

# Pennsylvania Redware

by Denise Wilz

**Pennsylvania Redware platter, 12 inches in length. The design was created using a sgraffito technique then bisque fired to cone 04. Selected areas were then glazed with a green copper oxide glaze then overglazed with a commercial clear glaze and fired to cone 06.**



PHOTOS BY LISA SHORT

**P**ennsylvania German folk art found me when I was searching for a different direction to take my clay work. To me this art embodies the spirit of a people who loved life, with their oft-used representations of hearts, tulips, birds and the flower urn. And while the Pennsylvania German potters made mostly plain functional ware with local red earthenware clay, I fell in love with the slip-decorated pieces with their beautiful rich red-and-yellow coloring.

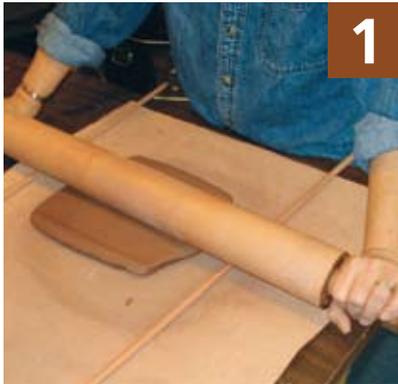
There are basically two styles of decorated Pennsylvania Redware: sgraffito ware and slipware. For ideas to use for decoration, I find inspiration in the Pennsylvania German

decorative arts, such as antique redware, fraktur and painted furniture to name just a few sources.

## Sgraffito Ware

Sgraffito ware is simply red earthenware decorated with a layer of white slip that is then scratched away to reveal the red clay underneath. To begin, roll out a slab of clay large enough for your mold (figure 1). For this plate I rolled the clay  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thick using  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch dowel rods on each side of the clay as a guide.

To create different-size circles, use a disc cutter that has an arm with multiple holes. Place a needle tool in the appropriate hole, then swing the arm in a circle to cut the clay (fig-



ure 2). Lightly wipe the clay with a damp sponge to smooth the surface.

Center the mold upside-down on the clay circle (figure 3) and carefully flip everything over, using the interfacing or a ware board to aid you. Avoid bending the clay in the opposite direction. Press the clay to the mold with your hands (figure 4); and paddle the clay down as well (figure 5). Smooth and press the clay to the mold by wiping the surface with a damp sponge, then allow to dry to leather-hard.

The Pennsylvania German potters used upside down bowl-shaped molds carved from wood with a foot underneath, which resembled a mushroom. My drape molds are

made of bisque-fired earthenware and I use commercially made serving bowls as slump molds.

Remove from the platter mold when it is leather hard and place it upright on your work surface or banding wheel. Apply slip with a 2-inch hake brush (figure 6). Brush on two or three thin even coats of slip, making sure the red clay cannot be seen through the surface. Clean the edge of excess slip and use a coggle wheel to decorate the edge (figure 7).

Allow the slip to dry to leather-hard before you begin the sgraffito process. I use a calligraphy pen with a rounded scratch nib and a stylus for my sgraffito work. Deciding when to sgraffito the piece depends on how

### TIP

Roll out slabs on heavy-duty interfacing rather than canvas as it avoids having to remove the canvas marks. Even though interfacing has a much shorter lifespan, I consider it a good trade-off.



**TIP**  
Use a high-quality brush to avoid losing bristles in the slip, which can mar the work.

wet you like the slip. I prefer a leather-hard surface but some potters prefer to sgraffito right after the slip has been applied and others like to sgraffito when the slip is bone dry.

You can use other tools, like a wire-loop tool, sharpened stick or even a pencil in a pinch. As for getting the design onto the plate, it can be freehanded with your sgraffito tool, drawn directly on the slip with a pencil or transferred using tracing paper. To use tracing paper, first draw the design onto the paper, making sure it will fit the size of the plate you are making. Center the design on the plate and lightly draw over the design with a stylus or pencil (figure 8) to leave a slight

indentation in the slip as a guide. Then use the sgraffito tool you prefer to scratch the design into the slip, revealing the red earthenware beneath (figure 9).

The Pennsylvania German potters applied the glaze directly to the green ware and once-fired the work in a wood-fired kiln. I bisque fire to cone 04, apply a commercial clear glaze then glaze fire to cone 06.

### Slip Trailing

Another form of Pennsylvania redware consists of red earthenware decorated with lines and dots of slip. Create a form using the same techniques as described above. To make a smooth surface to work on, lightly wipe the clay with a damp sponge



(figure 10). Use a slip cup to draw the design onto the plate (figure 11).

Of course you can use as many straws as you want in your slip cup. The Pennsylvania German potters made their slip cups from small pots that were thrown or pinched with quills inserted as the straws. I've tried making my own clay slip cups but have yet to successfully get the slip to flow out of the quills well evenly enough to look nice, but I'll keep trying. For dots and single lines, I use a plastic squeeze bottle (figure 12).

I find that standing to decorate slipware allows me to move my entire body with the motion of the slip cup across the plate resulting in nice smooth flowing lines.

Allow the slip to dry to the touch then press the slip into the red earthenware with the batter or rolling pin, wiping the tool after each use in case some slip remained on it (figure 13). Clean the edge of the plate to remove any slip that has dripped over the side and then decorate the edge with the coggle wheel (figure 14).

Next, mold the clay by centering the mold upside-down on the clay



circle and carefully flip everything over. Press the clay to the mold with your hands; use a batter to tamp the clay down as well. Wipe the surface with a damp sponge to smooth and press the clay to the mold. Remove the plate from the mold when it is leather-hard.

### Glazing

The leaded glazes the Pennsylvania German potters used gave the slip a warm tint that ranged from almost white to a deep yellow/orange. Instead of using leaded glazes, which are toxic and are not foodsafe, you can safely emulate the yellowish tint by staining the slip, or by tinting a transparent glaze with rutile, iron oxide or stains. And there are potters today who continue the tradition of wood-firing lead-glazed ware. You'll need to experiment to get the look you like.

**An example of slip-trailed redware done in the Pennsylvania German pottery tradition.**





## The Tools

Tools for making Pennsylvania Redware haven't changed much over the centuries. They consisted of a rolling pin, disc cutter and nail, brushes, a sharpened stick for sgraffito, slip cup for slip-trailing, batter, coggle wheel, wooden molds, lead glaze and a wood-fired kiln. Additional glaze colorants included copper oxide for green and manganese for brown/black. And those proficient with throwing used a potter's wheel to create complementary ware and both thrown and handbuilt pieces could be decorated using the same techniques.

In today's world, we use lead-free glazes, electric kilns and plaster or bisque molds. And the availability of commercial glazes, clays and stains makes it possible to get consistent results.



## The Slip Cup

For multiple lines I use a small plastic container with a tight fitting lid. I cut three small-diameter drinking straws to about 2 inches in length, and insert them in a straight line approximately 1 inch from the top, with about 1/4 inch of the straw inside the container. I apply glue around each hole to seal it and tape the straws together on the outside so they are always the same distance apart, otherwise they'll move while you're using it. Trim the outside straw ends so they're all the same length.

Fill the container with slip that is thin enough to pour from the straws but not too fast. Replace the lid and test the consistency. Make straight and/or wavy lines since both of these designs have been found on antique plates.