

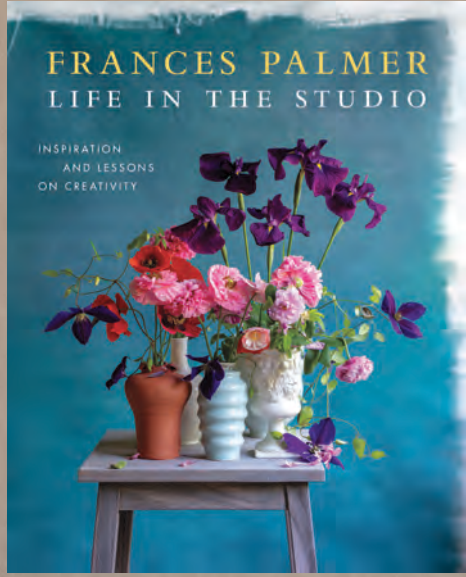
C T C & G

Connecticut Cottages and Gardens

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The **ART** of
DESIGN



EXCERPTED FROM *LIFE IN THE STUDIO*
BY FRANCES PALMER (ARTISAN BOOKS).
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Here, porcelain and earthenware pots are gathered for a group portrait. The porcelain is glazed with ash, celadon and cobalt, and the earthenware has a variety of finishing details; it's precisely these differences that make them look so lovely together. francespalmerpottery.com.

Each material has its own temperament and range of possibilities
CLAY HAS PERSONALITY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCES PALMER





A stack of earthenware cake plates demonstrates the clay's ability to maintain its shape across vast expanses (the bottom plate's diameter is 18 inches). francespalmerpottery.com.



For these pieces, I chose to exploit the cool, smooth white surface of bisque porcelain clay, leaving the pots unglazed. I was inspired by the simple forms of the objects and cabinetry designed by the Shakers; I photographed the group together on a cherrywood "stage," alluding to the wood commonly used by these makers. francespalmerpottery.com.

I read Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* as a child, and I continue to find in both books a reflection of the absurdity of life. In one of my favorite passages from *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice that he pays words extra wages for allowing him to get so much good use out of them. In my work, when I feel I have used a clay body to its utmost inherent qualities, I feel I am paying the clay its extra wages.

I work with three commercially sourced clays, primarily: white earthenware, terra-cotta, and high-fire translucent porcelain. Each has its own temperament and range of possibilities, and I take my cues from the material. For example, a cake plate is best made from earthenware, because this low-fire clay accommodates the cantilevered expanse of the plate over the pedestal. It may warp slightly but mostly keeps its shape. Because porcelain

becomes molten at high temperatures, it would be inclined to slump so would not be advisable for a cake plate. I mostly use porcelain clay for bowls and vases. I often select terra-cotta for garden pots, glazed or unglazed. This porous clay has served this purpose for centuries, but it is also useful for vases to be displayed indoors and for serveware.

WHITE EARTHENWARE

Earthenware is categorized as low-fire clay, indicating the temperature range at which it matures—it is fired to about 1950°F (1066°C) in an oxidized atmosphere. Even after the initial bisque (the first firing, which removes bonded water chemically found in the raw clay body), earthenware is still porous. Therefore, vessels that will hold liquid or food must be completely coated with a glaze to seal the pores and prevent moisture from moving inside the piece.



PORTRAIT: JANE BEILES



My terra-cotta vessels range from classically footed and carved urns to vases with slumped walls. All of the pieces here have been glazed in the interiors so they can hold water. francespalmerpottery.com

White earthenware is a formula originally developed in the mid-1800s in England. It was intended to be an accessibly priced tableware option for middle-class people, in contrast to the more expensive, soft-paste porcelain ware being manufactured for the upper classes. The most famous example of white earthenware was produced in 1779 by Josiah Wedgwood, who named it creamware.

The ceramics of the Omega Workshops, the London art cooperative founded in 1913 (and the original inspiration for my pottery), were mostly white earthenware with a white tin glaze. Artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant approached the surface of each piece as if it were a canvas, using ceramic colors painted on the surface of the glaze.

After spending time with earthenware, I learned that it had wonderful throwing and assembling qualities. It is happy to be squashed, pulled, and manipulated into multiple directions without complaint. Earthenware comprises the majority of my orders, and I am continually developing new shapes and finishes. Whenever I draw a complex tulipiere in my notebook and then form it in earthenware, I am reminded again of Humpty Dumpty paying his words extra for doing additional work.

TERRA-COTTA

Terra-cotta, or “baked earth,” has been an important material in everyday life for thousands of years. One can follow terra-cotta pottery through just about every civilization to document its presence—and not just in the garden. This sturdy clay is perhaps the most primitive of those that I work with.

Terra-cotta matures at a similar temperature to earthenware, approximately 1950°F (1066°C), yet it is grainier clay with a bit of grog, which I can feel in my fingers as I throw. (Grog refers to fired clay particles that range in size from fine to coarse; it is added to raw clay to reduce shrinkage.) Terra-cotta is not as forgiving as white earthenware clay. If a terra-cotta piece requires assembly,

The history of translucent porcelain is vast and complex. It mirrors the progress of technical advancement and trade over centuries originating in China and fanning out through Asia, then migrating to Europe.

such as attaching a pedestal to the main body, I watch carefully for the perfect moment of dryness to connect the different parts. Should terra-cotta crack as it dries, it is difficult to repair.

Several years ago, I researched the history of terra-cotta for a lecture I gave to the Manhattan chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society. In the process, I discovered exquisite ancient pieces. One of my favorites is a drinking cup, or skyphos, from Crete that dates from the eleventh to ninth century BC. This flawlessly proportioned footed cup with handles is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as is a spectacular sixth-century Etruscan stand designed for vegetable and floral offerings. If you walk into the Egyptian gallery at the Met and take a right, there is a rough ware pot from southern Upper Egypt dating from 3900 to 3750 BC that looks so contemporary, it could be sitting in one of our gardens today. Terra-cotta was used to manufacture the first cuneiform writing tablets in Mesopotamia around 3100 to 2900 BC. The Cycladic civilization produced terra-cotta bowls from 3200 to 2800 BC; these have long served as my models for perfect simplicity of form.

To prepare for my lecture, I remade the ancient pots that I planned to discuss, as a way to under-

stand the shapes more clearly. The forms are so beautiful that I was thrilled to have them represented in the studio. I consider this magnificent heritage each time I sit at the wheel.

I like to make terra-cotta pots that are unglazed on the outside and glazed on the inside so that they can be used as bowls or vases yet retain their raw outer surface. Happily, these pieces have recently come into fashion, and I've been getting more orders for these designs.

Most people do not understand the technical challenges of the material. I enjoy and respect terra-cotta enormously, however, and I love working with the clay.

HIGH-FIRE TRANSLUCENT PORCELAIN

The history of translucent porcelain is vast and complex. It mirrors the progress of technical advancement and trade over centuries originating in China and fanning out through Asia, then migrating to Europe.

It's a bit trickier to work with than earthenware or terra-cotta, however. Still, I yearned to throw this temperamental clay in order to produce the beautiful, classic celadon and oxblood glazes that are best achieved at high temperatures in the kiln.

Unlike with earthenware, I try to fuss with the porcelain as little as possible after throwing. If a design requires the pot to be constructed in multiple parts and assembled, everything must be made at the same time, and I hover over the clay waiting for just the right moment, when the clay is at the ideal level of dampness, to bring the pieces together. I try not to put pressure on the rims, and I handle the pots as gently as possible. The drying (which takes substantially longer than for white earthenware) cannot be rushed, or cracking will result. The pots must sit in the studio to dry at their own rate. The porcelain is first bisque fired at a low temperature (about 1650°F/900°C) to enable a bit more ease in handling for the glazing phase. Once the pots are ready for the glaze firing and carefully placed on the kiln shelves, the real magic begins.

I use a propane gas kiln for my porcelain pots, and to watch the temperature rise and the flames roll around the pots is endlessly thrilling. After approximately 12 hours, the kiln reaches about 2350°F (1288°C), at which point the porcelain vitrifies (transforms into a completely nonporous material, like glass). In theory, the clay does not need a glaze to seal its surfaces; the high-fire glazes simply add to the beauty of the piece. ✨

From left to right: low-fire white earthenware, high-fire translucent porcelain, and terra-cotta. Each likes to be thrown and then finished in its own way. Earthenware is the best choice when creating vessels with multiple components, porcelain takes well to gorgeous glazes of all kinds, and the handsome roughness of terra-cotta can offset more formal shapes. francespalmerpottery.com.

