

Overglaze: Challenging the Myths

*Johanna Demaine discusses the art
and technique of overglazing*

“THERE IS PROSE AND THERE IS POETRY. In pottery there seems to remain a possibility for providing both, sometimes in the same object. Pottery can be about design or about art, and occasionally both. Pots succeed because they move the spirit, like art, or they exactly fill a requirement, like design. That one discipline can straddle both areas with dual emphasis is distinctive.” (Dormer: 1994, p.7)

For reasons best known to ceramists themselves, the realm of overglaze has been neglected or, even at its extreme, derided as a valid means of expression/decoration for the craft/artist potter. In the past, as ceramists have been concerned with the approach fostered by the Arts and Crafts Movement together with the Leach tradition. Yet I believe we have neglected the technique of overglaze decoration as a valid and enduring element of the whole ceramic process, despite it being an integral part of the character of Oriental and Islamic ceramics for the past 1000 years, through the marriage of form and surface. This ignorance or perhaps fear of the process has seen overglaze unceremoniously dumped into the area known as china or porcelain painting and all the angst which that conjures up. I feel that this unfortunate terminology has contributed to the view that overglaze is not relevant to clay workers.

*Margaret Ford. Ceramic.
Overglaze enamel.*





Top: Imari ware.
18th century

Above: Qing Dynastly.
China. Famille Rose.

However, as with all things in today's fast changing society, the parameters within which ceramics operate, are in a state of flux. The newer and younger emerging ceramists within our midst have had the good fortune to be exposed to a wider range of techniques and mind-sets allowing for more lateral thought to be nurtured. Nevertheless, I feel overglaze is now associated more with the industrialisation of ceramics and still treated with misunderstanding by a large percentage of practitioners. Words such as screen-printed decals, computer generated images, solvents, oils, etc, all contribute to the mental block many ceramists seem to have towards overglaze techniques.

My aim is to provide a framework of understanding for ceramists so that overglaze can be accepted as a valid technique within our craft/art, whatever our influences. I propose to do this by defining the parameters of overglaze and other relevant terminology, locating it within a historical context, examining the different methods with reference to other ceramists, and offering my rationale and working methods. This will be accompanied by images gathered during my Churchill Fellowship research. Most of all I wish to share my passion for overglaze.

For the purposes of this article I use the word overglaze to embrace the whole spectrum of techniques that may be utilised on top of a vitrified glaze surface (that is after the claywork has been glaze fired). This takes into consideration the additive techniques of Persian or reduced lustres, resinatate lustres, gilding and other precious metals, overglaze colours and enamels, decals, added texture (example pastes, fibreglass and glass beads), low-fired glazes as well as the subtractive techniques of etching and sandblasting. The word onglaze is often used in literature to refer to the overglaze enamels and colours popularly known as china or porcelain paints and will not be used here. However I prefer to correctly classify these as overglaze techniques. Maiolica is often referred to as onglaze but it is technically an inglaze technique as it is applied on top of an unfired glaze. Therefore it is not included within the

range of overglaze techniques. As a matter of interest the word 'enamel' comes from the French word for glaze.

The history of overglaze is inextricably linked to the development of decoration on a ceramic surface and the discovery of porcelain. Decoration (ornamentation; embellishment) lives within the history of mankind. It has been well documented that the first manifestations of paintings appeared on cave walls in the western Mediterranean some 35,000 years ago. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that mark-making on the clay surface quite possibly predates clay's use as a material for making pots and from those earliest days of pot and tile-making, artists have painted on the clay's surface.

Advancements in ceramic history can be traced back to the refinements in the ceramic surface for decorating (this can be read as whiteness) as well as the development of high-temperature kilns. It is coincidental that white clay bodies and high-temperature kilns were both developed in China. The desire to emulate the white surfaces of the Chinese porcelain at a lower temperature led to the development of an opaque low-firing tin glaze in the Middle East. The tin glaze provided a stable ground for the use of lustres and overglaze colours. Lustres, the oxides of precious metals, were first used on glass in Egypt and Syria in the 8th century. By the 9th century lustre was being used on ceramics in Iraq. The decoration used was either calligraphic or from nature (if it was semi-abstracted). Overglaze enamels were developed to obtain a wide-ranging palette, which did not burn out as some of the metallic oxides did over 1000°C when used as underglaze. Simplistically, enamels are low-firing glazes applied over a vitrified glaze. The firing is usually between 750-850°C.

Overglaze enamels can be traced back to Minai ware in the Islamic world during the 11th century. This technique was referred to as Minai (glaze) or *half rang* (that is a reference to the many different colours used in this new overglaze decoration) as well as the Polychrome wares of the T'ang Dynasty in the 12th century. This expertise then reappeared on Chinese porcelain in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Here it became known as *Famille Verte* and *Famille Rose*, named after the dominant colours in the palette. *Famille Verte* centred on the mainly transparent colours of aubergine, blue, yellow, green and on opaque black and iron red. The *Famille Rose* palette focused on a colloidal gold-based rose pink and opaque white and opaque yellow, facilitating the blending of pastel colours. At the same time the Japanese Imari and Polychrome wares were being developed. The influence of these colours was such that by 1749 the French Vincennes factory (later to become Sevres) had a palette of 60 colours.

It has been recorded that overglaze was initially used in Europe to hide small imperfections in the glaze surface. The home-based ceramics industry virtually died out in the Western world after the establishment of the porcelain factories from the 17th century onwards, to cater for the demand for the new,



Top: Alan Caiger Smith. UK. **Platter**. Earthenware. Reduced lustre.
Above: Adrian Saxe. USA. Porcelain. Overglaze enamels.



Thomas Orr. USA.
Tile. *Multifirings.*

“... the contemporary ceramics ‘scene’ is a product of the Western visual arts economy.”
(Scott: 2000, p.11)

fine, white, highly-decorated and brightly-coloured tableware. With this fine white, extensively decorated porcelain being destined for the upper classes in Europe, the new porcelain manufactories soon came under Royal patronage. (Sevrès, Limoges, Meissen, Royal Copenhagen). Subsequently a wider range of decorating techniques developed including direct and indirect printing techniques, gilding, etching, texture pastes and decals, to name a few.

Industrialisation of the ceramics industry was the catalyst for many techniques that were specifically orientated towards producing a superior product with minimal loss of time. This included the overglaze decorating techniques and the materials used in their preparation. Solvents and mediums were introduced to speed up drying time and give more consistent results. The traditional water-based mediums gave way to oils. However in China and Japan the mediums continued to be water based, for example, green tea, seaweed, etc.

OVERGLAZE AND THE CONTEMPORARY POT

Art vocabulary today is often inadequate and misleading when discussing ceramics. Ruff argues that “contemporary vessel makers are called traditionalists; yet it is the potters who have defied Western art history (tradition) by refusing to yield to the traditional elitist hierarchy of media by which Western art is conventionally defined and judged” and that “today there is a kind of coexistence in the ceramics world between the ‘traditionalism’ of the vessel aesthetic and the outreach of clay to the pluralism of contemporary art in general.” (1983, p.27)

In terms of ceramics, modernist aesthetic ideology is concurrently rooted in the ambition of those who wish to free ceramics from the restraints of the past and those who wish to create an independent movement based on the unique qualities of the medium and its tradition. In fact, ceramics today can be seen both as an integral component of a diverse art community and as a tradition apart from the mainstream. Ruff argues that clay is always about itself, yet it is one of the most successful mimics in

art and this could account for the condition which lies in the duality inherent in the medium and the peculiar evolution of modern ceramics.

Contemporary ceramics can be seen as the coexistence of the mass of iconoclastic styles, which come under the umbrella of ceramic sculpture and a resurgence of vessel making which has allowed those who are disillusioned with the modernist constraints to keep the direction vital ceramics becomes one means of renewing their connection to the sources of creativity. Pluralism and eclecticism are the hallmarks of contemporary ceramics. Reinvention and recreation are part the contemporary ceramist’s toolbox.

Within the UK the diversity of claywork ranges between the extremes of the traditional slipware and contemporary sculpture. On the whole the small percentage of ceramists using overglaze techniques tends to be vessel orientated and use more traditional techniques. Sutton Taylor and Alan Caiger-Smith both use reduced lustres. While Caiger-Smith employs sensuous brushwork reminiscent of Islamic culture, Sutton Taylor concentrates on juxtaposing the lustrous colours to create visual textures. On the other hand Mary Rich uses resinate lustres, predominantly gold, to meticulously decorate her work. Jane

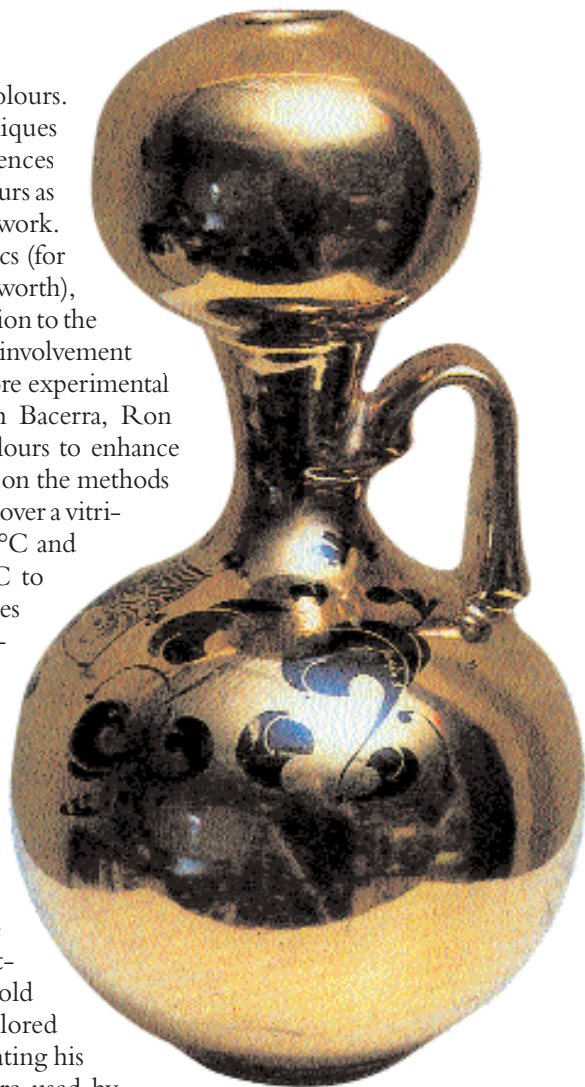
Osborne-Smith and Russel Coates both use overglaze colours. Russel Coates uses the traditional overglaze enamel techniques he learnt while working in Japan which also shows influences of Islamic ornament. Osborne-Smith uses overglaze colours as a means to provide the delicate penwork that defines her work.

Meanwhile, the émigré influence on American ceramics (for example, Gertrude and Otto Nazzler and Ruth Duckworth), together with the American belief in itself and its contribution to the world art scene, has ensured that this has led to greater involvement with overglaze within the realm of the studio potter as more experimental approaches have been undertaken. Adrian Saxe, Ralph Bacerra, Ron Nagle and Margaret Ford use overglaze enamels and colours to enhance their predominantly sculptural forms. Lana Wilson draws on the methods first seen during the T'ang dynasty using lower-fired glazes over a vitrified high firing glaze. Wilson initially glaze fires at 1220°C and then applies other glazes, which mature around 1040°C to achieve the textures that identify her work. Thomas Orr uses multiple firings of cone 06, 01, 04, 06, 06 to achieve his textured surfaces. John W. Hopkins uses both sandblasting and overglaze colours to inform his work while Rimas Vis Girdas is presently using decals, which he makes himself from overglaze colours.

In Australia, Alan Peascod is one of the best known overglaze artist for his research into Persian lustre. Bob Connery uses flowing brushwork with reduced lustre on traditional wheel thrown forms. Gary Bish takes control of overglaze colours as well as the decals that he generates himself. Marianne Cole uses raised enamel dotting on predominantly black/brown tenmokus with gold pen work on her bowls form while Greg Daly has explored the areas of gold and silver leaf and acid etching, formulating his own resinate lustres. Lustres combined with gilding are used by Stephen Bowers.

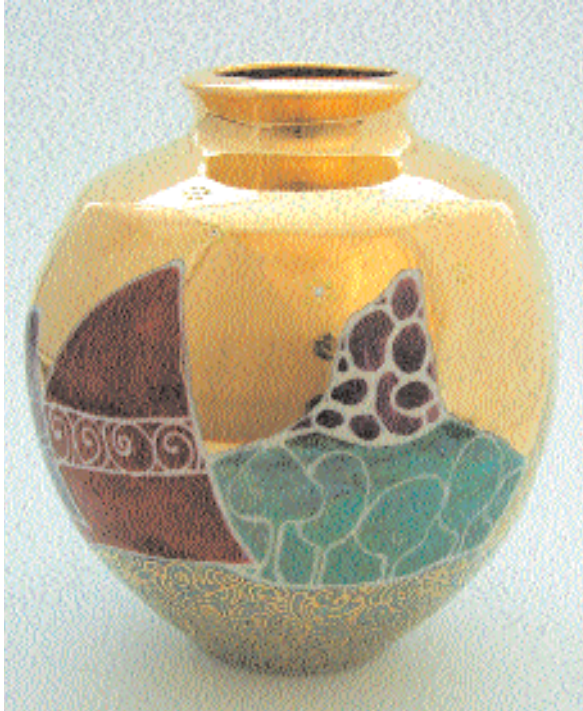
My aesthetic is influenced by the work of Gustav Klimt, concepts of atmospheric perspective inherent in Chinese landscape ink painting, cultural dichotomy and the elevation of objects from the everyday to ceremonial. I endeavour to make pots with volume that are patchworked with colours and lustres. I believe that the object itself is pre-eminent, not its implication. The reinterpretation of classical forms, while building up my own vocabulary of imagery and relationship of pattern to form, allows me to realise this. I aim for the overall effect of surface patterning combined with the integration of form to create a dialogue through visual stimulation. This has necessitated the use of decorating techniques demand a fine degree of control.

I started working with overglaze in 1992-3. I first used lustre when I was completing a graduate diploma in Visual Arts with Owen Rye at Gippsland. I became intrigued with the possibilities of this medium and continued my research with an MFA at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. In 2001 I undertook a 10-week Churchill Fellowship research project on health and safety issues involved with overglaze as well as the problems encountered in intensive hand-decorating techniques. This has allowed me to further extend my work with lustres as well as work with enamels and investigate the making of decals. At this point, I am investigating how sandblasting together with the use



Alan Peascod. *Vessel.*
Gold lustre.

“Studio pottery is currently more exuberant, more experimental, and sometimes more anarchic than ever before. At the same time it is also conservative and a guarantor of decorative tradition. The tension between these extremes, together with the diversity of the work along the way, gives contemporary ceramics its special flavour and interest.” (Dorner: 1994, p. 12)



of a computer controlled plotter/cutter can help to further achieve my aims.

There are hazardous materials used in some of the overglaze techniques. Lustres contain solvents and I have found no way to avoid this. My work is built up of layers of lustre, which have to be fired in between each application. After drawing my images on the pot with a permanent OHP pen, I draw over these lines with lustre resist using a *tjanting*. This allows for a great degree of control. I refer to this technique as batik on clay. I then block in with lustre and fire to 800°C. The ensuing layers are all built up in the same manner. I estimate that 90 per cent of my time is spent using lustre resist which is quite inert. The other 10 per cent is the actual application of the lustre, as all the fine lines apart from some gold pen work is achieved by resist. Because I often end up firing each piece between 10-20 times for overglaze depending on the size and complexity of the piece, I am limiting my exposure to lustre by using a fume booth.

Recently, I have started combining lustres with enamels in the final firing. I have always been wary of the oils and turpentine used for mediums as well as the solvents used for cleaning the enamels. With this in mind I researched the methods that were employed originally in China and used by studio potters in Japan. While in the UK I spoke with Russell Coates and found that he is using green tea as a medium. In other words he is using a water-based medium. Keeping in mind that I needed something to make the enamel/colour adhere to the glaze as well as something to make it flow, I have experimented with many concoctions. At present I am achieving good results for raised enamel with gums and glycerine. I now look forward to integrating the sandblasting into my overall work. For me the challenge of the next step keeps my work progressing.



Top: Johanna Demaine.
Star Light Star Bright.
 Above: Johanna Demaine.
Watching the Sails.
 Lustres and enamels,
 multiple firings.

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Johanna De Maine is a ceramic artist from Maleny, Queensland, Australia.