

Inspired by NATURE

by Alan Johnson

As a fine arts major, I took a wide range of studio and art history classes, but never took a ceramics class. Later, as a graduate student in art education, I took a two-day workshop with Mary Carolyn (MC) Richards. I had never touched clay before and it would be two years before I touched it again. For my first teaching position, I was hired to replace the high school ceramics teacher. My options that first year were clear: sink or swim. MC Richards planted the seed, and after my initial baptism as a first-year teacher, I was converted. I was preaching clay five days a week to classes of teenagers who began to love clay as much as I did. Teaching is learning and my unexpected initiation became a lifelong passion.

The *Flor Fina* series I am currently working on consists of thrown cylindrical forms combined, altered, and embellished with handbuilt textures and appendages. The name, *Flor Fina*, which means fine flower, is derived from an ornate label on an old cigar box. These textured, cigar-shaped forms reflect my interest in Florida landscapes, marine life, and a variety of natural forms and colors.

Drawing and Design

Drawing always initiates the process. Recorded as quick visual studies, drawings can be repeatedly referenced or wadded up and tossed. Exploration with the basic properties of design is the initial nudge that pushes the creative process forward. Multilayered and subject to unexpected possibilities, the process must travel through a necessary sequence of steps to transform two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional forms.

Wooden Armature Base and Rod

The cigar-shaped forms I am currently working on have holes drilled at the bottom and interior center of the form (see 2). This is designed to accommodate an armature rod during construction, glazing, and display, and to vent the form during firing. To allow me to design and build forms with narrow, tenuous bases, I built an armature to support the sculpture vertically as I work. My armature is a simple 12×12×10-inch wooden box (see 9). The largest hole in the wooden armature base is drilled top center to accommodate a vertical rod. Interchangeable plywood templates with different sized holes accommodate a variety of rod diameters. The templates are secured to the box with clamps before drilling the hole.

Throwing and Altering

I use Highwater Clay's Riverside Grit, which is a rich, reddish-brown clay body with a high grog content and an aversion to cracking. Depending on size, multiple forms can be thrown and combined to create a larger form.

To create a tall form from multiple parts, throw two cylinders on the wheel. Taper one cylinder at the top (1), and then throw the second form as a straight-sided cylinder, open at each end (see 2). Use calipers to measure the





diameter of the first cylinder and throw the second to match that same measurement. Allow the forms to stiffen to leather hard. Some trimming may be required at the leather-hard stage to ensure uniformity and fit.

Next, drill a hole at the tip of the tapered cylinder. Using the other cylinder as a chuck, invert the tapered cylinder into the straight-sided cylinder. Center the two cylinders on the wheel and drill the same size hole through the bottom of the tapered cylinder (2). These two openings will vent the piece when joined and accommodate the support rod after firing.

Tip: Consider making the bottoms of the tapered pieces broad and level enough so they stand on their own in the kiln. Some pieces can also be fired horizontally, supported by nichrome wire stilts. I have made my own custom stilts with nichrome wire and insulating softbrick to buttress the piece vertically.

Sculpture or Vessel?

I enjoy throwing pots, and many of my sculptures reference vessels. To incorporate this reference into each piece, I attach a bowl form to the top of the cylindrical piece, making it a double-walled form. To make the bowl, throw a small, inverted cone just a little taller than needed to allow you to more easily trim it to the desired depth. Reattach it to the wheel when leather hard and cut it to size (3). Roll out a slab to attach to the cone. Because of shrinkage, allow the slab to become leather hard like the cone before attaching them to each other. Trace one end of the straight cylinder on the slab. Center the rim of the small inverted bowl within this circle and join it to the slab (4). Attach the straight-sided cylinder to the traced circle on the slab, fitting it over the top of the inverted bowl (5). Cut away the excess slab surrounding the cylinder. Center this cylinder on the wheel, capped end up, and begin trimming an opening from the center out until the interior wall of the inverted bowl appears (6). This bowl will be the top of the finished form.

Assembling

Next, join both cylinders by scoring and slipping them together (7, 8). Score and slip the seam, add a coil, then meld the seam with a modeling tool and blend it all together smoothly. Wipe the form with a damp sponge and burnish it until the seam cannot be detected. The assembled form can now be inverted, with the tapered end down, over the armature rod (9).

Tip: Let the tapered end of the clay rest on a piece of foam to help cushion the point. Be careful not to let the foam absorb water as it will make the tip soggy, causing it to collapse.

Handbuilding, Texture, Alterations

Designing and adding appendages and textures is a part of my creative process. I use a variety of materials to create texture, making experimentation the key. The challenge is to figure out what the piece needs in terms of visual appeal and decide what is possible within the parameters of the material. I use whatever works and invent what is needed.

To make a dotted surface, use peg board or make a custom wooden texture board with a drilled, dimpled grid. Roll a slab over the texture board (10) that is large enough to form several appendages to capture the texture in the slab surface. Cut narrow triangles, then wrap around a paintbrush handle or some other tapered object to form cone-shaped tubes (11). As you form the tubes, be sure to secure the join, blend the seams together, and poke a small hole in each of them for venting.

Do you like to bring PMI into the studio to reference while trying out new techniques? Then check out the TEAR OUT AND TRY poster on the next page for the perfect wall decoration for your studio!

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Throw two 10-inch-tall cylinders. Taper and close the top of one cylinder forming a cone, then allow them to firm up.



Use the straight cylinder as a chuck. Invert the tapered cylinder into the chuck, find the center, and drill the bottom hole.



On the wheel, throw a small inverted bowl or cone. When leather hard, recenter it and cut to size.



Roll a slab for the top of the straight cylinder, trace its outline on the slab, and center the small bowl. Join it to the slab.



Attach the straight-sided cylinder onto the scored and slipped slab, centered over the small bowl.



Recenter the straight cylinder on the wheel. Trim from the center out until the interior of the small bowl is exposed.



Score the attachment areas, add slip, and join the two cylinders together, with the bowl-shaped opening as the top.

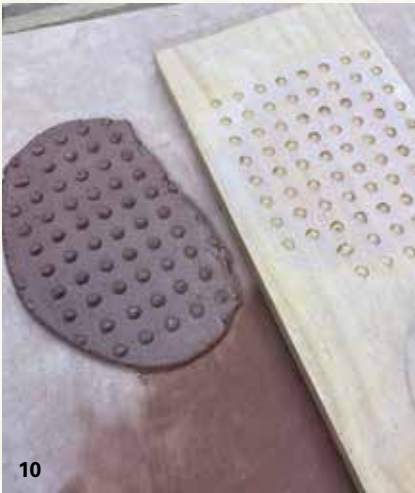


Once the two cylinders are attached, add a coil around the seam and smooth it in to make a seamless sculpture.



Use a wooden armature with a vertical rod to support the form, tapered end down. Rest the tip on a piece of foam.

Pottery Making Illustrated | Tear Out and Try



To make the appendages, first roll a small slab over a homemade or found textured template.



Use a paintbrush handle to form a long cone by wrapping the slab around it. Overlap and blend the edges together.



When leather hard, join the cones to the top edge of the thrown form. Be sure to vent the hollow appendages.



Form small balls of clay into dots. Score and slip them onto the surface of the larger form. Dry and bisque fire the piece.



Pour glaze through a funnel into the top opening. Quickly siphon the glaze out with a turkey baster and sponge.



Measure out glaze into a bucket and dip the tips of the pointed appendages into glaze. Fire the piece to cone 04.



Use a wide brush to apply a thin coat of a second color of glaze over the surface of the piece.



Spray on a coat of a darker contrasting glaze over the entire piece and then allow it to dry.



Use a dry sponge and a stiff bristled brush to wipe away the dark glaze, revealing the glaze below. Fire to cone 5.



When they reach leather hard, attach these to the top flat area of the cylinder form around the inverted bowl (12).

To integrate the texture of the tubes onto the cylinder form, flatten small balls of clay, then score and slip each of these dots to create a pattern on the body of the form (13). Vary the size of the dots to create more visual interest. Allow the form to slowly and fully dry, then bisque fire it.

Color and Glaze

Glazing in multiple firings has worked best to achieve what I want for a multicolored piece. I prefer this over masking each color separately. I use both matte and gloss cone-6 glazes, and fire in an electric kiln. The gloss glaze is usually for accent, emphasis, or contrast.

After the piece has been bisque fired, return it to the armature for glazing. Apply a gloss glaze (such as Ron Meyers Clear) to the bowl-like interior at the top by pouring it through a funnel (14). Extract the excess glaze with a turkey baster and a sponge.

Remove the piece from the armature, invert it, and dip the tips of the appendages into glaze (15). After the glaze dries, place it in the kiln and fire it again. At this point, this gloss glaze formula only needs to be fired to cone 04 to adhere it to the piece, but can be fired again to cone 6. **Note:** It may run at cone 6 on vertical surfaces.

For the second color, return the piece to the armature and mop on a thin wash of matte glaze (I used Opaque Matte #5) with a large soft brush (16). A thin wash will easily flow into small crevices and tight spaces. After laying down this wash, apply more glaze with a spray gun.

Tip: Prior to spraying wet glaze over a fired, non-porous, glazed surface, heat the piece in the kiln and to about 200°F (93°C) first, then apply the wet glaze. The hot surface quickly dries the wet glaze on contact, helping it to adhere without running. Do this for each additional layer of glaze. **Caution:** Wear a mask and work in a well-ventilated area when spraying glaze and when wiping dry glaze to prevent breathing in the dust.

Wipe away the second glaze in places where it has covered the first glaze and the tips of the appendages using a dry sponge. Fire the second coat to cone 5.

Heat the form and spray the darkest and final color over the entire piece (17) (I used Reynolds Green Metal Patina). Because the glaze is opaque, it will cover any selected areas of the matte glaze beneath it when fired. If possible, apply lighter colors first before the darkest final color. Apply the dark glaze as a wash, wiping away the dried,

RON MEYERS CLEAR

Cone 04–6 Oxidation

Ferro Frit 3124	80 %
EPK Kaolin	10
Silica	10
	<hr/> 100 %

Add: Mason Stain	10 %
Bentonite	1 %

I used Mason stain #6025 Coral Red as the colorant in the process images.

OPAQUE MATTE #5

Cone 6 Oxidation

Whiting	19 %
Zinc Oxide	9
G200 Feldspar	52
EPK Kaolin	15
Silica	5
	<hr/> 100 %

Add: Zircopax Plus	10 %
Mason Stain	10 %
Bentonite	1 %

I program a 15-minute hold and slow cool at the end of the firing in an electric kiln. This gives a very soft matte finish with little sheen. Otherwise it is a bit waxy with a low sheen. I used Mason stain #6315 Zirconium Vanadium Blue as the colorant in the process images.

REYNOLDS GREEN METAL PATINA

Cone 6 Oxidation

Lithium Carbonate	40.0 %
Ferro Frit 3124	30.0
Zircopax Plus	20.0
Silica	10.0
	<hr/> 100.0 %

Add Copper Carbonate	2.5 %
Bentonite	1.0 %

Apply by spraying, then remove excess glaze with a dry sponge to reveal the layers beneath.

unfired layer of glaze similar to staining wood (18). Areas of color from the two previously fired glaze coats will reappear as you wipe. Leave as much of the dark color as desired to add contrast and create depth while accenting the surface textures. I fire the last layer to cone 6.

Alan Johnson grew up in Florida where he received a BA in fine arts and an MA in art education from the University of South Florida in Tampa. He taught art for 35 years, 28 of which were at the Pinellas County Center for the Arts, an arts magnet high school in St. Petersburg, Florida. His work is currently on exhibit at Florida Craft Art Gallery in St. Petersburg. To see more, visit www.ajohnsonartist.com.