

# Building Big, Carving Deep

by Barbara Stevens

I came to brick relief carving later in my ceramic career after participating in a large-scale, public art project based on wet brick carving. I loved being able to use clay and work BIG. It was also at this time that I learned to carve sculptures that could also be used as benches. My first carved brick bench was so exciting, and I enjoyed working with 12×8×4-inch solid bricks that allowed me to apply heavy texture and have up to five inches of relief.

## Planning a Large-Scale Outdoor Brick Bench

Start with sketches of a bench design, use a theme or a pattern to make up the seat, back, and arms then carve a maquette. Sketch the outside ring of each brick layer, then number the layers as well as the individual bricks, which determines the exact dimensions of the bench and how many bricks you need. Order the unfired, wet brick from a local factory, either have them delivered or pick them up yourself depending on what's convenient

for you. Clear a large indoor space to work and cover the floor with plastic. Start by stacking the outside ring of bricks in layers to match your sketches. The center bricks are only used to form the stack so that the seat has support during this carving process. They're not counted in the numbering process, nor are they fired. The outside ring must form a box and these bricks need to be alternated to form a sound structure. While stacking, alternate the direction of the bricks on each layer so that the seams alternate by one half brick, ensuring a strong and durable structure.

## Deep Carving

Using the maquette, draw your design on each side of the stack (figure 1), then start carving the deepest areas first. An easy way to remove large hunks of brick is with a wire cutter (figure 2). This is much faster than using a loop tool, which works better for detailing. Once the deep grooves are in place and the



1 Stack the wet brick to form a bench. Use the maquette to sketch on the design.



2 Remove large sections of wet brick with a wire cutter to quickly define the form.



3 Use loop tools to add texture and details. Cover the brick when not carving it.



4 Label each brick with a number and the layer it's in. Make notes of the labels.



5 Choose a mortar color to match the fired brick for a cohesive looking bench.



6 Barbara Stevens' finished sunflower-themed bench.

design starts to take shape, begin the texturing, detailing, fine-tuning, and burnishing to complete the bench sculpture (*figure 3*). Remember to mist the bricks with water several times while carving and before covering with two layers of plastic after each carving session to keep them wet for the duration of the project.

### Label the Brick

After the sculpture is complete, the wet brick must be numbered and stamped as the brick layers are taken down. This is important because the bricks are handled many times from start to finish. To ensure that you can recreate the bench without too much confusion, make several drawings, take plenty of photos, and make notes on the bricks themselves. Label each brick with its layer number and an individual brick number. I use a hammer and heavy metal stamps to inlay numbers on the bricks (*figure 4*) making them easy read after they're fired. I also draw an arrow on each brick showing which direction the brick lies in that layer.

### Drying and Firing the Brick

To aid the drying process, drill holes into the back of the brick, leaving an inch of space between the holes and the carved edges. Three holes per full-sized brick is sufficient. Place the bricks on pallets with space between them for good air flow and even drying. Keep them away from any draft or lay a piece of plastic lightly over the top of each palette. The bricks may take several weeks or longer to dry completely depending on your climate.

Fire the bricks in individual layers with plenty of space between the kiln shelves. Do not overcrowd the kiln and note that

the firing may take longer due to the larger masses requiring more heatwork.

### Reconstructing and Installing the Bench

Lay the fired brick in rows according to their respective layer and number. Next, arrange the layers as they would be installed on the bench so they match the drawings and photos.

I hire a mason to install my large benches and recommend doing this unless you have masonry skills. Together we lay out layer A (the bottom layer) and square it on the cement base, which is laid ahead of time to support the sculpture. Next, mix the masonry cement with mason dye to match the brick, and start installing the first layer. From there, it's just a matter of laying the next three layers before filling the seat cavity with cut cement block and cement to support the seat. The cavity needs to set up and dry before the seat can be installed.

To complete the bench installation, stack a few layers of the arms and the back to make sure they line up with the base (*figure 5*). Adjustments may need to be made but as long as they're minor they can easily be fixed with some creative mortar work.

My finished bench looks great outside my studio and will hopefully inspire more brick sculptures (*figure 6*).

*Thank you to my ceramic professor Darrell McGinnis, St. Louis ceramic artist Catharine Magel, and Seattle brick carver Mara Smith for their training and inspiration in teaching both ceramics and brick carving.*

*Barbara Stevens works and lives in Downs, Kansas. To see more of her brick carving, check out <http://spiritstudio1.blogspot.com/2013/10/brick-works.html>.*