal, or plastic, used to shape and smooth clay surfaces.

Example: I used a rib to smooth the edges of my clay pot.

- **Needle Tool**

A needle tool is a sharp instrument used for cutting, carving, and adding details to clay.

Example: I used the needle tool to create patterns on my clay piece.

- **Rolling Table**

A large, flat work surface used for rolling out clay slabs evenly. Some rolling tables have built-in rollers or canvas tops to prevent sticking.

Example: She used the rolling table to flatten her clay before cutting out tile shapes.

- **Sponge**

A sponge is a soft tool used for smoothing and adding moisture to clay surfaces.

Example: After shaping the clay, I used a sponge to smooth out the surface.

- **Paddle**

A flat wooden tool used to shape, compress, or smooth clay surfaces by gently tapping or pressing.

Example: He used a paddle to refine the curve of his coil-built pot without distorting the form.

- **Wire Tool**

A thin, flexible wire with handles on each end, used to cut clay from blocks or to slice through finished forms for removal or shaping.

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Example: She used a wire tool to cut a chunk from the block of clay and to cleanly remove her pot from the potter's wheel.

Studio Materials

- **Earthenware**

Earthenware is a type of clay that is fired at low temperatures and is often porous and colorful.

Example: The bright colors of earthenware make it a popular choice for decorative pottery.

- **Stoneware**

Stoneware is a durable clay that is fired at higher temperatures, making it strong and non-porous.

Example: Stoneware is often used for functional items like dishes and mugs.

- **Porcelain**

Porcelain is a fine, white clay known for its strength and translucency, often used for delicate items.

Example: The delicate porcelain vase is perfect for displaying flowers.

- **Underglaze**

Underglaze is a colored slip used to decorate pottery before a clear glaze is applied.

Example: I painted flowers with underglaze before glazing my bowl.

- **Glaze**

Glaze is a liquid coating applied to pottery that transforms into a glass-like surface after firing.

Example: We apply glaze to our mugs to add color and a shiny finish.

- **Slip**

Slip is a mixture of clay and water that is used as a glue to join pieces of clay together.

Example: Slip is used to attach two pieces of clay to form a handle and for decoration.

This glossary provides foundational vocabulary for beginner ceramics students, facilitating their understanding and engagement in the studio environment.