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When Was Fine Art Pottery First Made?

Some experts consider that the earliest known fine art ceramic [sculpture](#) is the cache of figurines unearthed at Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, as exemplified by the [Venus of Dolni Vestonice](#), a statuette of a nude female figure, which has supposedly been dated to approximately 25,000 BCE.

In comparison, the earliest [ancient pottery](#) - allegedly found in China - are believed to date from approximately 30,000 BCE. However, no date has yet been scientifically established for these discoveries. At present the earliest carbon-dated [Chinese pottery](#) is the [Xianrendong Cave Pottery](#), discovered in Jiangxi Province, which dates to 18,000 BCE. After this comes the [Yuchanyan Cave Pottery](#) from Hunan Province (16,000 BCE), followed by [Vela Spila Pottery](#) from Croatia (15,500 BCE) and [Amur River Basin Pottery](#) (14,300 BCE). Meanwhile, in Japan, ceramics began with [Jomon Pottery](#) (from 14,500 BCE). For more details of chronology, please see: [Pottery Timeline](#).

In the West, pottery is associated with [Neolithic art](#), and achieved an early high point in Classical [Greek art](#), in the creation and decoration of vases. Many [art critics](#) consider [Greek pottery](#) to represent the zenith of ceramic art. Other sophisticated forms appeared in [Islamic art](#), made by Middle Eastern ceramicists, who invented tin-glaze in the 9th century CE. In the East, the most outstanding fine art ceramics were first produced in [China](#), where significant advances were achieved in the composition, glazing and decoration of clay objects.

For early works, see: [Neolithic Art in China](#) (7500-2000 BCE). An example of Chinese ceramic art is the remarkable **Celadon glaze** (first made during the Han Dynasty 206 BCE - 220 CE) created by a high-iron mixture which turned various shades of green during firing. (For other East Asian Celadon, see also: [Korean Art](#).) For a guide to the aesthetic principles behind Oriental pottery and other arts, see: [Traditional Chinese Art: Characteristics](#). For the evolution of pottery and porcelain in China, see: [Chinese Art Timeline](#) (18,000 BCE-present). In the Americas, pottery first appeared in [Pre-Columbian art](#) around 2000-1800 BCE.

What Are the Different Types of Pottery?

There are three basic categories of pottery: **earthenware**, **stoneware** and **porcelain**. They vary according to the clay used to make them, and the temperature needed to fire them.

Earthenware

This is the longest-established type of pottery, dating back to the Stone Age. Although its composition can vary significantly, a generic composition of earthenware clay is: 25 percent ball clay, 28 percent kaolin, 32 percent quartz, and 15 percent feldspar. It is the softest type, being fired at the lowest temperature. It is porous (absorbs water) and easily scratched. To make earthenware objects waterproof, they need to be coated in a vitreous (glass-like) liquid, and then re-fired in the kiln. The iron-content of the clay used for earthenware gives a colour which ranges from buff to dark red, or even cream, grey or black, according to the amount present and the atmosphere (notably the oxygen content) in the kiln during firing. Earthenware can be as thin as porcelain, but it is less strong, less tough, and more porous than stoneware. Generally speaking, earthenwares are fired at temperatures between 1000-1200 degrees Celsius. The category of earthenware includes all ancient pottery, terracotta objects, 16th century and later Japanese and Chinese pottery, as well as European pottery made up to the 17th century. In particular, it includes **maiolica** (faience or delft) a tin-glazed style of earthenware. The greatest examples of fine art earthenware are undoubtedly the series of Chinese clay warriors, known as the *Terracotta Army*.

Stoneware

Called stoneware due to its dense, stone-like character after being fired, this type is impermeable (waterproof) and usually opaque. In its natural state stoneware clay is grey but the firing process turns it light-brown or buff coloured, and different hues may then be applied in the form of glazes. Generally speaking, stonewares are fired at temperatures between 1100-1300 degrees Celsius. Stoneware clays are used in the manufacture of commercial ware, but are also preferred by artists (eg. Bernard Leech et al) creating fine art pottery. The earliest stoneware was produced during the era of [Shang Dynasty art](#) in China (c.1400 BCE); it first appeared in Europe in Germany (the Rhineland) in the 15th century. Later in the 17th century, English ceramicists first began producing a salt-glazed form of stoneware. Enhancements followed in the 18th century when **Josiah Wedgwood** created a black stoneware (basaltes), as well as a white stoneware known as **Jasperware**.

Porcelain

The distinction between porcelain and stoneware is rather vague. Chinese ceramicists define porcelain as any pottery item that gives off a ringing tone when tapped, whereas in the West it is distinguished from stoneware by its characteristic translucence when held to the light. According to the Combined Nomenclature of the European Communities, "Stoneware differs from porcelain because it is more opaque, and normally only partially vitrified."

[Chinese porcelain](#) first appeared in China during the era of [Han Dynasty art](#) (206 BCE-220 CE), or perhaps later in the era of [Tang Dynasty art](#) (618-906), using **kaolin** (white china clay) and ground **petuntse** (a **feldspathic** rock). However, enhancements were made during the eras of [Song Dynasty art](#) (960-1279) and [Yuan Dynasty art](#) (1271-1368), as well as [Ming Dynasty art](#) (1368-1644). Sixteenth century Florentine ceramicists tried to reproduce its unique translucence by adding **glass** to clay (creating a form known as '**soft**' porcelain) but the formula of the true or **hard** type of Chinese porcelain was not discovered until the 1700s in **Meissen** and **Dresden**, Germany, when ceramicist **Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus** and alchemist **Johann Friedrich Bottger** began using ground feldspathic rock instead of glass. Later English ceramicists like **Josiah Spode** varied the German formula by adding powdered **bone ash** (a calcium phosphate) to make **bone china** - the standard English type of porcelain which is less prone to chipping and has an ivory-white appearance. The Continent still favours the German type of porcelain while Bone china is more popular in Britain and the USA.

The colour of unfired porcelain clay can be anything from white to cream, while bone china clay is white. After firing they are both white. They are typically fired at temperatures between 1200 to 1450 degrees Celsius, a little higher than stoneware.

High Quality Commercial Ceramics

Commercial tableware may be manufactured using extremely high quality materials, but it remains a mass-produced product, despite its high price tag. Notable brands include: Delftware, English Delftware, Jasperware, Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, and Meissen porcelain.