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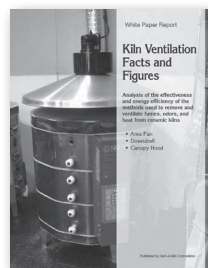
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# Pinched PITCHERS

by Emily Schroeder Willis



The ceramic artist Greg Payce once said to me, "If you can't draw it, you can't make it." If I had heard this as a student, I would have scoffed and kept on working as I had been, which was to simply imagine the work I wanted to make in my head and struggle through trial and error to execute my mental image. Now, however, as someone who builds pots primarily by pinching clay, I've come to see how important and true this statement actually is.

In many ways, making pots is drawing three dimensionally; creating a handle, a spout, or a profile of a pot, is like creating a line in space. Drawing on paper trains your eye to see more thoughtfully and be more critical of your work. I found that after sketching things like spouts and handles repeatedly, I saw

a significant difference in the ease with which I could create them. The simple gesture of putting pencil on paper made an immense impact, solidifying how my hands needed to move to create that element in my work when it

was time to actually build it in clay. The other reason I now see the importance of sketching is that my hands and fingertips need to be in tune with the physical and/or mental image I'm creating. I use very few tools to shape my work (figure 1). My fingers and my lap are my biggest tools and I sometimes even use the slack of my apron in my lap to help shape larger slabs that I'm pinching into a form. So, I always start with a drawing of the form, and I always have that image present when I'm making objects.



To build a pinch and coil pot, you'll need a few knife blades, a needle tool, wooden modeling tools, scoring tools, and ribs.



Press your thumb into the plum-sized ball of clay and rotate the ball as you thin the walls.



Slowly work your thumbs to the outer edges of the pinch pot, until each are uniform in thickness.



Lay a coil on top of the inverted pinch pot after scoring the attachment area and adding slip.



Cut the coil at an angle, join, then use a wooden modeling tool to connect the coil to the pinch pot along the interior seam.



Use your thumbs on the exterior and your index fingers on the interior to pinch the coil up, thinning the walls and adding height.



Level and score the surface, then place another coil on top. Join it to the pot using a criss-cross motion with your thumb.



After joining the inside and outside of the coil, use thumbs and index fingers to pinch the coil up, turning the pot as you work.

## Beginnings

To begin the form, I pinch out a small curved disk to use as the bottom to create a foot. I enjoy surprising users when they pick up my pots and find that the bottom is convex rather than flat. To pinch a curved disk, start with a round ball of clay about the size of a plum, pushing your thumb into the middle of it, leaving about half of an inch of clay between your thumb and the outer wall (figure 2). Then, create the proper thickness by pressing a thumb into the clay, proceeding to rotate the ball in small, ½-inch, counterclockwise increments, slowly working to the outside edges until each area is uniform in thickness (figure 3).

## Creating Coils

It would be difficult to create an entire form by simply pinching, so I add thick coils to help shape and add height to the work. To make coils nice and round, start shaping the coil while wedging the clay. Begin wedging and slowly shift from wedg-

ing to rolling the clay into a thick log shape about 3 inches in diameter. From there, pick up the log, squeezing and twisting it into a slightly thinner log, roughly 2 inches in diameter, which also helps to compress the clay further. Make sure it's uniform in thickness, then slowly start to roll out the coil, using your entire hand, held flat, rather than just your palms.

Gently but firmly apply even pressure onto the surface of the coil, keeping your hands as flat as possible, yet relaxed, gliding them over the surface, starting in the middle and working your way out to the ends. If at any time the coil starts to become uneven, simply pick it up, reshape it, and squeeze it into shape. Be careful not to let your coils get too thin—coils should always be thicker than the wall thickness you want on your work. This is the biggest misconception in creating coils. Some clay will be removed in the processes of attaching the coil and creating height. So, to achieve a wall that's ¼ inch thick and roughly 1½ inches high, use a coil that is approximately 1 inch thick.

## Attachments

Place the pinched base onto a banding wheel. Heavily score the base (I use a tool made from needles stuck into a wine cork, see figure 1), put a layer of slip on top of the base, and rescore the slip-coated area. Take a coil, lay it on top of the slip and cut each end at a 45° angle, pushing the ends together and smoothing them over (figure 4). Then use a round- or straight-edged wooden modeling tool to attach the clay on the interior of the vessel, slowly rotating the vessel with one hand and using your other hand as your working hand (figure 5). Using an X, or criss-cross, motion with your left thumb, push the clay down, starting at the top right, pushing down to the bottom left, and then lifting your thumb and pushing from the top left down to the bottom right (see figure 7). Repeat this motion around the entire vessel. Once the coil is properly attached, redefine the interior space with the wooden modeling tool.

Next, work on attaching the coil to the exterior using the same X motion on the exterior. After the coil is fully attached, flip the piece over and push out the bottom, which usually loses some of its shape when attaching the coil on the inside. Lastly, pinch the coil into its final shape so it fits the profile you want. I set my work on a taller banding wheel so I can see the profile of the vessel more easily. Place your hands in front of you with both thumbs on the exterior of the vessel and both index fingers on the interior of the vessel. You'll use both your thumbs and index fingers together to dictate the shape of the wall (figure 6). Pinch up, almost creating a subtle vertical or diagonal spine shape on the vessel every 4 inches around the circumference, which you can later smooth over with your fingers. If you want the shape to roll outward, use more pressure on both index fingers and almost roll your thumbs backwards to create an arc in the form. If you want the form to curve in, your thumbs become more dominant and push the clay over both index fingers (see figure 10).

Process photos: Darcy Demmel



9 Trim the top edge of the pot with a knife before you add each coil to remove the driest clay and to keep the walls an even height.



10 Taper the pot in. With your thumbs on the outside, press in against your fingers as you pinch the coil up into shape.



11 Create a handle by rolling out a coil to the appropriate diameter, then pinch up along the length to flatten and create a spine.



12 Begin creating a spout by rolling out a short, tapered coil, scoring the rim of the pot, and adding the coil.



13 Gently shape an arch to the lip as you pinch the coil up to create the spout.

## Adding Layers, Creating Form

The most important element in making pinched work is patience. It takes several days to create larger forms, so it's best to work on multiple pieces at once. To add another coil of clay, the work must be sufficiently dry, but slightly softer than leather hard. This can take anywhere from three hours to a whole day depending on the humidity/temperature/sunlight/air circulation in your work space. If you try adding a coil too early, it will be difficult to control the shape because the bottom can't support the weight and the pressure of the new coil. If you wait too long, the clay will be too dry to manipulate into shape. Make sure that everything is as close to the same level of dampness before adding more coils.

Before adding on more coils, trim off a thin layer of clay, leveling off the pot (see figure 9). This removes the area that is usually drier than the rest of the vessel, creating a slightly more malleable area to add a coil to. Additionally, it allows the vessel's height to increase at the same rate all around. Add a layer of slip on the exposed edge and score it with a serrated rib. I use a serrated rib rather than the cork needle tool because the coil's edge is thin, and the serrated

rib creates a finer scored area. Placing the coil on top, continue to attach the coil as in the first layer using the X motion with your thumb (figure 7), then pinching up to gain height. When you are ready to add another coil, level of the pot using an X-Acto knife (figure 9) and then repeat the process.

**Tip:** Once the base of the vessel has been established, I find it easier to shape a vessel that is going to flare out by attaching the exterior of the added coil first, that way while I'm smoothing out the interior coil, I can begin to push the shape out. As long as I work with soft clay, I don't have problems with cracking. If I want the vessel to curve in, I instead attach the added coil on the interior first and pinch up while applying more pressure with my thumbs on the exterior (figure 10). By doing this, when smoothing out the exterior coil, I can begin to push the vessel in and not worry about ruining what I have just shaped. To dramatically bring something in, I really compress the clay as I'm pinching, almost as if I'm trying to squeeze it together. I find that if I overcompensate on flaring or constricting the form, it usually ends up spot on.



14 After you finish pinching and shaping the spout, cut the lip down to the desired height and shape with an X-Acto knife.



15 Cut the coil handle to length, thicken the ends, score and slip the attachment points, then join the handle to the pitcher body.



The finished, fired pitcher with multiple layers of glaze decoration and resist decoration, ready to be put to use.

## Making a Handle

Making a handle is very similar to making a coil. The thickness of the coil depends on the size of the object it will be attached to. Cups and pitchers require handles of different thicknesses. For a tall or medium-sized pitcher, make the coil about 1 inch in diameter. Start at the bottom of the coil and pinch up, creating a spine up the middle of the coil (figure 11). Then, place the coil between your thumb and forefinger, flattening out the coil a bit more. Cut the ends of the coil at a 45° angle, tapping the ends to thicken them, making them easier to attach later. Hold the handle up to the vessel, checking the proportions and cutting it down to size. Then, bend it into the desired curve and lay it on the table to dry sufficiently so you can attach it later without ruining the shape.

## CHOOSING A CLAYBODY

I prefer to work with porcelain, finding the smoothness excellent for capturing each mark my fingertips impress into the clay. I love the fresh bright palette I achieve through glazing when I use porcelain. I now use Porcelain For The People by Matt and Dave's Clays ([www.mattanddavesclays.com](http://www.mattanddavesclays.com)) because it's a great color and they can ship 30 pounds of clay in USPS Express boxes, so I sometimes can get the clay delivered to my door within three days of placing an order.

## Creating a Spout

To create a spout, roll out a short coil that is tapered on each end. Score and slip the area where it will be attached and place the coil on the slipped area (figure 12). When attaching the coil, gently shape an arch into the lip immediately (figure 13). Using a X-Acto knife, cut the lip down to the desired height (figure 14), and shape and smooth it over with your fingers, creating a gradual and soft curve.

## Finishing Up

Attach the handle by first placing a ruler across the top of the pitcher so that one edge bisects the spout and rests on the opposite rim. Mark the rim of the pitcher where the handle should be attached, then score and slip the top and bottom attachment points. Attach the top part of the handle first, then, making sure that the arc of the handle and its length are appropriate, recut the bottom of the handle and proceed to attach it (figure 15).

Once finished, let the piece dry under plastic for at least three days and slowly open the plastic up over a series of days until it's completely dry.

*Emily Schroeder Willis is an artist and instructor living in Chicago, Illinois. To see more of her work, visit [www.emilyschroeder.com](http://www.emilyschroeder.com). Darcy Demmel is a photographer living and working in Chicago: [www.darcydemmel.com](http://www.darcydemmel.com).*