

A Dramatic Impact with

HANDLED BOWLS

by Steven Showalter



Designing any piece of ceramics always reminds me of the first day of creative writing, where you might ponder what it means to “write what you know.” I’ve always felt this means to really put yourself into your work. Each piece becomes a portrait of your personality. The risk with that, of course, is that people’s reaction to your work can feel intensely personal. The upside is that the language you create within the work feels natural and will flow in a way that copying can never achieve.

The turning point in finding my voice was a deliberate process. I purchased decades worth of *Ceramics Monthly* issues from a retiring potter in order to gain insight into what had happened in ceramics during the last 30 years. My goal was to tag pieces that elicited a visceral reaction. Leafing through stacks of magazines, I began to notice a theme in my selections. I reacted consistently to certain forms, textures, and colors, but my selections were so hard to quantify. This experience seemed important, but I didn’t know in what way. I went back to making pots, but this time with many images and ideas floating through my head. At first, my pots looked similar to favorite pieces from the magazines, but slowly they morphed into my own style. One form led to the next, and after a few years, I felt more fluent in the language that I was developing. Even these early pots showed my strong affinity for altered rims and handles, and it wasn’t long before I made my first of many handled bowls.

Throwing and Altering

As an artist making functional ceramics, I have the dual goal of creating something beautiful without sacrificing functionality. My bowls are altered with a cut rim, therefore I need to account for that clay removal by making the bowls a bit taller than typical proportions. These are made from 7 pounds of clay, creating a 14-inch wide and 6-inch tall bowl. Making the rim thickness the same as the walls ensures that the undulating rim is even throughout. After 20 years of teaching ceramics, I teach every form in a very specific way. When making bowls, my focus is on pulling all the height first with V-shaped pulls that are angled slightly outward, then refining the form into more of a bowl shape utilizing U-shaped pulls (1, 2).

Altering the bowl starts with laying out the four corners of the square on the rim, pressing lightly into the leather-hard surface to mark each one. Once this is finished, I use a wire bow cutter to cut the rim with a confident stroke from left to right (3). If that cut doesn’t hit my marks, using a Surform tool on the rim cleans up the edges (4). At this point, the bowl is still attached to the bar because I use a rib and a sponge to refine the cut rim while it spins slowly on the wheel head. The last part of the alteration is to use a circle cutter to remove a half circle on opposite sides of the bowl (5).

Handles

I love handles and look for reasons to put them on as many pieces as possible because they are the perfect blend of form and function.



The handles for this bowl style are extruded with a custom die made from a plastic cutting board (6). I pull about half of my handles and have made my own dies for the other half. In this case, using an extrusion cut to size (7) helps me better match the clay stage of the bowl to the handle, reducing the chance of a crack between the bowl and the handle. These handles hug the rim on both sides, creating a strong connection. They are curved into a half circle (8), attached with slip, and backfilled with clay on the inside connection to fully complete the now-enclosed circle (9). The mix of circular pot, squared rim, and circular handle really appeals to my design instincts.

Trimming

I thoroughly believe that it’s better to throw the form you want, rather than to simply reveal it through the trimming process. When trimming, I set the boundaries of what needs to be trimmed first and then proceed to remove the excess clay. At every stage of the process, clay likes to be worked with when it’s ready, not when it’s necessarily convenient. Altering the rim and attaching the handles before trimming helps to prevent cracks from forming in the handles. It’s also a great way to reduce warping that can show up after a glaze firing. I trim on a bone-dry chuck, dampening the chuck before use to keep the bowl in place while trimming (10–12).

Glazing and Setup

At the beginning, I dreaded the glazing process and felt like it was ruining my work. That anxiety decreased my desire to make work. Not wanting to give up, I explored glaze chemistry and development and read numerous books on the subject. There was considerable trial and error in the process of testing what amounted to more than a thousand glazes. It was extremely time consuming, but reshaped the



1 These are centerpiece bowls and made about 14 inches wide and 6 inches tall from 7 pounds of clay. Pull the walls more vertically at first before widening into a bowl form. **2** Use firm ribs and shaping pulls to widen and achieve the final bowl shape. **3** Line up two marks at a time on the rim and square the rim of the bowl with a confident slice that creates a clean path through the clay. **4** If necessary, refine the rim of the bowl with a Surfing tool. **5** Now that the rim is compressed, use a ruler to mark the middle of the sides of the bowl and use a circle cutter to cut a half circle in the rim where the handles will be added. **6** Use an extrusion die (this is a custom shape I created) or pull handles from a thick coil or cone of clay. **7** Cut the handles to the size that's scaled to your work (the handles pictured here are 5½ inches in length). **8** Bend the handle into a half circle and prepare for attachment. **9** Slip and score the handle and bowl and attach the handle. Make sure to backfill any voids and clean up the slip around the attachment. This is a great time to do final refinements before trimming.

way I thought about glazes. It was also at about the same time that I switched from dipping glazes to spraying. While it might appear that spraying has the basic advantage of creating a gradient, the real advantage is the ability to put the exact amount of glaze you want precisely where you want it. It's easy to rely too much on a glaze to do the work, but a good final result is achieved through equal parts glaze selection, application, and firing. Each of those aspects should be fully explored.

I began spraying glaze using one gravity-feed HVLP (high volume, low pressure) spray gun and cleaning it between glaze changes. If you are considering spraying glazes, this is a fine approach. I now have multiple guns filled with glazes and always put the same glazes in the same locations, making it possible to grab them without looking in order to keep a rhythm to the process (13). I usually run

through a few color schemes for each glaze firing, ranging from a simple combination of two colors to as many as seven overlapping colors. Spraying on an elevated surface allows me to spray both the inside and outside of the bowls without having to touch them until I'm done glazing (14, 15).

Vibrancy and Drips

Many of the methods I use for glazing are self taught, which sometimes means it takes longer to learn, but can also lead to a more individualized process. It's common practice to thin glazes down for spraying, but that caused a washed-out final result with my glazes, when I'm ultimately looking for vibrancy and glaze runs. My vibrant colors aren't caused by an overabundance of colorant; in fact, the glazes almost always contain less than 2% colorants. Instead, I mix



10



11



12



13



14



15



10 These serving bowls are trimmed on a chuck after the rims are altered and handles are attached. Either use a leather-hard chuck or dampen a bone-dry chuck so it sticks to the bowl while trimming to keep it in place. **11** Center the bowl upside down on the chuck and make sure it is level before trimming. While the top may be quite firm, the bottom should still be leather hard and ready for trimming. **12** Set the boundaries of what clay needs to be removed and trim away the excess clay. **13** The spray booth is prepared with the handled bowl on a raised surface on a banding wheel for spinning. The raised base allows for spraying both the outside and inside surfaces without flipping the bowl over. **14** The outside is sprayed first using a glaze that doesn't run near the bottom. **15** This is a simple glaze combination consisting of only two colors, so the top color is applied overlapping the first. It's applied very thick, which induces running over the bottom glaze. Make sure to spray glaze around all sides of the handles, too.

my glazes with very little water and use a deflocculant (Darvan 7) to thin them out for spraying, if necessary. With these thick glazes, some adjustments to the guns need to be considered. I use 2.5-mm tips on my gun so they don't get clogged and set my air compressor to 50 PSI to help force through the thicker glaze. Beyond the benefits of more vibrancy, the thicker glazes allow me to layer more glaze to induce running and spray the inside and outside of the handled bowls and other forms without worrying about excessive water leading to glaze crawling. As with any scientific approach, if you change one variable, the entire process may need to be recalibrated.

Firing

I currently fire in an electric kiln, and while it's certainly less time consuming than when I fire with wood, there is no easy way to

achieve an appealing result. Time saved in one area usually means you need to spend extra time elsewhere. In this case, all my extra time is spent on glaze application. There are a ton of firing cycles available online, but it's important to test many firing cycles until you find one that works best for your glazes and application. Small changes can have a dramatic impact. In the end, whatever your style, jump in. Commit fully and see if you can make it work. Without taking any risks, you'll never accomplish what you seek from the process.

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