

Meet the Artist of the Month



You can find Patti's work in various places including the Art Gallery of St. Albert



Patti Hartnagel

Ask any potter about their process and you will probably discover that they have a bit of a control issue: things must be done precisely or the work will turn out all wrong.

Raku artists are not your typical potters. They're daredevils of sorts, throwing much caution to the wind as a fairly significant segment of the entire operation is left to the elements. Really, it's all just one big game of Chance: throw the dice and let the chips fall where they may.

Patti Hartnagel wouldn't have it any other way. She's been making raku for more than 25 years. She still remembers that first glimpse of the incredible and unmistakable raku.

"It was so wild! I had never seen anything like that before," she recalled, remembering that course she took so many years ago through the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension.

"It was so unpredictable and spontaneous and very fast! It's just a completely different firing process."

From that very first moment, she was hooked. She was so entranced that she and some of her fellow students convinced the university to put on a ten-week course wholly dedicated to the Japanese pottery with a Western twist. Raku was definitely just what she was looking for in her creative adventure-seeking life.

That's entirely opposite to her reaction to working with functional stoneware where she focused her energies early on. "Been there, done that" is a good way of summing it up. She describes it as such a staid proposition. Clearly, it just wasn't for her.

"I got bored. Everything was predictable – pretty much – with stoneware. You flip the dials on the kiln, you put the glazes on ... and 12 hours later, you've got results. And they're the same results, time after time after time."

Raku is definitely different. It's pottery fired at generally

low temperatures – often with leaves or other combustible debris inside – and the pieces are taken out of the kiln while they are still glowing from the heat just so they can cool in the open air. Hartnagel, like so many other raku artists, has a few burn scars like honour marks to prove that she has earned her way through her practice.

"The red-hot pieces... it's quite scary and dangerous," she admitted. "There's a few hazards along the way. It's interesting and it sure is a lot more fun than stoneware, I've found."

With all of the random variables and inherent risk involved, any ordinary layperson must wonder why they do it. Why does any potter do anything?

It's all for the end result. What you forgo with control of the elements during the process, you gain (or possibly gain) in the beauty of the end product. You can't raku any other way, she says.

Raku can produce some resplendent iridescent colours and, what's more, they are absolutely unrepeatable. Since so much is left up to fate, everything is as unique as a snowflake. There are endless possibilities to how things turn out but, often enough, they turn out brilliantly and astoundingly.

She credited St. Albert potter Elke Blodgett for being a pioneer in raku and opening the public's eyes to the beauty of the artform.

Hartnagel produces a variety of vases, planters, masks, platters, flared vessels, decorative fish and cats, as well as wall hangings.

You can find her work in various places including the Alberta Craft Council, the Legislative Assembly Gift Shop and at the Art Gallery of St. Albert, of course, where she has developed a strong following over the last few years.

This special feature runs once a month and highlights a local artist from the region.



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 including Patti Hartnagel

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