

Firing Tips

AVOIDING CARBON BURNOUT PROBLEMS

Materials used in ceramics contain naturally occurring impurities that can affect the color, appearance and maturing temperature of the product.

Carbon, found in most clays, is normally considered one of these impurities. Carbon can also be present in the additives and binders which make up clay bodies, slips, decals and lusters.

How Carbon Burns Out

During heating (firing) the carbon reacts with oxygen to form carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide gases. The carbon leaves the body as a gas.

Binders are burned off at a relative low temperature: 300°F to 500°F.

Naturally occurring carbon in clay burns off (become gases) at higher temperatures: up to 1200°F-1400°F.

The rate at which this carbon burns out is related to:

1. The amount of carbon present (that is, the amount of natural contaminants in the body)

Some bodies have more contaminants than others, such as red clays. This needs to be considered when planning the firing.

2. Amount of air available (air provides oxygen for burnout)
Air needs to get to the carbon inside the body.

This is impacted by several factors. A load that is fired very quickly will not allow enough time for the oxygen to react with the carbon, form gases and leave the ware.

If ware is stacked during bisque firing, oxygen may not be able to penetrate all surfaces of or inside all the pieces.

Also, if gases are not removed from the kiln and replaced with fresh air, then there may not be sufficient oxygen to burn out the carbon.

3. Thickness of the piece

Air has to penetrate through the entire thickness of the piece and the gases have to escape the same way. It takes longer for carbon to burn out of a thicker piece of ware.

**Orton**

The Edward Orton Jr.
Ceramic Foundation

PO Box 2760 • Westerville OH 43086

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4. Time and temperature profile during the burn out period

Both time and temperature are important for proper burn out of the carbon. Some carbons require much higher temperatures than others. Oxidation should be completed below red heat (1400°F).

Carbon burns out from the surface first. As more oxygen penetrates the body, then more carbon is reacted to form the CO or CO₂ gas and the burn out process continues. If there is sufficient time, temperature and oxygen, then complete burn out occurs. If these conditions do not exist, the resulting incomplete burn out is referred to as black coring (where the center of the piece has a black or gray cast).

Incomplete Burn Out

Incomplete burn out can result in several firing problems including:

1. Bloating of the ware
If the temperature is hot enough, the outside of the piece will seal up before all the gases can escape. As the body becomes plastic due to glass forming, gases trapped inside the body expand with heat and cause bloating and sometimes cracking of the ware.
2. Glaze defects, such as pinholes
The escaping gases will push through the glaze surface and cause bubbles which pop. If these do not heal, then pinholes will result.
3. Appearance of fired bisque

Where carbon burn out is incomplete, the piece will have a grayish cast (white bodies) or may have a greenish cast (red bodies). The body will also be more porous and weak.

Preventing Incomplete Burnout

1. Slow down the firing.
2. Be sure the kiln is vented adequately so there is sufficient oxygen.
3. Load the kiln with burn out requirements in mind.

Leave plenty of space between ware and shelves. Do not stack ware. Use tile and plate stackers and invert pieces on top of one another to help conserve space and insure proper burnout.

Want to learn more?

Read more about carbon related glaze and body defects in the Orton Firing Line and Technical Tips publications. Each issue is packed full of articles to help you learn more about firing. Members of the Orton Firing Institute receive these publications at no charge. Single copies are available to non-members at a per issue rate. Orton's 80 minute video, *Key Principles of Successful Firing*, is also an excellent resource on firing.

For information on Orton products, see your Orton dealer or distributor. For information on the Firing Institute or publications, contact

Orton Firing Institute, PO Box 460,
Westerville OH 43086, 614-895-2663.