Introduction to Pottery & Ceramics
Prehistoric

• Early nomadic humans made and used woven baskets and animal skin pouches to carry objects.
• These were not able to carry liquids such as water (this is before plumbing, aquifers and other inventions).
Once some people settled down and began to cultivate crops, they discovered that if they left the muddy substance from streams and rivers out in the sun, it hardened. If they put that object into a fire, it became permanent and good for carrying water and other liquids. How was this a survivalist advantage?
Catal Huyuk, Turkey

• The earliest examples of Neolithic pottery come from the Middle East, the region where agriculture first develops.
• Pottery fragments from about 6500 BC have been found at Catal Huyuk in Turkey.
• The earliest wares at Catal Huyuk are made by one of the standard methods of primitive potters.
• Rings or coils of clay are built up from a circular base.
• The walls of the pot are then smoothed and thinned (by simultaneous pressure on the inner and outer surfaces) before being fired in a bread oven or in the most elementary of kilns - a hole in the ground, above which a bonfire is lit.
• Early Neolithic pottery is usually undecorated. Where there is decoration, it takes the form of patterns cut or pressed into the damp clay.
The Potter’s Wheel

• Invented in 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia
• Simple revolving wheel
• Made pottery perfectly round when forming
Greece, 6th-5th Century BCE

- Much more sophisticated style compared to Neolithic pottery
- Famous for vases
- Used as practical objects for storing things (each had its own shape, ex. olive oil or wine)
- Surface of vases are often decorated with black or red silhouettes of scenes from mythology
West Africa, 5th Century BCE

- Present-day Nigeria
- *Nok* sculptures
- Made from terracotta (a porous, unglazed reddish clay)
- Mainly figurines and heads of men and women, abstractly stylized
- Elaborately detailed hairstyles and jewelry are represented
- Thought to have been made for protection against ailments and diseases and also as portraiture
China, 7th – 13th Centuries CE

• T’ang Dynasty 7th-9th; tomb figures made of first porcelain (extremely high fire, low grog clay)

• Song Dynasty 10th-13th; porcelain, famous simple, elegant forms and for green glazes and black/brown glazed tea sets (*temmoku*)-popular with Buddhist monks and often imported to Japan
Islamic, 9th-12th Centuries

- Practical items for every day use
- Tin enamel (a glaze containing oxidized tin) gives a glowing appearance
- Famous for wall tiles
Japan 13th-16th Centuries

- Tea ceremonies- sought to achieve simplicity
- Black and iron-brown glazes
- Imitated Song Dynasty pottery
- Raku firing adapted from Korean culture
Europe, 15th-17th Centuries

- **Majolica**: Italian tin-glazed earthenware—Renaissance
- **Delftware**: Famous Dutch white pottery with blue glaze decoration. Delft is a city in the Netherlands.
Pottery Vocabulary
Vocabulary

- **Clay**: The term clay refers to a number of earthy materials that are composed of minerals rich in alumina, silica and water.

- **Kiln**: A specialized oven used to “fire” clay or bring clay up to extremely high temperatures.

- **Firing**: When clay is “fired”, it is exposed to extremely high temperatures. The clay fuses at a molecular level and becomes a permanent structure.
• **Bone Dry:** When the piece of pottery is complete dry and ready to be fired.

(Pottery that is bone dry and ready to be fired is called *greenware*.)

• **Leather Hard:** When clay has been partially dried but can still be carved, decorated, or joined to other pieces.

• **Bisque Firing:** The first firing for a piece of pottery. Pottery that has been “bisqued” is ready for glaze or paint application.
• **Warping:** Distortion of clay caused by uneven stresses within clay due to uneven drying, uneven support in firing, or uneven or excessive heat in firing.

• **Shrinkage:** As clay dries and the water evaporates, the pottery will somewhat shrink in size.

• **Plasticity:** Ability of the clay to be manipulated and formed.
• **Wedging**: The process where the air bubbles are removed from the clay by slamming and/or kneading it.

• **It is very important to wedge clay because air bubbles left in your pottery will cause your work to explode! Air will expand as it heats up.**

• **Score**: The first step in joining pieces of clay. The surface is roughed up with a tool.

• **Slip**: Liquefied clay used to join pieces of clay. As a second step, this is applied over the scored areas.

• **Seal**: The last step in joining clay. The area of attachment is smoothed with another small coil of clay.
• Additive: Adding on other pieces of clay.

• Subtractive: Carving, gouging, shaving, or another method by which clay is removed.

• *It is important to let clay dry completely before firing it because if you try to heat up wet clay, the water will evaporate and expand quickly, making your pottery explode in the kiln!