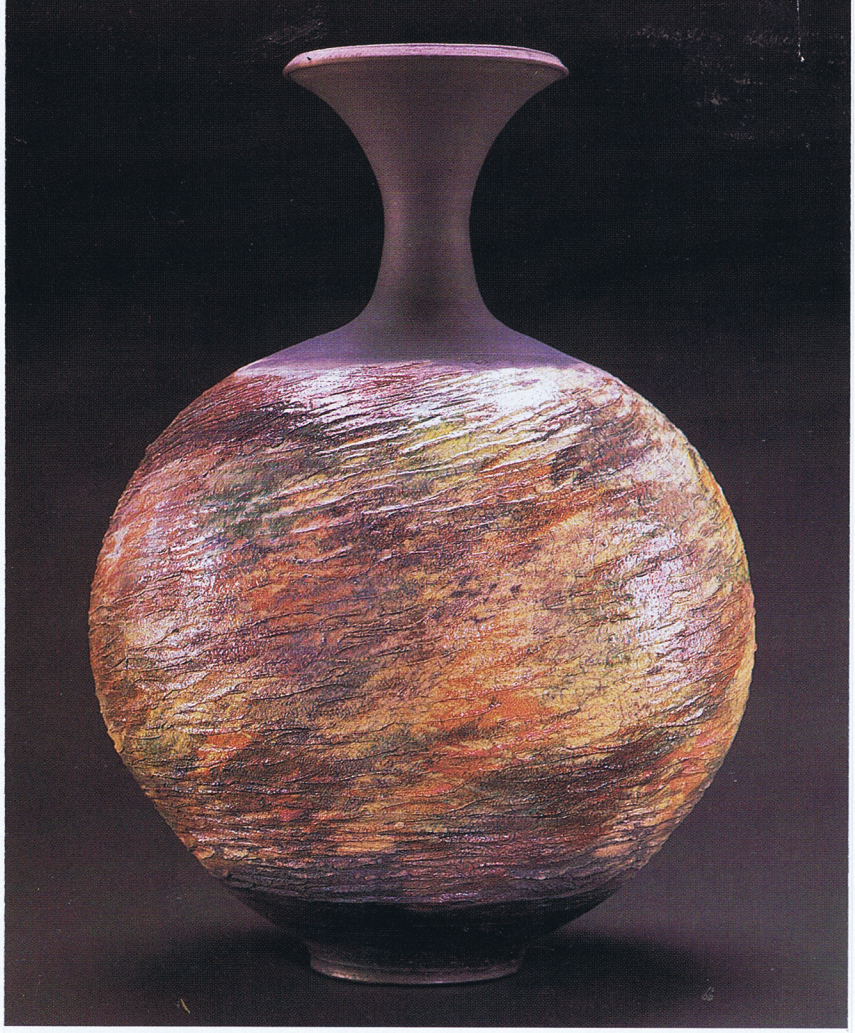

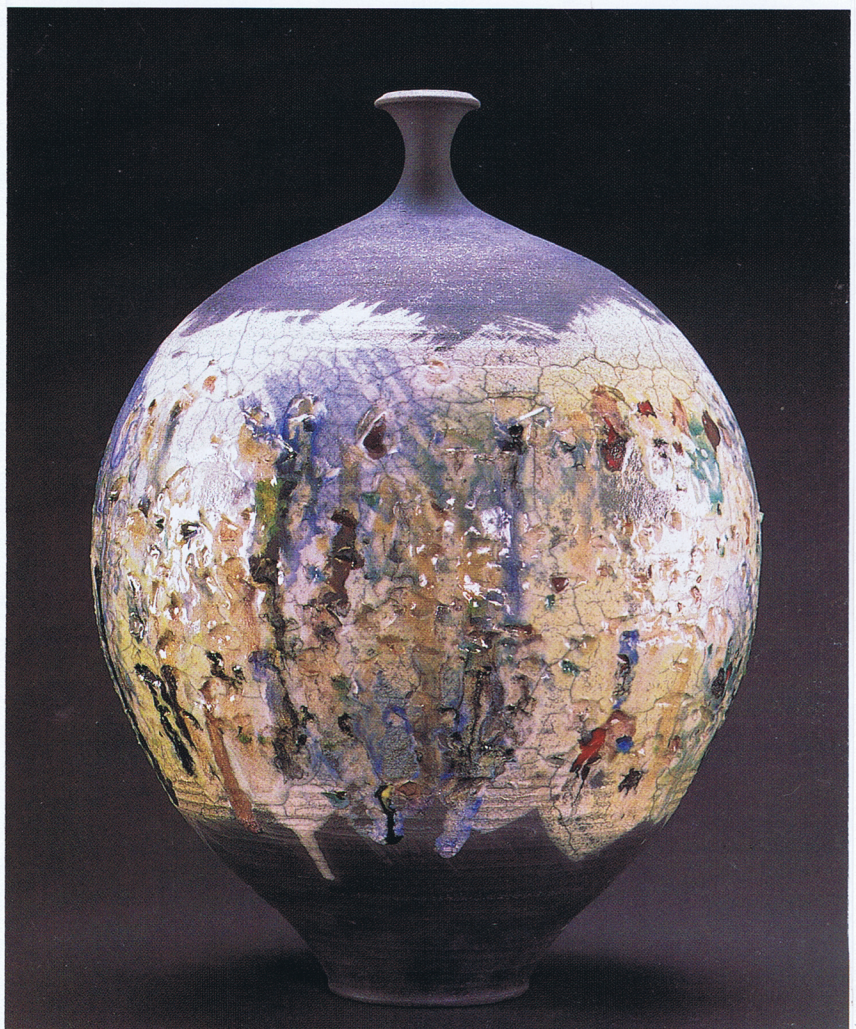

Ceramics MONTHLY
January 2000
Volume 48
Number 1

# RAKU at Amatlan

by Hilda San Vicente Tello

*Steven Branfman Workshop In Mexico*

About 50 miles south of Mexico City lies the village of Amatlan de Quetzacoatl. It is situated at the edge of high rocky mountains overlooking lush fields in the valley below. Quetzacoatl is the plumed serpent or feathered snake of the Nahautl people; the name means god of goodness. It was in the shade of Amatlan de Quetzacoatl's 16th-century Augustine chapel that Needham, Massachusetts, potter Steven Branfman conducted a raku seminar sponsored by El Olvido Ceramica.

Located in the heart of Mexico City, El Olvido Ceramica is a high-temperature ceramics studio where a group of 35 ceramists make their best efforts to maintain an educated dialogue with an excellent yet often difficult interlocutor—clay. It was just over five years ago that we first decided to study the raku technique. With the help of some basic literature, most notably Branfman's book *Raku: A Practical Approach,* a homebuilt kiln for raku and lots of enthusiasm, a series of simple forms were glazed and the first firing conducted.

After a long series of trials to find reliable glazes, the correct fusion temperatures, the effect of kiln atmosphere and the huge possibilities of "smoking," we started down the path of studying texture, shape, color and contrast through experimentation. Five years later, with our glazing knowledge and understanding more mature, we are convinced that in raku "the skin of the piece rules."

*continued next page*

Top: Vase, 21 inches in height, wheel thrown, brushed with raku glazes.

Bottom: Bottle, 18 inches in height, with slip, inlaid colored glass and glazes, raku fired, by Steven Branfman, Needham, Massachusetts.

Since the beginning, the help of Steven Branfman has been priceless. His experience of 25 years follows the tradition of Hal Riegger and Paul Soldner, who popularized raku practice in the United States in the 1960s. After having used Branfman's book extensively, we wanted a personal interchange of ideas and invited him to Mexico.

For Branfman, "raku is a process that offers the best of all worlds. The technique is deeply rooted in tradition. And while its origins serve as a constant reminder to me of where the craft has evolved from, its contemporary incarnation is very different. So, I can work simultaneously in a traditional technique where all the rules have been established, and a contemporary technique where the rules are constantly in question."

The seminar began at El Olvido in Mexico City where, after an evening slide presentation, Branfman spent two full days demonstrating forming techniques. The participants were able to observe an experienced potter wedging, throwing and carefully preparing surfaces for later glazing and final enrichment through raku firing methods. Sessions were full of intelligent, probing questions and equally thought-provoking answers.

The pots were made from a body composed of Mexican clays (47.6% Hidalgo stoneware, 4.8% Oaxaca red clay and 47.6% Zacatecas fireclay); it produced a white, refractory body with very plastic qualities. Glazing was done with some of Branfman's recipes, which allowed the participants to sample his personal glaze palette.

After a weekend of relaxing and sightseeing, the group arrived in Amatlan de Quetzacoatl. Many of the wares had been previously glazed, and the plan was to complete the glazing at the firing site with Branfman's instruction and guidance. The atmosphere and the beauty of this place helped produce a working euphoria among the participants that only intensified in strength, enthusiasm and creative activity as the hours passed.

Over the course of two days, using two kilns, we completed 16 firing cycles in each kiln. There was much successful experimentation with many of the possibilities that the raku technique offers. The main variables tested during our firings were as follows:

a) Oxidizing firing—maintaining an ample supply of air to produce an oxygen-rich atmosphere. The air supplied to the combustion is more than what is necessary for complete combustion of the fuel.

b) Reduction firing—restricting the intake of air to observe the effect of carbon-filled atmospheres in producing an "oxblood" effect with copper glazes. The amount of air allowed to enter is less than the necessary amount for efficient combustion.

c) Salt firing—introducing sodium chloride through the burner after the fusion of the glaze to produce alterations in color development and surface texture.

d) Postfiring reduction—removing the pots from the kiln and immediately placing them inside a container filled with combustible material. This procedure is used mainly to produce intense smoking, lusters and crackle glaze effects. We also allowed the pieces removed from the kiln to cool in the air for 15 to 60 seconds, then subjected them to the reduction atmosphere of the container. This procedure permits a partial reduction and produces blue or greenish tones mixed with metallics. A third variation involved removing the pieces from the kiln and immediately subjecting them to intense reduction, then opening the container, exposing the ware to the air to produce copper halo and matt effects.

At the end of the day, red and orange hues filled the sky over the valley as the kilns cooled, and Branfman offered his comments and suggestions regarding the work that had been completed. His final words to the group echoed how we viewed the intimacy and personal nature of his presentation: "An extraordinary collection of ware from a special group of people. You have embraced me and my family with your warmth and friendliness. Our experience here will remain forever in our hearts."

The sum of these emotions was captured in each of the pieces produced there. With the help of clay and fire, a strong relationship between the pieces and their creators was demonstrated. The seminar was an unforgettable experience for everyone, and it was made evident that our pieces reveal, to a great extent, our own hearts. ▲

Steven Branfman removing a piece from 1 of the 16 raku firings in a portable kiln at a workshop in Amatlan de Quetzacoatl, Mexico.