Block or relief printing is a great transfer technique for any kind of image, text or design you want on your work. Whether simple or complex, finished linocuts can even be the finished works on their own (figure 1). When inked with underglaze or slips, you can use the blocks to print directly onto clay or push them into the surface for embossing. Linoleum or lino, as it’s commonly called, is flexible and works on flat and curved surfaces making it versatile to use. Clay, plaster, wood and rubber can also be used for block printing.

Creating Your Linocut
Lino has a smooth gray or brown surface with a backing made of a coarse fabric called hessian that helps reduce cracking. Using a fine grit sand paper, remove any oils, scratches or imperfections on the surface before carving. This also makes for a more receptive surface to ink up with underglaze or slip. You can soften the surface of old or stiff sheets of lino by lightly ironing the surface or by holding a blow dryer or heat gun 6–12 inches from the back. Move the heat source in a circular pattern or from side to side and don’t sit still on one area too long. You only need to do this for a few minutes and the lino will be soft as butter for carving.

Block printing reverses the image so you’ll need to carve your designs backwards so they will print correctly on the clay. You can use tracing paper or carbon paper to reverse the original image onto your block before carving (figure 2). This is especially important if using text or numbers.

Carve on a tabletop and use a bench hook or C-clamp to hold your lino in place. A bench hook can be picked up wherever you buy your carving tools for the lino. Traditional or standard lino/wood gouges (figure 3) are...
used for carving the surface and can be found in any craft or art store. Never carve with your hand in the path of the gouge and never hold the block on your lap when carving. Gouges are extremely sharp so be very careful when using them.

Once the reversed image is drawn onto the lino, carve away all the areas you don’t want to print with color. The remaining raised areas create the relief image that you’ll print or emboss on the clay. Often I use an image where the orientation is important (figure 4).

Printing & Embossing

To print the linocut you’ll need a clean, smooth surface, a brayer (small hand roller) and an underglaze or slip that is thick and sticky (figure 5). Having the proper consistency to this ceramic ink is key to the success of the image being transferred cleanly. Commercial underglaze is usually too thin right out of the container, so pour what you need into a small plastic container and let it sit out overnight. Once it’s the thickness of yogurt, add clear acrylic printing medium to give it the body and stickiness needed for printing (figure 6). Shoot for a consistency of honey for the best printing results. An easy option is to purchase a semimoist commercial underglaze that’s ready to use right out of the tube and formulated specifically for printing purposes.

I use AMACO semimoist underglaze in the ¼-ounce tubes for small blocks or single prints, but for larger blocks or multiple prints I thicken the AMACO Velvet, GDC or LUG colors in whatever custom amounts I need. With some practice, though, the underglazes can be applied without being thickened or adding any printing medium. Artist Kathy King prints her linocuts on clay using AMACO LUG Black right out of the bottle with great success and good image clarity. Once you develop a touch for working with a thinner consistency it’s just as effective as using the semimoist colors.

Before printing, make sure everything is laid out and ready to go. Prepare extra slabs so you can do all your printing at once and not have to stop and roll out more
if you’re unhappy with some prints you’re getting. For good printing results, the surface of the clay slabs can be somewhat damp, but not sticky or even in the early stages of leather hard.

Put enough ceramic ink for one print on the Plexiglas and mix it with a stick or a spoon to ensure it’s even (figure 7). Move the roller back and forth over the color until you have an even coat on the roller (figure 8). Apply an even coat on the linocut making sure all areas are covered with color (figure 9). The ceramic ink should appear wet on the surface of the block when properly covered (figure 10).
Turn the block face down onto the clay slab (figure 11) and gently rub the back of it in a circular motion with your hand or a baren (figure 12) to help transfer the color. Don’t wait too long to print the block after it’s been inked or the color will start to dry and won’t transfer as cleanly. Peel the block off slowly from the clay and see how it came out (figure 13).

The first print will help you answer three questions. Was the ceramic ink mixed to the right consistency, was enough ceramic ink used on the block for good color results and was there enough pressure used for a clean transfer. Many times this first print isn’t usable and is considered a test print for this important information (figure 14). Make the necessary adjustments after seeing the test print, if any, and then continue printing the rest of your slabs.

**After the Print**

Once printed, the clay slabs can be used for whatever handbuilding purposes you want or can even be the finished piece if you like. You can also print on a clay piece that’s already built but still in the green stage. This is where your own creativity comes into play based on your work and how best to incorporate the lino image. Thoroughly clean all tools used for the printing process with water.

You may not be a printmaker when you start this process, but you will be an official “Clay Printer” once you’ve block printed on clay. You just need a curiosity of material and an image you want to repeat.

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**What a Relief**

A linocut can also be used as if it were a large stamp to emboss a soft clay surface (see photo below). Many artists make custom relief tiles in this fashion. The areas that would normally receive the ceramic ink are now embossed into the clay. Place your linocut face down on a soft piece of clay and rub the back in a circular motion. Don’t press so hard that the lino gets stuck. Peel back and the embossing is complete.

You can also add color in the embossed image to make the design appear as a color inlay. Bisque fire the embossing, then apply glaze, underglaze, or stain in the embossed areas with a brush or other applicator and let it dry. Use a damp cloth or sponge to wipe the color off the high areas leaving color only the embossed area.

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