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Making and Using Bisque Stamps and Rollers

One of the most effective and practical techniques for impressing decoration involves the use of bisque-fired clay stamps and rollers, since the porosity of the clay prevents them from sticking even after many impressions. Bisque stamps have a patterned or textured surface on one face, and are pressed directly into the clay, leaving a reverse impression of their surface. Bisque rollers or roulettes have a patterned impression around their circumference, which is transferred to the clay when they are rolled along the surface. There are several ways to make each of these tools.

Bisque Stamps

For the simplest bisque-stamp, press a small lump of clay into any interesting relief pattern or texture. When leather hard, add a handle. Explore your surroundings to find interesting patterned or textured surfaces that can be transferred onto bisque stamps. Good possibilities include tree-bark, fencing and screen materials, wood-grain, stone and concrete surfaces, and the soles of shoes. For truly original stamps, hand-form blanks and impress texture or pattern with tools while the clay is damp, or carve pattern or texture when leather-hard or bone-dry. You'll be surprised by the tools that work best for carving bisque-stamps. You can accomplish a lot with a cheap ball-point pen on hard-leather-hard clay. The popular mini-band-loop trimming tools work very well. For a very interesting effect like rough-carved stone, try scratching and picking at a bone-dry clay surface with the tip of your needle tool.

Think of the pattern or texture on the stamp as the negative impression, and the one applied to the clay as the positive impression. You might like the negative impression more than the positive. If so, wait until the first stamp is dry and carefully press a wad of clay into the surface and make a second stamp, so that you will have stamps that produce both positive and negative versions of the same pattern or texture.

Think about bisque-stamp patterns that work well when impressed repeatedly side-by-side to create a larger field of pattern. Or as another option, a single bisque stamp might only create a portion of one complete pattern element, with the stamp rotated and impressed again next to the previous impression to create the next portion of a multi-part design. As a third option, a complex pattern element might include multiple stamps impressed next to each other. It might seem more sensible to make a large stamp of the whole pattern element, but that stamp would require a great deal of pressure to impress effectively, and could not be used on an irregular or curved surface.

Making a "Chop"

A popular form of bisque-stamps is a "chop," a small stamp used to apply your initials or some other mark or symbol that identifies your work. Generally such stamps are quite small, often only a half inch across. If you decide to make a stamp with your initials, remember to carve them backwards.

Using Small Bisque Stamps for Impressing Registration Marks

Very small bisque stamps are useful for applying registration marks on covered vessels. This is not necessary on a wheel-thrown vessel that is absolutely round, but thrown-and-altered and handbuilt covered vessels are never perfectly even, and the lid generally fits only one way. In that case, apply two small registration marks directly above one another, one on the vessel and one on the lid. That will tell the user how the lid fits in place. It often works best to apply small medallions of clay and then stamp the impressions.

Bisque Rollers or Roulettes

Bisque rollers or roulettes are often disk-shaped, with pattern or texture around the circumference and a hole through the center. The thickness of disk determines the width of the band of impressed pattern. Traditional rollers are often mounted on a simple handle made of heavy wire, or on a screw or nail attached to a wood handle. Another approach is to make the disks with depressions in either side to hold between two fingers, but that only works for applying pattern to static forms. For use on a spinning pot on the wheel, the roller must be mounted on an axle.

Cylindrical or spherical rollers are other viable options. Such rollers are usually covered with pattern, and are rolled against the clay with the palm of your hand. Consider that a cylindrical roller with sharp edges at both ends will leave a distinct band, whereas one with rounded edges, even slightly barrel-shaped, can be used in overlapping strips to create a relatively unbroken field of pattern.

Spherical rollers are the least common type, but are ideal for certain applications. You have less control of the quality of pattern when randomly rolling a spherical roller over the surface with the palm of your hand, but that in itself holds appeal for a lot of people. And any spherical roller can also be rolled in a straight line to create an impression similar to a traditional roulette.

Bisque stamps and rollers work best on freshly worked clay that has had all surface slurry and moisture scraped away with a metal rib or removed with the heat of a torch or heat gun. With thrown forms you may wish to set the work aside to allow surface moisture to evaporate before using stamps or rollers. On thrown forms be sure to provide support behind the surface where you are using a stamp or roller. If you use a bisque stamp or roller repeatedly on a moist clay surface it will absorb moisture and may stick to the clay. At the first sign of this, heat up the stamp or roller with a torch or heat gun to dry it out.

Bisque stamps and rollers are among the most useful and versatile of decorating tools, offering unlimited possibilities for variations in surface decoration that can help define your personal style. For a good example, look at the early work of Lana Wilson. Think carefully about the patterns or textures you create on your bisque stamps or rollers, because they can do a lot towards defining your work. There is nothing wrong with harvesting pattern and texture from any source, but some artists like to invent their own, carving large numbers of stamps and rollers to build a personal library of relief decoration.