



Black-figure Oinochoe

This particular pot (which is a museum copy of an ancient pot made in Athens in 630 BC), is called an *oinochoe* and would have been used to serve wine.

The clay was shaped on a potter's wheel and *fired* (baked) at a high temperature in a *kiln* (special type of oven) to harden it. Instead of painting figures of people in outline as they had for many years, the *Athenian* potters of the time began to paint people in silhouette: this is called *black-figure*.

Black-figure is done using a type of clay found near Athens. The clay has a lot of iron in it, so it looks black when it is wet. When the clay is *fired* and plenty of air is allowed to get into the *kiln*, the iron in the clay rusts and turns from black to red. This happens because the iron mixes with the oxygen in the air. If the clay is *fired* and no air is allowed to get into the *kiln* the iron cannot mix with the oxygen so the pot stays black.

So to make the picture on the *oinochoe* the potter would have made the pot in the usual way and then left it to dry a little. They would then mix a little of the wet clay with a lot of water to make a *slip* (paint), which they would use to paint the black part of the picture. Detail would be scratched into the *slip* before leaving the whole thing dry.

When the pot was dry they would *fire* it in a *kiln*. At first they would let a lot of air get inside the kiln which would turn the whole pot red (including the *slip*). Remember the clay turns red because the oxygen in the air mixes with the iron in the clay to create *oxidized iron* which is red like rust or blood.

Then, just for a little while right at the end of the *firing*, the potter would shut off the air supply to the *kiln*. When the air runs out the fire sucks the oxygen right out of the clay of the pot. Because the *slip* (paint made of watered down clay) is thinner and easier to suck oxygen out of, the *slip* turns black much faster than the rest of the pot (which is red, the colour of iron with oxygen in it) so revealing the potter's *black-figure* painting.

Black-figure painting lasted until about 525 BC.

