

Women Potters, Part 4.

Judith Fisher

by Joan Witham

'Raku, 'happiness through chance' is a process discovered in sixteenth century Japan. Probably no other technique in the making of pottery is so exciting, so amazing, so filled with magical qualities whilst at the same time so fraught with possible disappointments.

It is a process in which flame and smoke affect glazes and slips containing copper oxide to produce a wide range of colours from sombre black and grey to glowing pink, turquoise, mauve and gold. Once the fire and smoke are active it is all out of the potter's control.'



1. Judith Fisher. Raku firing in her garden.

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*Incised mark
of Judith
Fisher*

Judith Fisher trained at Brighton College of Art from 1958 to 1962, obtaining a National Diploma of Design in Illustration, following this with a one-year art Teacher's Course at Goldsmith College, London.

This second course introduced her to ceramics and her interest in tangible three-dimensional objects was instantly engaged. It increased as she taught for a year in a secondary school and then worked with students in pottery evening classes. The first step towards a career in ceramics started with the purchase of a small electric kiln in which she fired her handmade ashtrays and rather crudely constructed pendants, which were so fashionable in the 1960s. Selling these around the shops in London and Brighton she saved enough to buy a potter's wheel and taught herself to throw.

At that time books on making pottery were hard to find but the discovery of Bernard

Leach's 'Potters Book' not only informed and inspired her generally but also introduced her to Raku making in Japan. Judith realised that she needed practical experience so joined with other potters on Raku courses and explored at first hand different methods of building special kilns, glazing, firing and reduction (reducing the oxygen). Inspired to build and fire her first Raku kiln she constructed one from house bricks and bought a load of wood from a building site. Unfortunately this wood had been heated with a fire retardant and she wasted a whole day trying to get the kiln fired to the required temperature. Undeterred, Judith continued to experiment and became committed to producing Raku pottery professionally. Since the firing process necessarily involves a great deal of smoke from burning wood and smouldering sawdust, likely to annoy neighbours it was important to have a fairly isolated site with plenty of space and scope to fire outside. Judith moved from Brighton to the Sussex countryside in 1986.

Whilst learning to make Raku she was also involved in producing stoneware and porcelain lustre bowls (photograph 2) and vases. She also developed a process, which she had seen in Tunisian villages of cutting leather-hard clay pots and dishes (photograph 3). She continued to make porcelain, alternating between Raku 70% and porcelain, 30% finding that coming back from one to the other she is revitalised and acquires new insights, ideas and enthusiasm.

The process of Raku is as follows :

1. A pot, which has been biscuit fired, is dipped in a Raku glaze. Judith mixes her own which is a copper matt slip glaze. She formerly used a shiny crackle glaze (photograph 6) but now prefers a malt glaze. (photograph 8)
2. Any decorative material such as leaves, bracken or torn and cut paper shapes are pressed into leather hard clay to leave a 'fossilised' impression. These may be removed before firing or will burn away. (Photograph 10)



2. Lustre glazed porcelain bowl. Height 8cm. 1975 - 1990.



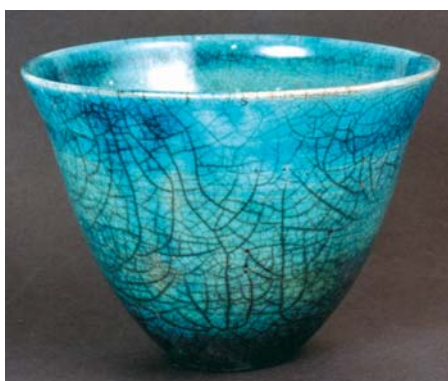
3. 'Splash' dish carved and pierced. Diameter 20cm. 1975 - 1990.



4. Agate-ware bowl. (clays of different colours, thrown on the wheel produce natural spiral patterns) 1989 - 1999. £24.



5. Early Raku vases, bronze/green shining glaze. Tallest 19cm. 1989.



6. Crackle glaze Raku bowl. Height 10 cm. 1989.



7. Raku vase with unglazed stripe. Height 20cm. 1989.



8. Raku vases. Heights 13cm to 22cm. 1990 - present day. £34 - £48 each.



9. Raku round pot. Height 11cm. 1990 - present day. £30.



10. Raku round pot. Height 11cm. 1990 - present day. £30 each.



11. White porcelain pots, Raku fired with a resist glaze, veining and carbon marks. Height 11cm. 1990 - present day. £30 each.

3. Two pots at a time are placed in a hot kiln fired by propane gas. The temperature is quickly raised to 900° for about ten minutes until the pots glow red-hot.

4. The kiln lid is removed, they are lifted out with long tongs and placed on a bed of sawdust, which smoulders and burns. Extra sawdust sprinkled around ensures good combustion. A tin can placed over the pots encloses the heat and reduces the amount of oxygen to the copper oxide glaze. Colours are thus produced and smoke whirling and flames licking around the wares form patterns. (photograph 9)

5. Emerging colours may be fixed with a spray of water but will fix anyway if left longer in the air. The whole procedure for a biscuit fired pot takes 3/4 hour.

Judith has used a variety of clays; now she uses a coarse-textured body, which is sometimes alternated with a smooth porcelain. Whatever the clay, it must withstand the rapid expansion and contraction inherent in Raku making. Results from a firing are unpredictable and there are frustrations and disappointments when pots break or emerge with rather dreary shades. Through constant experiments she has reduced her failure rate, "just playing around with clay and learning from mistakes". One example is a successful finish which emerged when she dipped a pot in the wrong bucket of glaze. The glaze peels away after the Raku firing leaving the porcelain body with carbonised marks and veins. (see photograph 11) The excitement of Raku comes from its elusive qualities. "One must take the disappointments with the delights".

Judith's work is sold in galleries currently in Chichester, Eastbourne, Totnes and Kuwait. She exhibits at high quality events such as Art in Action at Waterperry near Oxford. As a member of the Sussex Guild where a high standard of work is promoted, she exhibits in public galleries such as Brighton and Worthing Museums and also shows her work in Open Houses during the annual Brighton Festival. Recently photographs and an article on her Raku were published in the Chinese potters' newspaper, printed in Beijing. She was accepted as a professional member of the Craft Potters Association in 1991. Asked how she evaluates a good pot she describes the necessary association of form, colour, texture and pattern, which must all be in harmony.

"I also like to be aware that a pot has been made by hand and see the signs of fire and other processes through which it has travelled. Sometimes Raku pots show surface marks from the tongs. I regard these as signs of the history of its making rather than blemishes".

Acknowledgements to Judith Fisher and to Nicholas Sinclair for photographs 6, 7 & 11. Her studio is at Huntswood, St Helena Lane, Streat, near Hassocks, Sussex. To see her work please telephone 01273 890088.