

Firing Tips

LOADING A KILN FOR BEST RESULTS

Loading a kiln for firing is not a simple matter of placing shelves and stacking ware. The more thought and planning that is put into loading, the better the results. Ware and shelf placement, the size of the load, the firing characteristics of the kiln and the type of ware being firing are all important factors.

First the Furniture

Kiln shelves come in all shapes and sizes. For economy of space, it is best to choose shelves similar in shape and size to your kiln chamber. For instance, use a round or multi-sided shelf in a round or multi-sided kiln. Keep the size small enough so there is at least 1" of space between the shelf edge and the side of the kiln or the Kiln-Sitter®. Also allow some room between the top of your ware and the lid of the kiln and leave space for witness cones amongst your ware.

Select posts in heights to accommodate the ware you are firing. Leave some room between the kiln shelves for air to flow, for heat transfer and for removal of fumes.

Half shelves are very useful to improve

air movement in the kiln. Use two side by side with a 1/2" space between them and you don't lose much stacking space.

Some kiln manufacturers recommend placing shelves directly on the floor of the kiln. Most suggest using 1" posts to put the bottom up from the cooler floor. This creates an insulating layer much like a storm door.

Setters and Stilts

Air movement in the kiln is clearly a big consideration - one of the most important when loading a kiln. Ceramics need to heat uniformly to prevent warping and stresses in the ware. Air needs to move around shelves and around individual pieces.

Plates and tiles benefit from the use of tile and plate setters or stackers. Shelf-style setters allow air to move under the large flat objects so they heat more evenly. Avoid heating large flat objects directly on the cooler shelf. If you are firing decorated tiles or plates, vertical setters economize on space, and sets can be stacked to fit even more.

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Glazed ware needs to be stilted or dry footed or the melting glaze will stick the ware to the kiln shelf, ruining both. Stilts also provide space for air to move around all sides of the ware. Porcelain and stoneware can not be stilted. The stilts embed into the ware during firing. Instead, use high fire kiln wash or silica sand on the shelf. Use prop to prevent sagging of porcelain.

Consider Heat Distribution

It is important to evaluate heat flow in your kiln and to make this a consideration in loading. Use pyrometric cones to determine the heating characteristics of your kiln so you know where the hot and cooler places are. Arrange your ware with different sized pieces on the same shelf to allow better heat flow.

Don't Overfill

Perhaps one of the most important factors in good fired results is enough air to mature the ware - to burn out organics in bisque and develop best colors in glazes. Shelf and ware placement and the use of setters and stilts can all help this, but here are a couple more tips:

1. When stacking bisque, invert bowls and mugs opening to opening instead of nesting - this helps air move around all sides of a piece and prevents black rings and spots in the bottom of ware.
2. Fire bisque lids and bottoms together. To get the best fit for lids, fire them on the piece they match.

This will let the two pieces shrink together so you get a good tight fit. Fire all glaze pieces separately.

3. Leave space between ware - don't overfill. There is a temptation to cram as much as possible into the kiln to economize on firing costs. Ware fired too closely together creates firing problems. If you must overfill, fire very slowly and vent adequately.
4. Mix thin and thick-walled pieces together throughout the load - don't concentrate them in one area where they are competing for air and heat.
5. Use downdraft venting to move air through the kiln and to remove fumes created during firing.

Want to learn more?

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UNDERSTANDING HEAT TRANSFER

How Heat is Transferred

Heat moves through the kiln from hotter to cooler zones by:

1. convection
2. conduction
3. radiation

Convection

Convection is the first step in the heating process in the kiln. Air is heated as it passes across the warming kiln elements. As the hot air rises and cool air falls, air currents are created which circulate hot air to cooler places in kiln. This heat is transferred to the ware, shelves, etc.

The kiln will not be uniform in temperature at this early stage of firing unless the hot air is pushed through the kiln by mechanical means. Low cone firings such as 022 and 021 depend more heavily on convection for heat transfer.

The most common type of convection we are familiar with is wind chill. The cool air passes across the face and pulls heat from our warmer body, which lowers our skin temperature.

Conduction

When heat moves through a solid, it is conducted. An example would be heat moving through the handle of a saucepan. This is a slow way to heat, but the handle will eventually get hot.

In a kiln, conduction moves heat from the inside to the outside of the kiln and from the outside to the inside of the ware. Conduction is the main way we get uniform heating in the kiln. This is a slow process and if we fire too fast, the inside of our ware will receive too little heat and not fire properly.

Radiation

At the beginning of the firing, the elements are the hottest part of the kiln. The heat from the elements radiates out - like the sun warming us on a cool day. Eventually the firebrick and the ware will also get hot and will radiate heat as well.

As the temperature increases, more and more of the heat is transferred by radiation from the heating elements. For uniform heating, is important that all surfaces of the ware be exposed to heating elements, even partially.

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4. Time and temperature profile during the burn out period

Both time and temperature are important for proper burn out of the carbon. Some carbons require much higher temperatures than others. Oxidation should be completed below red heat (1400°F).

Carbon burns out from the surface first. As more oxygen penetrates the body, then more carbon is reacted to form the CO or CO₂ gas and the burn out process continues. If there is sufficient time, temperature and oxygen, then complete burn out occurs. If these conditions do not exist, the resulting incomplete burn out is referred to as black coring (where the center of the piece has a black or gray cast).

Incomplete Burn Out

Incomplete burn out can result in several firing problems including:

1. Bloating of the ware

If the temperature is hot enough, the outside of the piece will seal up before all the gases can escape. As the body becomes plastic due to glass forming, gases trapped inside the body expand with heat and cause bloating and sometimes cracking of the ware.

2. Glaze defects, such as pinholes

The escaping gases will push through the glaze surface and cause bubbles which pop. If these do not heal, then pinholes will result.

3. Appearance of fired bisque

Where carbon burn out is incomplete, the piece will have a grayish cast (white bodies) or may have a greenish cast (red bodies). The body will also be more porous and weak.

Preventing Incomplete Burnout

1. Slow down the firing.
2. Be sure the kiln is vented adequately so there is sufficient oxygen.
3. Load the kiln with burn out requirements in mind.

Leave plenty of space between ware and shelves. Do not stack ware. Use tile and plate stackers and invert pieces on top of one another to help conserve space and insure proper burnout.

Want to learn more?

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Firing Tips

CRACKING AND THERMAL SHOCK

Cracks that appear in fired ware which were not caused by casting or drying problems may be the result of thermal shock.

Thermal shock occurs when too much stress is created in a piece of ware during the heating and cooling process. It comes from temperature differences in the ware and can cause small to large cracks in the piece, or the piece may actually break.

Why Does Cracking Occur?

The tendency of a piece of be susceptible to thermal shock is related to:

- the strength of the piece
- the thermal expansion of the material

Thermal shock can result when changes in temperature occur in the kiln during heating and cooling. As temperature changes rapidly, the outside of the ware and kiln furniture becomes much hotter or cooler than the inside. This causes stresses which may result in cracking or breaking.

The following can effect thermal shock

- a fast heating rate or rapid cooling
- a sudden influx of cool air such as opening the kiln lid when the kiln has not finished cooling
- in a gas kiln - turning off the gas and allowing cool air from the burners to enter the kiln

Thermal shock can also occur when ware is stressed in use such as a casserole or dish that is taken from the freezer or refrigerator and put into a hot oven.

The stronger ware is, the better able it is to resist cracks due to thermal shocking. Weak ware will be more likely to break when stressed.

A piece that is porous will also be weaker, making it easier to crack. Water or condensation that enters pores in the ware can turn into steam and expand and this can cause cracking when heated. The harder (hotter) ware is fired, the less porous it will be.

Ware that expands and shrinks a great deal during heating and cooling is also more likely to be affected by thermal shock. Most kiln shelves contain

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cordierite because this material has a lower expansion than most of our ware and so less affected by thermal shock.

What Happens to Ware During Firing?

During heating and cooling, the body and glaze undergo many physical and chemical changes. Some of these include:

- moisture is driven out of the ware - if this occurs too rapidly, cracking can occur
- organic material is oxidized and released from the material
- the glaze softens, melts and flows during heating and may trap gas
- the body expands as it is heated and contracts during cooling
- the glaze solidifies and contracts during cooling

If the body or glaze contains silica, it will expand rapidly at 1063°F on heating and contract during cooling. If the heating or cooling is rapid near this temperature, this change can lead to cracking of the piece.

Control of heating and cooling is especially critical when firing thick-walled pieces or pieces with an irregular wall thickness.

Reducing Thermal Shock

There are several easy ways to minimize the potential for thermal shock:

- use a smooth, moderate heating rate
- let the kiln cool naturally with the lid closed

- use a controller to slow down the cooling time
- avoid sudden temperature changes

A programmable controller such as the Orton AutoFire™ is the best solution to control the heating and cooling rates and to get a smooth temperature rise.

If instrumentation is not available, heat loss during cooling can be controlled to some extent by keeping the kiln closed until well below red heat (900°F).

To be sure that ware is properly matured, be sure to use witness cones. Underfired bisque will continue to shrink during the glaze firing and this can result in a poor glaze fit.

Want to learn more?

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CRACKING AND WARPING CAUSED BY DRYING AND CASTING

In some instances cracking and warping problems share a common source: the casting and drying of the piece. In other cases, cracking may be related to how the piece is fired. This Tip looks at problems related to casting and drying

DRYING CERAMICS

Ceramics contain clay which can absorb and hold water. Before firing, it is important to remove all of the physical water so that the piece will not crack or explode when heated. This is often accomplished in steps with firing being the final stage. During firing, the chemical water is removed from the piece and it gains strength while developing physical surface characteristics.

UNDERSTANDING DRYING

Simplified, drying is the removal of water from body by evaporation. As the ware is dried, the film of water separating the clay particles gets thinner and thinner, the solid particles get closer together and the piece shrinks. Shrinkage stops when the particles finally contact each other.

DRYING FAULTS

Cracking, distorting and warping are problems that may not become evident until after firing. They are usually caused by drying too fast or unevenly.

If ware is heated too fast, the pressure from water vapor inside the piece can cause cracking. Ware dried only on one side, can shrink more on that side causing warping or bending of the somewhat plastic (flexible) piece. When one surface finishes drying, the piece is now too stiff to recover and the warping becomes permanent. This can lead to cracking.

Bodies made of very plastic clays or compositions having a high clay content require attention to uniform, slow drying.

Thicker walled pieces will often have a greater tendency to warp or distort.

Care needs to be taken to allow for uniform air movement around all sides of a piece to avoid drying problems. Sometimes drying must be slowed down to avoid cracking.


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Handles on cups can have a tendency to pull away from the mug. Doll heads and chest cavities may deform inward.

REDUCING WARPING AND CRACKING

To reduce warping and cracking, take steps to dry more slowly and more evenly from all sides.

Don't dry a flat object on a wet or cool surface like a formica or plastic table top or damp newspaper. The piece can only dry on one side. Instead, dry objects on something porous like wood or plaster or set them so air can circulate around them. If necessary, turn pieces over during drying for more even result.

Slow the drying of thick walled pieces and hand built ware.

Support areas during drying that might cause stresses to build up.

DRYING TECHNIQUES

slip cast ware - may warp or crack if stressed (deformed) when removed from the mold. Even if the ware is gently returned to the original shape, the created stress will ultimately cause the piece to warp or crack.

wheel thrown ware - should not distort during drying unless subjected to further mechanical forces - let the ware dry naturally on a bat or shelf and it should be fine.

thick handbuilt ware - needs to be

dried for a very long time before it can fired or it may explode during firing. Several days may be required or a low heat drying in an oven may be necessary to remove all the water.

plates - even drying is particularly important with plates. Warping can cause the center of plate to fall or arch up. Rims and centers must dry evenly to prevent warps, humps and cracks.

drying tiles - drying tiles can present a particular challenge because it can be difficult for the piece to dry evenly. Usually air is passed over the top of the tile. This results in warping because the bottom of the tile remains wet. Drying tiles in tile racks can help air movement for more even drying.

Want to learn more?

Read more about Solving Cracking and Warping Problems in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate. Orton's 80 minute video, *Key Principles of Successful Firing*, is also an excellent resource on firing.

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Firing Tips



USING THE THREE CONE SYSTEM

All ceramic products fire within a range to develop best fired properties. Some products such as stoneware have a wide firing range. Other products such as porcelain slip and leadless glazes have a narrow firing range (less than 2 cone numbers).

To be sure ware is properly fired, it is important to understand how your kiln is firing. The Three Cone System is an excellent way to do this.

What is the Three Cone System

The Three Cone System consists of three consecutively numbered cones:

- Firing Cone** - cone number recommended by manufacturer
- Guide Cone** - one cone number cooler
- Guard Cone** - one cone number hotter

For example: Cones 017 (guide cone), 018 (firing cone), 016 (guard cone)

Uses for the Three Cone System

- determine temperature uniformity in the kiln
- check the performance of the Kiln-Sitter® or electronic controller
- manually shut off the kiln by direct observation of the cones bending

- evaluate heatwork that ware receives during firing

How Witness Cones Work

Pyrometric cones indicate how much heat has been absorbed. Witness cones set on the shelf near the ware are true indicators of whether the ware received the proper amount of heat. Products are expected to be fired to a cone number or within a range of numbers. For some products, good results can be obtained at a cone lower or higher. Other products have to be fired very precisely.

Using the Three Cone System for Manual Shut-off

By observing the witness cones during firing, the end of the firing can be determined for manual kiln shut off.

To use the Three Cone System for manual shut-off, place cones on a kiln shelf near the center of the load, but out of a draft and where they can be observed through the peephole

When the kiln is near its firing point, the Guide cone will begin to bend. The ware is approaching maturity and soon the kiln can be shut off.



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It takes about 15 to 20 minutes for the Firing Cone to reach it's end point. The cone bends slowly at first, and more quickly after the half way point. When the cone tip is even with the top of the cone base, it is time to shut off the kiln. If the Guard Cone bends, the desired heatwork has been exceeded.

Using the Three Cone system to Evaluating Kiln Performance

Most kilns have temperature differences from top to bottom. The amount of difference depends on

- design of the kiln
- age of the heating elements
- load distribution in the kiln
- cone number being used

Usually, there will be a greater temperature difference at lower cone numbers than at higher ones. Placing a set of cones on each shelf during various firings allows you to determine the heating uniformity of your kiln for the materials you fire.

After firing, observe the cones and evaluate the heat distribution in the kiln. If only the guide cone is bent, there is less heat on that shelf. If the guard cone is bent, there is more heat on that shelf.

If you do find a difference, the heating uniformity can be improved by changing the kiln loading, adjusting switching or adding a downdraft vent system.

Checking Kiln-Sitter® Performance

The Kiln-Sitter® is designed to shut off the kiln as a Small Cone or Bar deforms. Here's how it works:

- Small Cone/Bar is placed under sensing rod
- firing begins, cone/bar receives heat, begins to soften
- sensing rod presses down, cone bends with weight
- movement of rod activates shut-off

Because the cone or bar in the Kiln-Sitter® is near the kiln wall (closer to the heating elements), it may receive more heat than witness cones on the shelf. If the kiln shuts off before the witness cones have properly deformed, you may need to use the next hotter cone number in the Sitter®.

Witness Cones Are Like Insurance

Cones are considered an inexpensive way to monitor your kiln and detect problems before a crisis occurs. Use Self-Supporting Cones for the Three Cone System because they are the easiest to use and most consistent cones available.

Want to learn more?

Read more about The Three Cone System in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

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CONES AND CONTROLLERS

Automatic controllers and shut-off devices are a convenient way to heat and turn off a kiln. But for consistent results it is still important to know how much heat the ware received. Only cones provide this information.

Witness cones set near the ware tell if the firing reached the cone value necessary to properly mature the ware. Cones also help in diagnosing firing problems.

Advantages of Controllers

Electronic controllers have many advantages. They:

- allow heating rate control - heat up/cool down of the kiln
- permit slow down of the firing below red heat to burn out carbon and organic materials
- permit elimination of a kiln shut-off device, although some use this as a safety backup
- allow soaking of kiln at the firing temperature to get more uniformity of fired pieces or for special results
- provide more consistency from firing to firing

So with all of these advantages, why

are cones still needed?

Firing Ceramics

Firing ceramics is much like baking food, except ceramics go to higher temperatures. When we bake, we leave food in the oven at a temperature for a certain time. A thermometer may help measure the temperature of our food or we may stick a fork in to test whether it seems right.

It is the same with firing - a combination of temperature and time "cooks" the ware. However, unlike baking we can't put our ware into a preheated kiln and poke a fork in our pot to test doneness. The next best thing is to place Pyrometric Cones near the ware to measure whether it has received enough heat.

Firing With Cones

The bodies, glazes and decoration products we use are all formulated to be correctly fired when they have received enough heat to properly bend a cone. The companies and individuals who make and test these supplies use Orton Cones. Cones deform when they have received the


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right amount of heat, not just when the kiln reaches a certain temperature. In other words, cones behave just like your ware. This is why they are such good indicators of whether the ware was properly fired.

How Controllers Work

Electronic controllers regulate power to the heating elements. They do this by comparing the temperature measured by a thermocouple with the expected temperature programmed into the controller. If the temperature is low, heat is added.

Controllers fire a kiln to a temperature. If this temperature is not measured accurately, the controller will fire the kiln improperly. Most controllers use a Type K thermocouple, which is less expensive, or a platinum thermocouple (Type S), which costs more but is more accurate and has a longer life.

Measuring Temperature

Even brand new, a Type K thermocouple can vary from a true reading, as shown below. On the other hand, a Self-Supporting witness Cone will vary no more than 4°F.

Variation in New Thermocouples Max. Cone Variation

Cone	Type K	Type S	Cones
020	8.5°F	2.9°F	4°F
06	13.5°F	4.5°F	4°F
6	16.6°F	5.6°F	4°F

This variation in the temperature measured by a thermocouple becomes even larger after the thermocouple has been used for awhile. It is not unusual for a Type K thermocouple to have an error of more than 25°F when fired to Cone 6 repeatedly. This means that more than a full cone error can be introduced.

Using Controllers and Cones

Controllers do a good job at what they do - controlling the heating and cooling rate and providing consistency from firing to firing. However, if witness cones are not used with the controller, there is no way of determining what the actual firing conditions were, except by how the ware looks. By then, it may be too late.

Want to learn more?

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AVOIDING CARBON BURNOUT PROBLEMS

Materials used in ceramics contain naturally occurring impurities that can affect the color, appearance and maturing temperature of the product.

Carbon, found in most clays, is normally considered one of these impurities. Carbon can also be present in the additives and binders which make up clay bodies, slips, decals and lusters.

How Carbon Burns Out

During heating (firing) the carbon reacts with oxygen to form carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide gases. The carbon leaves the body as a gas.

Binders are burned off at a relative low temperature: 300°F to 500°F.

Naturally occurring carbon in clay burns off (become gases) at higher temperatures: up to 1200°F-1400°F.

The rate at which this carbon burns out is related to:

1. The amount of carbon present (that is, the amount of natural contaminants in the body)

Some bodies have more contaminants than others, such as red clays. This needs to be considered when planning the firing.

2. Amount of air available (air provides oxygen for burnout)
Air needs to get to the carbon inside the body.

This is impacted by several factors. A load that is fired very quickly will not allow enough time for the oxygen to react with the carbon, form gases and leave the ware.

If ware is stacked during bisque firing, oxygen may not be able to penetrate all surfaces of or inside all the pieces.

Also, if gases are not removed from the kiln and replaced with fresh air, then there may not be sufficient oxygen to burn out the carbon.

3. Thickness of the piece

Air has to penetrate through the entire thickness of the piece and the gases have to escape the same way. It takes longer for carbon to burn out of a thicker piece of ware.


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Incomplete Burn Out

Incomplete burn out can result in several firing problems including:

1. Bloating of the ware
If the temperature is hot enough, the outside of the piece will seal up before all the gases can escape. As the body becomes plastic due to glass forming, gases trapped inside the body expand with heat and cause bloating and sometimes cracking of the ware.
2. Glaze defects, such as pinholes
The escaping gases will push through the glaze surface and cause bubbles which pop. If these do not heal, then pinholes will result.
3. Appearance of fired bisque

Where carbon burn out is incomplete, the piece will have a grayish cast (white bodies) or may have a greenish cast (red bodies). The body will also be more porous and weak.

Preventing Incomplete Burnout

1. Slow down the firing.
2. Be sure the kiln is vented adequately so there is sufficient oxygen.
3. Load the kiln with burn out requirements in mind.

Leave plenty of space between ware and shelves. Do not stack ware. Use tile and plate stackers and invert pieces on top of one another to help conserve space and insure proper burnout.

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FIRING HANDBUILT OR THICK CAST WARE

Most pinch pots, coiled or slab built ware generally have thicker walls than their slip cast cousins, although molded pieces may be cast heavily as well. With these types of pieces, the thicker walls create some unique challenges for firing.

Basic problems that can occur when firing handbuilt or thick cast ware include cracking (or exploding) and carbon burnout. Because of the thicker walls it is important to fire slower and control heating and cooling during firing. Preparation of the piece is important as well.

During forming, stresses within the piece may result in hairline cracks that appear during firing. It takes longer to fully dry a thick piece. Uneven drying can result in warping or cracking.

For pieces properly prepared, handled and dried, the next critical step is firing.

Firing issues

- Is the ware fully dry?

Ware that is not adequately dried will crack or explode during the early stages of firing. Water inside the pores of the ware turns to steam, exerting pressure inside the ware. To fully dry a thick walled piece, the ware needs to be warm for more than 12 hours.

- Am I firing too fast?

All bodies expand when heated and shrink when cooled. If the outside wall expands more than the inner wall, stresses occur. If these stresses are large enough, they pull the body apart and cause cracking. A 1" thick wall can have more than a 10°F difference in temperature between the hotter and cooler surfaces. Firings need to be slowed down for thicker wall pieces. Likewise, it is important not to cool too fast.

- Have I allowed enough time for carbon burnout?

It is important to burn out all carbon from the ware before higher temperatures are reached (1200°F or 650°C). It takes time for oxygen to move into the porous body, react with the carbon and then leave. If carbon remains, many problems can occur. These include problems with color, glaze fit, strength, blistering and discoloration. Use of a downdraft vent system, combined with slower heating, virtually eliminates carbon-related problems.

Heating & cooling control

The best way to control cracking problems during firing is by controlling the rate of heating and cooling for the kiln.

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During firing, materials that make up the body undergo many changes. Special care must be taken at temperatures below 1500°F (815°C) to heat the body uniformly.

Remember, the thicker the wall, the slower the heating should be done. Above 1500°F, temperatures can be increased more rapidly because the changes are less likely to cause stress cracks within the ware.

- What kind of changes occur?

All clays and many minerals contain water which does not leave the body until above 700°F. Organic (carbon) materials need to be oxidized (burned out). Other minerals, such as calcite, break down and give off a carbon dioxide gas. Minerals such as flint (silica) undergo a sudden expansion on heating to 1060°F and contraction during cooling.

- How can I control my heating?

This depends on the controls for the kiln. With switches, leave them on medium settings longer. It should take more than 3 hours to reach red heat and even longer for thick pieces or a heavily loaded kiln.

Make sure the kiln is well vented below red heat and closed up completely above red heat. Keep the kiln closed during cooling for 8 hours or until well below red heat.

- When did cracking occur?

Often the crack itself can be examined to determine when it occurred. If the edges are sharp, then it probably occurred during cooling. If the edges are rounded or if glaze has flowed into the crack, then it occurred during heating.

- What else can cause cracking?

1. Uneven heating is a primary culprit that causes cracking during firing.

Hot and cold spots in the kiln can cause uneven heating of pieces.

Use witness cones to diagnose hot and cold spots and then adjust the switching or use a downdraft vent to help even out the heating.

Careful loading of the ware in setters and on stilts can also help heat circulate around the piece.

2. Underfired bisque is not as strong and may crack more easily during the glaze firing.

Use witness cone to assure a proper firing and prevent underfired bisque.

3. Gas expanding in air pockets which developed in the ware during forming can cause large cracks during firing.

Want to learn more?

Read more about firing handbuilt and thickcast ware in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

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Firing Tips

FIRING CERAMIC BODIES

Most bodies and glazes contain clay. These fine clay particles give the body and glaze many desired properties and bonds other materials together.

When the body is fired:

- clay and other minerals in the body start to change
- clay/minerals break down and react with other materials to produce gases
- at 900 F (red heat), tightly held water molecules begin to break free and leave
- gases such as sulfur oxides and some fluorine may be released
- as the temperature increases, clay and other minerals continue to change and react with each other to form new compounds that will be part of the final product
- some products form glass which will bond everything together

Gases

The gases which form need to be removed from the body. For example, carbon is in the clay and organics are added to the body, glaze or decoration to improve strength during handling or application. These must be removed during firing to avoid defects.

Firing Conditions

Firing conditions can also determine many properties of the fired product. Firing too fast at lower temperatures may not allow sufficient time for materials to react and gases to leave the body or glaze.

Firing too fast can result in

- weaker bodies
- pinholing
- bubbling of the glaze
- color changes in the body
- color changes in the decoration
- mildewing of porcelain
- crazing or peeling of glazes if body is not properly mature

TYPES OF BODIES

Earthenware

- typically fired from Cone 07 - 03
- made with talc, less expensive clays
- clays contain many impurities, need fired longer at lower temperatures
- low shrinkage
- porous after firing
- usually tan or red in color
- frequently glazed or stained
- sometimes used as-fired.

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Often, problems arise because bodies are underfired. The piece may look okay, but is porous and weak. Also, underfired bodies may not match the expansion of the glaze used in a later firing. This can result in glaze fit problems or cracking of the body in use.

The high iron and carbon content of these clays requires plenty of air during firing to maintain good color and to burn out all of the carbon. If this is not done, many problems can occur when the product is glazed and refired.

Stoneware

- typically fired between Cone 6 -10
- large number of compositions
- contain clays and other minerals with many impurities, including sand, feldspar and grog
- additives are used to provide plasticity, workability, strength, color and to reduce shrinkage
- colors depend on raw materials

Because of the additives and impurities, care needs to be given to how stoneware is fired and to proper ventilation of the kiln early in the firing to burn out organics.

Stoneware is vitreous and contains a high percentage of glass in the fired product. For color variations, mature the ware under reducing conditions.

Porcelain

- typically fired from Cone 3 - 10
- compositions vary, but contain high quality materials
- colorants may be added.
- bodies are hard, white, translucent
- very high glass content

- narrow firing range - need to be fired close to slump or sag point for best fired properties.

Because color is very important, these bodies need to be fired with plenty of air below red heat to be sure all the carbon is removed. Shrinkage is high and special care must be given to supporting porcelain during firing or it will warp and distort.

CRITICAL FIRING PERIODS

For all clay containing bodies and for most glazes and decorations:

- be sure ware is dry before firing
- fire slowly below red heat (1100 F) where many changes occur in the clay and other materials
- provide plenty of air below red heat for oxidation and to burn out organics and carbon
- do not to force cool the kiln while it shows red heat.

Want to learn more?

Read more about successfully firing ceramic bodies in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

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Firing Tips

FIRING LEAD FREE GLAZES

Changes in glazes

Lead free glazes are becoming the standard for commercial use. This is due to government regulation and health concerns by the manufacturers.

As the name implies, lead free glazes are made from compositions or materials where lead has not been added.

To eliminate lead, glazes are reformulated. This can change some of their properties. Some of the differences you may notice include:

- does not flow or run as much in firing as lead containing glazes
- brush marks may show after firing
- not as wide a firing range
- may not be compatible with as many bodies (improper fit). This leads to shivering or crazing of the glaze.
- color does not match lead glazes
- more surface defects

For problem-free results with lead free glazes, firings must be more closely controlled and kilns well vented. Bodies may have to be bisqued to a higher or lower cone number to solve a problem.

Why do problems occur?

Lead softens a glaze and allows it to be fired over several cone numbers. Glazes made without lead have a narrower firing range. Typically, lead glazes are able to be fired over a four cone number range (example 08 to 05).

Lead free glazes typically need to be fired within two cone numbers (example 06-05) - less than half of that for lead glazes.

Glaze and body fit

Since the glaze and the body on which it is fired (bisque) are made from different materials, it is important that they expand and shrink a like amount when heated and cooled. If they don't, then the fired glaze can be stretched to the point where it can crack (crazing), or it can be pushed together on to itself to a point where shivering or crawling occurs.

When using lead free glazes:

1. Make test firings of the body and glaze to their recommended cone number, first the unglazed body and then the glazed bisque.

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2. Use witness cones placed near the ware to be sure the proper cone number was reached. Differences may exist between the Kiln-Sitter® and a witness cone or from the top to the bottom of the kiln. Firing with a controller to a cone number or a temperature may not be adequate.
3. If crazing occurs and the witness cone indicates the glaze and bisque firings are properly fired, make some tests by firing the bisque progressively hotter (e.g. if you fire bisque to 05, test to 04, then 03).

When you fire hotter, the expansion of the bisque is changed and glaze on the bisque may fit better.

4. If shivering occurs, fire one cone cooler. You may need to select another body for your bisque. Firing too cool is not a good idea since the strength is reduced and porosity increased, both of which may cause problems during use of the final piece.

Is Your Kiln Uniform in Temperature?

If temperature in your kiln varies by more than 1 to 2 cones, then glazed ware in one part of your kiln may fire okay, while ware fired in another part of your kiln will have a problem.

Most kilns vary in temperature from top to bottom. To determine how much your kiln varies, place witness cones on each shelf when making firings. Usually, there is less difference top to bottom for hotter firings.

Each kiln has its own personality and the solution for improving temperature uniformity may vary.

If you have glaze firing problems because

of too much variation, then we recommend the following:

1. Make sure cracks and holes are repaired to keep heat in your kiln.
2. Fire slower during the early part of your firing, before red heat (below 1200°F). This allows heat to soak into the refractory and even out temperatures in the kiln.
3. Consider changing the switching pattern to even out top and bottom temperatures. Switch the bottom to a higher setting before the top or vice versa. Higher settings add more heat.
4. Consider adding an Orton KilnVent. These pull hot gases from the top to the bottom of the kiln and cut temperature variations in half. Hoods above the kiln will not help temperature uniformity problems.

Want to learn more?

Read more about glaze and body fit, heat distribution and measuring heatwork in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

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FIRING RED GLAZES

Red glazes are among the liveliest, brightest colors we can use, but unfortunately, red glaze problems are legendary. Many of us simply give up using reds or accept whatever results we can get, including the problems.

Common Red Glaze Problems

improper color development - dark bluish or purple cast to the glaze

color loss - glaze looks gray, white

poor surface texture - a rough matte finish and/or visible surface defects

"The Strawberry Effect" - tiny black dots or spots in the fired glaze

crazing - a crackled or cracked appearance in the fired glaze

Some of these problems relate to the preparation of the piece and application of glaze, but many defects are the result of improper firing practices.

Preparation and Application

1. ware must be clean and free of dust
2. do not apply red glaze to greenware
3. apply only to properly fired bisque (use witness cones to verify firing) -
4. work area and tools should be kept clean and free of contaminants
5. no eating/smoking in glazing area
6. glaze away from cleaning areas
7. apply adequate coats of glaze - four coats is often recommended

8. allow each coat to dry

How Colors Develop

Many ceramic glazes need to be fired in an oxidizing (air) atmosphere for best results. Red, orange and yellow glazes in particular are very oxygen sensitive. This means they require sufficient air during the firing to bring out the colors to their fullest and to prevent surface/finish defects.

Firing reds requires us to control the firing rate and properly vent the kiln.

Controlling the Firing Rate

Nearly all ceramics fire better when fired slowly below red heat. Slow firings have the advantage of allowing the necessary physical and chemical changes to occur in the ware. Slower firings also permit time for sufficient air to enter the kiln and displace the carbon monoxide. This is true for both bisque and glaze firings.

Firing rate can be controlled using the settings on an automatic kiln, programming an electronic controller or by adjusting the switching. Control or slowing of the firing rate is most important in the early stages of the firing when most of the reactions are occurring and when air is needed to

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burn out the organics in ceramic materials. Near vitrification (the end of the firing) a faster rate is desirable and can usually be applied.

Venting for Proper Air

It is most important that enough air gets into the kiln in the early stages of firing. This is when the organic materials are burning out of the ware and air reacts with carbon to form carbon monoxide. Kilns can be vented manually or with an automatic venting system.

Manual Venting

Manual venting lets the fumes out of the kiln, but is only somewhat successful at letting air into the kiln. For manual venting, the top lid should be propped and the peephole plugs out for at least the first hour and a half. Slower firings require additional time. When the kiln reaches red heat, the lid can be closed and peephole plugs replaced. Leaving the peephole plugs out for the whole firing is not recommended since it can cause cold spots in the kiln.

Manual venting works better with a smaller load. Also, using split shelves allows air circulation and helps ventilation.

Manual venting is recommended whenever a downdraft vent is not available. When venting manually, it may be desirable to locate red glazes on the top shelf to assure sufficient air.

Automatic Downdraft Venting

A downdraft automatic venting system like the Orton KilnVent efficiently brings the proper amount of air into the

kiln and removes the fumes for exhausting. The kiln lid and peepholes remain closed the entire firing. Using the Orton Vent, tests have shown reds can even be fired with other colors with good results.

Firing to Proper Cone Number

Using witness cones on the kiln shelf to verify results is important to good results. Many problems occur when red glazes are not fired to the proper cone number. Blistering can occur if underfired and loss of color if overfired. Glaze on underfired bisque may craze. Firing lead free glazes to the proper cone number is especially important.

Firing reds can be a challenge, but by following good preparation, application, firing and venting practices, and by firing to the proper cone number, most problems can be eliminated.

Want to learn more?

Read more about Firing Reds in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate. Orton's 80 minute video, *Key Principles of Successful Firing*, is also an excellent resource on firing.

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UNDERSTANDING CRAZING

What is Crazing

Crazing is one of the most common problems related to glaze defects. It appears in the glazed surface of fired ware as a network of fine hairline cracks. The initial cracks are thicker and spiral upward. These are filled in horizontally with finer cracks.

Crazing is caused by the glaze being under too much tension. This tension occurs when the glaze contracts more than the body during cooling. Because glazes are a very thin coating, most will pull apart or craze under very little tension.

Crazing can make foodsafe glazes unsafe and ruin the look of a piece.

There are two types of crazing, each with a different cause:

immediate crazing

- appears when piece removed from kiln or shortly thereafter
- caused by glaze body fit (glaze fits too tightly to body)

delayed crazing

- shows up weeks/months later
- caused by moisture getting into ware

Immediate Crazing

Size Changes During Firing

All ceramic bodies change in size during heating (firing) and cooling. What is desired is for the glaze to shrink a little more than the body during cooling. If it doesn't then glaze problems may occur.

It is important for ware and glaze expansion and shrinkage to match or crazing can occur.

Glazes During Firing

1. during firing, glaze undergoes physical and chemical changes
2. as heating progresses, glaze melts
3. with further heating more liquid forms until viscous or thick fluid
4. more heating, more fluid glaze
5. at this point, viscous (thick flowing) glaze still conforms to size of the bisque.
6. any gas evolving from body will form blisters which can heal if glaze is still fluid
7. when kiln shuts off, glaze and body cool together
8. during cooling, both the body and glaze shrink
9. eventually glaze becomes a hard glass that will no longer flow

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Thermal expansion/shrinkage properties of both the body and the glaze determine if the glaze crazes.

Glazes are designed to shrink less than the body which puts them in compression, makes them stronger, and makes them less susceptible to crazing.

Solution to Glaze and Body Fit

1. test samples for a good fit
2. bisque to 1-2 cone numbers hotter than glaze to insure body is mature
3. use Self-Supporting Witness Cones to verify heatwork
4. recognize that bodies and glazes will have different fits for different heatwork. A glaze might fit bisque fired to 03, but craze on 07 bisque

DELAYED CRAZING

This type of crazing shows up weeks or months later and is practically always caused by underfiring.

If ware is underfired (does not reach maturity), it can, in time, expand when moisture fills the pores causing the body to expand. Sudden changes in temperature can cause crazing if the body and glaze do not expand or contract uniformly.

Either the body expanding or the glaze shrinking can cause fine hairline cracking (crazing) to occur. Refiring to the proper cone will sometimes solve the problem.

Proper Firing

Firing to the proper cone number is critical to help eliminate crazing problems. Witness cones must be used

to verify the heatwork the ware receives.

If the Kiln-Sitter® turns the kiln off and a witness cone is not properly deformed, then the ware is not fired to maturity.

Underfiring can occur because of:

- variations in kiln heating uniformity
- Kiln-Sitter® out of adjustment and shutting kiln off early
- controller thermocouple inaccurate
- differences in heatwork between kiln shelf and Kiln-Sitter® location

Crazing can also be reduced by slower cooling and slower firing.

LEAD FREE GLAZES

Lead-free glaze formulations today have less of firing range. They develop their fired properties more quickly and this makes proper firing more critical.

Want to learn more?

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Firing Tips

SOLVING GLAZE DEFECTS BLISTERS, CRATERS and PINHOLES

Blisters, craters and pinholes are related glaze surface defects. They show up as a rough, grainy or bubbled surface on the ware and appear after the glaze firing or decorating firing.

What Causes These Defects?

This family of problems can be caused by many different factors including:

- dust and contamination in the glaze
- air bubbles in the glaze
- air trapped in the slip
- improperly mixed slip
- a dirty kiln

Most commonly, however, the problems are related to gases coming from the body, glaze or kiln atmosphere.

What Happens During Firing?

Clays and glazes contain organic materials. When heated, these burn out of the body, forming gases such as carbon, sulfur and water.

If the carbon in materials is not fully removed from the body, then gas will form during the glaze or decorating firing, forming bubbles or blisters. These may pop to become craters or pinholes.

These defects can occur because:

1. There was not enough air in the kiln during firing for the carbon to properly burn out.

Any combustion process requires air. Without air, oxidation cannot occur.

2. Carbon monoxide formed by oxidation of carbon has not been adequately removed from kiln.

If the gases produced during firing are not removed from the kiln, they may deposit onto the glaze surface or affect the glaze color.

3. The kiln was heated so quickly that there was not enough time for the carbon to burn out.

Carbon which is only partially burned will continue to oxidize during the glaze or decorating firing causing defects.

4. The ware was underfired. That is, there was not enough heatwork.

When the body is underfired, it is weaker and its expansion may no longer fit the glaze.


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How Do I Solve Glaze Defects?

To make sure that glaze defects do not occur, it is important to properly mix glazes and slips and to use good pouring (slip) and application (glaze) techniques. Proper housekeeping for the kiln and workplace should be observed. Straining glaze through nylon often helps remove any lumps.

Most critical for good results are proper firing practices. We recommend the following:

1. Bring air into the kiln and make sure it circulates around the ware especially during bisque firings:
 - use setters and stilts to improve air flow around the ware
 - use half shelves to improve air flow through the kiln
 - adequately vent the kiln
 - position ware to take best advantage of air flow in the kiln

Use a downdraft vent like the Orton KilnVent to bring a controlled amount of air into the kiln and circulate it throughout the kiln. This helps remove fumes and even out the temperatures in the kiln.

2. Control the firing.

Fire slower, especially below 1200°F (650°C). Slow down the firing by adjusting switches to lower settings or soak/hold at a temperature to allow carbon to burn out.

Use an automatic controller to set heating rates and hold times.

3. Use witness cones to verify heat-work.

Underfiring can occur due to burned out heating elements, an improperly adjusted Kiln-Sitter®, a controller thermocouple which has changed or differences in heating within the kiln. Witness cones give a true reading of the heatwork the ware received.

Witness cones placed throughout the kiln show differences in heat distribution.

4. Vent the kiln to remove gases and prevent them from redepositing on ware. Only downdraft venting removes the gases from the kiln.

If good firing and venting practices are observed during firing, problems with glaze surface defects can be controlled.

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Firing Tips

SUCCESSFUL GLASS FUSING

Probably the most common problem encountered when fusing glass is that it breaks during firing. There are several causes, including:

1. glass incompatibility
2. glass sticking to shelves
3. glass heated too rapidly
4. glass annealed too quickly

Glass Compatibility

To be compatible, glasses must expand and contract at the same rate when heated and cooled. When this does not occur, they are considered incompatible.

If incompatible glass is fused together and then cooled, stresses will occur in the piece. If the stress is excessive, the fused glass will break either immediately upon cooling or months or even years later.

Glasses are rated using a coefficient of thermal expansion scale. This is based on the linear size change or expansion during heating.

What this means is that the amount the glass expands during heating is

measured and compared to a scale. The larger the number, the greater the expansion. Glass with low expansions will have greater resistance to thermal shock and breaking or cracking.

When you purchase glass, be sure all of the materials you are planning to use in a piece have similar expansion (coefficient) numbers.

Glass Sticking

If kiln wash (shelf primer) is applied unevenly or bare patches are left, the glass may stick as it moves (expands) during the firing process. When this happens, the glass can pull itself apart and break.

Kiln wash should be cleaned off and reapplied in a thin even coating to prevent sticking problems. Take care not to use too much shelf primer as it may require sandblasting to remove it from the bottom of the fired piece.

Glass Heating Too Rapidly

Thermal shocking of glass during


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heat up can lead to uneven heating and cracking of the piece. Thermal shocking means that the surface of the glass changes temperature rapidly.

When fusing glass, it is important to control the heating rate between about 150°F and 500°F. For larger or thicker pieces more time is needed. Glass fired in a mold is more susceptible to uneven heating since contacts with the cooler refractory (mold) can lead to uneven heating.

Direct radiant heat from heating elements needs to fall uniformly on the glass or it can cause uneven heating. Most glass firing is done in electric kilns, often with elements above the glass.

Glass Annealed Too Quickly

Annealing is done to reduce stresses in the glass that can result in cracks or breaks. Typically annealing is accomplished by soaking during the cooling cycle (at about 900°F) and then slow cooling between 900°F and 500°F. The amount of time the glass is annealed depends on its thickness. Annealing permits all the glass to equalize in temperature.

When glass is annealed too quickly, stresses can remain that can cause cracking.

When thick sheets or pieces of glass are being annealed, a process called firing down may be necessary. Firing down is done during the slow cooling phase of annealing. Firing down is

used if the kiln is unable to maintain the slow cooling rate required for the piece. The process of firing down involves adding a small amount of heat to the kiln as it cools.

The best way to control cooling during annealing is to use an automatic controller. The desired anneal temperature, soak time and cooling rate are set and the kiln operates automatically. Temperature is displayed. However, even with a controller, the cooling rate set by the operator may be too fast for the kiln to achieve. It is necessary to monitor the temperature change to insure the proper annealing and cooling down occurs.

The thickness of the glass being fired

Want to learn more?

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Firing Tips

SUCCESS WITH GOLDS

Gold overglazes are known as liquid precious metals. They are expensive and because of this they are traditionally used only for decoration.

Golds are typically used to add detail or distinction to plates, cups and china blanks.

There are several types of gold available in different forms, including bright golds and burnished golds.

Bright Golds

These are gold overglazes. They are not solid gold; instead they contain some percentage of gold, usually about 5 to 15%.

They come as a liquid solution and are usually applied with a brush to reduce waste. A thin coat is preferred to prevent the decoration from running, or failing to adhere.

If the liquid gold becomes too thick, it can be thinned with gold essence. Both of these products are very expensive and come in small vials or bottles.

Burnished Gold

Burnished golds are also gold overglazes. They differ from bright golds in that they require finishing (burnishing) to develop a lustrous finish and bright sheen.

Burnished golds are more durable and have a higher resistance to scratching than other golds. Their appearance is very rich and dense and slightly more matte. The brightness or matte quality can be controlled by application. A thinner application makes for a brighter gold.

Burnished golds contain 16-32% gold, including gold powder. Burnished golds are available in several forms: liquid, paste, dry powder or concentrated pats. The dry powder is extremely expensive.

There are some burnished golds that do not require polishing. These contain between 12 and 20% gold.

Firing Golds

Golds generally fire in the 022 to 018


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cone range. This can vary greatly depending on the gold itself and the ware it is being used on. For typical glassware, an 022-021 firing is the most common. For china blanks, the gold can fire as high as 011. Follow the instructions of the manufacturer when firing golds.

Gold will adhere best with a slow firing and a soak. This helps them to develop the proper color and finish. A faster firing increases the risk of surface defects which can be magnified through washing or use.

Golds contain heavy solvents which make kiln ventilation a must for both health and safety reasons and to bring air into the kiln. Usually gold is fired alone to reduce contamination problems.

Typical Gold Faults

Most gold faults are surface defects. These include:

cloudy appearance

caused by inadequate ventilation or too heavy application, firing too fast or overfiring

gold not adhering

caused by underfiring or too heavy application

gold is running

caused if application is too heavy

burnished gold is dull

caused by insufficient burnishing or possible underfiring

dull or scummy appearance

caused by inadequate ventilation or possible overfiring

cracking in finish

caused by firing too fast

pinholes and blemishes

caused by poor quality of gold or contamination of gold

blisters

caused by heavy application

Application and proper firing are the key to great gold results. Gold should be applied in moderation using a very light coating. Be sure to vent the kiln until it glows red hot. Use witness cones to verify the proper heatwork was achieved.

Want to learn more?

Read more about using golds in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate. Orton's 80 minute video, *Key Principles of Successful Firing*, is also an excellent resource on firing.

For information on Orton products, see your Orton dealer or distributor. For information on the Firing Institute or publications, contact

Orton Firing Institute, PO Box 2760,
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Firing Tips

SUCCESS WITH DECALS

Decals offer an opportunity to add decoration to ceramic and glass ware without the time and skill required for hand painting. When properly applied and fired, decals can add color, texture, design and personalization to a piece.

To achieve professional results with decals, it's important to understand how to select, apply and fire the decals.

- type of decals
 - different decals are made for glass and ceramics
 - ceramic decals often fire hotter than those for glass
- application
 - decals must have good contact with the surface of the ware
 - all wrinkles and bubbles need to be smoothed away
 - avoid tearing the decal
- firing
 - decals are generally low firing - from cone 022 to 016
 - check the package for the proper firing range
- venting
 - decals contain lots of organics which need to be burned off

- often smelly fumes result during decal firings

Firing Decals

A decal isn't fired that much differently than any other piece of ware, although there are some special considerations.

1. Venting is very important to good results with decals - especially to get true colors.

Problems related to venting include:

- poor color development
 - a cloudy or hazy appearance
2. Proper heatwork is also an important factor. Decals that are under or overfired may exhibit the following:
 - faded colors (overfired)
 - color shift (underfired)
 - decals rub off (underfired)
 - dull appearing metallics (underfired)

Determining Firing Range

Because the colors on decals can so easily be affected by the amount of heatwork they receive, we recommend test firings to determine the best firing range.

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Use a series of witness cones to fire samples of the decals on tiles or blanks. Make several firings and then select the fired appearance which looks the best.

Color development

Cloudy looking decals or decals where the color is not bright need to have additional air to develop properly. Organics need to be burned out and carbon monoxide fumes have to be removed from the kiln.

Manual venting by propping the lid and removal of peephole plugs will improve the firing, but may not help bring enough air to the bottom of the kiln or to distribute it evenly throughout the load.

A downdraft vent system will ensure sufficient air is brought into the kiln and circulated throughout.

Measuring heatwork

Heatwork is another critical factor in the color development of decals.

Fading, shifting and dullness are signs of too much or too little heatwork. This is also true when decals rub off after firing. (White or blank spots or burned off areas are generally related to application, not firing.)

Use witness cones to measure heatwork and to check the heat distribution in the kiln. Firing to a temperature or firing to a Kiln-Sitter® cone may not give the same results as found with a witness cone next to the ware.

Measuring heat distribution

Differences in heat distribution from top to bottom in the kiln are usually far more noticeable for cooler firings like decals. A 2 or 3 cone difference at 022 may only be a 1 cone difference at cone 6. This is because at higher temperatures radiation heats the kiln more effectively.

Slowing the first half of the firing can help heat distribution problems. This also helps by allowing more time for air to enter the kiln and burn out organics and for carbon monoxide to leave the kiln.

Use a controller to set heating rates and soaks for more precise firings.

Want to learn more?

Read more about successfully firing decals in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Published 8 times a year, each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate.

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Firing Tips

MAKING FOODSAFE WARE

When making ware to contain food and beverages, it is very important to be sure it is foodsafe. Some of important considerations for mugs, serving pieces and dinnerware include:

- body composition
- design of the ware
- glaze selection
- decoration
- firing to maturity
- testing for lead safety
- government regulations

What Type of Ware?

The design of some pieces of ware have inherent problems which make them unsuitable to contain food and beverages.

Design-related cracks, rough areas, crevices and nooks and crannies are difficult to clean and might trap bacteria. They can also be difficult to thoroughly glaze. Pitchers with hollow handles can have the same problems.

Ware also needs to be serviceable - that is, it should be strong so it won't fail or break during service.

Making Smart Glaze Choices

While glazes are extremely durable, most are not completely insoluble. If attacked by acids in foods such as orange juice, vinegar and tomatoes, small amounts of the glaze may dissolve and pose a health hazard.

Acid resistant glazes have passed rigorous tests and are labeled as foodsafe. These should be selected for glazing food ware. Lead-free glazes may not be acid-resistant and should not be used unless labeled as foodsafe.

Homemade, altered, crackle, matte or specialty glazes also should be avoided for surfaces of containers that will contact food and beverages.

How to Decorate

When glazing, be sure to completely glaze the ware to ensure the entire body is sealed. Properly bisqued porcelain may be dry footed, but only if the porcelain has been fired to vitrification. Label the ware as foodsafe for future users.

China paints, decals and rim designs


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are a popular way to decorate plates and mugs, but may not be safe for food surfaces. Specific regulations exist for the location of rim decorations which must be followed.

Decals should be used on the outside of a piece where they will not be in contact with food or beverages. Use china paints on decorative items only.

Safe Firing

Proper glaze firing and the bisque firing are very important to insure ware is foodsafe. If the bisque is underfired, it may create problems with glaze and body fit that result in crazing of the glaze, or glaze surface defects such as pinholes. These would not be acceptable for ware used to contain food and beverages.

If the glaze is not properly matured, it will not meet the foodsafe standards under which it was tested and may craze while in service.

Using pyrometric witness cones on the kiln shelf is the only way to insure that a proper firing has occurred. For foodsafe ware, many prefer to fire their bisque to an 03 witness cone just to be sure it is fully mature. Read and follow the manufacturer's instructions for glazes for the best and safest results.

Regulations

There are several very specific regulations for ware which will contain or contact food and beverages. California has the most stringent rules for dinnerware and new standards have been set

by the FDA for rim decorations. These rules are available from state and federal agencies. If you are selling your dinnerware you may be subject to additional regulation.

How to Test for Lead Release

Several easy to use products are available on the market to test for lead release. These are primarily quantitative tests - that is, they tell you yes or no if the surface has lead above a certain level. The most commonly used kit is a thick cotton swab which turns pink if lead levels are exceeded. This test does not harm ware so if it tests too high in lead, the piece can still be used as decoration. These tests are a simple, economical way to feel confident that your ware is safe.

Want to learn more?

Read more about Making Foodsafe Ware in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate. Orton's 80 minute video, *Key Principles of Successful Firing*, is also an excellent resource on firing.

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