

Burnishing



TINA VLASSOPULOS OFFERS HINTS AND TIPS.

Clay is a marvellous medium to work with as it can adapt and suit all personalities. For someone like me, who neither likes being an extension of a machine nor enjoys anything scientific, handbuilding and burnishing are the perfect techniques to use. While my primary concern is the concept behind a piece, the aesthetics of the form and the tactile qualities of burnished clay are crucial. The gentle pressure marks created by the burnishing tools and the tonal variations that result give the finished piece depth and highlight the shadowy hand of the potter – it's a very pleasing and sensual surface.

Although burnishing is a very time-consuming technique, there is a considerable advantage: it allows precious time to contemplate and explore new ideas. The rhythmical movements of burnishing, and the physical control needed to achieve a finished piece without any mishaps, are balanced by the delightfully free technique of handbuilding, which is full of endless possibilities.

I use Earthstone Original Clay, fired to 920°C.

TIPS AND HINTS

- Burnishing is the technique of polishing clay to produce a sheen. It is not practical for functional pots as the surface is still porous after firing.
- It works by compressing and aligning the particles on the surface of the pot, creating a dense and reflective surface.
- The higher the temperature, the less sheen (I fire to 920°C).
- Even though it is only fired to bisque temperatures, burnishing makes the clay stronger, and once fired, the pot will have a nice ring.
- The smoother the surface of the pot, the better it is to burnish. So before you start burnishing, scrape the surface of your pot with a metal kidney and smooth it all over with wooden ribs.
- Burnishing tools need to be smooth, hard, and easy to hold. Metal spoons or smooth polished stones work well.
- Use a piece of foam or sponge covered with a soft plastic bag to support your pot while you burnish it.
- Start burnishing when the clay is leatherhard.
- Begin with the rim as it dries the fastest.
- Burnish with circular movements or up and down in close parallel strokes, covering the whole surface evenly.
- Be careful not to nick or scratch the surface of the pot while burnishing.
- For a good sheen, burnish all over at least four times, continuing as the pot gets drier. I burnish each pot once all over, for four consecutive days.
- Do not let the pot dry out completely.
- Moisture will ruin the burnish. If you cover the pot between burnishing times, make sure that the plastic bag you use doesn't touch the pot as any condensation that falls onto it will ruin its surface.
- After burnishing has been completed, you can get an even higher gloss by polishing the surface with a piece of plastic bag. I use a very soft plastic, which doesn't scratch the surface.

1 Tina Vlassopoulos – *Trio*, burnished stoneware, 2013, H30cm max
Photography Mike Abrahams

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1 Metal kidneys, surform blades, and a kitchen scourer used for cleaning up the pot.



2 Scraping the pot with a surform blade and then a metal kidney.



3 Finishing the rim with a kitchen scourer.



4 Wooden ribs and tools used for smoothing the surface of the pot.



5 Smoothing with a wooden rib.



6 Burnishing tools: different tools are used to burnish different parts of the pot.



7 Burnishing the base with the handle of a metal spoon. Get into the nooks and crannies with a 'bone' tool.



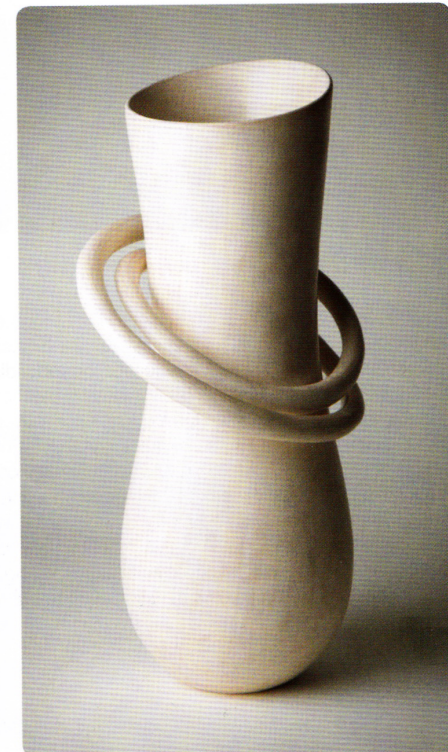
8 Using the back of a spoon while the pot rests on a piece of foam covered in a plastic bag.



9 The pot is kept covered with a loose plastic bag between burnishing.



10 Final polishing with a plastic bag. The pot is left to dry, and then fired to 920°C.



11 Final piece. *Encircle*, burnished stoneware, 2013, H39cm.