TAKE YOUR WORK TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

Join ceramic artist Deb Schwartzkopf for a journey that will help you grow as a functional potter, no matter your background. Creative Pottery is a self-guided exploration in which you can choose the techniques and projects that interest you. Go beyond the basics and learn how to alter and combine forms, master molds, work with templates, and much more! The projects are just as fun: from a cake stand and dessert boat to bud vases and a citrus juicer. A variety of artist interviews and themed galleries offer additional inspiration. Unlock your creativity!

PRAISE FOR CREATIVE POTTERY

"Not since Val Cushing, the late potter and distinguished Alfred professor, has someone shared every detail of creative thought and process so thoughtfully and clearly. Deb’s generosity as a mentor and teacher is unparalleled, and this book is a gift to the ceramic community."
—Marjorie Levy, artist, educator, and past President of NCECA

"Deb Schwartzkopf's energy and enthusiasm for ceramics, community building, and helping others refine their artistic voice infuses Creative Pottery. This book is indispensable for ceramic artists who want to integrate a wide range of innovative handbuilding and throwing techniques into their personal studio practice."
—Jessica Knapp, editor, Ceramics Monthly, associate editor, Pottery Making Illustrated

"Reading Creative Pottery, I was continually amazed at Deb’s straightforward approach to making complex forms. Her comprehensive understanding of altering ceramic forms made me feel like I could take risks in the studio and stretch my own boundaries and understanding. This book is a must-have for potters who are trying to put together all the pieces of a creative life."
—Ben Carter, author of Mastering the Potter’s Wheel

"This book is an excellent look behind the scenes for making complex forms. It also provides insight into the life of a studio potter and helps us answer the tough questions of how we grow as we make. Special thanks to Deb and her contributions to the field of ceramics."
—David Hiltnier, executive director of Red Lodge Clay Center

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CREATIVE POTTERY
Innovative Techniques & Experimental Designs in Thrown & Handbuilt Ceramics

DEB SCHWARTZKOPF
Foreword by Josh DeWeese
DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER,
who always encouraged me to take risks
and follow my dreams.

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CHAPTER 1

Getting Started

“Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”
—William Morris

This chapter offers a refresher on the basic tools and techniques you’ll need as a foundation for the chapters that follow. For beginner potters, I encourage you to read the chapter from start to finish and make sure you are comfortable before diving into a project. A strong knowledge of the basics will make projects and lessons in this book more approachable. For experienced potters, choose your own adventure! Take a look at how I approach things in my studio and keep an open mind.

While some of the tutorials may be remedial, such as a quick refresher on throwing, others may address skills you rarely (or have never) used. For example, I rely on templates for many of my forms and combine pieces frequently. Thus, I think the section on seams (page 31) is very important. In this chapter, we’ll also touch briefly on the journey of a potter and meet our first featured artist. For those looking to explore the more conceptual side of the potter’s journey, we’ll get into sources of inspiration and more in chapter 2 (page 35).

Questions for Growth

● Can you tell who made a pot because of their sense of touch or process?
● What skills am I developing as I try the techniques in this chapter?
● How can I select the right techniques to get the result I want?
● Can what I just learned apply to a form I already make?
The Journey of a Potter

As makers we need to be critical of our work, open to trying new things and taking risks. It is quite a balance. Being critical helps us see where improvements can be made. It helps us grow. However, we must remain open to failure, which can be a powerful teaching tool as well. Taking risks and learning from our efforts is key to keeping curiosity alive.

It’s easy for us potters to become very attached to a certain outcome, but I encourage you to suspend your expectations when you are trying a new technique or exploring a new form. Let the journey unfold in front of you as you remain open to exploring beyond the confines of what you hope will happen—or the final results shown on the pages in front of you!

Give yourself as much time in the studio as you are able and learn from as many people as you can. Practice in the studio is essential. Diverse perspectives or techniques will enrich what you have to draw from. The more time you spend making, the more you will have a feedback loop with the clay. You will notice how evenly your work dries and if seams are cracking. You will become less attached to the success of each piece when you are able make more and more work. And you will find a flow that fosters growth.

SETTING GOALS

Setting and accomplishing goals can feel insurmountable or impossible. Yet defining your dreams is an important step! While looking at the big picture sets your direction, lasting success is more likely to come from persistence as you approach it thoughtfully and with intention. Those skill areas outside of your comfort zone are exactly where the most room for growth exists. By being honest about your own weaknesses, you likely can identify the areas where skill development is most needed. Tackling new techniques will build your skills and open doors in your creative expression.

Last but not least, pay attention to the results. This can mean taking thorough notes when you glaze or taking pictures of shapes you tried along the way. Create a record for future reference. Depending on the outcome, you may want to try a similar technique next time or take a completely different approach. If you notice patterns, like a crack that always happens with the same type of attachment, respond by shifting your construction process or changing your timing. Observing details and responding are important skills to foster.

LEAN IN TO CHALLENGES

The thought of messing up something you are proud of can prevent you from taking risks. There are many parts of the pottery process you may try to avoid for this reason. For example, if you have a cup you like the shape of, you may be hesitant to add a handle because you haven’t yet developed the skill of pulling handles. Whether you are avoiding handles, glazing, or trimming, ask yourself, “If I had this skill or honed this skill, would my pottery improve?”

Instead of avoiding something overwhelming or challenging, approach it thoughtfully and with intention. Those skill areas outside of your comfort zone are exactly where the most room for growth exists. By being honest about your own weaknesses, you likely can identify the areas where skill development is most needed. Tackling new techniques will build your skills and open doors in your creative expression.

Now, when I am avoiding something, I tell myself “eat the frog legs first!” I get that done while I have the most focused energy. The challenge can be enjoyable when I approach it with motivated concentration. On the next try, I find that it is not as difficult, and I no longer dread the process. In fact, when I begin to succeed at challenges, they become more fun and I look forward to them.

Try the Frog Legs First

When I see a pattern of insufficient results, I focus on the skill I need to adjust or change. Once when I shared this habit with students in a workshop and one of them related a story that provides a fabulous visual for this idea. She was a generous guest at a small dinner party. Before her sat an array of family-style dishes, including frog legs. She really did not feel inspired to eat frog legs! Instead of avoiding them, she ate them first. She got the most challenging or unappealing part over with and then she could go on to enjoy the rest of her dinner.

“Eat the frog legs first!” I get that done while I have the most focused energy. The challenge can be enjoyable when I approach it with motivated concentration. On the next try, I find that it is not as difficult, and I no longer dread the process. In fact, when I begin to succeed at challenges, they become more fun and I look forward to them.
Getting Started

Tools Used in This Book

Setting up a studio that serves your needs is important. Sometimes that means getting noise-cancelling headphones, organizational tools, or investing in studio furniture. The proper tools make a tricky job easier and faster. It will funnel your energy into your practice rather than extending the struggle of tool making. Setting up a studio that serves your needs is important. Sometimes that means getting noise-cancelling headphones, organizational tools, or investing in studio furniture. The proper tools make a tricky job easier and faster. It will funnel your energy into your practice rather than extending the struggle of tool making.

BASIC TOOL KIT

I think of this grouping of tools as essential. They are widely available at ceramic supply stores.

Cutting Tools

PUNCHES: What makes these punches great is how easily the clay can be removed from them. They come in a variety of sizes. In the cake stand, the punch is ¾” (3.1 cm).

KNIFE: The Dolan Knife cuts precisely. Its thin, flexible blade is perfect for the seams and alterations throughout this book.

WIRE TOOLS: Whether you are cutting a block from bagged clay or a plate off a bat, this tool makes the job a cinch. Keep the wire straight. Don’t wrap it around your fingers to shorten it. (Get a shorter wire if you need one.) This will make a big difference—especially when you are cutting a cake stand plate. You want the smoothest cut you can get!

Measuring Tools

DIVIDING TOOL: I divide circles into even and odd numbers. A dividing tool comes in handy. They come in a small (4” [10 cm] diameter) and large (7½” [9.8 cm] diameter) option. The dividing tool is helpful when you add embellishment to the rib, want repeating form or surface patterns, or need to cut away clay in a repeating fashion.

RULER: Keep a ruler or straightedge in your toolkit as well.

CALIPERS: This tool will help you find and keep measurements. They are often used in conjunction with a ruler for replicating dimensions or sizing parts to fit together, such as the lid of a teapot or plates with the same diameter.

Water Management

SPRAY BOTTLE: Use a spray bottle to gently mist your work.

PLASTIC: Dry cleaner clothes bags and disposable paint drop cloths (0.7 ml) are great lightweight plastic for covering your work for even drying.

WATER BUCKET: Then you are working with clay, water is essential. Keep friction to a minimum when you throw by having a gallon water pail close at hand. There is no reason to have messy hands just because you work with clay. Use a water bucket with a defined edge or rim. When you are ready to take work off the wheel, scrape palms or fingertips across the rim to remove slip and water.

RASP: A rasp is an amazing shaving tool. They are perfect to use at a leather hard stage. You can refine angles to your heart’s content! If the rasp is clogging with clay, the clay most likely needs more time to dry.

Scoring Tool

This small metal handled scoring tool has a smaller head and makes careful, directed scoring easy. With accurate scoring there is much less cleanup or smoothing later on!

Smoothing Tools

SCOURING PAD: A generic scouring pad (normally a kitchen tool) is everything when it comes to finishing. Cut it down to a 2” × 2” (5 cm × 5 cm) square with scissors for more

Hands Are Tools

How you touch clay matters. Your hands are amazing tools! Fingerprints can add wonderful dimension and texture. They also can be unintentional and look messy. Take a moment to think about what you want the form and surface of your work to reflect. What qualities do you want present? Do you want the project to read glowing smoothly or glossy and soft as it reacts to plaining?

Do you want the form stark and hard-edged or uplifted and energetic? Each piece can take on so many feelings and attributes. The way you use your hands will add to the character of your work. If you are intentional about the character of your work, it will also show if you are moving too fast for the clay or are inattentive in your finishing. Your work can go from looking put together to a flop if you set it down too hard. Gentleness and attention to the state of the clay are crucial.

Shaping and Compressing

RIBS: Ribs are key in shaping and smoothing while wheel throwing and hand building. Compressing and refining the soft, clear curve of the plate is done with a large, firm wooden rib. MudTools is a popular brand of clay shaping tools that offers polymer ribs with varying degrees of flexibility. Shape A (green) and Shape O (red) are commonly used. A metal rib is important for shaving away uneven clay. A serrated metal rib is essential when blending coils.

MANDREL: Shape slab spouts on a tapered wooden mandrel to create an even curve. Or make your own uniquely shaped mandrels with clay and bisque fire them.

[Image of various tools listed]

[Image of various tools listed]
versatility. Use it wet to keep the dust at bay. It takes down hard edges, removes fingerprints, and will smooth rough surfaces in a jiffy. Just try not to let your enthusiasm lead you astray.

**Spoonges:** Keep a large sponge around for cleanup and a small one for aiding in the smoothing process.

**Paintbrush or Bristle Brush:** A long stiff, round bristle brush (often used in oil painting) is a wonderful addition to your toolbox. It makes it easy to clean up harder-to-reach seams. Use both the bristle and rounded handle end.

**Sponge on a Stick (Mudtools Baby Bump):** This tool is important for smoothing and compressing seams on the inside of pieces, especially in harder-to-reach attachments in forms like the pitcher (page 148).

**Wooden Hand Tools:** A variety of wooden tools helps compress or smooth joints and harder-to-reach spaces. Keep one with a flatter tip and another with a rounded tip.

**Trimming Tools**

**Loop Tools:** Owning a variety of trimming or loop tools will give you options when it comes time to shape the foot of your work. Beautiful, handmade Bison tools are fragile and costly, but the cutting edge is made of a very hard metal that does not dull. If they fall to the floor though, the metal edge can break. Dolan is a go-to brand for trim tools. They are sturdy and come in lots of shapes! Keep them sharp or you may have trouble trimming. When trim tools are not sharp, the clay is pushed down rather than shaved away. This can lead to cracking or breakage.

**Bats: Full and Small Squares**

*StudioPro Bats (based in Vermont) make high-quality, full and small squares.*

For trimming, I use the 14" (35.5 cm) hardboard bats. Bats make it easy to remove thrown work from the wheel and centering, and the thin foam keeps the pot in place while I am trimming away clay.

**Surfaces: Tables, Banding Wheels, Boards, and Interfacing**

**Banding Wheels** will allow you to adjust the height of your work. A selection of banding wheels is great if you do not have a lot of space. This essential tool is used when altering thrown parts, applying slabs to bisque molds, or making bisque molds. They come in different heights, or you can insert a small bucket under the banding wheel to change the height of the work surface. To make your space even more versatile, add locking casters to carts and tables. This allows your space to shift to the cyclic needs of your studio practice.

**MDO (3/8" [1.3 cm] thick Medium Density Overlay) is exterior grade plywood. It is made with waterproof glue and resists water very well. It comes in 4’ X 8’ (1.2 m X 2.4 m) sheets. Cut it down for use as a ware board or covering your tables.**

**Heavyweight, Non-Fusible (Not Iron-On) Interfacing** is a durable replacement for newspaper under work in process. This smooth, non-weave synthetic fabric can be reused indefinitely and imparts no texture to your clay. Buy it at any shop that sells fabrics.

**Setting Up a Wheel**

**Sometimes your passion for clay can be hard on your body. Standing while throwing can be a positive change. Try it out! It is a little bit of an adjustment, but you will be surprised by how much it will improve your viewpoint and workflow.**

**A Few of the Benefits of Standing and Throwing**

- Better body alignment. When standing, your body is less cramped. Avoid leaning over and twisting at all costs.
- More overall movement in repetitive motions. Instead of sitting for long spells, standing allows you to be up and moving.

**Drywall** is an inexpensive material and a great addition to your studio. I tape each edge of the drywall with packing tape to keep the crumbs of the interior from mixing with my projects. Drywall draws moisture from the clay and helps it dry more evenly, which is great for projects like trays. Help trays and similar projects dry flat by adding weight to the edges while they dry on drywall. Keep in mind, though, if you leave wet clay on drywall for too long, mold can develop.

**MDO is a great solution for a dust-free, smooth, and durable work surface (and it doesn’t leave that pesky canvas texture on your work).**