

METHOD OF DECORATING A CERAMIC PART

The invention relates to the field of microtechnology. It concerns more particularly a method for the local colouring of a ceramic part.

Ceramics such as zirconia ZrO_2 or alumina Al_2O_3 are widely employed in horology for making scratchproof cases, watchbands or bracelets. The colour of pure
5 zirconia or pure alumina is a milky white which has few applications in horology.

Methods for colouring zirconia are already widely used by ceramic manufacturers. They generally consist in introducing a pigment or an oxide in a powder state into the zirconium oxide based mixture, prior to an injection moulding step. However, this type of method does not allow designs to be made on ceramic
10 part, since the latter are coloured throughout.

Moreover, a local colouring method for zirconium oxide is disclosed in EP Patent No 0 741 117. This method consists in illuminating the surface of a zirconium oxide part, for a sufficiently long time to obtain a change in colour from milky white to black. It enables an image to be formed, but the contrast obtained, black on milky
15 white, is very strong and unattractive.

It is an object of the invention to provide a coloration method for locally colouring a ceramic part allowing patterns having a reduced contrast to be obtained.

More particularly, the invention proposes a method of locally colouring a part made of ceramic material of the metallic oxide type mainly including the following
20 steps::

- taking a support for the part and a laser, able to move relative to each other in an XY plane,

- Performing a plasma treatment of the part using a gas containing one element selected from among nitrogen and carbon, so as to convert a surface layer of
25 metallic oxide, into a substantially stoichiometric ceramic chosen from among metal nitrides and carbides.

- locally illuminating the part with the laser beam so as to provide sufficient energy to cause a local change in colour by altering the stoichiometry of the surface layer, and

- scanning the surface of the part using the laser beam so as to form a
30 determined pattern.

Other features will appear more clearly upon reading the following description of an example implementation of the method according to the invention.

A part made of pure zirconia ZrO_2 is used for the method according to the
35 invention. Pure zirconia means a zirconium oxide ZrO_2 allied with an yttrium, calcium,

magnesium or scandium oxide, for stabilising the zirconia. In a variant of the method, another metallic oxide could be used, for example aluminium oxide Al_2O_3 . The part is, for example, a watchcase or bracelet link. Its surface is polished, but in a variant of the method, it could be matt or have a satin finish.

5 The first step of the method consists in performing a plasma treatment on the surface of the piece in order to nitride harden it. In order to do so, the piece is placed in a chamber under vacuum, at a temperature comprised between 500°C and 900°C , and a gas such as ammoniac NH_3 or a mixture of hydrogen and nitrogen is introduced. Plasma is established in the chamber and the part is subjected to the
10 action of the plasma for a determined time period. Via the effect of the plasma, the part is totally surface nitride hardened over a thickness of the order of a micron and more, i.e. an external layer of substantially stoichiometric ZrN is formed. The surface has a golden colour. The zirconia part is further reduced to the core thereof, i.e. over the whole of its volume. This type of treatment is described in detail in EP Patent
15 Application NO 1 160 224. It will be noted that in the case where the part treated is an aluminium oxide, the external layer formed is made of aluminium nitride AlN .

 In a variant of the method, the first step consists of a plasma treatment for carburising the surface of the part. The principle is similar, but the gas used is methane CH_4 . The surface is totally carburised over a thickness of the order of a
20 micron and more, i.e. a substantially stoichiometric external layer of ZrC is formed. The surface has a metallic colour. Moreover, the zirconia is reduced to the core thereof. This type of treatment is described in detail in EP Patent Application No 0 850 900. It will be noted that in the case where the treated part is made of aluminium oxide, the external layer formed is made of aluminium carbide AlC .

25 The second step of the method consists in locally illuminating the surface thereby treated using a laser. In order to do so, the part is arranged on a support, above a laser that moves in an XY plane, and whose movement is computer controlled. The laser is of the Nd:YAG pulse type, optically pumped, with a wavelength of $1.06\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, and optical strength of 75W. The laser is used in Q-switched mode. The
30 size of the spot is $100\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, the pulse frequency is of the order of 80 to 100kHz and the width is $100\text{ }\mu\text{s}$. The scanning speed is of the order of 10 to 20 mm/s. A design is selected and converted, by suitable software, into a series of laser movement commands. The laser beam thus scans the surface of the part to form the selected pattern.

35 Via the effect of the laser ray, and provided that sufficient energy is provided locally, the illuminated surface changes colour. The colour contrast created between the illuminated zones and the non-illuminated zones, forms the selected pattern on the

surface of the part. The colour change results from an alteration in the stoichiometry of the nitride or carbide located at the surface, possibly accompanied by partial re-oxidisation, due to the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere.

5 It will be noted that the present invention is not limited to the example implementation of the method that has just been described, and that various simple alterations and variants can be envisaged by those skilled in the art without departing from the scope of the invention as defined by the annexed claims.

10 In particular, the method of colouring a ceramic material according to the invention can be applied to a solid metal carbide or nitride part, such as zirconium carbide ZrC , titanium carbide TiC , titanium nitride TiN , etc.. In such case, the plasma treatment step is optional, and the laser colouring step alone can be performed in order to obtain a pattern by colour contrast.

CLAIMS

1. Method of locally colouring a part made of ceramic material of the metallic oxide type, mainly including the following steps:
 - taking a support for said part and laser, able to move relative to each other in
5 an XY plane,
 - performing a plasma treatment of said part using a gas containing one element selected from among nitrogen and carbon, so as to convert a surface layer of metallic oxide, into a substantially stoichiometric ceramic chosen from among metal nitrides and carbides,
 - 10 - illuminating the part locally with said laser beam in order to provide sufficient efficient to cause a local change in colour by altering the stoichiometry of said surface layer, and
 - scanning the surface of the part using said laser beam so as to form a determined pattern.
- 15 2. Method according to claim 1, characterized in that said metallic oxide is chosen from a among zirconium, aluminium and titanium oxides.
3. Method according to any of claims 1 and 2, characterized in that said plasma treatment is performed using a gas containing carbon so as to convert a surface layer of the metallic oxide into a substantially stoichiometric ceramic of the
20 metal carbide type.
4. Method according to any of claims 1 and 2, characterized in that said plasma treatment is performed using a gas containing nitrogen so as to convert a surface layer of the metallic oxide into a substantially stoichiometric ceramic of the metal nitride type.
- 25 5. Method according to any of claims 1 to 4, characterized in that said part is reduced to the core.