

The Saggar Firing of Patty Wouters

by Roger Huisman

Patty Wouters is always busy doing a thousand-and-one things simultaneously—throwing, teaching, exhibiting, running a household with two children. She also runs a studio, Atelier Circle, in the outskirt north of Antwerp (Belgium) where she teaches and practices. Ceramics is more than a passion for this Flemish artist—it's an addiction.

After training as a graphic artist when she left high school, Wouters developed a love for ceramics during a year's course in the United States. Then she continued her ceramics education back in Belgium by attending evening courses while continuing her studies in art. Following a short hiatus after graduation, she continued with more courses and started to develop her own style, from domestic stoneware to sculptural work and finally to porcelain.

"I've always been attracted by the old forms of pots that have been used for thousands of years in religious rituals and everyday life," says Wouters, who visited many museums in Europe and in Korea, Japan and Indonesia. "[I found] these forms all over the world, they're timeless and universal. I try to represent this universal spirit in my work." Yet, at the same time, Wouters considers throwing a pot a sensual experience: "All the time you're busy feeling, smoking, rubbing, caressing... This sensuality is also found in the finishing layer: the burnishing and *terra sigillata* transform the upper layer into a silky smooth skin, which invites you to touch and feel the work."

Wouters chooses primitive firing techniques because she finds the different effects on a series of pots interesting. Though she tries to control and manipulate the firing procedure, the firing is still able to surprise her.

Wouters often produces works in series, typically with porcelain plates or vases resting on top of handbuilt pedestals. Completing a series of pots takes many phases, all of which require great concentration and accuracy (see Figures 1 through 3). After coming up with a design, Wouters starts a series by modeling the feet. While these are drying, she throws porcelain forms, such as plates or vases, which will rest on top of the pedestals. As soon as the forms are fairly dry, she starts trimming with a Surforn tool, then continues with homemade trimming tools and ribs to remove trimming marks. The pots are subsequently burnished using a little piece of plastic cut out of a discarded ice-cream box. Every step is taken at the right time: "It's important to choose the right time to start burnishing. When the clay is too wet or too dry, it won't give a nice result. It's almost a matter of minutes."

Applying the glaze on the inside of the pots is another demanding process. Wouters applies glaze on greenware when it is bone dry. She states, "If it takes too long, the glaze penetrates the walls and can cause cracks or even collapse completely." The next step is the application of the *terra sigillata* layer, which is burnished with a plastic shopping bag wrapped around



Figure 1. In producing the series "Moving Circles" (see page 32), Wouters threw porcelain bowl forms. After allowing the forms to set up to leather hard, she moistens the wheel and slicks the pot right-side up on the wheel to trim a glaze rim on the inside, prior to trimming the outside of the pot.



Figure 2. Wouters roughly trims the form with a Surforn blade, then uses homemade trimming tools and ribs to refine the form. She polishes the surface with her finger wrapped with a plastic bag. She states: "It's important to choose the right time to start burnishing. When the clay is too wet or too dry, it won't give a nice result. It's almost a matter of minutes." Wouters often spends up to an hour trimming and burnishing a pot.

her finger. Eventually, the object is bisqued at 2012°F for five to ten hours, depending on the load of the kiln. The pieces are then soaked in metal sulfates and fired in a homemade sagger covered with different kinds of combustible materials and metallic salts.

WARNING: Metal sulfates are toxic and must be handled with extreme caution!



Figure 3. Applying glaze to bone-dry greenware is demanding. Wouters states: "If it takes too long, the glaze penetrates the walls and can cause cracks or even collapse completely." After the glaze has dried, she scrapes any unwanted glaze from the inside and outside of the pot.

After firing, Wouters rinses her pots to wash away the dirty marks of the combustibles. Sometimes an extra polishing is needed. The terra sigillata and the reduction firing often lead to breathtaking results.

"Sometimes the result is much nicer than I had expected. Sometimes it seems disappointing at first sight. It happens however, that after awhile I start to appreciate the way the fire leaves its marks on the pots."



Figure 4. After the form has dried from applying the glaze on the inside, Patty immerses the pot in terra sigillata up to the glaze rim. When the terra sigillata is almost dry, the piece is burnished with a plastic shopping bag wrapped around her finger. Once dried, the pots are bisque fired to 2012°F (1100°C).



Figure 5. The subtle patterns in Wouters' work are a result of the reduction firing with materials such as metal, wood, bark, pineapples, leaves and metal sulfates. Cobalt provides blue through gray, iron yields rust to sandy-colored results, and copper provides a range from pink to blood or wine red and yellow to green. Patty places her pots in homemade saggars surrounded by the various materials.



Figure 6. Wouters fires her saggars in an old electric kiln, which she converted into a gas kiln. The saggars are placed in the kiln and covered with kiln shelves, and fired to low temperatures. She made a burner port on one side at the bottom, and the heat comes up in a circular motion. The heat doesn't spread evenly (the temperature can vary 120°F between the top and bottom), but it serves her goal of obtaining a wide variety of results.