

THE Cat's MEOW

by Deborah Schwartzkopf

I'll never forget coming home from an outing to find the butter dish left out on the table with the lid off! The crisp rectangle of butter had been licked into a soft, shallow mound by my cat. Memories like these make me smile, but also prompt me to make lids that keep the butter safe! This dish does that and also challenges your clay building skills.

Throwing a Closed Form for a Bisque Mold

My bisque mold for the butter dish is made from a closed thrown form. Start with 2½ pounds of well-wedged clay—molds can be made from studio reclaim. Center the clay and open all the way to the surface of your bat. Open the cylinder about 3–4 inches, then compress the wall down and out with the side of your right hand. Seal the base of the wall to the bat with your left fingers (inside) and thumb (outside). Then further pull the wall outward, widening the cylinder. With each pull outward, move the

clay about 1–1½ inches and then compress again. Repeat the process of pulling outward and compressing downward as needed until the wall is about 9 inches in diameter (1).

Now, pull the walls upward and lead them toward the center as they rise. Collar after each pull, making the wall lean inward more and more. Establish the curve of the closed form first at the bottom; this will be harder to reach as the opening gets smaller (2). Pull the walls a bit higher than you need to so there's extra clay to pinch off (3) instead of tilting/collaring the edges of the cylinder in until the walls just barely meet.

Once the form is closed, shape the dome with your hands and then refine it with a firm rib. Any thin spots in the wall may create unevenness if you compress the air inside too much. Create a small undercut using a firm rib at the base. This makes it much easier to pick the dish up off the table when it's in use later.



Cut the dome off the bat by incising around the foot with a knife. This keeps it rounder than cutting it off with a wire tool, which can drag the edge under, and potentially change its shape. Trim off any sharpness on the foot to keep the edges from chipping into your clay as you use the mold. Slowly dry and bisque fire the mold.

Thrown Parts

First make the thrown parts, including the gallery (which helps the lid align) and the side walls of the lid, the rim of which seats against the gallery. These are each thrown as bottomless cylinders. I throw the gallery or inner rim of the bottom of the dish off a larger ring, much like throwing small bowls off the hump. The



1 Use 2½ pounds of clay to throw a bisque mold. Start by centering the clay and opening up all the way to the bottom.



2 Develop a funnel shape and slowly start to collar in the cylinder until it closes in at the top.



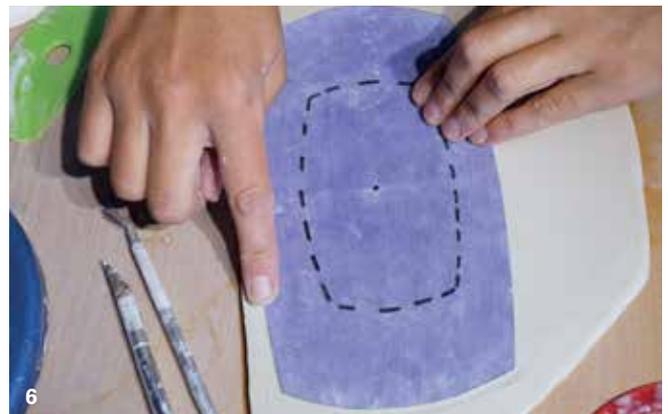
3 Once the thrown form is fully closed at the top, use your fingers to pinch away any excess clay.



4 Throw a 4-inch-diameter cylinder, then use a needle tool to cut a section off for the gallery that is ½ inch tall, and ⅜ inch thick.



5 Throw a 5-inch-diameter cylinder to use as the side walls of the lid. It is thrown lip-side down.



6 Using a template, press your finger down to mark the shape into a clay slab, then press on the center of each perforation mark.

gallery is approximately 4 inches in diameter, ½ inch tall, and ⅜ inch thick. After reaching these dimensions, use a needle tool to separate this from the larger coil, gingerly pick it up (4), and make a row of oval loops on a ware board for future use.

Now, throw the side walls of the lid up-side-down, approximately 5 inches in diameter (5). This gives a little leeway for the

clay to stretch into place. Cut the excess away and bevel the edges parallel to each other. This creates a seam that's easy to compress. Set the pieces aside to stiffen up.

Cutting a Template

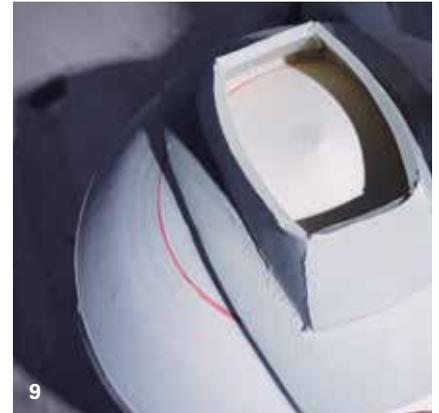
The two-piece template is made from file-folder paper. The outer edge of the template forms the wings, which curve up-



7 The transferred marks from the paper template can be used as a guide when cutting.



8 Cut and remove the center part (lid top) of the slab.



9 Use templates to cut out the four faces for the foot and attach. Clean up the seams.



10 Trace the shape of the foot onto a slab, then cut out the shape and remove any excess clay. Score and attach the two pieces.



11 Score the interior perimeter of the bottom of the dish and attach the thin gallery wall.



12 Place plastic strips along the gallery of the dish, then invert the wall the lid so the thrown rim touches the plastic.



13 Cut out a cat-eyed shape of clay and use a flexible rib to press the shape over the edge of the board to create a 90° angle.



14

Attach the cat-eyed-shaped piece of clay to the leather-hard lid, add tiny coils to fill any gaps, then clean up the seams.



15

Score the arch and the shaped coil, then attach it and blend it together, starting in the center and working toward the edges.



16

Once the piece stiffens up more, refine it further with a rasp and then use a metal rib, scouring pad, and a sponge to finish the job.

ward and form handles for use when passing the dish around. The inner area forms the roof of the lid (see sidebar to the lower left). These two pieces are separated by a dashed line on the template. Incise the dashed black line with an X-Acto knife. The burr from this transfers through to the clay slab once the template is in use. The black center dot indicates a perforation made with a needle tool through the template. This is a marker for centering the slab on the hump mold.

Slab Prep and Template Transfer

Roll out an even slab that is the same thickness as the thrown parts, then use a firm rib along with a scant bit of water to compress from at least two directions on each side of the slab. This ensures an even, well compressed, smooth slab.

To transfer the template to the slab, run your finger around the edge of the paper, along the dashed line, then lightly press on the center perforation to leave an indicator mark (6). Because of the thickness of the paper, this gentle pressure will leave a soft line to cut along once you remove the template (7).

Using the Hump Mold

On a banding wheel, place the slab on the bisque-fired hump mold by aligning the center indicator dot with the highest point of the mold. Let the soft clay stretch over the mold as you press down with flat hands around the slab. Slowly rotate the banding wheel, giving even pressure. Don't use the points of your fingertips as they leave divots rather than uniformly forming the clay.

Cutting and Attaching Pieces

In order to make a clean, straight cut, I use the pinky finger of my hand holding the tool for stability and balance by propping it against the clay. I use a dull X-Acto knife, that way nothing is accidentally cut and I still have the benefit of a thin blade to make precise seams. Once the clay has reached a soft leather-hard stage, cut and remove the inner part (lid top) of the shaped slab while it's still on the hump mold (8). Leave the larger part of the slab in place on the hump mold and save the inner piece for later.

Cut out the four faces of the foot (cut from a template). These should be a soft leather hard. Score the inner perimeter of the slab then attach the four pieces (see 9). Clean up the seams and define the corners with a firm rib (9). Add small coils

Template Shapes and Dimensions

A) Cat-eye-shaped template (5 × 1 in.) with a fold in the middle. Used to create two cat-eyed shapes of clay that have 90° angles, which are used to fill in the gaps between the top of the lid and the lid walls.

B) Main template (9 × 4¾ in.) or base and winged handles. The perforated marks are a guide to cut and remove the center, which is then used as the lid top.

C) Template (5 × 1½ in.) for the two longer sides of the foot.

D) Template (2½ × ¾ in.) for the two shorter sides of the foot.

to any areas that don't connect thoroughly or where gaps can be seen. Finally, trim the edge of the feet (facing upward) to level the whole piece. When trimming, I put a small bat on top of the foot to gauge if there are gaps and if it looks fairly level.

Prepare a soft leather-hard slab and place it on a banding wheel (cover the banding wheel with interfacing or paper to prevent sticking). Invert the bottom of the dish so that it arches upward and place it on the slab. Trace around where the foot touches, leaving a soft line (10), then cut around the line and remove the extra clay. Score and slip these two pieces together.

Score the interior perimeter of the bottom of the dish and attach the thin gallery wall (11). If there's excess, cut it off at an angle and slip and score the beveled edges together. Add a tiny coil to each joined seam and blend them in. This helps prevent cracking and fills in any crevices that butter could hide in. Compress the outer edge of the gallery seam with the corner of a firm rib, then do an initial smoothing.

Place small strips cut from a plastic bag along the gallery of the dish (this is a trick I learned from Nick Joerling). The plastic keeps the lid from sticking and gives a lifting point that disperses the pressure preventing warping and distortion. Invert the wall of the lid so that the thrown rim touches the plastic. Cut through the wall if it's too long, keeping the seam on the shorter horizontal plane (12). Keep the edges of the wall beveled parallel to each other to create a strong seam. Squeeze together on the upward-facing edge of this wall and press down gently, stretching it to match the curve of the winged bottom of the dish.

Use the crisp corner of a work surface and a flexible rib to create the 90° angle in the cats-eye shaped piece (cut from a template, see side bar on page 36). Gently guide the clay to bend it evenly over the corner of the board (13), then use the rib to increase the bend and define the corner. This piece becomes an indent in the lid that functions as a handle.

Press the cat-eye piece against the leather-hard lid where they will join to make a mark, showing where to cut away the excess. Trim away extra clay and score and slip this piece into place on each side (14). Add tiny coils anywhere there is a gap or the edges are not meeting fully, especially on the interior. Clean and smooth around each seam on the interior.

Handles on the Wings

When the lid is a soft leather hard, remove it and work on the wings of the lower dish. Roll out a coil that is about ½ inch in diameter. Taper it all along one long side. Cut two pieces the length of the ends of the wings (about 3½ inches).

Thoroughly score the arch and the shaped coil. Place the coil on the arch and begin blending it by first applying pressure in the center, then moving toward the edges (15). I use my thumbs to taper the clay into the arch and smooth it with a firm rib then a flexible rib. The arch must be just the right dryness. If it's too dry, the coil will crack away from it near the edges. If it's too soft the curve will flatten or distort.

Final Fussing

I initially define the edges with a firm rib, then wait until the dish is a firm leather hard to define the edges with a rasp. I use the rasp to remove extra clay from the bottom slab, then define the handles of the wings and the various planes of the lid.

For further refining, I use a metal rib to smooth rasp marks, followed by a wet Scotch Brite scouring pad, and finally a soft damp sponge to make the surface smooth (16). I find it helps to scrape the metal rib diagonally across the marks left by the rasp as I'm trying to remove them.

Cat Licking

One of my pottery mentors makes beautiful, simple thrown forms that are finished on the wheel. There is no cutting, attaching, sponging, etc. He jokes to me that I got an MFA in cat licking as I rasp, scour, and sponge my pottery smooth after all the alterations and construction. This refining is a major part of my building technique and I enjoy how the process of refining can both highlight and hide how a piece is made.

Rat City Studios is the workspace of Deborah Schwartzkopf, a Seattle-based studio potter and instructor. Her aim is to build the community of artists working in clay by connecting people through social and educational events. Emerging artists join in a year-long studio assistant position, trading their time for studio space. Further community-building endeavors include weekly clay classes, workshops, and seminars on professional development as an artist. Learn more at <http://ratcitystudios.com>, and on Instagram @debspottery and @ratcitystudios.

Deborah Schwartzkopf uses templates and bisque molds as guides for combining wheel-thrown and handbuilt parts to make vessels like the butter dish demonstrated in this article and the salt and pepper shakers shown here.

