



# SURFACE DECORATION TECHNIQUES

Edited by Anderson Turner

Ceramic  
Arts  
Handbook  
Series









The American Ceramic Society  
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Frontispiece: *Multi-Flower Vase*, 10½ inches in height, porcelain, handbuilt using press-molded slabs, by Margaret Bohls.



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# Preface

The surface of a piece of ware or a ceramic sculpture, while just one of the many aspects of ceramics a clay lover needs to consider, can be one of the most important parts of any creation made from clay. I've witnessed countless students and seasoned veterans struggle with the surfaces of their work. Sometimes the choice is to ignore the possibilities that texture, underglaze, glaze, slip and other decorating elements can bring to the sense of life of a piece. Or the opposite happens and the artist chooses to do too much.

This book is a book of possibilities. It's comprised of materials previously published in *Ceramics Monthly* and *Pottery Making Illustrated* over the past 15 or so years; some have been reprinted in various books or online; and others have been passed around among hundreds of potters at craft centers and schools. Where previously published materials included forming techniques or dissertations on a lifestyle or personal histories, we've selected choice processes germane to the surface treatment only.

Like anything in clay, practice makes perfect. I'd like to suggest you try a variety of techniques and see what happens. Move as much material through your studio as possible. It is only through this practice that we who work in clay can truly see all the possibilities before us. For anyone who has ever worked with a surface, results can vary from surprise to disappointment depending on a host of factors.

Surface treatment can be a lifesaver from having to consider the challenges of glazing. Perhaps Liz Smith (see page 59) said it best when she stated "After the form is constructed, I apply surface treatments at every stage of making. I think it may be my fear of the proverbial blank canvas. I can imagine almost nothing more daunting than looking at a table full of blank bisqueware without marking or color." Her primary mentor was Toshiko Takaezu, who was promoter of experimentation. When Liz asked her, as she glazed, what a piece would look like in the end she would reply, "... we'll see, it's all an experiment."

*Anderson Turner*

# Forming & Texture

## ORNAMENT BENEATH THE SURFACE

by A. Blair Clemo

There are only a few moments I can pinpoint in my life as a maker that have made me take pause, look at my work, and question it all the way down to its core. One such moment came by way of a simple mental exercise put forth by James Trilling in his book *Ornament, A Modern Prospective*.

Trilling states “. . . ornament is separable from the functional shape of the object. If you want to know whether a particular feature of an object is ornament, try imagining it away. If the object remains structurally intact, and recognizable, and can still perform its function, the feature is decoration, and may well be ornament . . .”

When I applied this exercise to my work, I noticed right away that so much of the labor I invested could be defined as such. My studio practice, and in fact the education system that I learned from, followed one simple mode of operation; ornamentation comes after generating a form, it is a secondary process.

This identification of ornamentation as a subsequent process itself does not trouble me, until Trilling continues, “Under the laws of modernist aesthetics, ornament bears damning witness against itself. If we take it away, physically or in imagination, the shape and function of the object are intact. Ornament is unnecessary.”



Jar, 8½ in. (22 cm), red stoneware, fired to cone 6.

My studio practice, at that time, centered on wheel throwing as a way of generating forms. I would sit down with a ball of clay and manipulate that clay into a utilitarian form, something that could be generically described as a vessel. This object would be clean, precise, and unadorned. By the laws of Modernist aesthetic that Trilling mentions, I could be finished at that point. I had made an object that, once glazed, would perform a utilitarian task just fine, perhaps even better than if it were ornate. From that vantage point, there was no actual need to invest more time and energy in my work.

But as a maker, I felt my work was far from over. As the clay reached leather hard it would be altered by adding layers of subsequent labor. The result is what I think of as visual interest. Whatever the process of altering or decoration one may choose, it seems important to me that





1. Decorative molds and examples of ornamental patties and strips.



2. A form mold can be used to make an open or closed form.



3. Clay pressed into a decorative mold.



4. Decorative pressings laid into the form mold. Intentional gaps are filled from behind to create depth.

it is there, furthering the visual impact of the piece. This does not seem like wasted time for me, it seems like the very reason to make something in the first place. For me, making pots is as much about a decorative surface as it is generating a form. Therefore, this idea of ornament coming after making, and it by definition being unnecessary, seemed very troubling indeed. This needed to be addressed where the trouble began in the first place, through the technical process of making.

The system of making that I developed from this question starts with ornamental pieces, generated from press molds, that become not only the skin of the work, but also its structure and form. Ornament is the primary building block in my work, integral and inseparable from the form.

It provides a different answer to Trilling's challenge. What would remain if the ornament were removed from my work? Nothing, that is, at least from a more conceptual viewpoint.

## Molds

The building blocks of my work are two different types of press molds, first a decorative mold that yields an ornamental patty or coil of clay to build from (figure 1) and the other is a form mold that can be pressed into to make the actual volume of the pots (figure 2). This form mold is cast in a circular shape and, after clay is pressed into it, it is centered on the wheel and used to throw the upper portion of the jar.

To make the decorative molds, clay or plasticine is hand formed flat on the table, typically out of small elements such as coils or cones ar-



**5.** A coil is pressed into the decorative mold providing an ornamental strip to coil build with.



**6.** Decorative pressed strips are added along the rim of the pressed form mold base to form the wall of the jar.



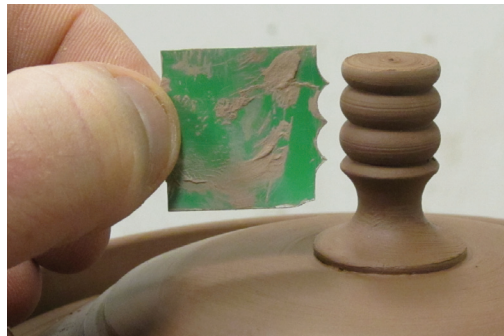
**7.** Angle a top strip to form the shoulder. Create another patterned layer with deep thumbprints.



**8.** A coil is added to the shoulder and thrown to make the flange.



**9.** After the rim has set to leather hard, throw a footring on the bottom.



**10.** A metal profile tool is used to make a clean and consistent knob on the lid.

ranged in whatever shape I need. Cottle boards are set up around the object and plaster is poured in a simple, one-part-mold fashion.

The form molds begin as objects thrown on the wheel, carved when leather hard, and typically cast in two-part molds. No pour spout is needed, as these molds are made for pressing, not slip casting.

## Clay

After pressing clay into the decorative molds (figure 3), I then set them into the form mold (figure 4) ornament side down. I can vary the clarity of the ornament with the pressure I use to push them into the mold—the harder I push the clay against the mold wall, the less ornament

will remain. I try to be strategic in placing the ornamental parts, as the composition of the pot's surface will depend on how the ornament is set in the mold (figure 4)

Once the form mold is filled, creating a half sphere, I trim the edge flush with the mold. This will be the bottom of my jar. I press a coil into a longer decorative mold (figure 5) yielding an ornamental strip to build with. This is scored and slipped onto the press-molded base (figure 6). This jar is made with two layers of ornamental strips, one on top of the other, making up the wall of the jar. The last strip is scored and slipped in place at a 45° angle, slanting inward (figure 7). This will give me a nice shoulder on which to throw a flange for the lid to rest on.

The jar is allowed to set up to a soft leather hard, just firm enough to support the pressure of adding and throwing a coil to make the flange. I center the jar (with the base still in the form mold) on the wheel and use a needle tool to cut the rim level. I score and slip a coil into place on the rim and throw a flange for the lid (figure 8). This is one of the most dynamic parts of the finished jar; a strong horizontal line that conspicuously shows the different touch between the squishy, press-molded body and the precise thrown rim. I usually leave this rim unglazed to increase focal attention. I throw the lid immediately after the rim so that they will both shrink at the same rate. I have noticed that, even though the rim is

freshly thrown, the body of the jar has already begun to shrink. This can throw off the precision of the lid fit. To compensate, I usually throw the lid slightly larger ( $\frac{1}{8}$  of an inch or so) than the flange. When both the lid and the lip are leather hard, I trim the lid to fit the jar.

Once the rim is leather hard, I remove the jar from the form mold and flip it over. Because the plaster form mold absorbs moisture, the bottom is usually a soft leather hard and ready for the thrown foot. I center the jar on the wheel upside down (resting on the rim), and mark with a needle tool where the foot-ring will go. This area is scored and slipped and a coil is added and thrown into a foot for the jar (figure 9).

Finally, after trimming the leather-hard lid to fit the jar, I throw the knob. I use a profile tool made from a piece of sheet metal to give me a precise, decorative finial (figure 10). Additional profile tools are also used to make decorative marks on the inside of the lid and the bottom of the jar.



Jar, 8 in. (20 cm), red stone-ware, fired in oxidation to cone 6..



# Layers & Inclusions

## DECORATING WITH WIRES, NAILS AND TERRA SIG

by Jeremy Randall



*Barn Salt Cellar*, earthenware with terra sigillata, crackle slip, copper oxide wash, steel carpet tacks, and nichrome wire. All photos: Sarah Panzarella.

I can trace my interest in the patina of use and the implications of function to the objects that surrounded me when I was a child, and can follow those objects as they have found a place in my own adult life. The iron-oxide wash on an early-American primitive pine cabinet with close to 175 years of use, the early-American, blue milk-painted blanket chest worn bare around the edges, or my grandfather's hammer, the handle smooth from years of use. These objects feel comfortable, both to hold and touch as well as to live with. This is the desire that I have for my pots. The information that can be received from using handmade objects and living with them can be rich and fruitful and at the same time quiet and contemplative.

Working with slabs allows me to create surfaces that can be primed with textural informa-

tion, and then move from flat surface to form almost instantly. The soft leather-hard qualities of the clay allow for immediate construction of the piece without having to wait for things to stiffen. This sheet material is also closely related to the materials that I love to look at as inspiration. The corrugated steel walls of a grain silo, for instance, are incredibly thin in relation to the structure, but the space that is created is voluminous and beautiful. The textures that I use are derived from various found mats and commercial surfaces, collected over the years as I cross paths with them. I have even pulled over while driving in order to pick up an old dish mat that was lying in the middle of the road. I have enjoyed creating surface texture for years and have used it on countless pots.



**1.** A plastic textured mat and a brayer are used to develop the surface of slabs.



**2.** You can roll the mat texture into the clay or roll the clay into the texture.



**3** Slightly stiffened slabs are joined to a base slab to form the vessel.



**4** Seams are left rough with the slab edges exposed to reference a used object.

## Forming Used Objects

When building my vessels, I start with a dialog on the surface between the front and the back of the piece. The plastic mats, made for a sink or for the floor of a car are pressed into fresh rolled and cut-to-size slabs (figures 1–2). The mats generally have a pattern on one side and some have patterns on both the front and the back. They are made out of a heavy, slightly flexible plastic and hold up very well to repeated use. For my purposes, they create a surface that shows how objects and building materials weather over time and use.

Scale is also important. When I add the textured slabs to the base slab of the vessel (figure 3), I consciously consider the vertical and horizontal planes of the piece, then determine how the

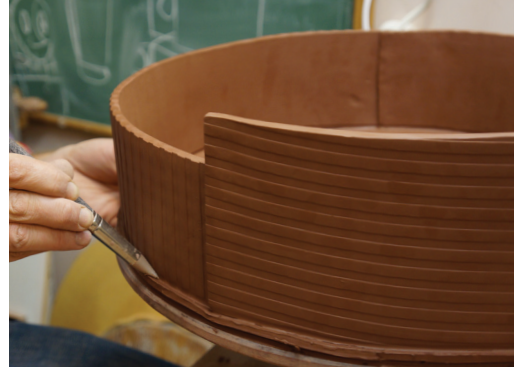
texture can make the viewer's eye want to move around it (see figure 5).

As I secure the side pieces to the base and the trim pieces to finish the rim, it is important for me to make sure the seams and the edges are not straight and true (figure 4). I don't want to overwork them and risk the possibility of losing the reference to a used object that contains a sense of history (figure 6). The roughness that remains will also catch the stains that are applied after the bisque firing.

While researching industrial and construction references, I spent time in the hardware store looking for bits that could be used in my pots. Rather than adding more texture that might clutter the surface, I found that standard steel carpet tacks could be pressed into the surface and remain



5. The texture varies from horizontal to vertical orientations adding variety.



6. Seams are secured and edges are left visible rather than blended together to retain the qualities of construction.



7. Extruded trim pieces are added to finish the rim.



8. Steel carpet tacks (inset) are added to both secure the seams and reference construction material.

intact after the firing because I fire to a temperature that is lower than the melting point of steel. I add them to places where seams come together as they may even help to secure the construction (figure 8). The other non-clay material that I add to the pot is nichrome wire. The wire adds to the shifting scale of the pot while also adding to the reference of material like corrugated steel, roofing material, or barn wood (figures 9–10). Both of these materials also help to break the plane of the rectangles and the repeated textures.

### Developing a Weathered Surface

I have always steered away from traditional glazes for my pots. I want the exteriors to allude to the layered surfaces that I reference, and a glassy shine has never really seemed right. Using terra sigillata has filled a number of my goals, and provides a

new vocabulary of surface and color. Firstly, to apply it properly, I have to touch each curve and crack of the piece, becoming fondly reacquainted with every detail of all my pots. This surface material and its application are ancient, most known for their use on the surfaces of pottery from ancient Rome and Greece, and extremely simple to make, leading to a simpler studio practice.

The colors I use are Mason commercial ceramic stains, mixed into a jar of terra sigillata to the desired intensity, applied at the bone dry state with a soft brush, and burnished with a plastic bag stretched over my finger. The surface obtained is soft and waxy, much like the surface of an eggshell or semi-gloss latex paint . . . or better yet, milk paint. This surface quality remains after bisque, and because it is smooth and somewhat



## Surface Decoration Techniques



**9.** Cut nichrome wire to length with wire cutters.



**10.** Nichrome wire breaks the plane of the pot's flat, level rim.



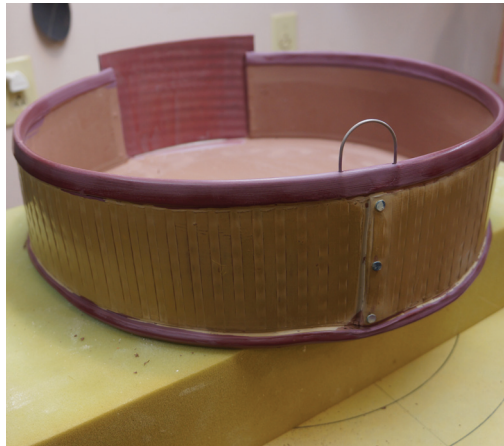
**11.** Broad strokes of terra sigillata are applied using a hake brush.



**12.** Just as the surface sheen has disappeared, burnish it with plastic stretched over a thumb or finger.



**13.** Contrasting colors are added for visual interest.



**14.** The finished pot. After bisque firing, add a liner glaze to the interior and apply copper oxide wash.

shiny, the copper oxide wash I use to patina the surface, when applied after bisque, wipes off the surface easily. The copper then fumes during the firing and adds halos around the texture, lending a sense of uncertainty to every firing. Finally soda ash washes and selected sculpture/texture glazes help to bring my surfaces closer to the constructed and weathered surfaces that I am referencing.

### Building the Surface with Terra Sigillata

I apply the terra sigillata to bone dry pieces. This is a great way for me to semi-seal the clay without having to use a glaze. My terra sigillata (3½ pounds of water mixed with 2 tablespoons of sodium silicate and 14 pounds of OM4 Kentucky Ball Clay) is mixed with a ratio of approximately 1 cup of sigillata to 1 tablespoon of stain and sieved if necessary. I increase the amount of stain if I desire a more intense color. The sigillata should be the consistency of thin milk. I apply it to the pot in broad strokes using

a hake brush (figure 11) and burnish the freshly coated area with a plastic grocery bag stretched over my fingers just after the sheen has disappeared (figure 12).

I choose my colors based on contrasts and the ability of the combinations to add visual interest for the viewer (figure 13). I like the way it references traditional milk-paint—milk mixed with pigment and washed over wood—surfaces often used in early American furniture and having a soft satin sheen. After the surface and the pot itself, which has absorbed water from the terra sigillata, have dried, the piece is ready for the bisque firing (figure 14).

I want my pots to be used so I add a black liner glaze to the interior. For a finishing on the exterior, I apply a copper oxide wash, brushed on to cover the entire exterior then wiped off, leaving a residue of copper material within the textures and grooves. The remaining copper will fume and give an overall sense of history and wear.



*Flat Stack Vase.* Upon completion, the sources of reference are embedded into the piece, quietly reminding the user of things and places that they may have seen.



*Lidded Tank.* Nostalgia is a trigger. It brings a person back while at the same time allowing them to be present, in time and space, with the pot.

# Carving & Etching

## SURFACE ETCHING: SHELLAC AND WATER

by Jim Gottuso



A few years ago, I developed an interest in trying to exploit the use of wax resist in the service of surface decoration. I was disappointed with the waxes I tried on both bisqueware and greenware. They were globs of goo that didn't respond to thin brushes or delicate application.

At the same time I happened upon the work of Arne Ase whose work absolutely floored me, especially after unsuccessfully trying wax, paraffin, and acrylic medium on greenware in an attempt to etch the unprotected areas and create depth to the surface. His decorations were incredibly delicate and, of course, his use of soluble salts and translucent porcelain came together in pieces of sublime beauty. What wasn't clear was what he used for a resist. It turns out that Arne had written *Water Colour On Porcelain*, which has been described as the definitive book on soluble salt use and the secret ingredient had to be in that book. Unfortunately it is out of print, but the library managed to find a copy, and the book revealed the ingredient as shellac.

Fellow blogger, Michael Kline, says that at Penland the process of using a resist and dissolving the exposed unfired clay was referred to as "hydro-abrasion". After a couple of years trial-and-error and evolving a personal visual vocabulary, it turns out that this process dovetails very nicely with what appeals to my sense of design, form, and aesthetics. I've always loved what happens when a brush, pen or pencil makes contact

A water abraded surface of calligraphic lines decorates the surface of Jim Gottuso's clean-lined forms.

with another surface, and using shellac as a resist on dried, unfired clay allows the surface to be etched without losing the immediacy and spontaneity of such brushwork.

### Materials

For this technique, you will need shellac, denatured alcohol, brush, sponge, water, and an OSHA approved respirator.

Shellac thickens when exposed to air and loses its ability to soak into the clay body thoroughly. It can be thinned with alcohol, but over time it loses its viscosity and eventually needs to be discarded. Avoid the waste by decanting only what you need into a small lidded jar.

### Thinking in Reverse

Begin with a bone dry, trimmed piece. Since my pieces are typically about 1/4-inch thick, tapering to 3/16-inch at the rim, I'm careful not to put a strain on it. This process requires a bit of thinking in reverse. Protect the parts of the piece that are not to be altered. The first layer of shellac resist applied to the piece, because it covers the clay before any abrasion takes place, ends up being the





1. Apply resist to both the foot and rim to preserve their integrity throughout the process.



2. Apply the first (and ultimately foreground) layer of resist for your chosen design.



3. Allow the shellac to completely dry and remove clay from the exposed areas using a damp sponge.



4. Apply shellac over the top of the first layer, making this second layer extend about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch past the edge.

topmost layer, or highest relief area at the end of the process. Since I don't want the rim or foot to be etched, I apply resist to both to preserve their integrity (figure 1).

### Defining the Foreground

The next step is to apply the first layer of resist that creates the decoration and results in the top or foreground layer of the final design (figure 2). Imagine writing your name with the shellac then etching the un-shellacked areas. If, after that another layer of shellac was applied in a grid pattern over the name and etched again, the result would appear as your name hovering over the grid, even though the applications were done in reverse. For the finished piece here, the first layer is a series of vertical calligraphic marks that go from the foot to the rim.

### Abrading the Clay

Allow the shellac to dry completely (24 hours), then start abrading the exposed areas with a damp sponge (figure 3). If you intend to preserve what's been laid down in shellac without degradation, jettison the idea of abrasion, and think of your goal in the process as more like dissolving the clay, even though that's not technically what's happening.

Abrasion occurs when the water between the sponge and the surface collects dislodged clay particles in it and creates a localized slurry, which gets thicker and thicker as you go. Do not leave this thick slurry between the sponge and the pot. When the sponge has lots of clay on the surface and little water left in it, you're likely to eradicate your image along with the unprotected areas as the particles on the sponge move across and scratch into the surface.



5. Brush shellac in the remaining unprotected areas, leaving a small gap between the two covered areas.



6. Allow the piece to dry again and repeat the etching process. Continue these steps until you are satisfied.



7. Brush a black slip that is suitable for use on greenware over the entire surface of the outside of the bowl.



8. Use a sponge to wipe off any black slip that is not in the etched lines.

To avoid this, load a sponge with water and wipe the surface of the pot until the slurry starts to form, then rinse the sponge thoroughly in your bucket of water and repeat. In this early stage, with large unprotected areas of clay, this means you're having to rinse out the sponge frequently, sometimes after only two swipes across the clay.

### Defining the Middle Ground

After allowing the piece to completely dry again apply a second layer of shellac. I'm trying to create the appearance on the final bowl of a thin brush stroke that's hovering or sitting on top of another, slightly wider, brush stroke. I apply shellac over the top of the original shellac lines and make this second layer extend about  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch past the edge of that first layer (figure 4).

### Adding Linear Elements

On this particular bowl, my goal is to have a linear reinforcement of the negative space that's created by the slightly widening brushwork. To achieve this, apply shellac in all the remaining unprotected areas, leaving only a small ( $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{16}$  inch) gap of bare clay between the two covered areas (figure 5).

Allow the piece to dry and repeat the etching process (figure 6). When you notice a slurry developing, rinse the sponge to avoid abrading the edges of the resisted areas, otherwise your lines may have jagged rather than crisp edges. Since the area being dissolved now is linear as opposed to large planes, moving in a circular motion with the sponge aids in getting a uniform depth to the etching. It can be particularly difficult to gauge how





Go over the entire surface with a stiff brush after the bisque firing to clean off the shellac residue.

deep the etching is now because the layers of shellac have some thickness or depth themselves. The shellac will eventually burn out in the bisque and only then is the depth and uniformity of the etching revealed.

### Adding Color

Let the piece dry completely then brush on a black slip over the entire exterior of the bowl (figure 7). My black slip is made from throwing slip reclaim and 35 grams of Mason stain #6600 black added per 2 cups of slip.

Wipe off any slip that is not in between the etched lines before it dries (figure 8). If you accidentally take too much slip off and there are unprotected areas that are now back to bare clay, it's easy to reapply more slip immediately to that area and try again allow it to dry.

### Glazing Strategies

When the bowl is bisque fired, you'll finally be able to see how the decoration looks, from the subtleties of the etched layers to the contrast between the dark and light tones of the slipped and bare areas. If a flaky residue is present from the shellac, brush the entire surface with a stiff brush to clean it up (figure 9) or it will wreak havoc.

When glazing, I dip my pots but spraying, pouring and painting the glaze also works. Of course, in order to accentuate the subtle differences in relief, transparent or translucent glazes, or glazes that break over texture and edges, works the best. If the colored slip is dark (like this black one), a darker glaze cuts way down on the contrast. Note: Since the relief is low, a thin glaze application works better since a thicker glaze on the finished piece will soften the etched effect.



# Carving & Etching

## MAKING SGRAFFITO TOOLS

by Nancy Gallagher

Clay is rough on tools. Fortunately, some of the most used tools in the box are quick and cheap to assemble right in your own studio. To make your own sgraffito and carving tools, start by gathering dowels, pencils, or brushes that can be used for tool handles. Taper the ends with a pencil sharpener just a bit so the edges don't cut into your clay surface while you're working. Drill a  $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch hole into the tapered end.

### Smaller Carving Tools

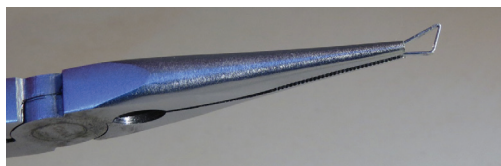
Utility staples and office staples make excellent carving loops. A straightened utility staple makes a needle-type stylus for sgraffito, which creates nicely tapered lines when the chiseled edge is held at an angle. An office staple is easy to bend into a small carving loop. Use a pair of needle-nose pliers, bend the staples to the shapes that will work best for your sgraffito work.

Put a small dab of Gorilla Glue in each drilled hole, then insert the wire shape into the hole. Note that Gorilla Glue expands while it dries. Dry the tool in an upright position for 12 hours.

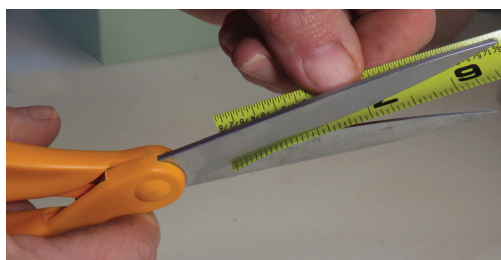
### Larger Carving Tools

For creating thicker lines or carving away larger areas of clay, make loop tools with spring steel from a measuring tape. Cheap measuring tapes from a dollar store work fine. Unscrew the back of the tape and slowly remove the inside tape, which is under pressure. Cut into 1-inch strips of varying widths with scissors.

Cut a  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-deep slit into the end of your dowel. Loop your strip of steel tape so the ends meet, dip the ends in Gorilla Glue, and place them into the slotted end of your dowel. Let the tool dry upright for 12 hours.



Bend staples to the shapes that will work best for you.



Scissors easily cut cheap steel measuring tape.



Assorted handles fitted with various metal tips.



Bent staples carve lines of varying width.



Steel loop tools work well for thicker lines and carving.