

Sonoma County Museum

JUN KANEKO: CERAMICS

March 26 – June 5, 2011



Educator Guide

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

JUN KANEKO

Jun Kaneko is one of the most famous ceramic sculptors working today. He is especially known for large scale, abstract sculptures that approach the limits of size in clay. Kaneko was born in Nagoya, Japan in 1942. He studied painting in his adolescence, working in a studio during the day and attending high school in the evening. He came to the United States in 1963 to continue those studies at the Chouinard Institute of Art in Southern California, when his introduction to Fred Marer drew him to sculptural ceramics.

He studied ceramics with Peter Voukos, Paul Soldner, and Jerry Rothman in California during the time now defined as the Contemporary Ceramics Movement or the “Clay Revolution”—a movement that upended the functional traditions of ceramic arts in favor of an unorthodox, personally expressive, and rougher sculptural medium. The following decade, Kaneko taught at some of the nation’s leading art schools, including Scripps College, Rhode Island School of Design, and Canbrook Academy of Art.

Kaneko’s artwork appears in numerous international, solo and group exhibitions annually, and is included in approximately fifty museum collections. He has realized almost thirty public art commissions in the United States and Japan, and has been honored with national, state, and organization fellowships and an honorary doctorate from the Royal College of Art in London. Kaneko currently lives and works in Omaha, Nebraska. In 2006 he designed the set and costumes for a production of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, and he and his wife are in the process of opening KANEKO, a non-profit scholarly and presenting organization for the exploration of creativity in the arts, sciences, and philosophy. (*Adapted from junkaneko.com*)

ARTISTIC PROCESS

Kaneko is perhaps best known for a particular type of sculpture—the Dango—that has become his blank canvas for a wide range of expression. A term adapted from the Japanese word for a rounded form, the Dango is usually a mound-like, freestanding sculpture made from slab-built clay walls. He has developed his Dangos into an intriguing family of shapes, from low boulders to broad shouldered, triangles to tall, sleek, and elegant pods. He has repeatedly pushed this form to the outward limits of size, as large as 13 feet high, with each dango’s weight measured in hundreds of pounds and production time marked by years.

Kaneko’s Omaha studio is industrial in scale, for his enormous pieces often require drive-in kilns sometimes as big as a three-car garage. The sculptures are sometimes so large they need to be built inside the kiln. Often with help from assistants, Kaneko builds his Dangos by wrestling massive slabs of wet clay into place, like building an igloo block-by-block. Kaneko glazes the forms with colored slips (liquid clay), using masking to create surface markings and patterns,

and then finishes with a clear glaze.

Early on, Kaneko decided to restrict his color palette, a decision only in part a function of glaze chemistry's limitations. Black, white, gray, red, light blue, golden yellow and metallic bronze remain the main colors in his design arsenal. This set of colors is then deployed in a larger lexicon of mainly geometric motifs, including dots, drips, splashes, triangles, squares, and, most especially, lines. On the curved form of the Dango, line can enhance the work's height, swathe its girth in pinstripes, dissolve its surface with delicate calligraphic or slashing expressionism, or completely contradict its volume by emphasizing a decidedly two-dimensional graphic pattern.

Nearly two decades ago, Kaneko began experimenting with a new sculptural form for his art: the human head. A head sculpture has the virtue of being instantly recognizable and therefore accessible to viewers, yet comes loaded with a vast array of traditions, meanings, and associations, especially from Buddhist sculptures. Kaneko's response is to make the heads neutral, monumental forms ranging in size from 6–10 feet. They are stylized and streamlined, with closed eyes and mute expression.

Kaneko's sculptures can weigh as much as 1,000 pounds and take a type of technical aptitude that comes only from years of patient experience. After construction, his work generally takes four months of drying time and a several day firing process. In the final stage of production, out of a group of 10 pieces, only 2 or 3 survive.

Kaneko says: "Ninety-five percent of it is planning – and engineering. Clay really should be soft enough that you could connect pieces, but as you go up, it has to be stiff enough to hold the weight on top. So if you go too fast, obviously it collapses. If you go too slow, [the clay dries out and] you have a hard time to connect it. During firing there are lots of ceramic [chemical] changes happening. So if you don't go easy at that time, that could be the biggest cause of the piece cracking."

(Text partially adapted from ://www.sculptsite.com/sculpture-headlines-Jun-Kaneko-07-18-10.html, and from Kaneko Studio.)

F.A.Q.

- The smallest dango in the exhibit (the egg-shaped striped dango) weighs about 150 pounds.
- The largest dango in the exhibit weighs 1,100 pounds (the striped triangle dango in the lobby) and is over 6 ½ feet tall. The pieces that weigh just under this are 950 and 900 pounds and are also dangos.
- The Head sculpture is the heaviest in the exhibit – it weighs 1,300 pounds. (And the table it sits on weighs 900 pounds.) It is 5 ½ feet tall.

- Using thick clay slabs to form the walls of his sculptures, Kaneko must allow the bottom layers to dry enough to hold the top layers, while remaining plastic enough to incorporate the next layer of slabs.
- Each piece has to survive the drying process without breaking or cracking, and the bisque and glaze firings without exploding. This is challenging even with small clay pieces. With Kaneko's massive works, unfortunately many do not make it through this process.
- Some of the works can take up to 3 years to complete.
- The kilns Kaneko uses can be up to the size of a three car garage. (The larger pieces have to be built inside of the kilns.)

KANEKO'S USE OF MEDIA

Kaneko uses not only the medium of ceramics, but also painting, drawing, and has designed the set and costumes for a production of *Madama Butterfly*.

Small Sculptures:

From his earliest work with clay, Kaneko favored making sculpture rather than purely utilitarian or decorative objects. Even his oval platters are weighty, with designs that are forceful or intentionally composed in a way that minimizes any impulse to put them to use. Other small sculptures, to which he refers as "Chunks," emphasize clay's basic building block—the slab or wedge.

Wall Slabs:

Despite his emphasis on sculpture, the artist has never lost touch with his impulse as a painter. Rather, he has explored that directness of touch in many different media. In ceramics, it is consistently evident in his Wall Slabs, which are "easelsized," flat and rectangular like a typical canvas. With them, he often tries to be free and spontaneous as possible, exploiting degrees of "planned accident," an artfulness in glaze technique with centuries-old roots. His broad gesture and graphic edge, however, are purely within the context of contemporary abstraction.

Drawings:

Kaneko's drawings run the gamut from bright and intense to deep and meditative. In his series completed during a residency at Alberta's Banff Centre for Fine Arts, he appears to translate the experience of his objects in the kiln's heat into fiery whorls of form and color. Conversely, the ink and oil stick drawings from his Hawaiian studio contrast dark, luscious pourings of ink with geometric shapes and lines in brilliant colors that dance across the surfaces and anchor the compositions. Other such drawings explore the freehand marks of intersecting color that recur in

his ceramics and paintings.

Paintings:

If ceramics require time, patience, commitment, and trust, and drawings offer an opportunity both to play with direct expression, then painting in Kaneko's view is the ultimate luxury. It can be open-ended, studied, continually altered, advancing and receding until it gels. On his canvases, line is the insistent form, layered and measured, creating balancing tones and complex chords of color and intervals of dynamic space. And despite the wide range of hues available to him, Kaneko does not stray far from his characteristic color palette, striving to discover new possibilities within a closed system.

(Text partially adapted from Kaneko Studio.)

VOCABULARY

Bisqueware (Bisque): Clay that has been fired in a kiln, but not yet glazed.

Ceramics: Objects made from clay and fired at a high temperature in a kiln.

Dango: Japanese for "rounded form," and also the word for dumpling. Kaneko also uses the word to refer to the rounded form of his designs. What began as a nickname became a formal title for his pieces.

Firing: Cooking clay at a very hot temperature in a kiln (see *Kiln*) until it becomes hard and durable.

Glaze: A special paint made for clay that comes in thousands of different color and finishes. Glazing gives ceramic objects their colored, shiny, translucent appearance.

Greenware: A clay object that has dried, but has not yet been fired.

Kiln: An oven, furnace or heated enclosure used for burning, firing or drying clay.

Ma: This concept is one that emerges out of the Japanese religion Shinto (See *Shinto*). It emphasizes the relationship between a piece of artwork and its surrounding space. Another way to think of *ma* is that it is negative space – the space that surrounds an artwork, not the artwork itself. Or, you can think of it as a conversation: it is not just the words spoken, but also the pauses and silences in between the words that give full meaning.

Shinto: A religion that is native to Japan that can be characterized by a lack of formal dogma, and the polytheistic worship of spirits of nature and ancestors.

Slip: Clay mixed with water until it forms a soupy mixture that can be poured.

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

The *Jun Kaneko* exhibit offers many opportunities for student learning.

As an art exhibit, the show offers curricular tie-ins for the Visual Arts, including the following **California State Content Standards**:

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 2.0 Creative Expression
- 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

In addition, teachers may find the following themes useful in finding curriculum overlaps for the exhibit, and planning their visit:

THEME 1: SCALE

The huge size of the dangos is very important to our experience of them. Kaneko is the artist who has probably done the most to push clay to its physical limits. Clay sculptures much larger than Kaneko's simply are not physically possible.

Their human or larger-than-human size makes them seem almost 'alive'. Since his time as a student of Peter Voulkos, Kaneko has developed his own techniques in working with clay, which include allowing the life-size dangos to 'speak' (not literally) to him during his creative process.

THEME 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kaneko was a part of a rich group of ceramic artists who worked in California during the 1960s and 1970s who sought to elevate contemporary ceramics above the status of craft, and into the realm of fine art. This movement became known as **the Revolution in Clay** and/or **the Contemporary Ceramics Movement**.

The Revolution in Clay brought ceramics out of the kitchen and into museums, and is now used to explore artistic themes. For Kaneko, an important part of this exploration is that of scale and size.

Both Kaneko's heads and dangos come loaded with a vast array of traditions, meanings, and associations (including connections with Japanese culture through the use of the word 'dango,' and the iconography for his heads borrowed from sculptures of the Buddha that sit on pedestals.) These connections can be explored in the classroom.

THEME 3: BUILDING WITH CLAY

In order to create these large-scale ceramics, Kaneko uses thick clay slabs to form the structure. He must allow the bottom layers to dry enough to hold the upper layers yet still be pliable enough to incorporate the next layer of slabs. After the structure is fully formed, Kaneko allows each piece months of drying time, hoping they don't crack along the way. Successfully dried pieces are put into massive kilns to be fired, which usually takes several days.

According to Kaneko, "Ninety-five percent of it is planning – and engineering. Clay really should be soft enough that you could connect pieces, but as you go up, it has to be stiff enough to hold the weight on top. So if you go too fast, obviously it collapses. If you go too slow, [the clay dries out and] you have a hard time to connect it. During firing there are lots of ceramic [chemical] changes happening. So if you don't go easy at that time, that could be the biggest cause of the piece cracking."

From start to finish, this grueling process includes the following steps:

- Several types of clay are mixed to form the right composition for molding.
- Kaneko sketches and plans each form he wants. For the creation of forms of this size, planning and engineering are key.
- The clay is pounded into slabs $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick and molded by hand into the desired shape.
- The ceramics dry in tents for 6 to 7 months, so that the moisture lessens and are distributed evenly.
- The ceramics are then fired in a huge drive-in kiln that reaches 2,000 degrees. This process can take from 6 to 9 days, or even longer.
- The pieces are then ground by hand to eliminate seams (grinding is much like sanding).
- Finally, they are glazed.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Art Talk

(Adapted from <http://www.boiseartmuseum.org/education/sizescaleshapepretour.php>)

Please view the two reproductions (p. 9 and 10) with your class, either as handouts or a projected digital image. Lead a discussion using the following questions as guidelines. There are no "right" answers. The questions are meant to guide the group discussion. Students will revisit and discuss the original works at the museum. The vocabulary in this packet will aid discussion.

Research and experience have shown that students feel more comfortable when they can connect with something familiar once they arrive at the Museum. The students are excited to find "their" works of art while they are at SCM. They enjoy sharing their insights from the

classroom discussion with the docent and making valuable comparisons between the textbook-like reproductions and the original works of art.

Teacher Prompt:

This tour examines the large-scale and small-scale, two- and three-dimensional works of one of today's most innovative ceramic artists, Jun Kaneko. Students will discuss the technical and artistic aspects of the artist's clay sculptures, drawings and paintings and will experience a hands-on project related to Jun Kaneko's works of art. Born in Japan and currently residing in Omaha, Nebraska, Kaneko is internationally recognized as being at the forefront of the ceramics movement. Known for the ambitious scale of his ceramics projects, his massive tapered forms called "dangos," which translates as "dumplings" in Japanese, can be as much as eleven feet high and weigh thousands of pounds. Kaneko is one of the few artists in modern history to attempt clay pieces of such size and weight.

Discussion Questions for Drawing (pg. 9)

What colors do you see in this work of art?

What kinds of lines do you see?

What shapes can you identify?

Are they geometric shapes or organic shapes, or both?

Do you see any repeating lines or shapes?

Can you tell what medium or media the artist used just by looking at this reproduction?

How would this work of art change if all of the black areas were red instead?

Discussion Questions for Dango (pg. 10)

How is this work of art similar to the one we just discussed?

How is it different?

What colors do you see?

What kinds of lines do you see?

Do you see any repeating lines or shapes?

Although this sheet of paper is the same size as the other sheet of paper, the actual artwork is much larger. Can you guess how big it might be? How much do you think it might weigh?

What do you think it will look like when you see it in person at the Museum?



Jun Kaneko
Untitled, Hawaiian Drawing, 2002
oil stick & sumi ink on Korean rice paper, 37.5" h x 25" w



Jun Kaneko
Untitled, Dango, 2003
glazed ceramics, 62.5"h x 26"w x 19"d

AT THE MUSEUM

The first step in understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. The docents leading the tour will be using questions like the ones below, to encourage participation from the students.

Question

- Can you identify the material/s used to make this sculpture?
- What draws you to look more closely at this sculpture - colors, textures, lines, marks, light, shadow, shapes and forms?
- The artist calls this form a *dango* - which means Japanese dumpling. Why do you think he calls it that?
- How would you describe the lines and patterns and forms that you see?
- Does Kaneko use one line or many lines to cover the surface of the dango? How can you tell?
- Can you identify the concepts behind the sculpture you are viewing? How are those concepts represented in the sculpture?
- Does this sculpture speak to you? Do you feel anything for the dango?
- Does it make you think of something you have never thought of before?
- What is it persuading you to think about or to do?
- What else about the art created makes you think or feel something?

POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Visual Comparisons

To extend the museum experience and connect the tour to your curriculum, please consider using or adapting this suggested lesson.

Introduction

Students will make visual representations by using appropriate scale and proportion. Older students can be given the written information from which to choose and can be divided into groups to create their visual comparisons. Younger students can be read the information and instructions and walked through the comparisons so that they are able to visually represent their knowledge visually. Then have them make their own visual representations, applying the mathematical relationships to the best of their abilities. Optional: Share the book *If You Hopped Like a Frog* by David Schwartz, Scholastic, 1999, with students.

Grade Level: adaptable 1-6

CA Curriculum content: Visual Arts, Mathematics

Time Required: 45 – 60 minutes

Materials

- Drawing paper
- Colored pencils, crayons, markers

Instructions:

Step 1 – Have students choose a scenario and draw an interpretation:

- A snake can open its jaws to 5 times its normal size to eat. Show with a visual representation what the jaws would look like if humans could do the same thing.
- A giraffe’s neck is almost half its total height. If the human neck was in the same proportion, how long would it be? Create a visual representation of that relationship.
- A flea can jump 100 times its height. If a human could do the same thing, how high could it jump? Show that in a visual representation.
- The scarab beetle can lift 850 times its own weight. If a human could do the same thing, how much could a human lift? Create a visual representation of this relationship.
- An African elephant’s ears are half of its height. If a human’s ear were in the same proportion, how big would they be? Show this visually.

Step 2 – Have students create a drawing, from memory, of themselves standing next to a Kaneko dango.

ADDITIONAL CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ART ACTIVITY: ‘GLAZE’ A DANGO

Grade Level: 2 - 6

CA Curriculum Content: Visual Arts

Time Required: 30 – 45 minutes

Materials:

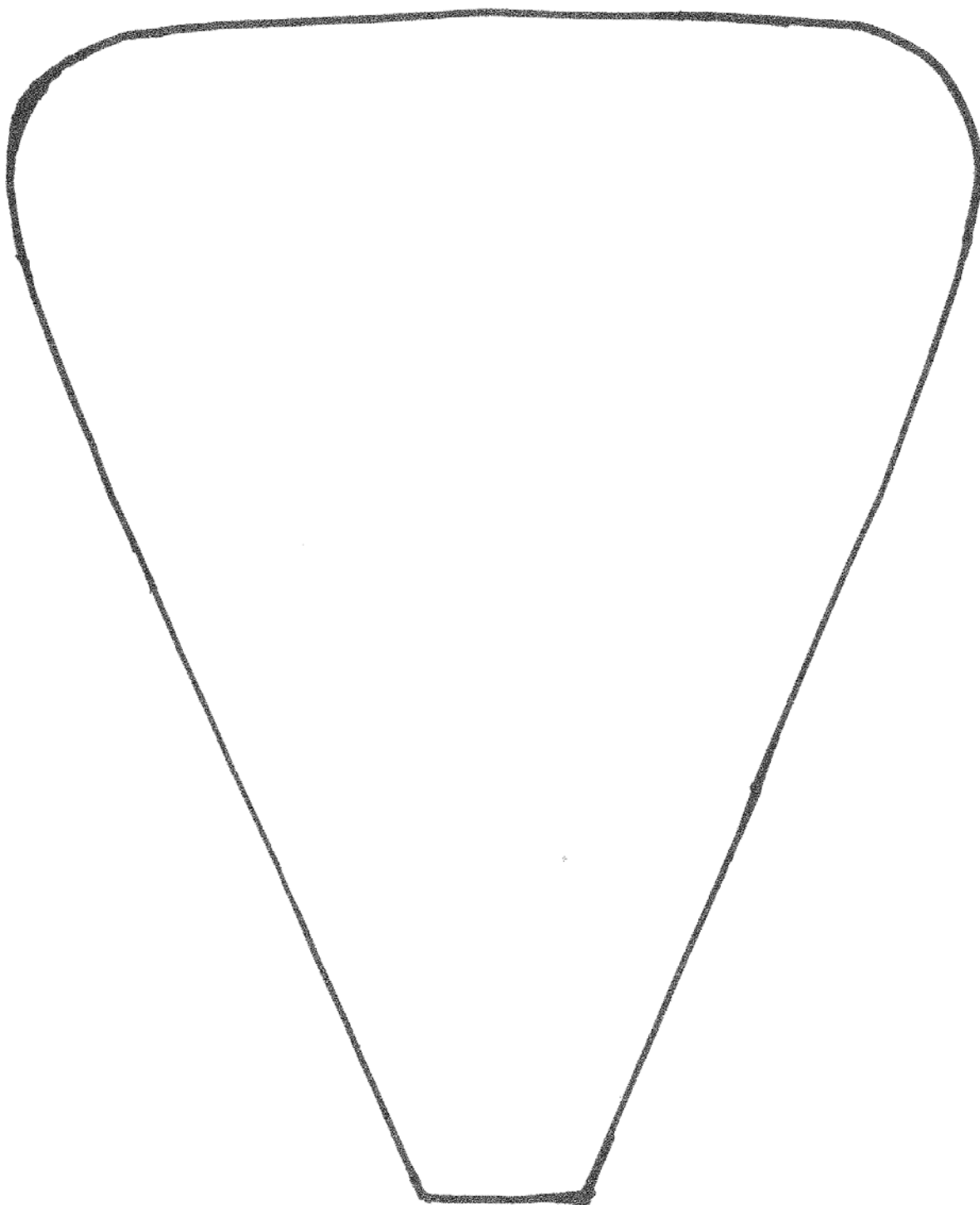
- Dango shapes for each student (attached)
- Sample Kaneko dangos for glaze design ideas/comparisons (attached)
- Black construction paper cut into strips and small circles
- Glue sticks (or glue)
- Scissors

INTRODUCTION:

Using the template supplied on p. 14, have students 'glaze' their own dango. As with Kaneko's dangos, the means supplied here are intentionally extremely simple – only two shapes and one color. The challenge for students is to see how creative and varied they can be with their designs.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Introduce the project to students, and have them look at the sample pictures of Kaneko's dangos.
2. Decide on a design for your dango based on the available shapes, exploring different options before gluing is encouraged.
3. Once the design is decided on, glue stick the pieces of paper to the dango.
4. Cut the dango shape out of the paper. Optional: mount it with glue stick onto a black piece of construction paper for display.
5. Display the dangos and discuss as a class. Note the great variety in designs, even with such simple materials.





Jun Kaneko
Untitled, Dango, 2003
glazed ceramics, 62"h x 55"w x 13"d

READING AND WRITING ACTIVITIES

Grade Level: 5-12

CA Curriculum content: Language Arts

Time Required: 45 – 60 minutes

Materials:

- Pen or pencil
- Paper

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES:

- Have students write a Haiku or other type of poem inspired by one of Jun Kaneko's works of art.
- Talk about ways to describe shapes using words such as sides, corners, lines and angles. Analyze familiar 2-dimensional plane figures, such as squares, triangles, and rectangles. Identify properties that make each shape unique. Compare familiar 3-dimensional space figures such as cubes and pyramids. What properties make these forms unique? Use these words to add to a class spelling or vocabulary list. Have each student select one shape and one form to describe with words, either orally or in writing. Discuss how the descriptions are the same and how they are different.
- Use the web to define the meaning of words related to Jun Kaneko's artwork including dango, tanka, sculpture, ceramics, sumi, etc.

MATH AND SCIENCE ACTIVITIES

Grade Level: 9-12

CA Curriculum content: Math and Science

Time Required: 45 – 60 minutes

Materials:

- Image of Kaneko piece (attached)
- Paper
- Pen, pencil, marker

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES:

- Have students learn about scale and ratio. Have students use one of the pre-tour packet images of Jun Kaneko's images to grid, reproduce in sections and enlarge.
- Learn how mathematics is used as a tool to construct artwork. Have students learn about the Golden Mean, Golden Ratio, The Divine Proportion, Phi and Fibonacci Numbers by studying various artworks. Refer to the website [://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/high/Grace-golden.htm](http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/high/Grace-golden.htm) for lesson plan ideas and web links for teaching these mathematical concepts.
- Have students learn the difference between 2-D shapes and 3-D forms. Have them construct their own two-dimensional and three-dimensional shapes and forms. Begin by having students cut out and measure different angles in order to construct a shape. Use these shapes as tracing templates in order to construct three-dimensional forms. Visit http://mathforum.org/sum95/math_and/poly/polyhedra.html as a reference.
- Chemistry: Have students research why glazes change from the first application to the final fired piece.
- Have students learn about the physical properties of clay and the temperature of a kiln as compared to a kitchen oven.

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