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About Covered Jars: Thrown, Altered, Handbuilt

Covered vessels are about storage, containment, and closure. Regardless of exterior surface and decoration, first and foremost they are containers. The inside space described by the form is critical to both utility and aesthetic, and the nature of closure affects both. Covered vessels are inherently slightly mysterious, because we rarely know the exact use of the interior space unless the maker is so unimaginative as to impress the word “Cookies” on the face of the jar.

We are all familiar with traditional covered jars. Whether wheel-thrown or handbuilt, there are a number of stereotypical forms that easily come to mind, and altogether too often we automatically gravitate towards those. As studio artists, it’s always to our advantage to be innovative and find new interpretations of traditional forms. We can always learn by imitating examples we have seen, but why not combine influences from different sources and try to come up with something new?

When throwing or handbuilding covered jars there are no limits to invention. Consider the full range of possibility in thrown-and-altered, coil-built, soft-slab, and stiff-slab construction techniques, depending on the type of form you wish to make. Coil construction is most practical for free-form organic shapes, soft-slab or thrown for cylinders and cones and combinations or variations of those forms, and stiff-slab or thrown-and-altered for rectilinear and architectural form. On the wheel, focus on the possibilities of altering forms to create variations such as oblong/oval, square, or polygonal. Consider cutting darts or other shapes from the walls or base and rejoining the edges in order to alter the standard “lathe-turned” pose and symmetry of wheel-thrown forms.

The expressive nature and practical function of a covered vessel change greatly as the size and shape are altered. Low, wide forms are most often associated with casseroles and bean pots. When thinking about tall-narrow forms, consider the practical realities of access and use. Tall, narrow covered jars may be beautiful sitting on a shelf, especially as cinerary urns, but would not be very practical as kitchen storage vessels except perhaps for bamboo skewers or uncooked spaghetti.

In observing covered jars, consider the expressive energy in form and surface. To what degree does the vessel express a unique personality? Think about anthropomorphism, where inanimate objects seem to take on qualities of living things such as gesture and movement. Do you see qualities comparable to human or animal movement and gesture?

Does the Jar Have an Implied Use?

Most covered vessels are associated with food, and their utility may include storing, preparing, cooking, serving, transporting, protecting, fermenting, pickling, and/or preserving. In these

examples, utility dictates ease of access and use. If the vessel is utilitarian, think about the aesthetics of utility and the degree to which the entire vessel invites utility and serves its intended purpose. For example, if its use requires picking it up and moving it, are sufficient handles provided? If it must be picked up, moved, and/or opened when hot, are the handles usable when wearing an oven mitt?

Traditional covered vessels include not only the above uses, but also reliquaries, cinerary or funerary vessels, and religious fixtures. In these examples closure may involve elaborate form, surface decoration, and modeled appendages, and may even incorporate latches or seals implying security or protection. In contemporary work, such treatments can be very evocative. The exterior details of a covered vessel can simply decorate the surface, provide clues as to the intended purpose, or present questions or mysteries that challenge the viewer's expectations and interpretation of the work and its possible use. All are valid, but do consider the possibilities of incorporating specific narrative.

Raised Feet and Separate Bases

Don't assume a traditional raised foot. For a utilitarian covered jar, either handbuilt or wheel-thrown, a flat base might be ideal. At the same time, consider not only traditional raised feet on different covered jars, but think about parallel considerations in architecture and furniture. Think about legs, bases, foundations, and podiums, and consider elevation, buoyancy, stability, and gravity.

A raised foot with cut openings creates the impression of raised legs, and the resulting dark spaces beneath the vessel become an essential part of its expression, with evocative connections to furniture and architecture and the inherent romance of tunnels and basements. On thrown jars, consider making the form with a thick bottom, and after trimming a raised foot right at the outer edge, cut four to six equally-spaced sections out of the foot to give the impression of raised feet. A thick slab bottom on a handbuilt vessel can be similarly carved with a half-round or full-round Surform tool. Or, a strip of thicker slab may be applied to the perimeter of a slab bottom as a raised foot and then cut away to create openings. In that case, make sure to use a slab considerably thicker than the wall-thickness of the vessel.

Consider having the raised foot flush with the walls, or recessed slightly beneath the form. Clay may also be added and carved or modeled to create feet. While still quite soft, the bottom of a thrown or handbuilt vessel can be worked by paddling or hitting with a large dowel to recess some areas and create the impression of raised feet.

For a very special or ceremonial covered vessel, consider making a separate raised stand or base. Always make such a base heavy enough that it looks sturdy and supportive under the vessel. That's always easy to accomplish in slab-building simply by using thicker slabs than in the walls of the vessel. To make a separate base for a thrown covered jar, simply throw the raised base upside-down as a low bowl form with a thick bottom and thick vertical or slightly

outward-flared walls. Leave an extra-thick rim at the top of the bowl, because this will be the bottom of the foot or feet and will need to be sturdy. Make the outside diameter of the base of the “bowl” slightly larger than the foot of the covered jar, and when leather hard, wheel-trim the bottom (the top of the base) to create a recess to accept the jar. If you wish, cut away sections of the walls to create the impression of raised feet. With such a raised base, the area where the jar sits is generally left unglazed (and of course the bottom surfaces where the base will sit on the kiln shelf), while the rest of the base is glazed with a matching or complimentary treatment. For ideas and inspiration, consider the black lacquered wood bases often used with East-Asian vases and jars.

Lids and Galleries

Carefully plan the lid and gallery system. Examine the lid handout and consider the various types of lids. Think about the kind of access provided by each type of lid and gallery, and plan the diameter of your lid and gallery in proportion to the overall diameter of the jar with both design and function in mind. Obviously a large covered jar with a small-diameter gallery and lid is either intended for a very specialized function, or it is intended to be non-functional. Don’t rule that out, because such a design refers to a long tradition of specialized ceremonial vessels.

For any covered vessel to be used for pickling, remember that the items being pickled generally have to be weighted down with a ceramic or wood disk (like a plate) to hold them beneath the surface of the brine so that they do not spoil from contact with the air. A vessel with straight vertical walls is usually required for this application, and the gallery is always on the lid so that there is no interior flange on the vessel rim to interfere with the use of a disk/weight only slightly smaller in diameter than the inside of the jar.

As you examine covered jars and plan your own, it will help to consider these questions:

- Can you immediately see the break between lid and vessel, or is it concealed? Either is okay, but most people prefer to see the dividing point, both in terms of utility and aesthetics.
- Can you immediately identify how to pick up the lid?
- Does the lid remove and replace easily without endangering itself or the gallery?
- If the jar is asymmetrical and the lid fits on only one way, are there registration marks that make it easy to recognize the proper lid position?
- Does the lid have a lifter, and if so, how does the lifter address both utility and aesthetics?
- Does the lid lifter repeat visual elements found elsewhere in handles or other aspects of the design?

Whether or not you are concerned with utility, use good design and craftsmanship in the creation of the lid system. Through the entire history of ceramics, utility has informed aesthetics, and the two are inescapably connected in any vessel that looks utilitarian. If it looks

like it would function well, then it will most likely seem well-designed from an aesthetic point of view.

Think carefully about how the lid fits the vessel, functionally and aesthetically. For thrown and altered vessels, consider using a slumped thrown-slab lid, but make sure that the treatment of the lid works with the vessel. The lid is subservient to the vessel. Make sure the lids knows its place. Again, review the handout on lids.

To see good examples of covered jars, look at the work of Frederic Hurton Rhead, Adelaide Alsop Robineau, Tom Turner, Suze Lindsay, Carl Borgeson, Val Cushing, Tom Coleman, Michael Simon, Adrian Saxe, Josh DeWeese, Robert Briscoe, Don Reitz, David Shaner, Mark Hewitt, Mark Shapiro, Linda Sikora, Alex Matisse, Warren Mackenzie, Byron Temple, Chris Staley, Larry Richmond, Ron Meyers, Ellen Shankin, Bruce Cochrane, and Matthew Metz.