

Workshop from Home with Mike Griffin Resources for November 13, 2024

- Mike Griffin's studio, which he shares with his wife, is approximately 30x30-feet.
- He gets his clay from Alfred University—it is called Laguna Jr. Tile Red and is only made for Alfred University. Recipe: Here is the recipe for Mike's clay body <https://glazy.org/recipes/92116>
- Mike bisque fires to cone 06 and glaze fires to cone 6.
- He mostly uses terra sigillata but mixes it thick and likes to call it "terra SLIG", haha!
- Mike uses a few glazes, but his liner glaze is [Cream](#) from Clayscapes Pottery Inc. in Syracuse. He also uses a few other glazes he was given by friends.
- A few years ago, Mike changed building techniques from wheel throwing to handbuilding. He often uses slabs, coils, and a method Sunshine Cobb coined the "coil and scrape".
- Some of Mike's favorite tools include: [Dolan knife](#), [Sunshine Stick](#)
- He does not have an assistant, but some day he'd love to have someone stay at his cabin to be an apprentice.

Links from the webinar:

- Bailey Slab Rollers: https://www.baileypottery.com/slab-rollers/mid-range-slab-rollers.html?gad_source=1
- Mike's feature article in *Ceramics Monthly*, February 2023 (also available as an audio article): <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/ceramics-monthly/ceramics-monthly-article/a-laid-back-teapot#>
- Inspiration: Seong Weon Joanne Lee <https://www.instagram.com/swjceramics/>
- Xiem Tools: <https://www.xiemtoolsusa.com/>
 - Foot Maker tool: https://www.xiemtoolsusa.com/Foot-Maker_p_633.html
- Mudtools Shredder (rasp): <https://mudtools.com/collections/shredders/products/shredder-small>
- 8-PIECE RIFFLER RASP SET <https://www.woodcarverssupply.com/8-PIECE-RIFFLER-RASP-SET/productinfo/627060/>

- *Terra Sigillata: Contemporary Techniques* by Rhonda Willers sold in the Ceramic Arts Network Shop: <https://mycan.ceramicartsnetwork.org/s/product-details?id=a1B3u000009udqnEAA>
- Peter Pinnell Terra Sig recipes: <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/docs/default-source/uploadedfiles/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/terrasigillata-recipes.pdf>
- Custom Fineline tape: Custom Fineline tape: <https://www.cftapes.com/collections/fbs-tapes>
- Natural Round Wide-Mouth Plastic Jars https://www.uline.com/BL_8185/Natural-Round-Wide-Mouth-Plastic-Jars
- Some info on liquid quartz: <https://madeofaustralia.com/liquid-quartz/>
- Bailey Ceramic Supply ceramic stains: <https://www.baileypottery.com/store-dept-pottery-glazes/stains.html>
- XX Sagger ball clay is a nice white clay for make terra sig as it takes stain well: <https://www.baileypottery.com/c-020-007.html>
- Blick Sumi Bamboo brush: <https://www.dickblick.com/items/blick-sumi-brush-size-6/>
- Mason Stain Best Black 6600: <https://www.masoncolor.com/ceramic-stains/blacks/6600-best-black>

Links from Mike Griffin:

Instagram: [@mike_griffin_ceramics](#)

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 550 Polaris Parkway, Suite 510
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[& Ceramics](#), a travel show exploring clay communities around the world, and [Talking Clay](#), a conversational program hosted by Simon Levin featuring interviews with artists working in the field about anything from aesthetics, to process, to business and anything in between!

A Laid-Back Teapot

by Michael Griffin

While wheel throwing and using glazes as a beginner potter, I was never really happy with the surface results. I was constantly looking to make the pots feel like they were moving and to create some action on the surfaces. I tried carving, which was not my cup of tea, and all sorts of different layering techniques, from latex resist to water etching, but never really found a pot I truly liked.

Techniques and Inspiration

A few years ago, after many years of wheel throwing, I decided to try handbuilding and researched techniques by Sunshine Cobb, whose laid-back style and rough surface results I admire. I also fell in love with the terra-sigillata surfaces on Mark Arnold's

work, which led me to Rhonda Willers' book on terra sigillata recipes and techniques. After many iterations and failures, I have found a style that is recognizably my own. I look forward to future failures and discoveries and to the ways my pots change along with me.

Prior to attending Alfred University in New York, where I studied liberal arts, I did not know anything about pottery. While there, I became friends with potters and artists and found a new love in ceramics. I was lucky to get to know some of the greats like Val Cushing, John Gill, and Matt Metz, among others. Early on in my ceramics career, I was very fortunate to gain their insight and assistance with many kiln emergencies that were solved by the great Freddie Fredrickson.



Teapot, 9 in. (23 cm) in height,
Laguna Jr. Tile Red clay, terra
sigillata, underglaze, fired to
cone 6, 2022.



1 Form the foot ring in the plaster base. **2** Score the top of the foot ring and apply slip to ensure that the base slab adheres to it. **3** Roll out a slab and push it firmly into the mold to attach it to the scored foot. **4** Score the top of the base slab to ensure a strong attachment and then compress and smooth the first coil onto the base. **5** Pinch a metal kidney rib between your forefinger and thumb and use the rounded corner of it to compress and blend part of the top coil into the lower coil. Support the wall from the inside with your other hand. **6** Next, use the rib to scrape the coils in an upward motion to smooth and shape the wall.

Coil-building Process

While first experimenting with different handbuilding techniques, I came across a few artists using the coil-and-scrape method and decided to give it a try. I quickly realized that this was going to be my new process. In contrast to throwing on the wheel—where I sometimes stared at a freshly thrown cylinder and thought “now what,” and felt stuck with two form options, a cylinder or a bowl—handbuilding allowed me to make any form I could think of.

My process usually starts with a slab base or a base formed in a plaster press mold that I made (1–3). Then, I add coils, making them by tearing off pieces from a block of clay and rolling them in my hands. Starting on the far side of the pot, I press the inside half of the coil down onto the coil below it with my thumb (4), creating two to three coils or rows before smoothing the inside and the outside. I don’t worry about making the inside super smooth, and I scrape the outside twice. The next step is what I call the down blend, which is supporting the inside with my left hand, while using the rounded corner of a metal rib to push about half of the outside of the newly applied coil down onto the one below it (5). This may be an extra step, but I think it makes the pot stronger and keeps the coils from separating when I scrape up. Next, supporting the inside with one

hand, I go around the whole pot, scraping up with a metal rib held so that it is flexed between my thumb and forefingers (6). This makes the wall straight again (doing the down blend sometimes pushes the walls out) and thins the coils and walls, so the piece is not too heavy. In my early days on the wheel, my old friend Pete Roberts used to say, “Stop making doorstops!” So, now I always consider the weight of the piece. After attaching the coils and scraping the walls into the desired shape and thinness, I use a small torch to dry about an inch or two below the top of the piece somewhat (7). This gives the walls enough strength for me to continue building up. If I want the walls to curve inward, I gauge by eye and cut four equidistant slits into the wall, down from the rim. I fold the sections over each other and score the attachment areas, apply slip, and then press them together. Next, supporting the piece with one hand inside the form again, I lean my other hand toward the center of the piece to blend and stretch the walls inward, creating the shoulder of the piece. Generously scoring and applying slip to the top of the last coil before moving on to adding more coils ensures it’s strong and won’t crack in the firing.

When forming the spout and lid, begin with slabs that are rolled out with a rolling pin and compressed with a rib. For the lid, there



7 Use a torch to heat the interior and exterior of the walls about an inch from the top. This will dry the wall a bit so that it can support the weight of added coils. **8** Drape a small slab over a slump mold to form the lid. **9** Add a cylindrical slab flange to the bottom of the leather-hard lid. The flange will keep the lid in place while pouring from the teapot. **10** Form a small slab into a cone for the spout and shape it with your fingers. **11** Mark the placement of the spout on the teapot. Place it so that the opening is higher than the fill line so that water won't spill out when the teapot is resting flat on the table. Remove the spout, then cut drainage holes inside this marked area for the water to flow through the spout. **12** Score the attachment area, apply slip, then attach the spout, making sure it is straight and secure. **13** Cut or refine the opening in the end of the spout with a hole cutter, leaving a semi-sharp line on the bottom inside edge to cut the water flow when in use (to prevent drips). **14** Form a bone-shaped coil and pinch it out into a handle, leaving the ends thicker and creating a slightly raised spine down the center. **15** Attach the handle, paying close attention to the interior curve so that it will be comfortable to hold and will balance the weight of the teapot when in use.



16 Add a few layers of terra sigillata to the bone-dry teapot with a sponge. **17** Affix cutout newspaper-resist shapes to the surface with water. Brush or sponge-blot to apply colored terra sigillata over and around the newspaper resist, then remove the newspaper to reveal the masked shapes. **18** After bisque firing, liberally coat the whole piece with black underglaze wash, adding it all over and into the cracks and textures. **19** Wipe the excess wash off with a sponge, ringing out the sponge each time you wipe away a section. **20** Use automotive pinstripe tape to block off spaces where you want to add underglaze, then paint on the underglaze. **21** Peel the tape off to reveal the underglaze shapes and then refine them with a knife. **22** Pre-fired pieces waiting for their next time in the kiln.



are a few ways to create them. In this example, I slump the slab over a plaster mold made years ago to create a bit of a domed shape (8, 9), and let that dry to a leather-hard stage while forming the piece. This way, I can manipulate it into the right shape. One thing about handbuilding a lid is that it cannot be perfectly round and a perfect fit like a wheel thrown, caliper-measured lid. But that is one of the things I enjoy about handbuilt pieces—the freedom of non-round forms made to have a utilitarian function.

For the spout, I have a spout stick (a small, cone-shaped piece of wood that I acquired somewhere along the way) that I wrap the slab around, and score and slip it together (10). Then, I just pinch away until I get the form that will fit the teapot. To form the curve in the spout, I simply bend it with my finger and thumb, making sure it doesn't crease or go flat in the process. I test the fit, cut drainage holes into the teapot body, and then attach and refine the spout when it has firmed up a bit (11–13).



Teapot with matching mugs, to 9 in. (23 cm) in height, Laguna Jr. Tile Red clay, terra sigillata, underglaze, fired to cone 6, 2022.

For my handles, I use the pinching method that I learned when researching various ways to make handles. I have never been a fan of a pulled handle, because to me they look too rectangular and lack character, so I pinch handles and each is one of a kind.

I squish and compress a small ball of clay in my hands and roll it on the table into a short, stubby coil. Then, I tap the ends to flatten them so the piece will look like a Tootsie Roll. While turning it in my hands, I pinch the coil in the middle to work it into a bone shape, with the ends being fatter than the middle. Then, pinching from one end to the other with a thumb and forefinger creates a spine-like ridge (14). I am careful to keep the ends fat, and when finished with shaping, I tap the ends with a finger to spread them out. These ends will be scored, slipped, and attached to the teapot once the handle sets up to leather hard (15).

Surface Decoration Process

My surface decoration process includes a bit of everything. I use a homemade terra sigillata to create a matte surface that looks rough, but feels much smoother than it appears in pictures. I also use paper resist, wax, and sometimes underglaze after the bisque firing.

First, the pot has to be very dry, which I learned when starting to use terra sigillata by cracking a few pots. Nothing is worse than hours of work wasted by being impatient. To begin, I apply a few base layers of terra sigillata using a sponge (16). Next, I create resist patterns on the surface using cut strips of newspaper that are dipped in water then adhered onto the pot. Be careful and adhere the paper well, or else the terra sigillata will bleed underneath and the resulting line or shape on the pot will not be crisp. I apply the terra sigillata with a sponge and blotting method as well as using a brush for some areas (17). Each color takes three to four coats, depending on the desired look and the clay body used. I use plastic 1-quart jars for all

my colored terra sigillata, with the colors written on the top of the jar. Sometimes I wax over the terra-sigillata shape I just made, then remove the resist paper so I can apply other colors adjoining that one without having to use a brush.

After the bisque firing, I apply a black wash to every piece with a mixture of black underglaze and water, which is not a very scientific or measured ratio: I simply pour a few tablespoons of black Amaco Velvet underglaze into a 1-quart jar along with some water and shake it. After applying the black wash (18), I wipe each piece with a wet sponge, leaving a light layer of black over the whole piece, which gives the surface some depth when the black sits in the marks made during the forming process (19). It also gives the piece a patina that suggests use and age.

Sometimes after that, I apply automotive pinstriping tape to the surface and create fine lines that I fill with underglaze (20). I remove the tape prior to firing and refine the shapes with a knife (21). I glaze the interior with a liner glaze called Cream, which I buy premixed from Clayscapes Pottery in Syracuse, New York. I sign all my pieces on the bottom with black underglaze, and then the final step is my signature X that I put on each piece. Sometimes I hide it, and other times I put it on the part of a pot I want to accentuate. My thought behind the X is this: they say X marks the spot, so if you're holding one of my pieces, you're exactly where you need to be.

the author *Mike Griffin is originally from Long Island, but moved to the Finger Lakes region in New York. He found his love for clay while living in the Alfred area. As a golf professional in the summer, he only makes pots in the winter, when his course is closed. Griffin is looking to expand as an artist and to become a full time potter when he retires. To learn more, follow him on Instagram: @mike_griffin_ceramics.*