

Chapter One

General making methods

All the traditional ceramic making methods are applicable to work done on a larger scale – it only requires an ability to think BIG and a bit of ingenuity. Below I will describe how some well-known artists have used and adapted various methods to produce some outstanding work.

Coil and pinch

Manipulations of the clay between the fingers and hands must be the oldest and arguably the most sensitive form of making. Building is so direct and feedback from the fingers conveys instantaneous information about moisture content, thickness, form and surface.

Gudrun Klix (Australia) illustrates the advantages of coil building in this spiral piece she built over a period of a few days at Clay Sculpt in Gulgong, Australia in the summer of 1995. Where slabs often retain a sense of rigidity and limit the movement of the clay to one direction only (as when bending paper), coils can be manipulated in any direction which permits greater freedom of form. However, it is necessary to know where you are going with the work, because as you are always building from the base up, trying to imagine the top of the form early on is not easy. A scale model can be



Coil-built sculpture by Gudrun Klix
(Australia) being made at Gulgong, Australia.



Goddess by Tova Beck-Friedman, being made at Gulgong, Australia. Copper oxide wash is being applied before firing on site.

of considerable help in visualising the work in progress.

In 'Homage to Wisdom' Tova Beck-Friedman (USA) has created very large works through an extension of the coiling method. She tears small pieces of clay, and pinches them together, smoothing only on the inside of the piece. To hasten the process, she uses a torch, blowing only on the outside. This allows the piece to retain moisture on the interior of the sculpture, permitting new clay to adhere, while accentuating the outer texture. The varied shapes and sizes create an attractive natural surface.

Colour is achieved with metallic oxides that are rubbed into the surface in its leatherhard stage. When the piece is bone dry, she rubs the raised areas with steel wool, pushing oxides into the crevices.

In her 'Homage to Wisdom' group, each figure is made in three sections – each section made to fit the height of the kiln. A ledge is made at the top of each part to accept the section that will rest on top of it. The work is fired once to 1280°C (2330°F). The clay used is rough and open, consisting of

- 40% Fireclay
- 10% Rough grog
- 15% Medium grog
- 35% Ball clay

Carol Windham (UK) builds her figures from a more refined coil building method. Coiled forms are scraped down and surfaces worked into. As put by Emmanuel Cooper in his review of her work in a London show, 'these look as if they have been honed down rather than built up'. These pieces are nearly life size. She starts with extensive drawing and attempts to combine an interest in the traditional pot form with visions of the female figure. In 'The Tea Drinker', she started with the central stem of the body,



Coiled figure in the making by Carol Windham (UK)

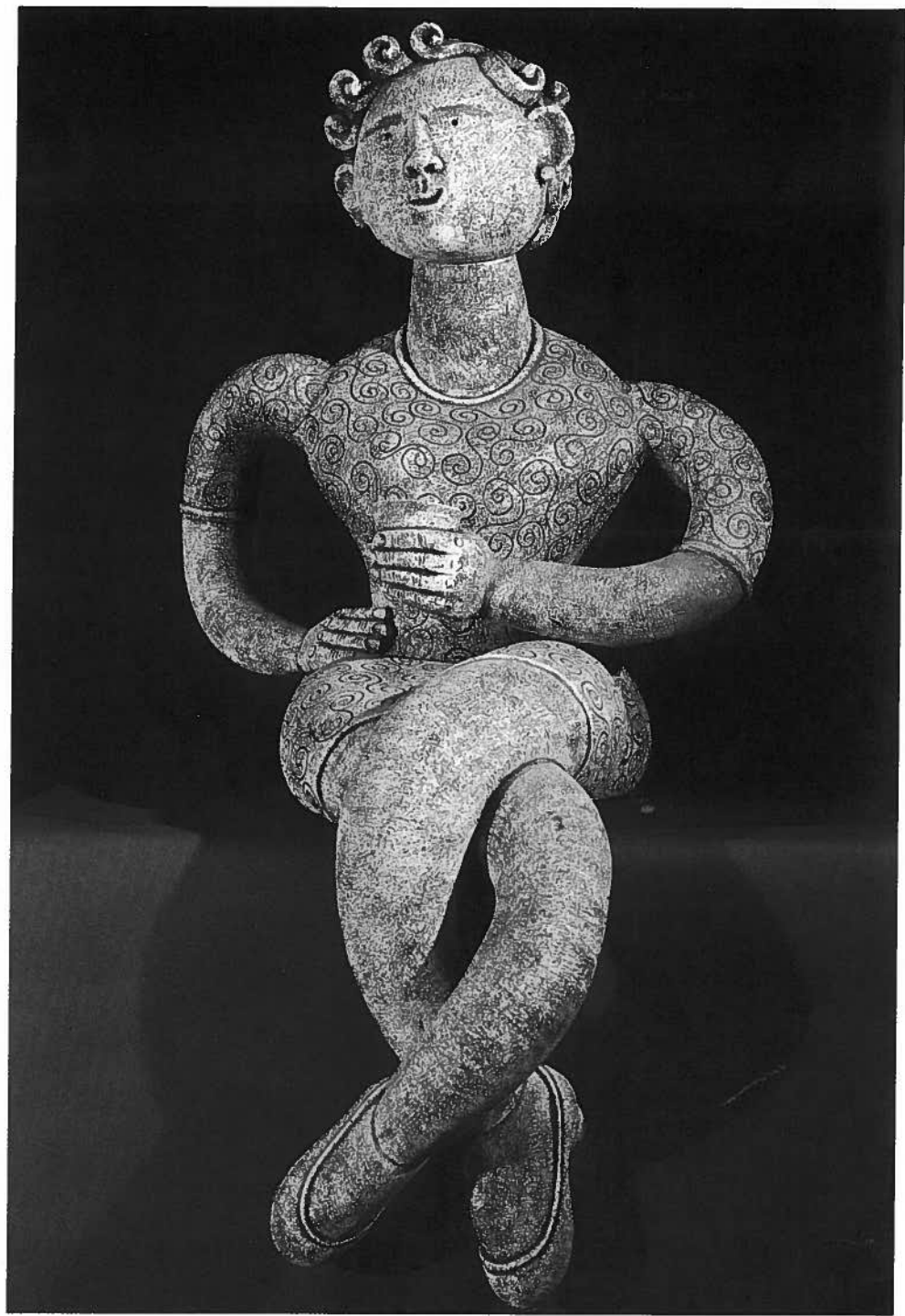
but then, rather unusually, had to coil downwards for the limbs.

Her refinement is also evident in the clay she chooses to use – industrially-manufactured ‘T’ material – which is incredibly strong (and equally expensive). Another example of this refinement can be seen in the detail which is drawn into the surface and picked out with oxides.

Carol worked for a time as an assistant in the studio of the American sculptor, Robert Arneson. The expressive, larger than life portraits for which he is known also demonstrate extraordinary skills and great sensitivity to materials. These combine a number of methods, being built up and modelled on a thrown base. Moulds are also used to define features of the head.



Coiled figure in process by Carol Windham. ‘T’ material is used. Unusually, arms and legs are being coiled downwards.



Completed figure entitled 'Tea Drinker' by Carol Windham. It is approximately $\frac{7}{8}$ life size.



'Homage to Wisdom', by Tova Beck-Friedman (USA), 7 foot (175 cm) high. *Courtesy of the Herzliya Museum, Israel.*

Right

'Chemo 1' in studio by Robert Arneson, approximately 4 foot (120 cm) high. *Photograph by Carol Windham.*

Use of the wheel

Coil and throw

The initial use of a revolving disc or support for clay was closely related to coil building i.e. forming and smoothing manageable amounts of clay onto the rim of the pot below. This still is one of the easiest methods of creating large forms on the wheel. The base, or initial starting point can be centred and then allowed to harden enough to support additional weight. Use sufficient clay to make a base of a thickness appropriate to the scale of the intended work.

The rim must be kept moist (cover in plastic) until lower sections are firm and then be well-scored and slipped to insure secure jointing of additional coils to the





near the base, a more uniform thickness may be easier achieve when pieces are placed rim to rim. The top section can be thinned by additional throwing and the lower section trimmed as desired.

David Frith (UK) makes enormous jugs in three sections. The first two are cylinders stretched into deep bowls, which are attached rim to rim. The third is a short cylinder which provides generous amounts of clay for a substantial rim and spout. This seems to be a better solution than the struggle to

Left

Two bowls are joined together at the rims to create a larger pot. The throwing bat is cut free after positioning inverted bowl.

Below

Throwing the rim of the large pot.

pot below. If in a hurry, gas burners, electric paint strippers, hair driers or fan heaters can be used to dry out lower sections, but it is much better to be patient and avoid the inevitable unevenness in moisture content which results. Use a removable bat with locating pins to allow the work to be dried while the wheel is used for other pieces.

Throwing in sections

Throwing in sections is another way to achieve scale. Cylinders are a good starting point for as Phil Rogers says in his book on *Throwing Pots*, 'A simple cylinder is the "root" of all upright, tall forms . . .'. Whether sculptural or functional, the basic skills required are the same, and forms are created in the service of an idea. Cylinders can be stacked directly on top of each other, or placed rim to rim. As there is a tendency for cylinders to be thicker and heavier





Fountain by David Frith (UK). It is composed of seven separately thrown sections.

reach great heights which leaves so little clay at the end for a finishing touch.

When inverting one form onto another, use calipers to determine identical sizes. Throw on removable bats but do not wire off the top form immediately. You are then able to use the bat to lift and invert this section to line it up with the lower one. Wire cut the upper form from its bat when satisfied with its location.

Enjoying throwing

Charles Bound (UK/USA) takes a quite loose approach to his throwing. He attributes much of this to an inability to work in a cerebral, refined way. There is a recognition of 'my own limitations' is how he puts it. 'Loose and awkward is how I would define it. For the more I let



Assembled fountain by David Frith, 43 inches (110 cm) high. Base contains recirculation pump and water reservoir.

go of that (efforts at refinement), the more successful the work.'

For Charles, there is a love of what clay can do – the cracks, dryness that promotes splitting at the sides, building in layers. Pieces frequently fall apart and are picked up and reassembled. Large plates with torn and cut segments, gaping holes



Large storage jar by David Frith, 29 x 20 inches (75 x 50 cm). *Collection of the author.*

and spontaneous marks covered in slips and applied bits of clay attest to this approach. Stacked cylinders twist and writhe upwards. Sand and grog additions to the clay are evident in abundance and even his smallest teabowls have surfaces which are full of life. He suggests that his first efforts on the potters wheel only

came to life when using 15 pound balls of clay. This says much about personality, where small precise movements are impossible, and a free interchange of ideas and materials exists.

Charles enjoys the challenge of pushing large lumps of clay around and when watching him work, I am reminded



Large plate by Charles Bound, 24 inches (60 cm) in diameter.



Footprints on pot by Paul Soldner. *Collection of the author.*

of Peter Voulkos and the recent California description of centring as '*muscling the clay*'. I wish I could say there was an easier way to do this, but a wiry strength and determination, coupled with lots of practice, seems to be the only solution if you wish to work this way. Of course, coils can be added to rims for additional dimensions and to the footring when turning.

Paul Soldner (USA) illustrates yet another approach in his recent work. This is to use the wheel as a tool to create slabs and forms for further work. The basic cylinder becomes the source of shapes to be manipulated, cut up, indeed walked upon, and reassembled. Slabs made in this way may also take advantage of the throwing ridges to create linear patterns across the surface.

Avoiding cracks

A few thoughts on avoiding 's' cracks in the base of large plates:

1. The clay must be firmly compressed for strength, and one way to do this is to centre the lump, compress it into a thick disc, then cut it off and turn it over, repeating the process so that both sides are pressed firmly down.
2. Try the Japanese approach, which is to pound the lump into the centre and open it up with a rhythmical thumping of the fist as the wheel slowly rotates. This will get the ball of clay roughly centred, well-compressed, and ready to throw without huge muscular effort.
3. As with all large works, additions of sand or grog will lessen the shrinkage and therefore the stresses involved.
4. Wire cut the work free of the wheel-head immediately and repeat this several times as the work dries to the point of removal from the bat.
5. Dry slowly and evenly. Try sanded bats and slatted drying racks. Dry rims will cause the damp centre to contract outwards, with disastrous results. The finer the clay and the larger the piece, the slower must be the drying. Australian Greg Daly tells me that he manages large porcelain

plates (about 60 cm across), when allowed to dry over a period of *several months*.

Slabware

Slabware has certain advantages over other methods: Large surfaces can be created relatively easily and whole sections may be created on the flat, then erected into a vertical position when dry enough to support their own weight. This means you do not *have* to work from the base up as with coils and wheel work. When you do build up, small slabs may be combined with coil methods for a faster result. Sheets of clay may be used spontaneously or patterns made and the pieces assembled according to considered plans and designs. I also like the way that a slab resembles a skin that may be stretched into a form.

Slab preparation

Creating slabs gives the material dimensional characteristics – length, width and thickness. When firm, they can be related to construction experience with sheet building materials, or if soft, experience of dealing with fabrics. Slabs can be made in a number of ways: hand rolled with a rolling pin, wire cut from a block of clay, pressed or pounded out, stretched by throwing repeatedly onto a table or floor, extruded, or made with a slab rolling machine. My own methods include a combination of these, but most often I use an old washing mangle which has been converted into a slab roller.

In addition to the dimensions created by slab preparation, two other important features appear: *edges* and *surface qualities* which result from pressures and stretching. Textured cloth and paper, or

any absorbent material can be used as a work surface and rolled onto the clay. Receptiveness of clay to impressions is one of the characteristics that make it such a wonderful material to work with. As Coll Minogue says in *Impressed and Incised Ceramics*, the ability of clay to retain impressions and marks, and the knowledge that, when fired, it will last indefinitely, has attracted people to this medium throughout history. And there



Coloured slips and cloth textures are applied to slabs.



Detailed and plain slabs are collaged together.



Trial assembly of 'Elemental Concerns', a sculpture group for the Leicester Royal Infirmary, by Jim Robison. Coloured slips and cloth textures are applied to slabs.

are artists for whom the process of working the clay surface becomes the major part of the overall artistic statement.

Working method

Certainly, for me, the act of slab rolling has become an essential part of the making process. When I prepare for work, the first task is to make slabs – a lot of them. They are made to dimensions required by the size of the proposed work and left to stiffen a bit on several layers of newspaper. For larger projects, slabs may be stacked up with paper in between and covered in plastic until needed. The old mangle I use, like any slab rolling machine, requires a cloth to keep clay from sticking to the rollers. The choice of cloth, or combination of materials will transfer an immediate richness to the clay surface. The act of rolling causes the clay to stretch, and this is revealed clearly along broken edges. When slabs are folded over and re-rolled slightly thicker, the edges are increasingly activated. Responding to pressure, they tear into

fresh and spontaneous shapes that suggest geological events and the ageing process.

Assembling a work

Slabs are prepared, textured, painted with slips and collaged together at a soft to leatherhard stage. The combined pieces form sheets that make up the sides of vessels and sculptures. Laid on paper, these are allowed to stiffen in curved supports made from hardboard.

When leatherhard, the curved supports are raised into a vertical position on a base slab and the clay sides joined to each other at the edges. To provide additional support, lengths of wood are sometimes temporarily attached to the inner sides with soft coils of clay. When slabs are fairly stiff, joints must be carefully made. I use a kitchen tool, an onion holder, which has long pins like a

Sides of large pieces are placed in hardboard forms until leatherhard. Wood slats are attached with soft coils to prevent sides from bending when stood up.

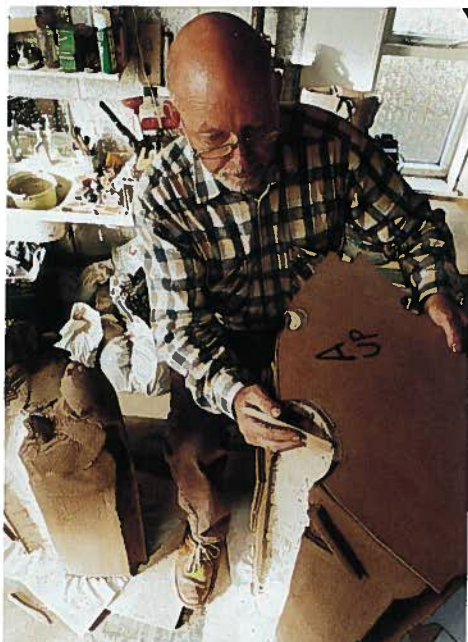




One of the eight Leicester Royal Infirmary sections during construction. Hardboard forms tied together for support during the joining of sides. String in the background is a plumb line to insure absolute verticality.

Below

Top of section is refined to fit hardboard pattern. This pattern will then be used to make the base of the next section.



comb to score the edges. A stiff toothbrush, dipped in water, is also useful. Slip is commonly used, although I find that water softens the slabs faster and a soft coil, worked in, makes a secure join.

Multiple sections

When making pieces which rise beyond the four foot (120 cm) height of my kiln, multiple sections are in order. I don't really mind joints when they have been thought about and planned for. Another factor in my thinking is *what can I lift?* – especially as there is a set of stairs

between studio and kiln room. With an assistant, substantial chunks can be manoeuvred (and I admit to cries of 'help' when the time comes to load the kiln) but on your own it can be quite a struggle. I can't think of many things worse than having a completed piece, dried and glazed, broken on its way into the kiln!