

Vince Pitelka, 2017

Throwing on Canvas Bats as an Alternative to Rigid Bats

An advantage of any bat system is that you don't have to touch the surface of a thrown form when removing it from the wheel. That's especially critical if you wish decorate the outside surface of the form. But if you are throwing small forms on 12" bats, they take up a lot of space until the pieces are leather-hard and can be removed from the bat. An underutilized and highly efficient alternative to rigid bats involves the use of canvas squares. It's a mystery why this technique is so little known. While inappropriate for most plate, platter, and bowl shapes that would distort when removed from the wheel on canvas bats, this system is ideal for any small and medium-sized cylinder-based forms that don't need wheel-trimming, and the canvas leaves a pleasing texture on the bottom. Any sealed canvas works well, such as gessoed canvas, old-style oilcloth, heavy waterproof tent canvas, or plasticized canvas for awnings. An additional advantage of such sealed canvas is that it will not fray along the edges. Of the variations listed, my favorite is oilcloth, and it is still available online and from some marine suppliers. As a production potter in Northern California I made a large number of canvas bats out of green oilcloth canvas. 37 years later they are still in perfect shape and have not frayed at all.

Anticipate the base-diameter of the forms you are going to throw, and cut canvas squares with a diagonal measurement twice that diameter. In other words, if you wish to throw mugs with a base diameter of 3", your squares should have a diagonal measurement of 6". It is critical that they be squares, because you will use the corners to pull the piece off the wheel.

You will need a standard triangular concrete trowel – the type with a wood handle, a shaft that drops downward, and a flat triangular blade. You'll use this trowel to transfer work from the wheelhead to a wareboard, and the design of the trowel lowers the center of gravity of the item you are moving, allowing you to handle larger thrown forms. Nothing else works as well, and a flat trowel or spatula would be very unsteady. These trowels are available inexpensively from discount stores and home-improvement centers. If you commit to this system, you will want to get several sizes appropriate for different types of vessels. The smallest ones work well for mugs and tumblers.

Once you've made a supply of cut squares, mix up a gritless slurry of appropriate clay (Goldart for stoneware, EPK for porcelain or whiteware, Redart for terracotta). It's important to use an appropriate clay, because it will show on the bottom of the vessel. With a wide brush or a small sponge, give both sides of new canvas squares a thin coat of slurry and allow them to dry completely. When ready to use, smear a spiral of the same gritless slurry on the wheelhead with your fingertips. Place a dry, coated canvas square centered on the slurry, rotate the wheelhead, and quickly squeegee out from the center with a stiff rubber rib. Allow the slurry that comes out from under the canvas to smear across the top of the canvas, sealing it down, but thoroughly squeegee away all excess. The thin coat of dry slurry on the underside of the canvas absorbs moisture and helps the square to cinch down to the wheelhead, but only if you work fast. As soon as you place the square on the wheelhead, rotate the wheelhead and squeegee the square down as quickly as possible. With subsequent use, the remaining clay left on the

square from the previous use is adequate as long as the squares are completely dry. Don't try to use them again when they're damp.

Proceed with throwing in a conventional fashion. When a thrown form is complete, carefully run a cut-off wire under the canvas (this will take some practice), grasp one corner of the square, and pull the canvas and thrown form onto the blade of the concrete trowel. Lift the trowel, transfer to a wareboard, and slide the form off onto a wareboard. With canvas squares cut to an appropriate size, you can fit just as many pieces onto a wareboard as you would if lifting the pieces off the wheel individually. Before attaching another square to the wheelhead, use the same stiff rubber rib to scrape the residue off the wheelhead. If you let it build up, it becomes more difficult to run the cutoff wire under the canvas.

When the wares are leather-hard, peel off the canvas and smooth the small burr along the edge.

Canvas bats are very inexpensive compared to any sort of commercially-made (or homemade) rigid bats. If you find that this system works well for you, make plenty of squares of the various sizes you need. If you generally switch back and forth between several claybodies that are quite different in color (like buff stoneware and porcelain), make separate sets for the different claybodies.