

## ***Rolling Out Slabs by Hand with a Rolling Pin***

Vince Pitelka, 2021

Slabs can be rolled by hand very efficiently with a suitable rolling pin. With practice it is possible to roll even fairly large uniform slabs by hand almost as fast as with a slab roller. Whatever rolling method you use, be sure to neutralize any directional grain structure as explained in the handout on rolling slabs.

On Amazon or other online source, purchase a heavy-duty baker's rolling pine at least 2 ¾" in diameter with a barrel at least 18" long and bearing-mounted handles. If uniform thickness is especially important, use wood shims under the ends of the rolling pin to control the thickness of the slab. Dowels work well as shims, but tend to get mashed down a bit with use, producing thinner slabs. Home-improvement centers usually have small square and rectangular stock in the same display with the dowels, and those work far better but are available in fewer size increments. If this is important to you, have a woodworker make you a set of 36"-long shims graduated by 1/16" increments from 1/8" to ¾".

With shims, you can only roll slabs of a width slightly less than the length of the rolling pin barrel. Fortunately, a friend gave me a rolling pin with a 24" barrel, and you can have any wood-turner make you one. Without shims, you can roll slabs of any size that can still be handled on a sheet of canvas.

If this is going to be your standard method of making slabs, either by choice or necessity, get a proper Chinese slab mallet to save wear-and-tear on your fists and arms. Wedge the clay and pound it out to form a rough slab and place on an appropriate sheet of canvas, depending on the amount of clay and the size slab you want. Do the rolling on a sturdy table that is absolutely flat and has no flex at all and start rolling out from the center in all directions. After just a few passes the clay will stick to the canvas and won't expand any more. If the slab is fairly small at this point you can peel it off the canvas and resume rolling. Otherwise lay another sheet of canvas on top, grab both sheets at the far edge and flip the slab towards you. Pull off the top (formerly bottom) sheet, pull any wrinkles out of the bottom sheet, and continue rolling. As you vary the direction of rolling, you can control the expansion of the slab, but remember that you need to roll in multiple directions on both sides of the slab to eliminate grain structure effectively.

Hold the rolling pin absolutely level in order to avoid a lens-shaped slab that is thicker in the center. That's easy when rolling across the center of a slab, but when rolling along the edge, simply press a little harder on the end of the rolling pin that is over the slab. If you apply equal pressure to both ends of the rolling pin when rolling along the edge, there's less resistance near the edge, and you'll end up with a slab that tapers thinner towards the edges. If uniform thickness is critical, use shims. If the slab is too large to use shims, regularly measure the thickness in several places with a needle tool and adjust the rolling accordingly.

When done rolling, the slab will be stuck to the bottom sheet of canvas. If you cut out shapes and attempt to lift them from the canvas they will stretch and distort. Lay a sheet of canvas over the slab and flip it as described above, remove the stuck sheet (formerly the bottom sheet), and you are ready to proceed.