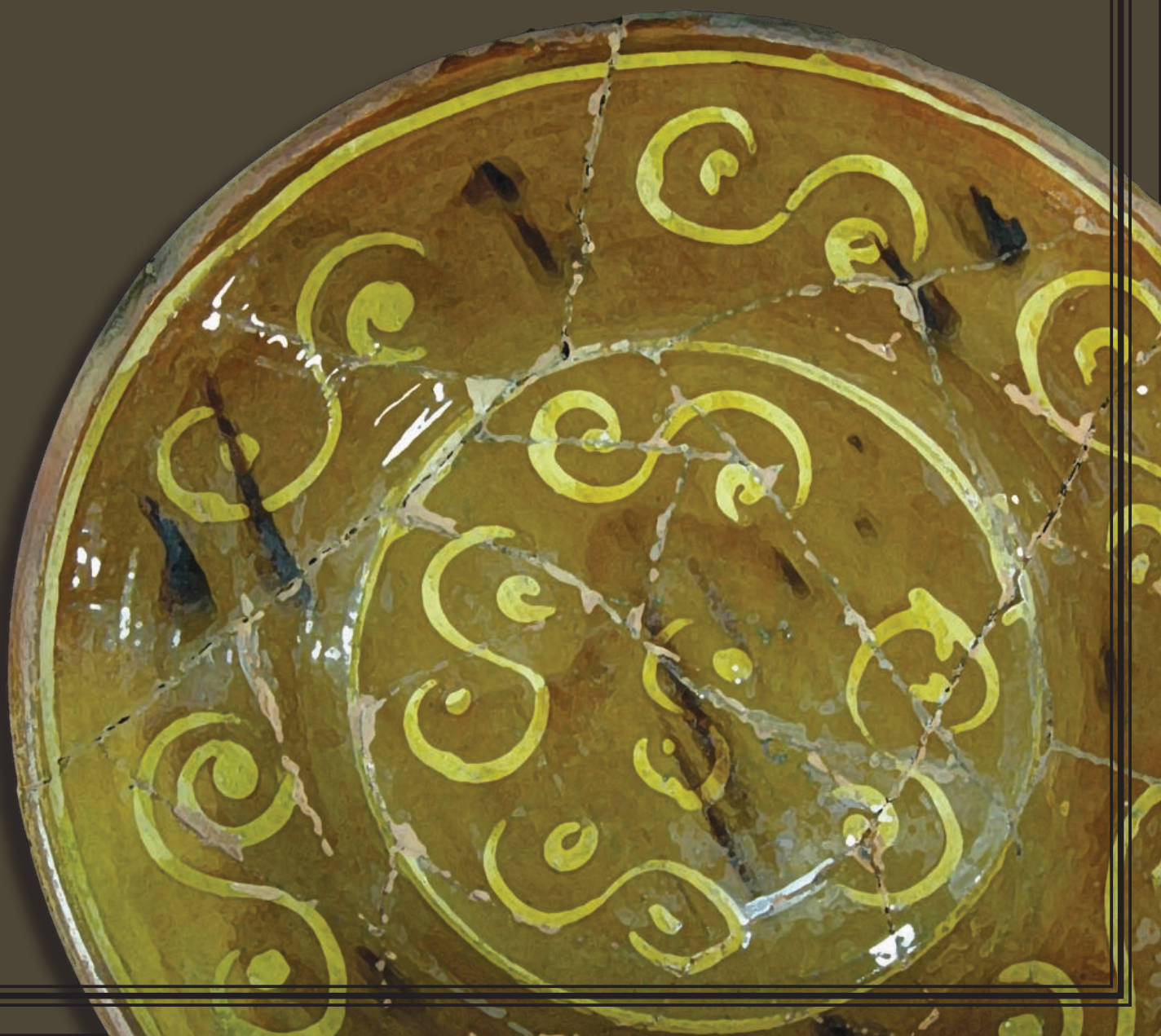


MASSACHUSETTS  
ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH 2007  
SLIPWARE LESSON PLANS



# SLIPWARE LESSON PLAN

This year's Archaeology Month theme, "Don't let the Past Slip Away," is an archaeological pun. While we are true to the obvious meaning, slip is also a material used to decorate the ceramics featured. Slipware, as some archaeologists call it, is made by trailing a slip—or heavily diluted colored clay — onto a vessel before it is fired. The lesson ideas below help convey two important archaeological concepts. The first focuses on the relationship between form and function, the second is an art project that illustrates the technology behind creating the patterns on the ceramics featured on the poster.



Posset pot  
with  
trailed slip  
decoration.  
(MHC)

## BACKGROUND

Archaeologists excavated the pottery featured on this year's Massachusetts Archaeology Month poster during the "Big Dig" archaeological project. Many sites were excavated in downtown Boston before the Central Artery road construction began. Building the new underground tunnels would destroy any buried archaeological sites. In order to preserve the important information buried in these sites, archaeologists were digging with their shovels and trowels long before construction workers began to dig with their backhoes and bulldozers.

All of the pottery on this year's poster comes from the Charlestown neighborhood of Boston. The artifacts generally came from privies (outhouses) surrounding a structure that served many purposes during its lifetime. It was originally constructed in 1629/30 to be Governor John Winthrop's home and an administrative headquarters for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Later it was a tavern known as Long's Ordinary, and finally Three Cranes Tavern. The building was destroyed in 1775 during the Battle of Bunker Hill.



Some of the most interesting artifacts found on archaeological sites are ceramic sherds, or pieces of broken pottery. Here we are going to discuss one kind of pottery in particular: slipware. The town of Staffordshire was a hub of ceramic production in England, therefore most early British slipware designs are referred to as Staffordshire-type. In the earliest days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, most of the materials used by the colonists in their daily lives were imported from Britain. As the colonists became more self-sufficient they began to produce these items here in Boston and surrounding towns. Slipwares produced in England were made from yellowish clay, while those made here were generally more pinkish-red.



Example of "combed" slipware.  
Longridge Collection (SL38)

In its simplest form, slip is a mixture of equal parts clay and water and is, as its name implies, the main form of decoration for slipwares. Some historic potters referred to slip as a "batter" or "syrup," if that helps you visualize its consistency. To make a slipware, a clay vessel was constructed, either by hand or on a potter's wheel. After the object was formed, there were many different kinds of slipware decoration that could be used.

The most basic slipware design is known as "slip trailing." The potter applied lines or dots of slip onto a vessel using a tool called a slip cup. Most slip cups were simple containers made of clay that had a small reed or quill inserted at the bottom to create a

nozzle. While it was the simplest method, the designs were still difficult to control. It required a steady hand, and the slip cup nozzles were constantly getting clogged as the slip dried.

"Combed slipware" is one of the simpler techniques to replicate. One color of slip was poured over the entire surface of the vessel. Immediately after this first coating of slip, a slip of contrasting color was applied from a slip cup in parallel lines over the surface. Then a sharp tool, usually made of animal bristle, was pulled through these lines creating a zig-zag effect. Many chefs use a similar technique today to decorate desserts.

"Marbled slipware" is similar to combed slipware because it uses two different colors of slip. All of the steps are the same up until the very last one. Instead of using a comb to mix the colors, the potter tipped and rotated the vessel so that the slips would swirl around each other, creating a "marbled" appearance. The potter had to be careful to mix the slips just enough. Otherwise the slips could blend too much, leaving just a brown muddy-looking surface.

The earliest British slipware that archaeologists find in New England is "sgraffito" (from the Italian word for "scratched"). It is different from the other slipware techniques because instead of adding slip to create the



Example of "sgraffito" slipware.  
Longridge Collection (SL24)

decoration, the potter removed it. A slip (in contrasting color from the clay body, usually white) was poured all over the vessel. After the slip dried a little, the potter used a tool to scrape away the slip and reveal the clay body in whatever design the artist desired, often floral or geometric forms. Then the entire vessel was glazed, and the two contrasting colors were revealed. These designs were usually intricate and delicate.

All of these slipware objects were finished the same way. After all of the slips were completely dry, a clear lead glaze was applied to the surface and the vessel was put into the kiln to bake. This hardened glaze made the vessel impermeable and made it possible to serve food and beverages in them without the contents leaking.

The first lesson plan in this unit explores a variety of vessel forms, and asks students to identify how various vessel forms are used. This helps students understand the relationship between form and function. The second plan gives the students the opportunity to create their very own slip decorated plate.

The images in this lesson plan, other than the archaeological examples, are from the Digital Library for the Decorative Arts and Material Culture. You can find the database online at: <http://decorativearts.library.wisc.edu>. The ceramics pictured are from the Chipstone Ceramics Collection and the Longridge Collection. The digital library is made possible by the Chipstone Foundation.

## 2007 MASSACHUSETTS ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH

### SLIPWARE LESSON PLAN 1

Taverns served many purposes in the 17th and 18th centuries: travelers stopped for a meal and a place to stay and community members gathered to debate local issues and socialize. A guest could get all three meals of the day at a tavern or have a drink while playing cards or dice. Tavern patrons in the 17th century would be expected to share not only their dinner table, but the objects on the table as well. It was common at this time for a table of hungry tavern-goers to share: tankards for their beer or ale, large platters for their meats, and multi-handled pots for other drinks or porridge. In the 18th century, colonists began to drift away from this idea of communal eating, and more individual place settings of cups and plates as well as utensils start to show up in the archaeological record.

Most of the pottery that is excavated at Three Cranes Tavern is referred to as tavernware. Usually, tavernwares fell into two categories: vessels for serving food and vessels for consumption. If food/drink was prepared or served in the vessel then it was a service object. But if someone ate or drank from the vessel it was for consumption. Objects that fall into both of these categories were found during the excavations at Three Cranes Tavern. Many 17th and 18th-century vessels had specific forms, the shape of which was directly related to how they were used. There are numerous objects that we use today that do the same thing.

### OBJECTIVE:

Identify vessel shapes, similar to the ones excavated at Three Cranes Tavern, and understand how their shapes and function were dictated by changes in Colonial culture.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Ask students to identify things they eat and drink from that have a specific design that allows them to function for a very specific food or situation. Examples may be a sport bottle, sandwich container, travel mug, jello mold, deviled egg plate, etc. Have them identify and describe the specific attributes that make the modern vessel work.
2. Study the images of 17th and 18th-century vessels and objects. Students should attempt to identify these objects to the best of their ability. **(Exercise 1 - Student worksheet and teacher's key provided).**
3. On a separate sheet of paper, have the students design their own vessel to fit a particular need or desire of their own. Have them draw it and explain its form and function. Later the students could also use what they will learn in Lesson 2 to decorate this vessel with a traditional slipware pattern.
4. Students can further their exploration of vessel shapes during this exercise. On pages 7 and 8, students can try their hand at completing the slipware vessel. These fragments were all excavated during the Big Dig. Students should use what they learned about vessel form and function during the first part of this lesson to complete the shape. There are no right or wrong answers as long as the student can explain why he/she chose that particular form, and what function this item would perform. **(Exercise 2 - Student worksheet and teacher's key provided).**

### SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER:

The students should evaluate these questions during each part of this lesson.

What purpose did this vessel serve? Would it be for service or consumption?

What would you most likely find in this vessel?

Would it need to be glazed on the inside? Outside? Or both?

Would this be for individual or communal use?

What might this item need to be made out of (glass, plastic, metal, ceramic, etc.)?



# EXERCISE 1: IDENTIFY THE VESSELS

## SLIPWARE LESSON 1.1

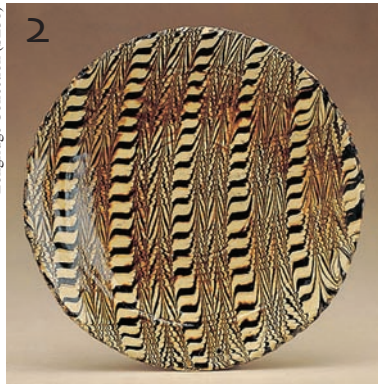
Longridge Collection (SL94)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Longridge Collection (SL38)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Chipstone Collection (1963.15)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Chipstone Collection (1965.10)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Longridge Collection (SL45A)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Longridge Collection (SL93A)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

# EXERCISE 1: IDENTIFY THE VESSELS

## SLIPWARE LESSON 1.1 CONT.

Longridge Collection (SL44A)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Longridge Collection (SL86B)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

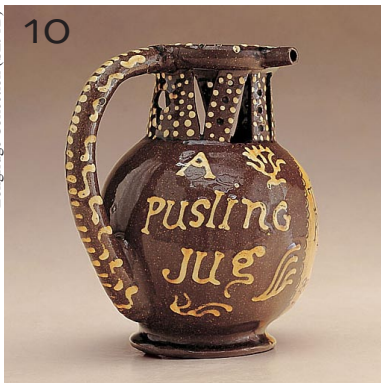
Longridge Collection (SL65B)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

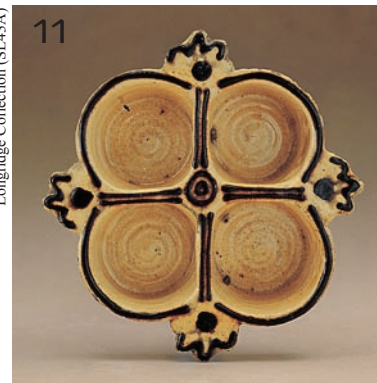
Longridge Collection (SL91B)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Longridge Collection (SL43A)



**Object/Purpose:**

**Decoration:**

Study the vessel fragments below. Using what you learned about vessel forms in Exercise 1, complete the vessel shape in the space provided and describe how this object may have been used.

DRAWING SPACE

1.



2.





DRAWING SPACE

3.



4.



1. **Flower container:** Vessels like these were used to hold floral decorations around the home.  
*Decoration: marbled slip.*
2. **Plate:** These vessels served much the same purpose then as they do now. As eating became less communal, more individual place settings including plates began to appear.  
*Decoration: combed slip.*
3. **Tyg:** This was a large mug with three or more handles- sometimes as many as nine. These handles divided the rim into sections to allow for several drinkers. The multiple handles also made it easier for tavern guests to pass hot drinks around without burning themselves. This particular vessel has four handles.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*
4. **Figural jug:** Pitchers and jugs were made into many novelty shapes- this one is an owl. The head would be removed to pour the beverage.  
*Decoration: trailed and combed slip.*
5. **Piggin:** These vessels were usually made out of wood and one of the bucket staves would be left longer than the rest to use as a handle. Here is a ceramic version, but the handle remains. This would have been used as an oversized scoop or dipper.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*
6. **Nightlight:** A candle (or possibly an oil lamp) would have been placed in the center of this ceramic vessel to light a room after dark.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*
7. **Porringer:** This vessel was used to eat porridges and potages (soups), generally without the use of a spoon. Porringers were often made of pewter as well. The handle allowed people to eat without getting burned.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*
8. **Jug/pitcher:** This large pitcher/jug would have held various beverages.  
*Decoration: sgraffito.*
9. **Posset pot:** Posset was a popular drink made of warm milk and spiced rum. The posset pot was similar to a tyg mug because it also had multiple handles and was passed around from guest to guest. These vessels, however had a spout that from which all of the guests would drink and a lid to keep the posset warm. The slip-trailed inscription on this vessel read "God Save the King and Bless Him."  
*Decoration: combed (bottom half) and trailed slip.*
10. **Puzzle jug:** These objects were quite popular in taverns. The challenge of these vessels was to drink the contents without spilling it. As you can see from the design of this piece, that would be virtually impossible by traditional means. The secret to the puzzle jugs is a hidden tube that leads from the bottom of the vessel, generally up through the hollow handle and into the spout. The drinker must suck on the tube to drink the contents.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*
11. **Sweetmeat/condiment dish:** In the 17th century, sweetmeats were a popular confection. They were generally fruits and/or nuts preserved in sugar. This multi-sectioned vessel was either displayed sweetmeats or contained a variety of condiments to accompany the tavern fare.  
*Decoration: trailed slip.*

1. Chamber pot, slip-trailed and combed decoration
2. Mug/cup, slip trailed decoration
3. Likely colander, combed decoration
4. Plate, sgraffito decoration

Note: Most of the ceramics archaeologists find during excavations are fragments and part of their job is to determine what sort of vessel that fragment belonged to. As long as the students provide thoughtful explanations for their vessel forms, each answer is valid.



**OBJECTIVE:**

Understand basic historic slipware techniques. Recreate a Staffordshire slipware plate in the classroom.

**MATERIALS:**

- ✧ Styrofoam or heavy-duty (Chinet-type) paper plates. Thinner paper plates will not hold up under the weight of thicker paints.
- ✧ Different colored paints. The paint needs to be fairly thick. (Brown and yellow paint would best mimic traditional Staffordshire slipwares.)
- ✧ Paintbrushes
- ✧ Pencils or styluses (any tool with fairly pointed end)
- ✧ Squeeze bottles (plastic condiment bottle would work)

Use these tools to create a combed plate, much like the fragment on the archaeology month poster. That fragment is a fragment of a platter. Platters were used in the past in much the same way we use them now- to serve large portions of food.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

1. Give each student a Styrofoam/paper plate, a paintbrush, and an ample amount of paint to cover the interior of the plate.
2. Students should apply a fairly thick layer of paint to interior of the plate. It may be easier to dip the interior surface in a layer of paint.
3. Next, distribute contrasting colored paints in squeeze bottles to each student.
4. Students should (without actually touching the surface of the plate) squeeze the paint out in parallel lines across the interior of the plate.
5. Using a stylus, have the students draw lines in the paint, perpendicular to the parallel lines they just applied.
6. This should create a “combed effect” similar to the platter on the poster.
7. Leave the newly created plates in a safe place to dry.

Not all decorations were combed. Some of the vessels on this year’s poster are decorated more simply with repeating swirls of slip. These were likely made locally and could easily be replicated by your students.

Teachers: If you would like to expand this lesson, you may want to think about collaborating with your school’s art teacher to create actual clay slipware vessels. Or you may be able to find unglazed plates in a craft store that can be decorated with this technique—although special paint may be required.