

Plaited Clay

by RINA PELEG

ALMOST EVERYWHERE one walks through an Israeli kibbutz one practically stumbles over pottery shards that are sometimes the only evidence of previous Middle Eastern cultures. First acquainted with ceramics through these fragments, working with clay became a way to make contact with the world outside the kibbutz and, ultimately, outside Israel. While studying ceramics at Alfred University, New York, I explored coiling vessels and decided to try "weaving" with grogless plastic clay.

With about sixteen extruded coils (each 36 inches in length), the warp for a circular basket was laid over two pieces of canvas or cotton cloth in a concave plaster mold. Several dies were employed to extrude a variety of coils. To form round coils, extruded clay was rolled on a table. The warp coils, meeting at the bottom center, were secured with a woven horizontal coil. One to three more of these at a time were then plaited with the warp; double-walled baskets were made by adding another layer of warp and weaving the two plaited walls together at the

lip. Made without a mold, square baskets were begun with longer warp coils, adjusted when necessary with additional clay. Patterns were developed in the baskets by utilizing various plaiting techniques and incorporating the following clay bodies:

White Porcelain Body (Cone 6, oxidation or reduction)

Talc	3.9%
Custer Feldspar	11.5
Nepheline Syenite	9.6
Ball Clay	5.8
Georgia Kaolin	17.3
Kaolin (6 Tile Clay)	34.6
Flint	17.3
	<hr/> 100.0%

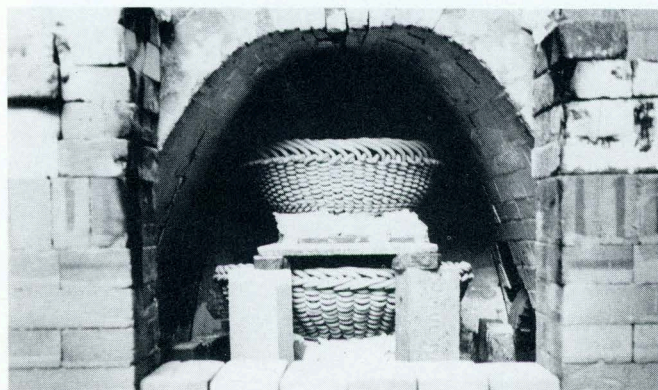
Black Clay Body (Cone 4, oxidation or reduction)

Barnard Slip	13.3%
Earthenware Clay	13.4
Ocmulgee Red Clay	13.3
PBX Fireclay	40.0
Wollastonite	20.0
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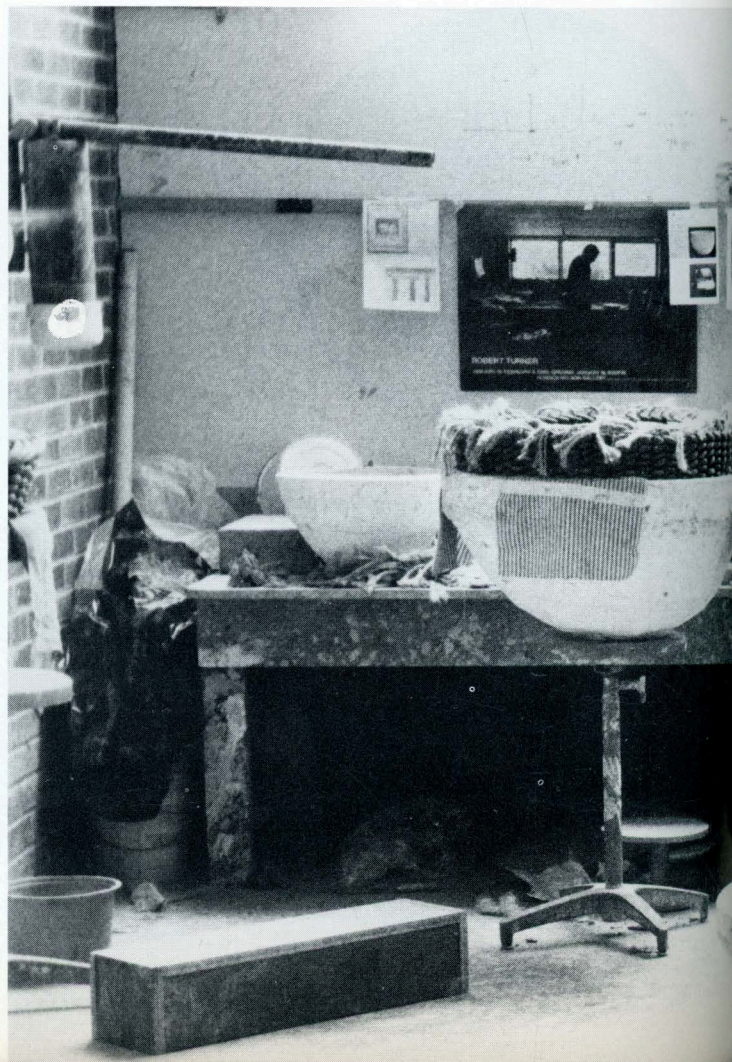
Add: Black Iron Oxide	4.0%
Iron Chromate	4.0%
Manganese Dioxide	10.0%



The author's clay baskets were plaited (intertwined or braided) from extruded coils and slats.



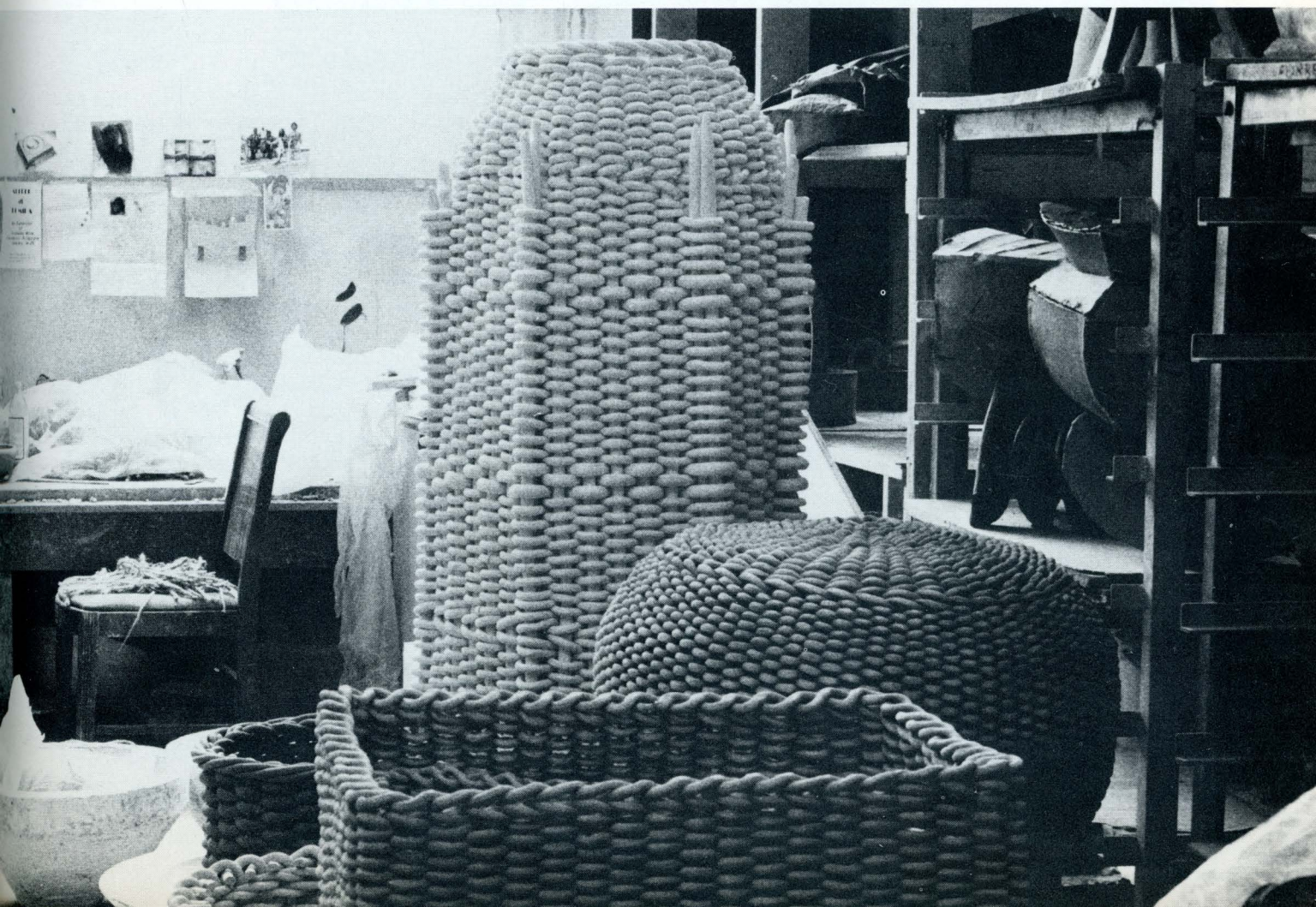
Two baskets await reduction firing in a catenary arch kiln; Kaowool lends support against slumping.

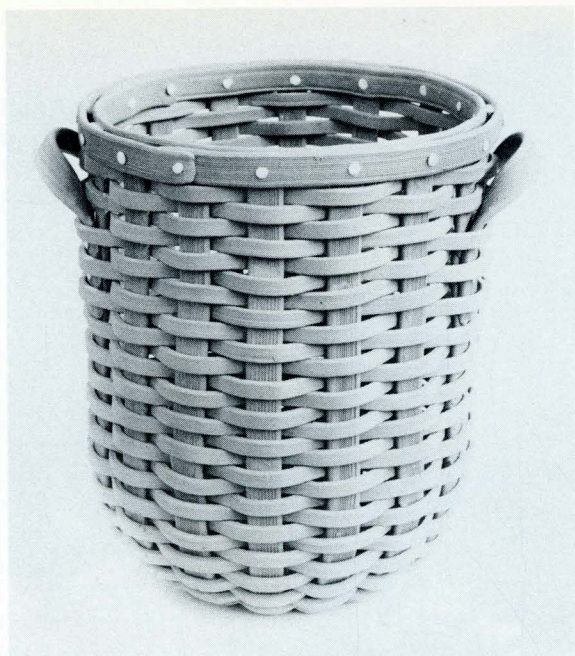




Above Rounded baskets are plaited in a concave mold; rope is a stronger warp and often replaces clay.

Below Rina's studio at Alfred University, with clay baskets in various stages of completion.





Above Earthenware basket, 29 inches in height, formed of extruded slats, unglazed.

Yellow Clay Body (Cone 4, oxidation or reduction)
 Cedar Heights Goldart Clay 45%
 A.P. Green Fireclay 20
 Pine Lake Fireclay 20
 Wollastonite 15

..... 100%
 Add: Macaloid 2%

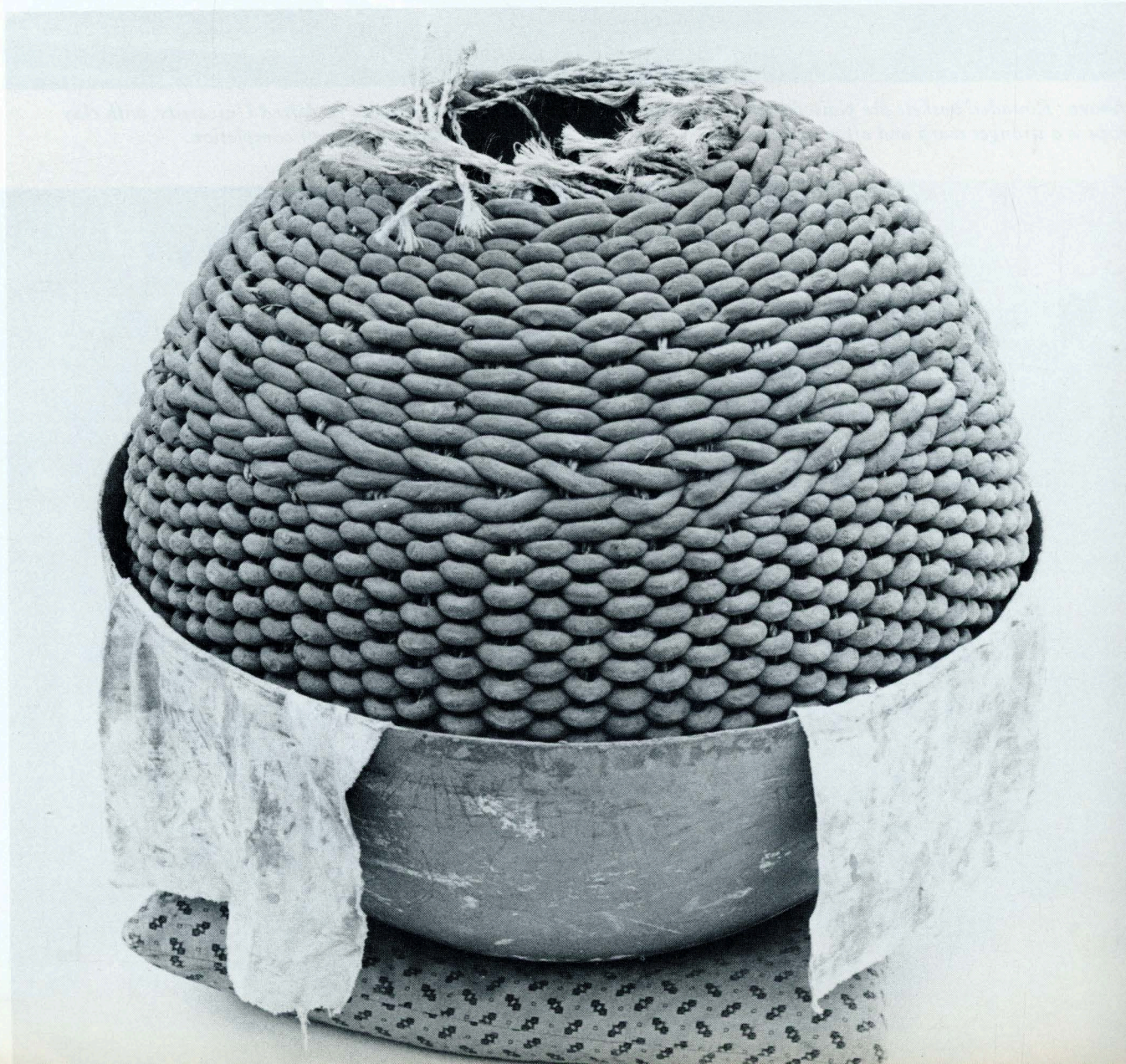
Red Clay Body (Cone 04, oxidation or reduction)
 Talc 10%
 Cedar Heights Goldart Clay 20
 Cedar Heights Redart Clay 60
 Fireclay 10

..... 100%
 Add: Barium Carbonate 1%

Supported with bricks in the kiln, the unglazed baskets were fired to Cone 04 in oxidation or reduction.

To plait forms closed in at the top, a rope warp, instead of the more fragile clay coils, was employed. Of course,

Below A cloth sling facilitates handling and removal from the metal form before firing.



the rope burns out in the kiln, but slip applied between the plaited coils strengthens the structure. Occasionally, Fiberfrax rope was incorporated for visual effect; people are often surprised by this "rope" still intact in a finished basket.

The connection between basketry and clay work seems very natural. Historically, the first clay container probably came about when a hole was dug in the clay ground for a fire pit; after the fire was extinguished, someone discovered the sides of the hole had become hard. For use as a container, the fired clay was removed from the surrounding earth to make the shape self-supporting and portable. Eventually, man discovered a better way to make a pot was not to remove a "hole," but to pinch together clay coils assembled as a basket. An imprint of a basket made with coils was found in the clay floor of a home in Jericho circa 7000 B.C., a time when ceramics was in its infancy.

Baskets were employed also as molds and simply

allowed to burn in the subsequent firing. Surface decorations were applied by impressing mats and other woven materials, and coils resembling rope also are found as decorative elements on early pots. Woven straw and clay were employed together in ancient Egypt where large pots often had no handles and were carried in baskets—much in the way some Latin Americans and Africans carry their ware to market today.

Although my clay baskets relate to traditional straw and clay objects, they were constructed without any function in mind. Strong, yet light in appearance, the plaited clay basket "breathes" like straw, but is indicative of the ceramist's right to create nonfunctional work.



An interior view shows decorative/structural clay loops, built around rope which burns out during firing. Sometimes the author employs Fiberfrax rope since it is refractory and thus remains in the fired form.

