

Vince Pitelka, 2018

Platters: Thrown and Handbuilt

Among the many vessels used at the table, the platter is one of those used communally, sharing the main course or a side dish or dessert during a group meal. People generally don't use a platter when eating by themselves, so there is an inherent sense of community and sharing whenever a platter is used. The simple act of placing food on a platter is significant, implying a quantity of food to supply two or more people who will help themselves or be served from the platter at the table. The British traditionally call a platter a "charger," because it delivers a "charge" of food to each person.

Making good plates is a challenge in itself, but things become more challenging and complex when a plate is increased in dimension to become a platter, especially when you want the platter to be seen as special. A platter as part of a traditional matching dinnerware set usually is usually nothing more than a large plate, but consider the things you can do to make a platter special – to make it stand out as more than an oversized dinner plate. In today's design sensibilities, having everything on the table match is often seen as boring or obsessively "designed." In comparison, an interesting and unusual platter that looks good with the other pieces on the table tends to stand out, and makes the food upon it seem that much more special. Many contemporary chefs and designers (including Martha Stewart) advocate a more eclectic mix of accessories rather than a matched set. That's a personal choice, but it's fun and instructive to focus on creating interesting and unique platters that invite notice and use, rather than ones that match everything else on the table.

An important consideration with utilitarian platters is that their peak moment of utility occurs when they are brought out to the table loaded with food. At that moment, the center portion of the platter is concealed, and even when the food is served, the gradual appearance of the glaze or design work beneath is altered by food residue. This should be considered when designing a utilitarian platter. Is the added design compatible with utilitarian use, especially as the food is removed?

With that in mind, the following are some possible features of shape and decoration that will still be visible when the platter is loaded with food.

- Scalloped or otherwise altered edges
- Polygonal flat-sided shape
- Rounded square or polygonal shape (rounded edges)
- Flange rim with slip decoration design
- Oval shape
- Elongated oval, as in a fish platter
- Striking glaze design on the rim
- Tall foot to raise the platter a little higher than a normal plate
- Rim with impressed design or additive sculptural design.
- Rim with pierced design work
- Two or more handles attached to the rim

On the other hand, the platter as a utilitarian vessel is the closest the potter comes to something similar to a framed painting on the wall, and lots of platters do end up hung on the wall or spend part of their time there or in a plate stand as highly-visible decoration. Many potters take advantage of this with surface decoration occupying the “well” of the platter, with the rim serving as a visually plainer framing element, making them ideal wall decoration without denying their use as functional vessels. The reality is that such platters sell very well in galleries or online, and the buyers/users accept the fact that the primary decoration is beneath the food and might look a bit odd as that surface is revealed during use. I expect that most people don’t even stop to think about it, but as artists/designers, it is important that we consider these things.

As you consider options, think about all the possible variations in the rim of a platter. Part of that choice will be based on the decorating options mentioned above. The choice may also depend on the intended use of the platter. A platter with a very wide well (the flat or curved portion of the platter that carries food) will hold more food, but if there is only an up-curved rim with no flange, during use the platter will likely be completely covered with food and will not show itself off much at all. When there is a flaring flange rim, it is generally assumed that the food will be in the well of the platter and will not extend up onto the flange rim. That also provides a surface to hold onto the platter while passing it around the table.

Consider the choice of flat-bottom platters or the “lens” shape with a continuous curve across the bottom. Generally, platters with a distinct well and a good flange rim, or with the lens-shape with continuous curvature are less likely to warp in the kiln. In all cases pay special attention to the placement of feet or a trimmed foot, especially in the way they support the form during firing. It is a big disappointment to have an otherwise fine platter ruined by warpage caused by insufficient or misplaced support during firing. All it takes is some careful consideration of what happens during firing – where the weight is carried, and how the leverage of the overhanging rim is evenly supported by the foot or feet.

In a lens-shaped platter with continuous curvature in cross-section, the foot ring can be placed anywhere as long as it gives adequate stability in use. In a platter with a wide, flat well, the outer foot ring (there should always be several foot rings on any platter with a wide, flat well) must be located directly beneath the point where the well ends and the rim starts to curve upwards. If the well continues level out beyond the outer foot ring, warpage is a certainty. Also, the larger the outer foot ring in proportion to the overall diameter of the platter, the greater the chance it will warp in the kiln. On a platter with a flat well and without a flange rim, far better to have the flat portion of the well a reasonable diameter and then have the rim curve up gradually outside the foot ring.

When designing and making platters, try to avoid forms where the well or the overall cross-section is so curved that you can’t tell whether it is a platter or bowl. This happens quite frequently because it’s a lot easier to throw a wide, low serving bowl than it is to throw a good platter.

There is excellent imagery and information available in books, and online at the galleries listed on the links page at my website.