

Seventeen Suggestions for Better Side-Handles on Mugs, Cups, and Pouring Vessels

1. ***A Handle Should Be No Longer/Larger Than It Needs To Be*** - A good handle on a cup, mug, or pitcher should not stick out from the form any further than it has to in order to fit one, two, three, or four fingers (your choice) without your knuckles touching the surface of the vessel. In other words, a handle should never move the hand further from the center of gravity than is necessary. My favorite design for a mug handle is one that comfortably fits two fingers, with the other two below the handle helping to support the weight of the mug/cup. One of the most common mistakes with cups/mugs is to have big swooping handles that move the hand further from the center of gravity, making it harder to use the cup.
2. ***A Handle Should Not Make a Bold Sculptural Statement***. Broadly swooping handles and curlicue shapes went out twenty-five years ago. Every functional form is sculptural, but if you make it sculptural to the point of defying or denying function it becomes a little ridiculous unless your intent is to make a purely sculptural object. Lots of good cup, mug, pitcher, and teapot designs are ruined by handles that make an aesthetic statement incompatible with utility.
3. ***Form Follows Function: Utility Informs Beauty*** – The design aesthetics of functional pots are informed by thousands of years of functional pots. The cliché is "form follows function," and of course it is true. If all or part of a utilitarian pot looks like it will not function well, then it probably will look awkward and unattractive from the standpoint of design aesthetics. We can't always explain this, but most people can see it. Whether or not the viewer/user/buyer knows much about ceramics, she/he will have a great deal of experience in the use of drinking and pouring vessels, and an intuitive understanding of what works and what doesn't. That is a certainty, and yet when it comes to designing utilitarian pots it is amazing how often we obsess on what we think a handle should look like and overlook what we already know. In utilitarian form, function and beauty are inescapably intertwined. The challenge is to be original and still come up with a design that serves beauty and utility. That's not a problem, because the human race has barely scratched the surface of what is possible.
4. ***Carefully Consider the Curve*** - A handle should not have a smooth un-modulated circular curve for its entire length because the filled cup will want to swing downwards with nothing to allow you to get a purchase on it. To eliminate this problem, a handle can have a smooth curve upon leaving the mug/cup at the top, but as it approaches the bottom attachment point it should straighten out in order to give a surface for the grasping fingers to stop against, to support the mug/cup without the fingers swinging down against the hot surface. One variation is the large coffee or beer mug, where the primary section of the handle is vertical, intended to be grabbed with the whole hand.
5. ***Good Handles Usually Taper in Thickness and Width*** - A handle can be tapered in width and thickness from top to bottom, from bottom to top, or from both ends to the center. All of those can work very well, but handles with no taper look machine-made, and makes the cup or mug look like a 99-cent Wal-Mart purchase. The extruder is a wonderful device for so many things, but ***un-altered extruded handles look machine-made***. There is nothing wrong with using the extruder to create handle stock

that is then pulled to create taper, but without the latter step you demean your handmade work. The same is true of handles made of strips of slab. Even if they are tapered in width, the side profile is more important in design aesthetics, and if it looks un-modulated in thickness, it will hurt the overall design.

6. ***Attach the Handle ASAP after Throwing/Handbuilding the Vessel*** - Attach the handle as soon as the mug, cup, or pitcher is barely stiff enough to handle. The longer you wait, the greater the chance of shrinkage cracks at the attachment point. Some claybodies join well without scoring and slurry if the joining is done when the clay is still quite wet. Do some tests and see if this works with your claybody. In some cases, brushing Lana Wilson's "Magic Water" on the joining spot will result in a strong attachment without scoring or slurry. Otherwise, always score thoroughly with a serrated rib and apply ample slurry made from the same claybody. Clean off all extra slurry, and do not try to radius the joint with slurry, because drying shrinkage will likely result in cracking during firing. If you want to radius the joint to get a smoothly-curved attachment line, add additional clay.

7. ***No Sharp Edges – Flattened Oval Cross-Section*** - A handle should not have sharp edges or ridges on the inside or the outside surfaces that are uncomfortable against the fingers or knuckles. Most people hold a mug/cup handle with several fingers inside the handle and a finger or two against the outside of the handle, thus the importance of a comfortable surfaces on both sides. Some potters pull handles with their thumb in the center of the handle, which tends to create a deep groove and problematic ridges, even if you rotate the handle back and forth 180 degrees every pull. Experienced potters usually find that the most comfortable and effective cross-section for a handle is a flattened oval. To achieve that, do not run your thumb down the center of the handle except on the first few pulls. After that, pull the handle in the space between the base of your thumb and the side of your hand. Lay your thumb flat against the side of your hand, and then bend your thumb and hand slightly with the thumb tip still touching the hand so that it creates an open space that looks like an eye. That space works great for pulling handles that are very comfortable on both the inside and the outside. It is a good idea to rotate the handle back and forth 180 degrees while pulling in order to make the flattened oval more even.

The same kind of handle can be handbuilt from a flattened coil of clay. For a normal mug or pitcher handle that tapers in thickness and width, roll a carrot-shaped coil of clay. Flatten it by lightly beating the surface with the base of the palm of your hand to get the taper and thickness you desire. What you have at this point could suffice as a handle, but it would be just a tapered strip. It is far more pleasing and comfortable with the flattened oval cross-section. To achieve that, lightly beat the base of the palm of your hand along one edge of the handle, turn it around, and do the same along the other edge. Turn the handle over, and repeat the same steps on the other side. The result should be a handle with a slightly pointed oval cross-section. This hand-rolled handle will work with the taper towards the top or the bottom. If you want a handle that tapers from both ends towards the center, just roll a coil of that shape, thinner in the center than at the ends, and then proceed as described above.

8. ***Avoid Round Cross-Section*** - A handle with a round cross-section is problematic because it is awkward to grasp, especially on a mug or cup. As you raise the vessel to your lips, holding it from the side, the vessel wants to swing downwards, and a round handle must be grabbed very tightly to prevent this.

Handles with a round cross-section are found on 99-cent Wal-Mart mugs, and generally look awkward on handmade mugs.

- 9. *Not Too Thick, Not Too Thin*** - Don't make a handle too thin and narrow. It can be quite wide and still be very comfortable and attractive, and it can be thick at its attachment point, but if it remains thick throughout its length it will look clunky. When made by the above method, a mug handle can be about ¼" thick at its midpoint – thicker above, thinner below. A good mug handle is generally at least 1" wide at the upper attachment point, and might taper to a little less than that at the midpoint.

There should be some correlation between the thickness of the rim and the thickness of the handle. A mug with a very thin rim and a thick handle looks pretty lame. A very thin handle on a mug with a thick rim looks flimsy and precarious.

- 10. *Decorative Surface marks*** - If you want to create some decorative marks on the outside surface of a pulled handle, lay the handle on a piece of plastic film (grocery bag or dry-cleaner bag) and pinch or cut it from the lump it was pulled from. Run your fingertips or a profile rib down the length of the handle, creating low ridges or grooves that will not make the handle uncomfortable, but can be a nice decorative addition. Don't try this with the handle lying on canvas or other surfaces, because it will stick and will be ruined when you try to lift it. It lifts easily from the plastic film, and if any marks are left on the back, you can moisten your hands and gently pull it once or twice to smooth the back.

- 11. *The Utility of Attachment Points*** - Thicker attachment points reassure the user of utility and sturdiness. When pulling handles, leave a good stout lug at the top when you smear the handle off on the edge of a table or shelf prior to attaching it to the mug (if you pull the handle directly off the pot, be sure to attach a stout enough piece that it leaves a good lug at the attachment point). When you are ready to attach the handle, look at the profile of the mug, think about the attachment angle you want, and use a needle tool to cut the handle at the desired angle. Handles benefit greatly from having a fairly stout attachment point at the top, and this is easily accomplished when pulling handles by just leaving a good mass of clay at the upper end of the handle. It is also no problem to add extra clay to the attachment point to create more visual authority in the connection.

- 12. *The Aesthetics of Attachment Points*** – As you deal with the utility of attachment points, also be thinking about the aesthetics. You can choose to either blend the handle attachment point smoothly or leave the joint visible. It usually works best if you are consistent top and bottom, but there are exceptions. Some contemporary potters paddle the ends of the handle slightly both top and bottom with their fingers or a small paddle to flare the attachment point, and then join it to the surface of the cup/mug with the seam clearly visible all the way around both attachment points. That can be very beautiful and effective once you get it under control.

If the lower attachment point is just laid flat against the surface without being blended in at all, the handle generally looks awkward and weak. Little winding curlicues or folds at the bottom attachment point look like cake frosting and went out in the 80s.

- 13. *Consider the Negative Space Formed by the Handle.*** That's a big part of the aesthetics of a cup, mug, or pitcher. Some people do not like the sharp "V" at the bottom attachment point and the effect it has on the negative space inside the handle. In that case, blend the upper connection well, and then after

smearing off the lower attachment point and blending it in on the outside, create a little wedge-shaped piece of clay, dip it in slurry, drop it into the space inside the bottom attachment point of the handle, and use a piece of wood dowel to smooth and blend it by rolling and rocking the dowel against the attachment on the inside surfaces. Once you get used to this step it goes very quickly, and it really changes the negative space.

- 14. *Don't Use Thumb Stops Unless They are Functional and Comfortable*** – Thumb stops are those bumps or smeared dabs of clay that are sometimes placed on top of the handle just below the attachment point. They are an insult to your pots and to the user unless they genuinely contribute to comfort and utility when holding the handle a variety of different ways.

- 15. *Where Does the Implied Line Go?*** - On any mug, cup, or pitcher, think about where the implied line of the handle goes. That implied line doesn't just stop at the surface where the handle ends. It keeps going, and it is very important in the overall design of the piece. On a mug handle, it can be very pleasing when the upper curve and attachment point of the handle imply a line that follows the upper profile of the mug when viewed from the side, or else when the handle attaches just below the top and the implied line points towards the opposite rim of the mug. It can also work well when the upper part of the handle curves downwards at the attachment point and the implied line points towards the opposite lower base of the mug. On some of the most beautiful pitchers, the implied line of the handle passes through the upper part of the pitcher and points directly towards the pouring spout. On some of the best teapots with the handle on the opposite side from the spout (rather than overhead), the implied lines of the of the upper attachment point of the handle and the spout sometimes cross in the lower center of the teapot body.

- 16. *Design the Form for the Handle, and the Handle for the Form*** - It can be awkward to apply a handle where the body swells outwards, because the handle must extend even further to compensate for that outward swell, and the negative space is less pleasing. Sometimes there is no way around it, as in a round teapot with a side handle. But that is precisely why very round teapots usually have overhead handles instead. Always design a cup, mug, or pouring vessel to accept a handle, and then carefully design the handle for the particular vessel. It all needs to be part of the same package, designed together to work in harmony, in consideration of both beauty and utility. Vessel forms that are slightly figurative work well for mugs. If you have a "belly-swell" low down and then a long neck, apply the handle where the neck is. If you have a tapered "column" low down and then a swelling shoulder, apply the handle low. On a straight-walled mug, apply the handle wherever you think it works best. That's why so many potters make straight-walled mugs, either with vertical walls or tapered inwards or outwards.

- 17. *Where to Place the Handle on a Pitcher*** - Looking at pitchers through history, you will see that handles are rarely applied where the body swells outwards, for the reasons explained above. A pitcher with the primary volume up high tends to be unstable unless it has a broadly flaring base, and then where do you put the handle? There are innumerable alternatives. Look at British medieval jugs (pitchers) and ancient Anatolian and Cypriot pitchers. Look at contemporary pitchers by Josh DeWeese, Mick Casson, Peg Malloy, Kate Maury, Ellen Shankin, Mark Shapiro, Michael Connelly, Charity Davis-Woodward, Tony Clennell, John Glick, Jack Troy, Tara Wilson, Michael Kline, Linda Sikora, Ruggles and Rankin, Willi Singleton, Simon Leach, Svend Bayer, Marty Fielding, Mark Hewitt, and Jeff Oestreich.