



Cambridge Archaeology Field Group

What is that pottery?

Number 1. Staffordshire slipware

Field walking and Staffordshire Slipware.

Our field walking efforts produce finds representing many different types of material and covering a wide range of periods but one of the easiest to recognise is the pottery shown in the Figure 1 below (excavated during our Wimpole Parterre Gardens excavations). This part of a Staffordshire Slipware combed decoration platter illustrates the main features we recognise – the decoration and the piecrust rim.



*Figure 1. Staffordshire platter with combed slip decoration and pie crust rim.
From Wimpole parterre garden excavation. (Author's photograph)*

Slipware

When used for decoration in pottery, the word **slip** is used to mean a pottery clay that has been mixed with water and levigated to form a smooth runny suspension of fine particles. This is applied to the surface either as a complete covering or used to pick out various individual design features. It has been used for many years to decorate pottery, as the photograph in Figure 2 below shows a Nene Valley Roman beaker covered in a



dark slip and then decorated using a white coloured slip to pick out the decoration. It is not glazed but go forward to the 17th C and slipware known as Metropolitan (or Harlow from one of its manufacturing sites) uses the same technique. Figure 3 shows the red ware pots use a white slip decoration of lines and squiggles but in this case it is covered by a clear shiny lead glaze.

Figure 2. Nene Valley Roman beaker dating from the 4th C with a white slip decoration of vines and grapes. (<https://www.nenevalleyarchaeology.co.uk>)



Figure 3. Metropolitan (or Harlow) ware dating from the beginning of the 17th C with a white slip decoration of lines and under a lead glaze. From Wimpole parterre garden excavation (Authors photograph)

There are example of this technique using different colour slips, as shown in Figure 4. Pottery known as Werra slipware, made in Germany between 1550-1650, is of this type.



Figure 4. Slipware using different coloured slips under a lead glaze. From Wimpole parterre garden excavation. (Authors photograph)

The use of slips was taken to the next level with the technique used to make what is known as **marbled** pottery. This uses many of the procedures used to make combed slipware.



Figure 5. Example of a marbled decorated platter

How to Make Marbled Slipware Pottery

The process begins with a clay vessel which is either wheel-thrown or press moulded. Moulding did not require skilled potters so more vessels could be produced more cheaply. Slips were either white clay or a dark coloured clay containing iron oxide or manganese

For a platter, a slab of clay was rolled out to an even thickness and supported on a board. A base coat of slip (either white or coloured) was spread over the base vessel. Figure 6 shows the process in action, here the base coat is dark and the applied slip is white (a typical Staffordshire plate has a white base and dark lines). Excess slip was drained off and a series of lines in a contrasting slip were piped across the vessel using a pouring tube (often a feather quill). The width of the lines is controlled by holding the tube closer or further away from the base slip (closer = narrower lines).

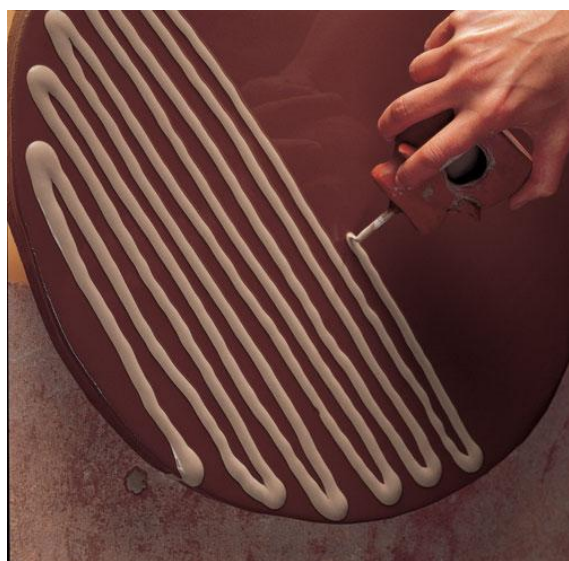


Figure 6. Applying lines to a slipped platter (photograph from <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/article/slipware-marbleizing/>)



Figure 7. A marbled platter after joggling ((photograph from <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/article/slipware-marbleizing/>)

After the slip lines have been applied, the clay slab on its board is tipped and twisted so that gravity causes the slips to flow creating a pattern of swirling lines (see Figure 7) – this process is known as **joggling**. The timing is important – if the slips dry too quickly they will not flow – and generally 30 – 45 seconds is optimal (depending on the wetness of the slips involved).



Figure 8. Forming the platter on a mould (photograph from <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/article/slipware-marbleizing/>)

The marbled vessel is placed to one side in order for the slips to dry enough so they do not stick to the mould. The vessel remains pliable enough to be shaped by the mould, as shown in Figure 8.

The dish is allowed to dry further to a leather hard stage. The irregular edge is trimmed with a knife to form a completely circular form and the rim is then crimped or pressed with a coggle wheel to create a patterned rim. The moulding process helps flatten the slips and after glazing, the surface is smooth.

Staffordshire combed slipware

The process described above is partly the same as the Staffordshire process where the application of a background white slip is followed by the use of dark slip lines. These are usually very thin. A comb or pointed wire is then used to drag perpendicularly through the slip lines to produce the characteristic appearance. It is a very manual process and probably no two pottery pieces looked exactly the same.



Figure 9. Staffordshire combed ware mug (photograph from V & A Museum)

Figure 9 shows a combed ware mug where the variability of pattern in a single vessel is obvious. The white slip appears yellow due to the use of a lead glaze applied on top. Figure 1 also shows how the slip lines can be very fine or thicker and even smudged.

The photograph in Figure 10 below shows just a few examples of Staffordshire Combed ware that we have recovered while field walking.



Figure 10. Staffordshire pottery field walked finds (Author's photograph)

This shows just some of the styles employed. Noticeable on some is the smudging that occurs when the underslip is still not dried enough when the line slip is applied.

Dating and wares

Staffordshire wares were produced in the period 1680 – 1750AD and were a common utilitarian vessels used in lower-middle class homes. They have a pale buff fabric and were the first pottery to be produced using moulds since the Roman Samian ware. A variety of wares were produced, including cups and mugs, plates and bowls, jars and teapots and candlesticks. The increasing demand for finer ware by the middle classes at around 1720AD meant utilitarian wares were less profitable and the Staffordshire potteries started producing much finer wares to satisfy this market. Staffordshire wares were exported to other markets, especially to the American states.

Further Reading

Barker, D., 2009, *Slipware*, Number 297, Shire Books Ltd.

Hildyard, R, 2005, *English Pottery, 1620 – 1840*, V & A Publications

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