Pour It On

by Sam Scott

The smooth surface of Sam Scott's wheel-thrown lidded jar is the perfect canvas for his bold, poured-on glaze decoration. The patterns look so precise that you'd think he spent hours masking off the surface, but it's really much simpler than that, though lots of practice is required.

In the early 1970s, an encounter with Bob Sperry's work influenced my decision to go to the University of Washington. Sperry's on-glaze brushwork had attracted me, and after three years there, in addition to facility with a brush and learning to work with porcelain, I had acquired many skills. Upon graduation, I set up my studio and began to develop my own approach to brushwork. One of my techniques was to leave areas of the porcelain surface unglazed. When I applied the oxides, I would get a different color depending on whether the brushwork was on clay or glaze (see page 26). I applied the glaze by pouring it over selective areas, and with practice, I began to control the poured areas and was able create interesting patterns. The biomorphic shapes would widen or taper based on the flow of the glaze and the form of the piece being glazed.

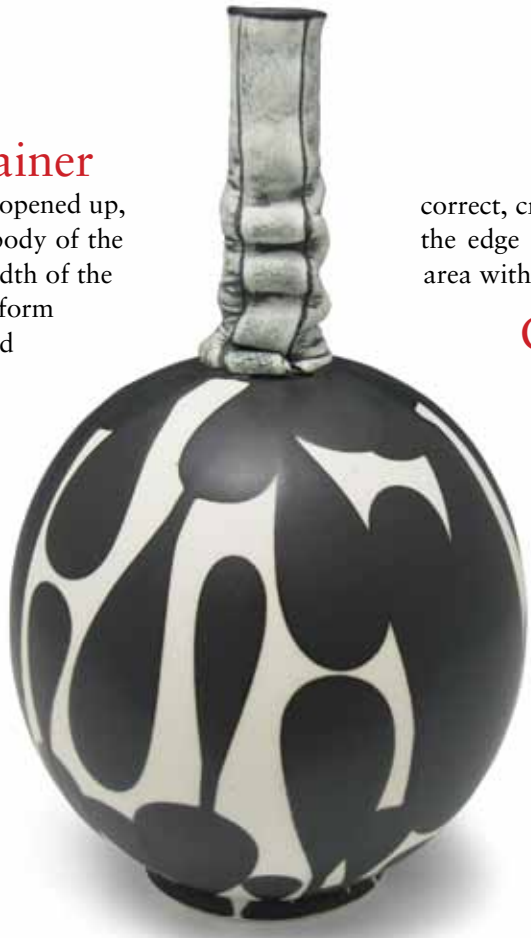
As time passed, the patterns became more interesting, but given that I used a clear glaze, there was little contrast to the clay and glaze. My main focus was to add visual interest to the brushwork. In the 1990s, I began to develop a black matte glaze. Because this black glaze contrasted with the white porcelain, the patterns themselves became the main focus of the surface decoration.

Lidded jar, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, wheel-thrown porcelain, black glaze.

Throwing the Container

After wedging, the clay is centered, opened up, and drawn into a cylinder for the body of the lidded container. The height and width of the cylinder is dictated by the actual form you are planning to make. My round forms tend to be more vertical, so the cylinders I start with are taller than they are wide.

Working with porcelain can be difficult, but I've found that my clay (Kai Porcelain from Laguna Clay Co.) has a window of workability where forming on the wheel is manageable. When too stiff, it's difficult to wedge and center; if it's too soft it has no body and slumps easily. Another reality of porcelain is the thickness that needs to be left in the lower region of larger round forms. The extra clay supports the curves. As a result, trimming figures prominently when working in porcelain; the form one wishes to end up with will be the inside shape. After trimming the excess clay from the outside, you're left with the desired profile.



Black and white vase, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and hand-built porcelain, black glaze.

After the cylinder is made, nudge the central shape out with your middle finger on the inside and a flexible metal rib on the outside. As the curve develops, change to a curved wooden rib on the inside that's sized to the scale of the piece while still using the metal rib outside (*figure 1*).

Once the basic form is achieved, collar the shoulder into the desired diameter. On a lidded jar of reasonable size, try to leave an opening that allows you to reach in with your hand. Of course the actual size is always dictated by the best proportions of lid to form. When the opening is correct, create a flange for the lid by turning the edge of the clay up. Finally, refine this area with a rib.

Capping it Off

Measuring and throwing the lid comes next. For a cap lid, this is basically a short cylinder or a bowl with straight walls. Use calipers to measure the outside diameter of the flange at the top of the pot (*figure 2*). This measurement should be the same or larger than the inside edge of the lid, which is thrown upside down as a low, wide cylinder (*figure 3*). Angle the flange slightly so the widest point is at the shoulder of the jar. The lid will actually sit on the jar's shoulder. Making the fit tighter allows for some adjustments while trimming. You can remove clay from the lid edge or flange to get the best fit. I've found that this style of lid should fit snug after the bisque as the flange shrinks a bit more than the lid in the glaze firing. At this point, the pieces are put aside to get evenly leather-hard. Depending on the size of the piece and amount of moisture in the air, this can take a few days.

Trimming the Form

Once the pieces reach a stiff leather hard, they're ready to trim. I primarily use a Kemper LT5 loop tool and keep the trimming tools very sharp for working on stiffer clay. If the clay sticks to the tool while trimming, it's too soft. For a round form with a small opening, use a leather-hard chuck to support the piece while trimming. I prefer the clay-to-clay contact because there is a resistance to slipping that's not there with a bisque-fired chuck. You'll find that with care, you can keep the chucks leather-hard for months or years and use them repeatedly.

Center the chuck, put the piece in it in an upright position, then level and center it. Use a pencil to make a line on the lowest part of the pot so it will be visible when turned upside down (*figure 4*). This mark is the reference I use to

The Process… Practice Makes Perfect

Finish the curve using a curved wooden rib on the inside and a flexible metal rib on the outside.

In preparation for making the lid, measure the diameter of the outside of the flange using calipers.

Throw the lid as a low wide cylinder. Use the caliper measurement to size the inside diameter.

Mark a line around the lowest part of the pot as it sits in the chuck after it's leveled.

Jar placed upside down in the chuck, with the marked line level. The opening is parallel to the line.

Establish the diameter and interior of the foot then trim excess clay from the walls.

Shave the trimming marks using a metal rib held at close to a right angle against the pot.

Hold the metal rib against the pot at a low angle to smooth out the trimming marks.

Use a foam bat for support while trimming the lid. This works for low, wide forms.

Process photos: Mary C. Tevis

Apply the glaze using a combination of pouring and splashing from a flexible plastic container.

The shape of the pot, glaze viscosity, velocity, and angling of the pot changes the poured shape.

The finished pot, prior to glaze firing. Glaze was poured with the pot upside down and upright.

ensure that the form is not skewed in the chuck. If I get the upside-down form centered in the chuck with the line level, I know the opening (which is not visible in this position) is parallel to the line and now centered (*figure 5*).

The Foot

When you're satisfied that it's centered, begin to trim. The first thing to do is establish the diameter of the foot. These round forms are designed to have feet so you can hold the piece firmly while glazing. It's important that the foot always be high enough and wide enough so you can easily grasp the piece. I find that these parameters make an effective foot for the visual balance I want.

As I continue to trim, I'm aware of the thickness and continuity of form. After removing most of the excess clay with the loop tool (*figure 6*), I use a stainless-steel rib at close to a right angle to shave the clay and remove the marks made by the loop tool (*figure 7*). After all the clay and marks are removed, I moisten the surface and quickly use that same rib, at a low angle, to get a very smooth but not burnished surface (*figure 8*). The piece is then put upright in the chuck and the upper area is smoothed as well. To trim the lid I use a foam bat, which is resistant to slippage with low, wide forms (*figure 9*). I make sure the bottom is flat, then turn it over (base down) to trim the interior edge if I need to fine tune the fit. I then trim it, edge down, to remove the excess clay.

Lidded jar with brushwork and poured clear glaze, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, wheel-thrown porcelain, clear glaze.

Adding Handles

After trimming, the handles are applied. The form is usually too stiff after trimming, so I moisten it a bit before attaching them. These pulled and cut handles have a bone-like quality to them. When I began making these forms, I imagined them as reliquaries, so having bone handles seemed appropriate. In addition to the pulled section, I add three balls of clay to create a stand off for the handle.

Making a Splash

Once the piece is bisque-fired to cone 09, it's ready to be glazed. All of my forms are smooth with uninterrupted curves, making surface decoration a bit easier. Whether I use brushwork or the pouring technique, throwing lines or variations in surface texture compete with and alter the decoration.

The technique I use is remarkably simple. I use a small, flexible margarine container with a thin edge so I can alter its width as needed to get a wider or narrower flow. As I begin to apply the glaze, it's a combination of pour and splash (*figure 10*). If I touch the container to the pot, it splits the flow of glaze. If I just splash it on the piece, I am not able to control the shape as the glaze flows down the surface. The angle at which I hold the pot, the shape of the piece, the viscosity of the glaze, and the degree of impetus I give the glaze at the initial pour all factor into the shapes that develop (*figure 11*). I also alter the angle and direction (from the rim or from the foot) of the pours to create a graphic tension on the surface (*figure 12*).

I pour from either the top or bottom in a fairly random manner to begin with. Once this area is dry, I pour from the other direction, reacting to the shapes that now exist on the surface. At this point, I can see the pattern begin to energize the surface. The size of the biomorphic shapes, the distance between the shapes, whether they touch or not, all factor into the effect. When I am finished pouring, I scrape off the inevitable small splatters with a needle tool and use an eraser to clean off any residue. Because of the fluidity of the poured shapes, I rarely alter them. If I get an edge I don't like, I pour over that area to clean it up.

Conclusion

I believe the ability to realize a creative vision is proportional to your skill set. Whatever the field, watching someone with real skill is fascinating. Acquiring those skills develops a new maturity and direction to your work. In my case, the years of pouring on the glaze, as I applied it, led me to the potential and spontaneity of the patterns that are created. ■

Sam Scott is an artist and educator living in Seattle Washington, where he teaches at Shoreline Community College. His work will be included in the NCECA Invitational Exhibition "Push Play" on view at the Bellevue Arts Museum from January 19–June 17, 2012. To see more of his work, visit www.samscottpottery.com.