Steve Howell

Creating Forms with Hump Molds

by Harriet Gamble

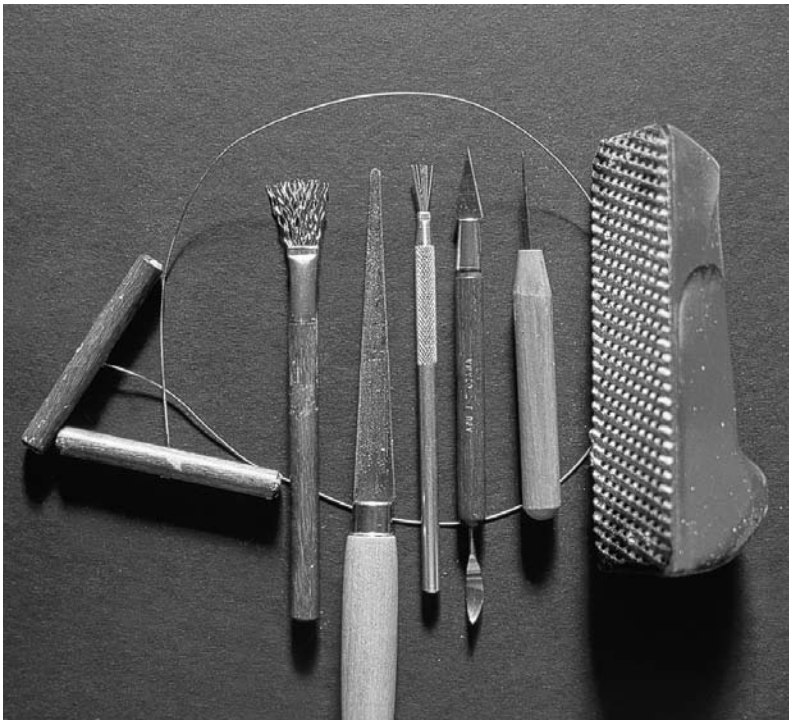
Majolica-glazed platter, 16 inches in length, made over lightweight hump mold.

Florida ceramist Steve Howell creates beautifully colored, low-fire sculptural vessels. He has developed a personal style and unique artistic techniques quite different from the traditional, functional high-fire ceramics he learned during the sixties and seventies. The ceramics programs he studied were wheel-oriented, and the emphasis was on functional, high-fired work. Steve spent most of his first ten years in clay working with stoneware and porcelain and experimenting with salt glazing, raku, and pit firing before he discovered low-fire and colored slips and underglazes. Now he does only low-fire and handbuilds his pieces using molds.

Steve's majolica pieces have a soft surface, and the images are looser than the hard-edged, shiny surfaces of his other work. He paints directly on the bisqued form with colored glazes creating a soft saturated surface and brush work that's abstract and visible.

Steve continues to stretch his talent creating new forms with more elaborate and intricate designs. His slab-built forms are created using lightweight hump molds he makes himself. His pieces are manipulated and embellished to create the sculptural forms that are his trademark. Sometimes, Steve explains, a new form or design doesn't necessarily come from the depths of one's creativity, but from necessity. "I never made oval dishes or platters. We have an annual potters' dinner to which all the potters bring a dish to share, served on one of their handmade dishes. My wife wanted to take a poached salmon and needed a platter to put it on. When I told her I didn't have platters of that shape, she told me to go make one. I've been making them ever since."

Bowl, 17 inches in width. Steve paints directly on the bisqued form with colored glazes creating a soft saturated surface and brush work that is abstract and visible.



Tools needed include a cutting wire, large scoring tool, fettling knife, small scoring tool, lace tools, needle tool, Surform and brayer or rolling pin (not shown).

Process

Using a slab roller, Steve rolls out a 3/8-inch-thick slab of clay that is at least 3 inches longer and wider than the hump mold he is using. If using a rolling pin, prevent the clay from warping by rolling both sides of the slab to ensure that the clay is evenly compressed. Drape the slab over the plaster hump (figure 1).

Roll the slab using a wooden brayer or rolling pin so that it conforms to the shape of the mold (figure 2). Note: Clay has memory, and because the slab only has a memory of being flat, it must be given a new memory of the shape of the hump mold. If the slab is not rolled again, it will try to return to the flat position during firing and is likely to warp.

Once the slab is draped and rolled, the excess clay around the edge of the mold is trimmed away (figures 3 and 4). Note: While the photo shows Steve using a fettling knife, he suggests that a knife is too sharp and

Place a slab over the mold.

Use a small roller to roll the slab.

Trim off excess clay.

Fully trimmed platter

may gouge or otherwise damage the edge of the hump mold, so he suggests using a needle tool instead.

Add the foot (figure 5). Steve suggests two possibilities. To create a simple foot, he lightly marks the outside shape of the foot with a pencil or stick tool, then scores over that line with a serrated rib. He then covers the rib marks with slip or vinegar and affixes a simple coil about ½ to ¾ inches thick, smoothing the coil to the bottom of the pot with a sponge. A more complicated foot involves throwing a collar about 2 inches high. Using the light mark drawn on the bottom of the platter, Steve roughly measures the distance all the way around the mark. He takes this measurement and divides it by three to get the diameter of the collar he needs to throw. As soon as the collar is thrown, Steve cuts it off the wheel, shapes it into an oval, and immediately attaches it to the bottom of the platter using the same technique described above. He uses a sponge to smooth the joint and straightens out any imperfections in the collar. When the collar

Add the foot.

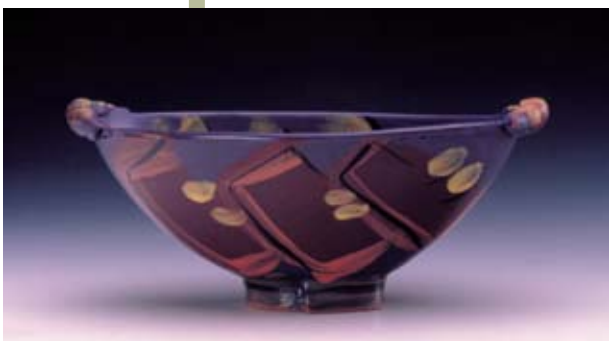
Carve the foot.

Add a rim.

Add handles.

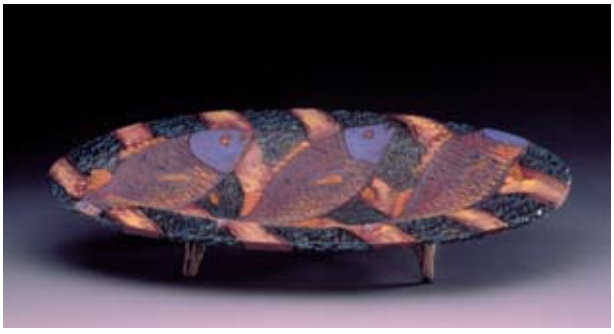
is leather hard, he cuts away parts of it to make different-shaped feet (figure 6).

Once the coil or the feet on the carved foot are a firm leather hard, and the platter has dried enough to hold its shape, Steve removes the platter from the mold and finishes the rim of the pot. This finishing can be done by simply smoothing the rim or by adding a coil and small strap (about ¾ to 1½ inches wide) to the rim (figure 7). Steve prefers adding to the rim because it makes the pot look stronger and more substantial. He also adds small strap handles at each end (figure 8). He sees handles as very powerful tools beyond their functional value since they provide a point of focus and help define the lines of the pot. He encourages potters to experiment with different rims and handles. When the platter is complete, it's covered in plastic and dried slowly so all of these added parts can equalize, which minimizes warping and prevents cracking.



Bowl, 12 inches in length. Steve Howell creates his hump mold pieces using a red earthenware clay, color-saturated glazes, and Amaco GDC Majolica glazes.

Platter, 18 inches in length. Steve's majolica pieces have a soft surface and the images are looser than the hard-edged, shiny surfaces of his other work.



Platter, 18 inches in length. Steve makes all his pieces using lightweight molds.

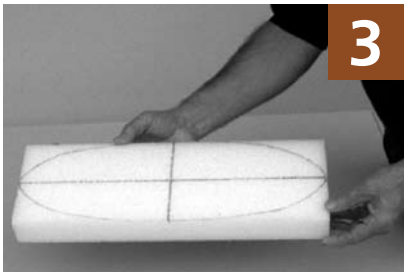
Steve prefers the addition of a rim to many of his pieces to make the pot look stronger and more substantial.

Bowl, 12 inches in width. After years of firing to cone 10 and scorning low-fire work, Steve now works exclusively in earthenware and constructs all his pieces using molds.

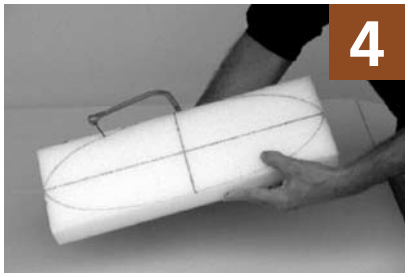
Making a Lightweight Hump Mold

Use 2-inch thick Styrofoam.

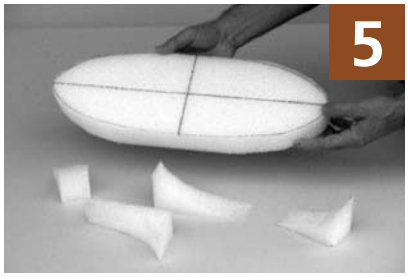
Transfer pattern from template.



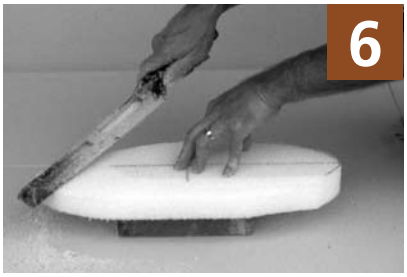
Draw intersecting lines.



Cut away excess.



Rough out the shape.



Create soft curves.

Steve Howell states that the benefits of making lightweight hump molds are:

- You can make any shape you want very quickly and easily.
- The molds are very light—a similar shape of solid plaster would weigh much more.
- The thin shell of plaster allows the clay to release easily.
- The molds do not hold a lot of water so they dry out quickly and can be reused.

Process

Purchase 2-inch-thick slabs of Styrofoam from a craft store (figure 1). For thicker molds, stack slabs of foam and glue them with a little bit of liquid plaster. Note: Steve recommends using plaster for glue because regular glue leaves hard spots that make carving difficult.

With the amount and thickness of the foam ready, make a paper pattern of the shape of the hump. Lay the pattern on top of the foam and, with a permanent marker, draw the pattern on the foam (figure 2). Draw lines that divide the foam in half along the length and width of the block (figure 3).

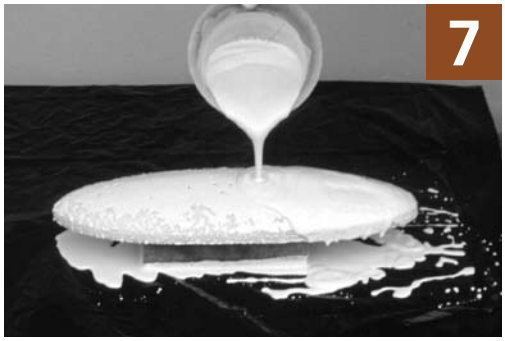
Cut away the excess on the outside of the foam block (figure 4). Shape the roughly cut block of foam using a Surform file (figure 5). The bisecting marks help you keep track of the middle of the block in both di-

rections. Continue shaping until you achieve a soft, smooth curve (figure 6). The Surform allows you to create a smooth, curved oval hump in a short amount of time.

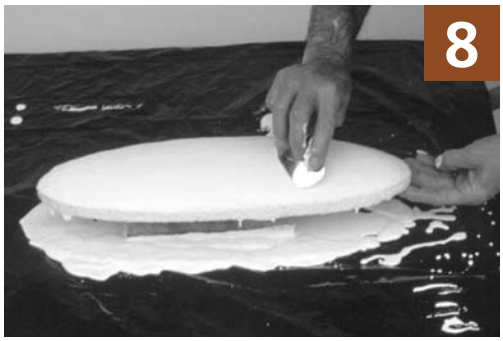
Place the oval-shaped hump of foam on a brick. Mix up a small portion of plaster (2¾ pounds of plaster and 1 quart of water are usually enough). Mix the plaster and, just as it starts to thicken, pour it over the entire foam hump (figure 7). Tip: Never try to smooth out the ripples of plaster with your fingers, just simply pick up the foam hump and tap it lightly against the brick.

In a few minutes, when the plaster has set but is not rock hard, gently smooth out any imperfections in the surface of the mold with a flexible metal rib (figure 8). Repeat the pouring process so you can get two good coats of plaster over the foam.

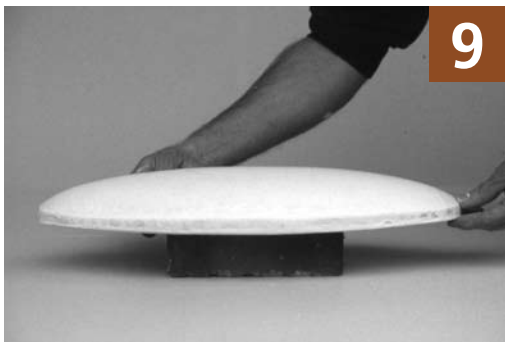
When the top side of the hump mold is complete, pour a puddle of plaster on a piece of heavy paper, then set the unfinished side of the mold in that puddle. Just as the puddle sets up, cut around the edge of the hump mold with a knife. Once the plaster is really set, pick up the mold, peal away the paper and smooth the bottom. It is important to finish the bottom of the hump in plaster so that it is not top heavy. The foam is now entirely encased in plaster (figure 9). When the plaster covering process is complete, use a metal rib to smooth the plaster. Dip the rib in water and gently scrape and smooth the surface.



Pour plaster over form.



Smooth plaster with metal rib.



A fully encased Styrofoam mold.