

Selecting Fired Finishes: A Guide



Glazes

Your opportunities with glazes are almost endless. You can select from gloss finishes, matte, spotted, speckled, crackled, dipping, dimensional, specialized, textured, opaque, translucent, transparent, semi-opaque, semi-translucent and more. Where do we begin?

When selecting a glaze finish, you will want to determine what you are looking for as a final result to help narrow your choices. Here is a list of question to ask yourself.

- Will I be using this piece to serve food?
- What kind of appearance am I looking for?
- Do I want a shiny or dull finish?
- Am I looking for dimension or texture?
- Would I prefer the look of pottery?
- Do I want a wild, spotted finish?
- Am I applying this glaze over a design?
- Do I need to block out anything under the glaze?
- Does the piece I am about to glaze have texture I want to accentuate?
- Is the surface completely smooth?
- Will this be going outdoors or in water?
- Am I looking for the quickest and easiest way to get this done?

Opaque, Translucent, Semi-Opaque - What Does This Mean?

An **opaque** glaze will generally be sold in color and will block out most designs beneath. These colors are ideal for smooth surfaces where you want solid color. They need to be applied smoothly and even to avoid streaks.

Translucent means that you can see through it somewhat like a stained-glass window. Some light colours will show most design work from below, while other colours may block out parts of a design. These products will generally be darker in crevices or anywhere the glaze is applied heavily. Translucent glazes are ideal for detailed objects where you want the detail to show up. They need to be applied evenly to avoid streaks or overlap marks on smooth items.

Semi-opaque means the glaze is almost opaque, but not solid enough to classify as opaque.

Gloss or Matte

Determine the look you want to achieve. Gloss glazes are what you want if shiny is the ultimate goal. Look for matte finishes if you want dull. Some finishes will combine matte and gloss finishes in one.

Crystal Glazes

Crystal glazes come in a variety of different combinations. These products consist of a base glaze and chunks of hard glaze that melt in firing leaving spots of other colours. The hardened chunks of glaze, or crystals, will normally settle in the bottom of the jar. It is customary to use glaze from the top of the jar for all required coats except for the final coat. For the final coat mix the crystals well with the base glaze. Apply the final coat with the crystals but be careful not to get a heavy concentration of crystals near or on the bottom of your piece. Some crystals will run during firing, and the result could be large drips or bumps of glaze on the bottom of the object or puddles of colour on the kiln shelf. You can always rub or pick excessive crystal clusters off the object before firing if you have concerns that the colors could run or drip.

Some crystal glazes are nontoxic while others may contain lead. Refer to the label of your specific brand to see any safety precautions.

Crackle Glazes

If you like the look of aged pottery with tiny cracks in the finish, then look to crackle glazes. These colours are designed to crackle during the firing process. Crackle glazes come in a variety of different colours ranging from transparent to opaque. Depending on the manufacturer, some may require a lower temperature in the greenware firing, so make sure you plan ahead and let the person doing your firing know if you are planning to use this kind of finish.

It is normal to hear a pinging sound of the glaze cracking even after the objects are removed from the kiln. The glaze can continue to crackle up to a day or more after firing. Most of the cracks are not noticeable (to see) even after a day. You are required to rub a thinned colorant of some kind over the surface so it can catch in the cracks. You can use thinned stains or anything that will flow into the cracks. Select a colour of your choice and rub in a circular motion and you will be amazed at all the cracks.

Use caution in handling the piece from the time you remove it from the kiln. Oils from your skin can fill cracks and prevent colour from staining later. It is best to handle items with a clean cloth between your hand and the object.

Since these colours have actual cracks in the surface, they are not safe for food surfaces. Cracks are breeding ground for bacteria if food is served. Even if the colour is nontoxic, it does not mean it is food safe once fired.

Speckled Glazes

Speckled glazes come in a variety of colours in gloss and matte finishes with an assortment of spec colours from which to choose. These colours are not the same as crystal glazes since the specs of colour are not designed to run like the crystal chunks. The specs are generally suspended in the glaze and require little more than shaking the jar to get them mixed. You can feel free to apply colour on or near the bottom without fear of glaze drips or puddles. Check the label for the particular product you are using since some are nontoxic and others are not. Many speckled colours are safe for food surfaces.

Dimensional Colours

Dimensional can represent many different kinds of products. Some dimensional colours are applied to greenware and required to have a glaze over the top after firing. Some products can be applied to bisque or even on top of a non-moving or non-flowing glaze. Yet others are dimensional like puffy snow, some will break up like eggshells, and others will look like bark. Many unique features are obtainable with a variety of dimensional products.

Pottery Look Finishes

Some manufacturers have recently come out with lines of low-fire glazes that simulate the look of high-fire pottery. These glazes are simple to use and create unique finishes that are difficult to duplicate exactly a second time. Many of the techniques require multiple coats of different products that run and flow to create the pottery look.

Dipping Glazes

For those who are in a hurry or are doing production work, dipping glazes may be what is needed. Dipping glazes need to be in a container that is large than the pieces you are making so you can dunk the item without touching the sides of the container. Mixing is required prior to the dipping process.

Dipping glazes are designed to set up and dry quickly. You normally dunk the item one time and into the glaze for a certain amount of time, pull it out, and within seconds it can be ready to touch. Most artists prefer to use dipping tongs so their hands do not have to go into the glaze. A small amount of smoothing may be required to level out the drip spots or bumps on the glaze prior to firing.

Use the Proper Tools

No matter what kind of finish you select, make sure you get the right tools for application. Manufacturers test products thoroughly before they place them in the market. If you use a stiff drybrush to apply a glaze rather than the soft brush like the directions say, you may not end up with a pleasant finish. If you are not sure what kind of tool to use, read the label.

Colours Designed for Bisque

There are underglaze colours designed primarily for decorating bisque pieces. These colours are frit-based, therefore, when 3 coats are applied, they have a glossy sheen when fired.

One, two, or three coats may be applied. These underglazes for bisque are available from Duncan, Mayco and Gare product lines in various sizes. Clear glaze is also available in various sizes.

When three flowing coats are applied, most colors are opaque and have a gloss finish. However, some colours do not fire as shiny as others, therefore, clear glaze is recommended.

For best results, allow the underglaze to dry completely before glazing. These colours can be used for washes and watercolour techniques

1. Coat coverage is Translucent.
2. Coat coverage is semi-translucent of semi-opaque.
3. Coat coverage is generally opaque.

These underglazes can be used directly on bisque, between some glazes, under some glazes and over some glazes. They can also be mixed with one another to achieve a wide variety of colours. (It is recommended to conduct tests when mixing colours together.)

General firing temperature is cone 06. However, they many can be fired to cone 10. They may be applied to stoneware and porcelain clay bodies. When high firing some colours, appearance may vary and change in colour, value and tone.

Please remember they must be stilted when they are applied to the bottom of a piece, whether glazed or not. Remember, they are frit-based, therefore, they could stock to the kiln shelf during firing.