

Clay

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Steve Branfman applies crushed stained glass decoration to a wet pot before a group of watchful eyes.

Steve Branfman Leads Raku Weekend

BY REBECCA JERNIGAN & JACKIE ALLEN • PHOTOS BY JOANNE WOOD

Approximately 50 clay enthusiasts from as far away as Louisiana, Ohio and Tennessee converged upon Dan Finch's pottery studio in Bailey, NC recently to learn first-hand forming, glazing and firing techniques from Steve Branfman, a contemporary raku master. Author of *Raku: A Practical Approach* and technical editor/book review



Red-hot pots are removed from one of four raku kilns used at the event.

columnist for *Clay Times*, Branfman made the journey south from his Needham, Massachusetts school and studio in early November to the studio/blueberry nursery of Dan Finch, who hosted the workshop.

Branfman opened the event with a Friday evening slide presentation, where he recalled to an attentive audience how his original career choice had been physical education. Due to his parents' influence and that of the art-rich environment of New York in which he was raised, Branfman said, he soon became drawn into the arts instead.

His slide presentation clearly illustrated the evolution of his work over the course of 20 years. He shared stories about The Potter's Shop, the studio he founded back in 1977, which has now expanded into a nationally-known

school and artists' workspace.

On the second day, excited potters returned to the Finch farm during a cool morning rain. After wandering through the expansive, rustic studio, participants took their seats in a greenhouse structure erected especially for the event.

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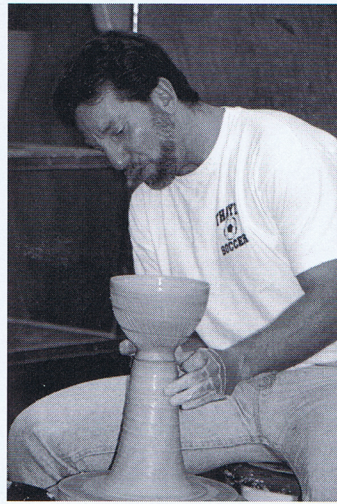


A raku-fired pot featuring a copper lustre glaze.

Raku weekend

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Branfman began the day with an impressive demonstration of various throwing techniques, his mastery shining through as he handled the clay with complete control. His strong perception of the final product resulted in the expert throwing of almost any form imaginable.



Steve Branfman at the wheel.

Following Saturday night's southern-style pig pickin,' participants returned on Sunday morning to see Branfman's trimming techniques. First, he threw a chuck to facilitate the trimming of his large bottle forms. After he turned several bottles, he transformed the chuck into a beautifully shaped bowl.

A large bottle form with a long, narrow neck is Branfman's preferred shape. He shared his technique of texturing the exterior of the bottle, then swelling out the middle before collaring in the neck, to yield an altered surface texture.

To make a 35-pound platter, Branfman centered the huge mass of clay by rhythmic slapping of the carefully prepared cone. He then pummeled the center of the mass. The shape was approximated and worked from an irregular donut of clay into a refined 24-inch platter.

On Saturday evening, we watched as Steve glazed and fired two of his large raku vessels. The results were as beautiful as his artistic handling of the pots and tools.

Branfman shared many glazing techniques with us. The most noteworthy of these included the addition of grog for a granular effect, and the use of stoneware glazes on raku to create a pastel matte effect.

Branfman also demonstrated an exciting form of surface decoration in which he rolled a pre-leather hard cylinder in crushed stained glass. Glaze over the glass can be used if desired, he said, to further enhance the surface.

Now it was time for participants to glaze their own pots. As Branfman circulated the area, ideas and thoughts were shared as he offered advice and explanation of the various results. As was the case in this workshop, group glazing sessions can offer a unique learning experience, since so many different people use a wide variety of techniques.

Throughout the remainder of the day, glazed pots were fired in four different kilns. Branfman showed us how to perform a saggar firing, where pots were loaded into a lidded container with combustibles, then placed into a kiln with other pots and fired.

A second demonstration was of salt firing in a converted electric kiln. Small packets of rock salt, tightly wrapped in wet newspaper, were fed into the burner port as the firing progressed. The resulting pots featured a soft, subtle glaze.

Branfman's philosophy: one must live to enjoy the journey, not simply strive to reach a destination. Just as his energy and enthusiasm are contagious, his connection to the clay and flame is magical to observe. ■