

IDENTIFYING  
AMERICAN  
POTTERY  
**LOOK AT THE BOTTOM!**

## IDENTIFYING AMERICAN POTTERY

Have you ever wondered why some people turn every piece of pottery over and look at the bottom? Maybe you thought they were emptying the contents or dusting the shop! Well, some of the pottery lovers like myself have spent many years identifying American pottery, and one of the best ways to do this is by looking at the bottom of the piece. In most of the American pottery pieces, the bottom tells more than the glaze. The bottom shows the name, if there is one, the color of the clay, the way the piece is fired, and other characteristics that help with the identification.

### THE OBVIOUS

If you pick up a piece of pottery and it has identifying marks such as a name or logo, you can easily determine the maker. This is wonderful, but not always available. See figure 1. Since not all pottery is marked, the identification must be done with a little more resourcefulness.



Figure 1.

### THE WEIGHT

The best identifier I have found for determining if an unmarked piece of pottery is AMERICAN made is the heft of the piece. Most American pottery pieces have some weight to them—unlike the Japan imports of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s that seem fairly light in comparison. This is a good place to start to identify the country of origin, if it is not shown. So, just in the process of picking up the piece, the weight is registering in my mind. This is something that has to be developed over time. It is not that any piece over a certain weight is American pottery—it is the relationship between the size and the weight that helps determine the country of origin. The American pieces feel like they have “heavy bottoms” and often the walls are thicker than Japan and other foreign potteries.

### THE CLAY

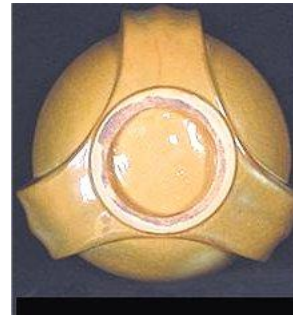
The clay color is the first thing I see on the bottom of any piece of pottery, and certain colors can identify the maker. It is essential to look for an unglazed area to determine the clay color.



**Figure 2.**

For example, you probably know that Frankoma was made with a red clay for many years. See figure 2.

Frankoma was also made with Ada and a pink clay. Ada clay was a yellow beige and was EARLIER than the red clay pieces. See figure 3.



**Figure 3.**



**Figure 4.**

Blue Mountain pottery of Canada is usually made of red clay, is often unmarked and looks and feels much like American pottery. Early Peters and Reed pottery was red clay, too, as were many of the Arts and Crafts pots like Grueby. Some Italian and Mexican pottery is made with red clay, and much of the southwest or Native American pottery uses shades of red. Harris G. Strong used red clay sometimes, too, and Nicodemus is a red clay pottery. Jugtown is often red clay, and there are some North Carolina potters who used red clay. See figure 4.

Of course there are lots more, but if you have a piece of pottery with a red clay base, this is a start. There are many different shades of “red” clay, but red and deep pink clays have been readily available to the potter for centuries, and this color often gives the glaze a different look than it would have with another color clay.

Yellow clay was primarily from Ohio, so most of the Ohio potteries used yellow clay. Roseville, McCoy and Brush are examples of the yellow clay potters. See figure 5.



**Figure 5.**



**Figure 6.**

Robinson-Ransbottom was mostly yellow clay. Watt Pottery is in a class I call yellowware, since they used a clear glaze over the yellow clay instead of colors. Robinson-Ransbottom, Blue Ridge, Purinton, and Watt all did some yellowware with a clear glaze over the yellow clay. See figure 6.

Weller sometimes used yellow to cream colored clay, but just when you think you have learned how to identify these by clay color, another one shows up. Look at this Weller piece in red clay! See figure 7.



**Figure 7.**



**Figure 8.**

Hull and Shawnee are a cream color with a pink tint to the clay. So are American Bisque and Royal Copley. Don't confuse this with pink clay—used by Coventry and Kay Finch and a few other California potters, including some Hagen-Renaker. See figure 8.

Camark and some Arkansas potteries as well as Texas potters used a white to ecru clay, primarily. See figure 9.



**Figure 9.**



**Figure 10.**

Niloak is often white clay, and much of the Niloak was heavier with a wider foot or base than many other American potteries of that era. See figure 10.

Alamo and Gilmer are Texas potteries using white clay. Figure 11.



**Figure 11.**

Stangl Pottery is often made of a white clay, too. Some Hawaii pieces are also white clay. Figure 12.



**Figure 12.**



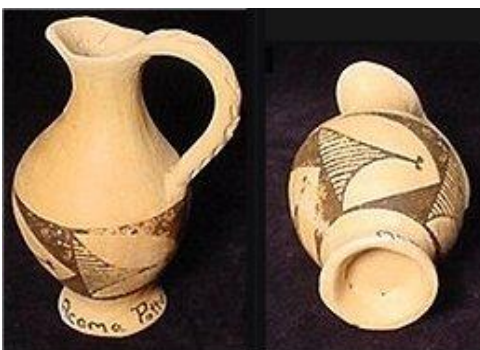
**Figure 13.**

Monmouth or Western Stoneware used a sandy clay, often seen with a maple leaf and USA incised into the clay. See figure 14.

Beige clay was used by Rosemeade and some eras of Dryden, primarily Kansas Dryden. Figure 13.



**Figure 14.**



**Figure 15.**

Some of the southwest Native American pottery is beige clay, too. This pitcher is marked Acoma on the side. Figure 15.

Mosaic tile made pieces that were not tiles, and they often have beige clay. See figure 16.



**Figure 16.**



**Figure 17.**

Heath used sandy clay for much of their dinnerware lines. Dryden and Rosemeade may be sandy clay, too.

See figure 17.

Any pottery that has been soaked in water may be beige, too, so beware of dirty bottoms!

## **THE FOOT**

The shape, glazing and markings of the “foot” or base surface of the piece which makes contact with a supporting surface (ie – table or shelf) can be as revealing as the color and texture of the clay.

Many pieces of pottery have a dry rim around the bottom edge, known as a dry foot. See figure 18.



**Figure 18.**



**Figure 19.**

Others have a completely dry or unglazed bottom, and still others have wedge shapes on the bottom. Royal Copley frequently used bars across the bottom.

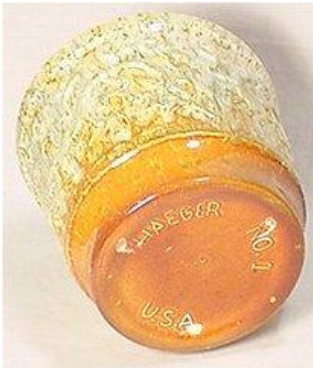
See figure 19.

American Bisque used the wedge shapes routinely, so that is always my first guess on a piece with a dry wedge foot. Figure 20.



**Figure 20.**

Companies using a dry foot include most of the Ohio companies and some Stangl of New Jersey.



**Figure 21.**

Several companies used stilts for glazing pottery, and the bottom will be glazed over completely with three small marks for the stilts. Haeger and Royal Haeger are often glazed like this. See figure 21.



There are also some California potters who used stilts or firing pins for most of

their glazing. Metlox was one California pottery using firing pins. See figure 22.

**Figure 22.**

Vohann is another example of a glazed bottom with firing pins. Figure 23.



**Figure 23.**



**Figure 24.**

RedWing (also Rumrill ) and Stangl used stilts for some of their ware lines. See figure 24.

Peters and Reed often has three stilt marks, too, and the old pieces show red clay under the glaze. SO, if you see three little flaws on a glazed bottom, these are not damage—they are stilt marks or firing pin marks used for the firing process. Examining the bottom for stilt marks may reveal some numbers that may help with identification, too.

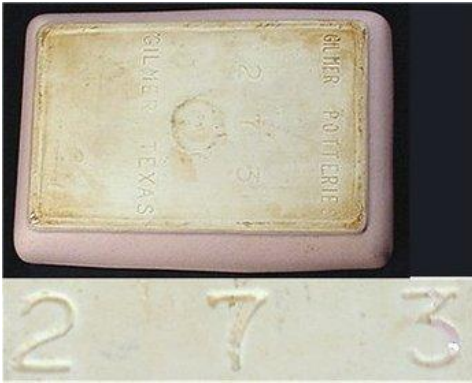
## **THE NUMBERS**

For many years, three numbers were used to identify many of the SHAPES for American pottery. Some companies only used two numbers for some of the shapes, and some used four. These are numbers that are in the mold, not handwritten. (See Figure 23 Below) RedWing and RumRill are routinely marked with numbers, and sometimes the name. Some of the pieces were also marked with a letter, a dash, then a number – so items marked similar to M-3333 are often Redwing (Murphy Era).

If you see three numbers at a slant on a yellow clay pot, it may be Brush or McCoy. See Figure 25.



**Figure 25.**



**Figure 26.**

Three square numbers on a white pottery bottom may be Alamo Pottery, made in San Antonio, Texas from about 1946-1952, or it may be Gilmer, another Texas pottery in business for much longer. Figure 26.

Remember to look at Camark and Niloak, too, because they used a white clay for much of their production. Note the difference, though. Alamo and Gilmer often have a completely unglazed bottom, while Camark and Niloak may have just a dry foot. Figure 27.



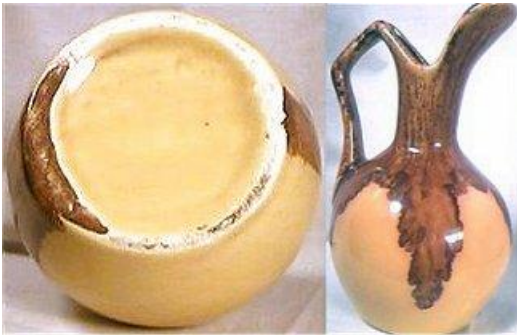
**Figure 27.**

The way the numbers are written, the style of number and even the number of numbers are all significant in determining the maker of a piece of pottery. It is that combination of details that helps the pottery enthusiast to determine the maker.

### **THE GLAZE**

This article is about the identification of American pottery by the bottom, and it is not my intent to vary from that topic much, but it is difficult to look at the bottom and not see the top—so a comment on glaze seems essential here. Once the clay color has been examined, the weight of the pot has been considered, and it has been determined to likely be an American pottery, then a cursory glance at the glaze may help with certain identification.

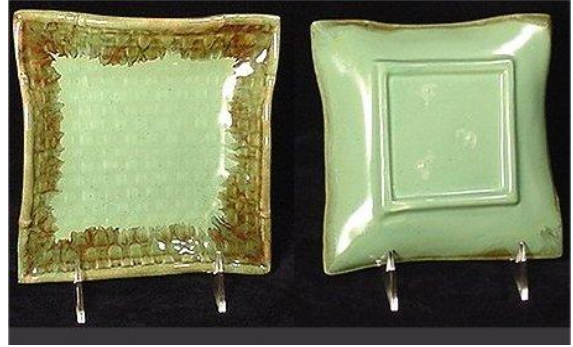
The glazes in pottery went with fashion of the day, and trends can be noted, although there are lots of exceptions. The era of standard glaze—the shiny brown finish used by Weller, Loyal-Nel-Art, Peters and Reed and Rozane—was at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Great detail in hand-painting and hand-work including sgraffito with pastels, predominated the next 15 years or so. Think Rookwood and Newcomb. By 1915, much American pottery was matte finish and early Art Deco shapes. This continued through the 1920's. Some American potteries went back to shiny glazes in the late 1930s and 1950s, and through the 1960s for many of the companies. Much of the newer Roseville, not reproduction but 1960s era production, was a shiny glaze, but this started as early as 1937 with Ivory II production. Roseville, for one, had both shiny and matte patterns side by side for many years. By 1947, most of their lines had gone to shiny glaze. The same general dating can be used for Hull, Weller, and other American companies of the first half of the Twentieth Century. In general, shiny glaze has not met with the same favor by collectors as the matte glaze pieces. This is probably most evident in Van Briggles and Rookwood. The shiny pieces do not sell for the premium prices of matte glaze pieces.



**Figure 28.**

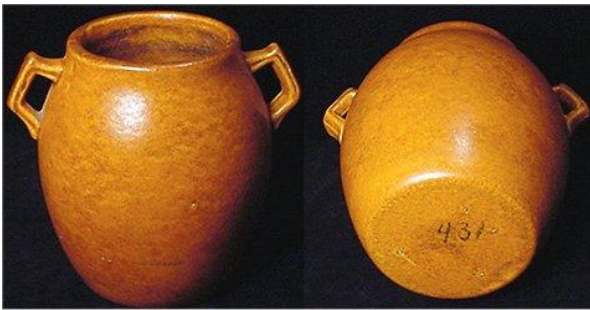
Some companies typically made certain colors and styles of glazes. Winart Pottery made a drip glaze that identifies much of their wares. See figure 28.

Guppys Island Ware of California used a drip glaze. See figure 29.



**Figure 29.**

Drip glazes were also common in Fulper, Stangl, and Zanesville pottery. Morton pottery made drip glaze pots and figurines, and it is becoming collectible.



**Figure 30.**

Crystalline glazes were done in early Camark and early Haeger. See figure 30.

There are some contemporary studio potters doing glazes with large crystal formations in the glaze – but these early production works were small crystals. See figure 31.



**Figure 31.**

Lava or foam glazes were common in VanBriggle and Haeger – the most recognized being Bennington Brown Foam by Haeger. These are a type of drip glaze, but are bubbled at the top and do not form the “drips” of drip glazes.



**Figure 32.**

Mottled glazes were most often made by Ohio potters--Burley-Winter, McCoy and Zanesville come to mind. Figure 32.

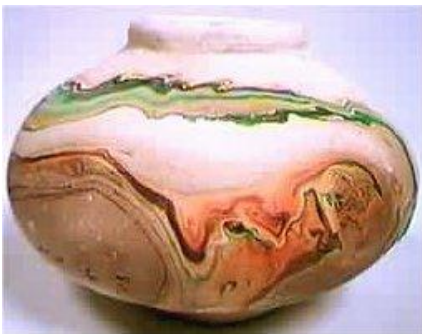
### **OTHER IDENTIFIERS**

Camark used a cutting tool that left what I call “saw marks” on the dry foot of their pots.

I have been able to identify several Camark pieces instantly by the saw marks. See figure 33.



**Figure 33.**



**Figure 34.**

Nemadji has a distinctive look, done almost in mission style like the swirl clay potters. Figure 34.

Haeger often looks as if it has a “seam” in the middle of the glazed bottom, and that helps in the identification of any Haeger or Royal Haeger that is not otherwise marked. Some Weller has a distinctive three-part seam at the bottom. See figure 35.



**Figure 35.**



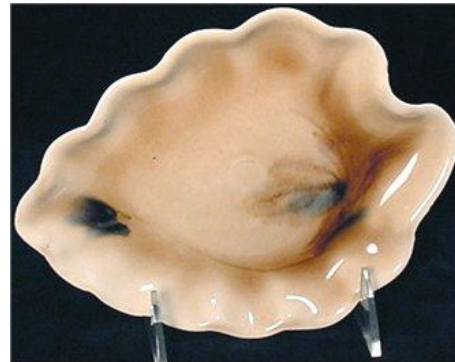
**Figure 36.**

Purinton may have a seam with an unglazed foot. See figure 36.

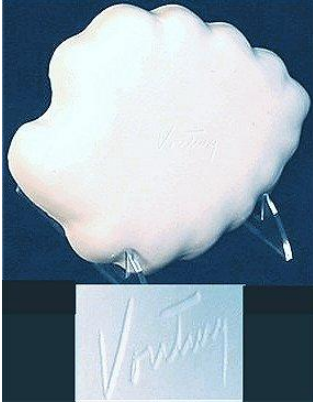
Some Dryden has a flat unglazed bottom, and that, along with the sandy clay helps identify older Dryden, even if the mark is not readable.

Vitreous china was made by many of the American potters, and it is best known as restaurant ware. It is usually white clay with a very hard, high-fired finish. Much of the Alamo and Gilmer pottery is vitreous, pottery fired at a high temperature in the kiln. Mosaic also did vitreous with a white or sandy clay and hard shiny glaze. This pottery is difficult to chip or break, and feels like bathtub porcelain. It is usually very heavy, almost the weight of stoneware.

Vontury of New Jersey was also high-fired pottery, and much of the Vontury is done in pastels with impressionistic nature scenes. Figure 37.



**Figure 37.**



**Figure 38.**

Most Vontury is marked, but the name is difficult to read unless you know what it should be. See figure 38.

Handles were often elaborate on Fulper and Stangl and sometimes Dryden and Morton. Much of the Floraline McCoy line was very plain, Art Deco style pottery, made for the florist trade. Hyalyn also made Deco style pieces, and often they had cork bottoms. See figure 39.



**Figure 39.**

What I call “sloppy” pots were made by Burley-Winter, Zanesville and sometimes McCoy. These had a glaze that ran down over the edge of the dry foot, oftentimes not trimmed.



**Figure 40.**

VanBriggle did some of these, too, but most of the VanBriggle pottery is marked and not difficult to identify. Figure 40.

## CONCLUSION

When looking at a piece of pottery, learning to combine the information here will be the most helpful. Check the weight, then the bottom. Check the color, then the design of the bottom – whether a dry foot, flat bottom, wedged base, ridged bottom or stilts. Then, identify the piece by style, glaze, or some other identifier. Confirm your conclusion by checking in a book or the internet. Once you have done this for a few years, you will develop confidence in your skill.

This is just a lightweight review for identification of unmarked American Pottery. Maybe it will encourage you to try your luck at identification of pieces on your shelf or in the collectibles malls. It may also give some insight into why some people pick up pottery and check out the bottom. They aren't dusting the shop, or emptying the spiders (or crickets in Texas). They are looking under the pot for answers!

Happy hunting for American Pottery!

About the Author: Linda H. Richard has been collecting American Pottery for twenty years, and has been an ISA Appraiser for ten years. She is currently pursuing other interests and is not an active appraiser with the International Society of Appraisers. She has contributed to several books and articles. Her husband, Darrell, does the photography and design work for her pursuits.