

Clay on the Wheel - Syllabus

Required Text

Pitelka, Vince. *Clay: A Studio Handbook*, American Ceramic Society, 2016

Course Objectives - To build in the student:

1. A solid working knowledge of basic wheel-throwing and altering techniques, with the primary objective of conceiving, designing, and creating interesting and efficient utilitarian vessels.
2. Intermediate-level knowledge of ceramic decorating and firing methods.
3. An awareness of historical and contemporary directions in wheel-thrown ceramics within the interconnected traditions of folk art, fine craft, and fine art.
4. An appreciation of the ethnic and cultural diversity in ceramic form and process through history world-wide.
5. An appreciation of fine craft as a critical connection between art and life.

Background

The potter's wheel first appeared in Palestine 4500 years ago as an elaboration of the simple turntable, providing a mechanical rotary motion to facilitate the forming of clay vessels. Before then (and still today in many tribal cultures), all vessels were handbuilt by pinch and coil methods, often with a compelling organic asymmetry. In the Western Hemisphere, classical notions of beauty have often been associated with symmetry and physical perfection, and in handbuilding off the wheel, potters have often attempted to make smooth, symmetrical vessels, but always with the essential slight irregularity of handbuilt form.

With the advent of the wheel, and even more with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the mentality of mass-production, potters naturally used the potter's wheel like a machinist's lathe, a means of quickly producing ever more symmetrical and mechanically perfect vessels. While that may seem a noble accomplishment, it is not necessarily a logical goal, as we will discover in our exploration of contemporary wheel-thrown work.

Today, there are no limits to how the wheel is used. Whether for studio production or one-of-a-kind vessels, the wheel often best serves as a tool to make pots that are subsequently altered off the wheel, or to make components for assembling handbuilt forms.

Contemporary ceramics is a wide open field, with unlimited possibilities for innovative expression on or off the wheel. Do not succumb to popular rhetoric limiting the role of fine craft. As with a fine statue or painting, an exceptionally beautiful vase or teapot can be a work of fine art.

Course Description

We are here to investigate the technique and aesthetics of the potter's wheel. Our primary emphasis is hands-on studio work, with frequent demonstrations of throwing and decorating technique. In slide

discussions we will explore historical and contemporary wheel-thrown form and decoration as they relate to specific assignments. We will work with our stock claybodies, including the Warren Mackenzie stoneware and the studio stoneware. Most of our work will be fired in high-fire reduction, but we will likely have the opportunity to put some work in salt, soda, or wood firings. All of you will participate in the loading, firing, unloading, and cleanup of kilns.

You will through a lot of clay in this class, and each of you will mix your own claybody from raw materials at considerable savings over purchasing moist bagged clay. You are welcome to start off purchasing several bags of clay to see which you prefer. The Mackenzie stoneware is a textural sandy stoneware with excellent throwing properties. The studio stoneware is a smooth gritless body that throws beautifully, but the lack of filler materials such as sand or grog increases drying and firing shrinkage, with a greater risk of shrinkage cracks.

We stock a range of slips, glazes, and oxide patinas that are maintained by the artist-in-residence. If you notice that any of these media are getting low in the container, or if there is a problem with any of them, please inform the instructor or artist-in-residence promptly.

Designing Pots

In this course we deal with issues of practical utility, but you must avoid thinking only in terms of utility. Remember that every pot is also an expressive, sculptural object that communicates a message through surface, form, and utility. Once you learn the basics, it is your responsibility to consciously design each pot - to create vessels purposefully with an idea of shape and surface in mind.

Try to be original and innovative in your work, and always be proactive as an artist/designer. Think about what you want your work to say to the viewer/user. Consider ergonomics - the way a pot feels and functions in a utilitarian sense. How does it fit the hand or the lip? How well does it serve its intended utilitarian purpose? Consider overall design - the interaction of shape, balance, color, contrast, pattern, texture, etc. Do all of these elements work together in unison? Are they compatible with the utilitarian purpose of the vessel? Consider gesture - the essential physical expression of the pot. Does it look like the vessel wants to serve its intended purpose?

Take freely from the slide-shows, but at the same time, consider personal taste and inclinations - let the forms you make be expressions of who you are and what you think. Avoid the common and the ordinary. Don't just go for the most obvious vessel shapes that you have seen again and again. And remember, barring catastrophic forces, ceramic objects can survive into eternity. Don't let this weigh you down, but consider the responsibility it places upon you to design and create worthwhile objects. This could be your legacy.

In developing your skills you must learn to create uniform, symmetrical wheel-thrown forms, but avoid assuming that this is always the ultimate objective. The propaganda of progress and industrialization brainwashes us into thinking of mechanical uniformity as an advantage, and in this case the wheel enables us to produce precise, symmetrical clay vessels very quickly, while similar handbuilt forms take longer and might be uneven and asymmetrical. In contemporary ceramics this mind-set can cause a severe limitation and handicap in its assumption and/or imposition of uniformity and exactness.

Explore the possibilities of asymmetrical and/or altered shape, manipulated by impressing, paddling, slicing, faceting, disassembling, reassembling, etc. Much of the most exciting work in ceramics today has been “thrown and altered” to some extent. The wheel is an ingenious tool, but you must remain in charge. Don’t let the mechanical movement and precision of the wheel seduce you into letting its possibilities limit yours.

Clay consistency and wheel speed are critical. Throwing stiff clay is very difficult and can be physically harmful for some people. Throwing at high wheel speeds encourages mechanical precision and symmetry, while slower speeds and softer clay allow a more organic development of form, showing the marks and movements of the maker. A popular phrase today is “soft clay on a slow wheel.” With softer clay and lower wheel speeds it is still possible to throw quickly, but the wares will show more expressive energy translated directly from the movements of the potter.

The size of wares is important, since throwing large comes with practice. Minimum sizes are given for some assigned forms, and this refers to the size of the damp form. When designing utilitarian forms, remember that there will be about 14% overall shrinkage in drying and glaze firing.

Expectations and Grading – Attendance and Additional Studio Time

Regular on-time attendance is required. Demonstrations and/or slide shows will always take place early in the class meetings - try not to miss any of them. This class runs from 9:00 to noon. Please arrive well-rested and energized in order to make the most of it, but feel free to take breaks when you need. If special circumstances force you to miss several class meetings, stay in touch with me so that we can make appropriate accommodations. I can be flexible in special situations as long as I know what is going on. Otherwise I expect you to be here for every class meeting and stay for the full three hours. At least 70% of class time will be devoted to working on assigned projects.

Much of what you learn is from each other, watching and listening. I have a sound system that will connect to your iPod or other MP3 player, but no headphones are allowed during regular class time because they isolate you from the group.

No texting or cell phone usage during class. Do not answer your phone during class under any circumstances unless you are expecting a genuinely important call, and in that case step outside before answering.

Learning to Throw Depends Absolutely on Diligent Practice, and That Must Start Right Now.

Standard K-12 school policy tends to teach us to be fairly relaxed and casual at the semesters start and then to “ramp up” as deadlines approach. That won’t work in this class because your accomplishment through the semester depends absolutely on how quickly you learn the basics. All studio art classes require hands-on studio time outside of class equivalent to in-class hours – that’s six hours in class and six hours outside of class – a minimum of twelve hours per week. In this case, it is essential that you allocate even more practice time outside of class during the first part of the semester, and you must take this seriously. If you make this commitment, you will quickly establish a comfortable familiarity with the potter’s wheel.

Why is this necessary? There are so many critical steps in throwing, and there are no shortcuts. All of the steps are necessary, and you can only learn them by long practice. The greater your speed and efficiency in throwing, the less water is absorbed, and the more control you have over size and form. The rest of the semester will be easier, and your wares will clearly show your elevated skill-level. If you do not make this commitment right away, you will struggle throughout the semester and it will show in the quantity and quality of your work. Your overall accomplishment in this class depends absolutely on a serious investment of time early in the semester to jump-start your throwing ability. This should not be a problem, because demands in some of your other classes will be lighter now, ramping up later in the semester. Studio access here is excellent, and you can work at any time. By official ACC policy the studio outside doors are locked at 11:00 PM, but if you are here when they lock up you can stay as long as you like.

Contacting You via Email

I will occasionally send you messages via email. It is your responsibility to check your email frequently. Make sure that the email address you provided is one you are checking. You are responsible for any information sent via email.

Assigned Reading

Many parts of the throwing process involve complex steps, and it is a lot to keep track of at once. With diligent practice it will become second nature, but that depends on how quickly you familiarize yourself with the specifics of each form and process before we start that assignment. Check the class schedule at the end of this syllabus weekly, and to do the assigned readings before we discuss and begin each project. Most readings are identified by the page numbers, but you should also peruse the appropriate sections of the text and read any sections that are applicable to what we are doing. Note that you will need to read about slip decoration when we get ready to do plates, and to study the specifics of glazing before we start glazing the work. You are required to study the reading assignments before coming to class and beginning each assignment or process.

Determining Your Grade

Up to 80% of your grade depends on a serious commitment to the studio projects, incorporating information discussed and demonstrated in class, covered in the text, and/or specified in the syllabus and other handouts. You are strongly encouraged to bring external and personal influences and ideas into your work. Originality and innovation will be generously rewarded. Please note that good attendance and completion of all the assigned projects does not necessarily earn you an "A." Grades will be assigned as follows:

- "A" - Exceptional work, addressing all expectations specified, showing very high standards of craftsmanship and finish, and interesting/innovative design features.
- "B" - Good work, addressing all expectations specified, showing good craftsmanship and finish, but with less interesting/innovative design features.
- "C" - Adequate work addressing all expectations specified, but with adequate craftsmanship and no interesting/innovative design features.

- “D” - Work only partially addresses the expectations specified, and/or design and craftsmanship are careless.
- “F” - Work fails to address expectations specified, and/or design and craftsmanship are very careless, and/or work is only partially completed.

Note: In addition to the above criteria, assignments completed late without sufficient excuse will negatively affect your grade in proportion to how late they are.

At least 20% of your grade depends on attendance, studio behavior, and class participation. Class participation includes a proactive involvement in studio cleanup and the loading, firing, unloading, and cleaning of kilns. The above percentages are flexible, at my discretion, in that excessive absences will seriously affect your grade, regardless of the quantity or quality of your work. I will not take roll in a traditional sense, but if you habitually miss classes I will keep track, and after three unexcused absences each additional unexcused absence will result in one letter grade reduction in your final grade.

Marking Your Wares

This class produces a great volume of work, and along with the other classes, we end up with a large volume of bisque-fired work on the shelves. It can be difficult to identify your own work before glazing, leading to possible misunderstandings about which wares belong to whom. In order to eliminate this problem, all wares must be signed or stamped with your initials or some other distinguishing mark.

Unsigned/unmarked wares will not receive credit.

Group Reviews

At midterms and finals we will have group reviews to evaluate your progress. These are the equivalent of midterm and final exams and attendance is mandatory. I believe in structuring reviews primarily around constructive dialogue and information exchange, minimizing confrontation or embarrassment. The end result is that negative criticism is often made by omission, which can be confusing. If no one says anything about your work it may be because they are not in a talkative mood. It may be because they cannot find anything worth talking about. It may be because they are so impressed that they do not feel up to commenting about the work, or do not know where to begin. Often, the only way for you to get the information you need is to catalyze the discussion by asking specific questions of the rest of us. It is your responsibility to contribute to every review, and when we are discussing your work to seek appropriate comments and suggestions. If we all participate equally in sustaining the momentum, each review will invariably be a productive experience. Keep in mind that the instructor and/or artist-in-residence are available at any time (within reason) for individual or group critique.

Required Materials

Clay materials, moist bagged clay, all the standard tools, and the text are purchased through the gallery. A wide range of specialized clay tools are available online - chineseclayart.com is excellent. Also, be sure to consult the section entitled “Clay Studio Tools: Buy, Make, Find, Improve” in Chapter 10 of the text.

- Pitelka, Vince. *Clay: A Studio Handbook*, American Ceramic Society, 2016
- One or two bags of moist clay (either Mackenzie or Studio Stoneware or one of each) for use during the first week of class.

- Sketchbook for developing ideas
- Kemper Basic Tool Kit - includes trimming tools, sponge, cut-off wire, wooden knife, needle tool, metal and wooden ribs
- Two squares of chamois (Wal-Mart - car-wash chamois - make sure it is real chamois)
- Flexible **black** rubber kidney-shaped rib, or the stiffest of the Sherrill MudTools flexible colored plastic ribs
- Serrated stainless steel rib for scoring and decoration
- Several wooden modeling tools of your choice
- X-Acto knife - get the pencil-thin version with the 1"-long tapered blade - no substitutes (Wal-Mart, or stationary store)
- Old kitchen fork
- Good-quality reusable twin-element dust-mask for mixing clay (Lowe's, Wal-Mart, hardware store). You will not be allowed to mix clay without this dust-mask.
- One 1/2" diameter bamboo-handle watercolor brush, and one 1"- or 2"-wide "hake" brush
- One 36" or 48" length of 3/8"-diameter wood dowel (Lowe's)
- Several plastic pails (approx ½ gal.) for water and for storing tools
- Surform Pocket Plane and Surform Shaver – both are available at Lowe's or any hardware store or from amazon.com.
- 12" Ruler
- Apron (optional)
- Several old towels or large rags
- 5-gallon buckets for recycle
- 30-gallon barrel for clay storage - don't get a cheap one with wheels - they can't take the weight

Class Projects in Sequence

This list applies to students approaching the potter's wheel with little or no previous experience. Of the claybodies available, the Mackenzie is by far the best for beginners.

1. Cylinders for skill development - at least 4" tall, as many as are necessary
2. Six tumblers, at least 4" tall
3. Four bisque stamps, including a small "chop" signature stamp
4. Six stoneware mugs, varying sizes, with pulled handles
5. Four stoneware bowls at least 7" diameter, with trimmed foot
6. Twelve tea bowls, thrown off the hump, with trimmed foot, at last half exploring altered shape
7. 8"-tall cylinders for skill development - as many as are necessary
8. One stoneware pitcher at least 8" tall, with pulled handle
9. Two jar/vase forms at least 8" tall
10. Two covered jars, at least 8" tall, at least one with altered shape
11. Two stemmed vessels (two-piece, assembled), at least 7" tall
12. Two thrown-and-altered square or oval open casseroles
13. Four stoneware plates at least 10" diameter with a variety of slip decoration
14. Two covered boxes thrown as closed forms
15. One teapot with lid, handle, and thrown spout

Projects for Intermediate-Level Students: This sequence is similar to the one above, and roughly follows the course schedule below, but is intended for students who already have basic throwing skills. The choice of claybodies is yours.

1. 8"-tall cylinders for skill development - as many as necessary
2. Six matching 5" tumblers
3. A selection of bisque stamps, including a small "chop" signature stamp
4. Eight matching mugs with pulled handles
5. Six matching soup bowls at least 7" diameter, with trimmed feet
6. Four serving bowls at least 10" diameter, with trimmed feet
7. Eighteen tea bowls thrown off the hump, with trimmed feet, at least half exploring thrown-and-altered form
8. Two pitchers at least 10" tall, with pulled handles
9. Three jar/vase forms at least 12" tall, of varying shapes, including globular
10. Three covered jars at least 8" tall, each with different type of lid, at least one with altered shape
11. Three stemmed vessels
12. Two thrown-and-altered square or oval open casseroles
13. Two thrown and altered covered casseroles with side handles and slumped lids
14. Six stoneware plates at least 12" diameter
15. Six covered boxes thrown as closed forms
16. Two bottle or jug forms at least 10" tall
17. One teapot with six matching cups

Advanced-Level Students: Any students with substantial wheel experience will pursue a more advanced project sequence designed around areas that most need development and exploration. Give me a brief but comprehensive written proposal by the start of the second week of class.

Course Schedule

This represents an approximate schedule for the course, although nothing is etched in stone. Only the basic-level assignments are indicated. Reading assignments are all in the text, *Clay: A Studio Handbook*.

First Week - Intro to class, review syllabus, studio tour. Demo of wedging, centering, cylinders, tumblers, mugs, bisque stamps. Read sections on basic throwing, cylinders, mugs, handles, and bisque stamps. Work on wedging, centering, cylinders, tumblers, mugs, bisque stamps.

Second Week – Slide show on thrown form and technique, including tumblers, mugs, teabowls, and bowls. Demo of pulled handles. **Finish cylinders and bisque-stamps.** Work on tumblers, mugs, pulled handles. Bisque-fire bisque stamps. Read sections on finishing bottoms, the rolled edge, throwing off-the-hump, making bowls, and trimming.

Third Week – Timed exercises throwing tumblers/mugs. Demos of bowls, throwing off-the-hump, teabowls, trimming. Work on tumblers, mugs, tea bowls, bowls.

Fourth Week - Finish tumblers and mugs. Work on bowls, teabowls, larger cylinders. Read sections on pitcher, jar, and vase forms.

Fifth Week - Slide show on pitchers, jar/vase forms. Demo of pitchers, vases. **Finish teabowls and bowls.** Work on larger cylinders, pitchers, jar/vase forms. Bisque-fire tumblers, mugs, teabowls, and bowls. Read sections on covered jars and lids, and on glazing. Study handout of "Guidelines for Glazing."

Sixth Week – Slide show/demo of covered jars. Discussion/demo of cone-10 glazing. Glaze tumblers, mugs, teabowls, and bowls for cone 10 firings. Work on pitchers, jar/vase forms, covered jars. Read sections on making and trimming plates, and slip-decoration.

Seventh Week – Demo of stemmed vessels. Slide show/demo on plates, slip decoration. **Finish pitchers, jar/vase forms,** work on covered jars, stemmed vessels, plates. **Midterm Review on Wednesday.** Have your tumblers, mugs, tea bowls and bowls glaze-fired, bisque-stamps bisque-fired, pitcher and jar/vase forms in greenware.

Eighth Week – Work on covered jars, stemmed vessels, plates. Read section on thrown-and-altered forms.

Ninth Week - Demo of thrown-and-altered casserole, covered boxes thrown as closed forms. **Finish covered jars and stemmed vessels,** work on casseroles, covered boxes, plates, slip decoration. Read section on teapots.

Tenth Week – Slide-show/demo on teapots. Work on casseroles, covered boxes, plates, slip decoration, teapots.

Eleventh Week – **Finish casseroles, covered boxes,** finish throwing plates. Work on slip decoration, teapots.

Twelfth Week – Finish making teapot components, slip decoration, trimming plates, work on assembling teapots. **Friday is Last Wet Clay Day.** Review sections on glazing.

Thirteenth Week - Finish assembling teapot by Tuesday. Finish all greenware by Wednesday. Glaze all wares already bisque-fired. Load bisque and glaze firings. **Last bisque-firings loaded on Sunday.**

Fourteenth Week – Glaze all remaining work by Wednesday evening. **Last cone 10 glaze firing loaded on Friday.**

Fifteenth Week - Finish any needed grinding and post-fire effects on wares. **Group Final Review with Pot-luck Refreshments on Wednesday**