

SEWING CULTURES THROUGH Pottery

BY LAUREN KARLE



Mug, 5½ in. (14 cm) in length, handbuilt earthenware, slip-transferred pattern and copper carbonate hand-painted slip, cone 03 oxidation, 2012.

Handmade objects are a reflection of people and place long before the separation of utility from beauty. Nowhere is this more true than in the garments of the indigenous cultures of Guatemala and Mexico. Huipiles, or Mayan blouses, relate ancient and modern histories through their weave and designs that combine patterns. After being surrounded by these textiles during the 2½ years I lived in Guatemala, I see them as symbols of identity and

protectors of culture. Like them, I create objects that are culturally functional in addition to being useful in everyday life. My current palette references Latin American color combinations. By using color and pattern as cultural signifiers, my intention is to create pots that demonstrate unity within diversity. I seek to unify different cultures by combining timeless traditions and modern interpretations through visual and metaphorical layering.

A pot embodies a specific feeling when all its elements speak to one thing. I harmonize the lip, feet, seams, handle, surfaces, and interior, exterior, and negative spaces. Imagining cloth wrapping around the form of a person, I try to give my pots volume from within. I dart, alter, cut, and join pieces of clay as a tailor creates a garment. Nature is another source of inspiration as pattern and parts come together in elegant ways.

Preparing a Slab

To make a mug, I begin by rolling out a thin slab of red earthenware, a medium that I prefer for its rich color, its long tradition in Latin America, and its association with the common person. Eddie Dominguez taught me to roll a slab between two pieces of bed sheet, a technique that allows me to easily flip the slab and roll both sides. When the slab is an even, ¼-inch thick, I lay a pattern on top and carefully cut out a 13×4½-inch rectangle. When it is ready, I run a rib over it to smooth and compress the clay.

The lip of a cup is the most intimate point of connection with the user, so it is essential to give it a physically pleasing form before applying the pattern. I flatten and compress one of the long edges with a roller and rib (1—see page 58) and flip the slab repeatedly to create a curve that comes gently to a point.

For the handle, I cut two strips about ¾ of an inch wide by 6 inches long, then use a roller to make these even thinner, since they will be layered on top of one another. As with the lip, I smooth the edges of the handle so that they form a gentle curve for the user's hand (2). In addition, I cut a 3-inch square for the base.

Decorating the Surface

On the surfaces of my pots I capture some of the qualities of the huipiles, which have a multitude of different patterns that work together visually. By situating regular slip-transferred patterns next to painterly marks, I emulate the contrast of the tight weave of fabric and hand-sewn decoration. I combine the earthenware hues of pre-Colombian vessels with bright colors of contemporary Latin America.

It is essential to layer the surface of a cup while the slab is still flat and wet. There are infinite opportunities to experiment with the order and quantity of layers, but I usually start with a low-fire white slip with the goal of making the underglaze or wash brighter. The underglaze or wash can be applied as a solid background color, a gradient, or a series of painterly strokes (3). I always consider the pot and how color will flatten or enhance the form, highlight seams, or create an illusion of depth.

Once the background is no longer shiny, I apply a pattern through slip transfer, a simple and gratifying technique that I learned from Charlie Cummings. First, I create a black-and-white pattern on the computer by altering a picture in Photoshop, creating a pattern by hand and scanning it, or finding an existing



Mug, 5½ in. (14 cm) in diameter, handbuilt earthenware, slip-transferred pattern, cone 03 oxidation, 2012.

pattern. Then I print the inverse of the pattern using a laser printer on regular printer paper. An ink-jet printer will not work, since ink does not have the resistive properties of toner. Slip sticks only to the white areas of the image, which are the parts that will transfer.

I deflocculate the colored slip to brush on the pattern using one drop of Darvan 7 per cup of slip. Sodium silicate also works. Deflocculating the slip keeps the color intense but negatively charges the clay particles so that they slide over each other, making the slip flow

more easily with less water content. In sweeping strokes, I brush the deflocculated slip over the pattern. The slip sticks to the white paper and pulls back from the laser toner. If the slip bridges from one white section to another over the toner, I just touch it gently with a finger and it immediately recedes (4).

I cut several sizes from the patterned paper, to match the size of each of my slabs, and coat them with colored slip (5). When the slip on the pattern is leather hard, I lay it face down on a prepared background. If the slip is still shiny, it will smear and blur; if it is too dry, it may flake off the page. I press it smoothly onto the clay and brush a little water onto the back (6). The water causes the paper to lie flat and helps the slip release onto the slab. The perfect amount of water will barely saturate the laser ink, so you can see the pattern through the back of the paper. I use a rib to compress and smooth the back of the paper (7), then peel a corner back to check how well the pattern is transferring (8). I brush more water on the back or rub the paper if necessary. How clearly the pattern transfers and where depends on the balance of these techniques. I continue to check it until it has transferred to my satisfaction and I can remove the whole paper. It is possible to print patterns on top of patterns, rotate, flip, block out sections, paint over parts, and experiment endlessly with layers.

Another option is to juxtapose patterns made by hand with the regularity of printed patterns. In this case, I use a copper carbonate low-fire slip to paint horizontal lines around a cup (9). Copper carbonate has beautiful qualities that naturally create depth and variation in value. Another option is to paint line-and-dash patterns directly on raw clay with a wash. I use combinations of these techniques and materials to create a composition on the outside, inside, handle, and base of the cup.

Building the Form

When the surface is no longer tacky, I start building the form by creating a cylinder. I always cut the joining edges at an angle to make a stronger joint with a greater surface area. I score with a serrated rib, add a small amount of water with a paint brush, and score again (10). This creates slip in the joint without adding more volume that will squeeze out along the edge and ruin

Pair of mugs, 5½ in. (14 cm) in diameter each, handbuilt earthenware, slip-transferred pattern, cone 03 oxidation, 2012.



the surface pattern. I wiggle and press the two sides together to secure them, then turn the cup upside down to measure five equally spaced darts (11). Using a pattern, I cut an equilateral triangle where each dart belongs (12). It helps to angle the blade slightly out from the triangle when cutting to make the two edges flush when attached. I bend the flanges inward and attach them using the same method. It often helps to use a rib at the intersection to change and define the angle of the slab to lessen the potential of cracking (13). I compress the joints without rubbing the pattern on the outside and smooth and secure the joints from the inside.

After stepping back to consider other adjustments in the form, I push outward from the inside, slightly curving the walls of the cup to make it look full, and pinch or shape it.

To build the handle, I lay a thin strip of raw clay over my fingers to create a curve, then lay the decorated strip over this slightly wider raw strip and attach them (14). Because they have been curved in advance, less stretching occurs and therefore less cracking. I shape the handle and let it set up to a soft leather-hard state, then hold it up to the body of the cup and cut to the desired length, considering the angle of each attachment. After holding it up for a dry fit, I attach it securely (15).

Finishing the Inside

In order to turn an industrial utensil, which forbids extravagance, into a ritual object, I embellish the inside of a cup with surprises and add small details. Before attaching the base, I place the cup on the wheel and apply a generous layer of slip to the inside as it turns (16). I set the cup on the decorated three-inch square slab and trace the inside pentagonal opening that was created by darting the cylinder bottom. When I cut the shape, I keep the knife blade at an outward angle to create a small pedestal for the cup (17). To avoid gaps at the joint, I attach the base in the same orientation as I traced it. As with the darts, I compress the inside without rubbing the pattern, then carefully seal the outside (18).

I slip-trail a bead along the darts on the inside (19). By using the same color of slip that was applied on the wheel, I acknowledge the seams without highlighting them. I also enjoy the contrast in line quality between the slip applied on the wheel with the slip applied by hand.

Last, I add my signature by slip-trailing it backwards on newspaper. When the slip is leather hard, I press it on the bottom of the pot (20). As when transferring the pattern, I brush on a small amount of water and rub it with a rib. When transferred onto the



Glass, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, handbuilt earthenware, slip-transferred pattern, sprigs, cone 03 oxidation, 2011.

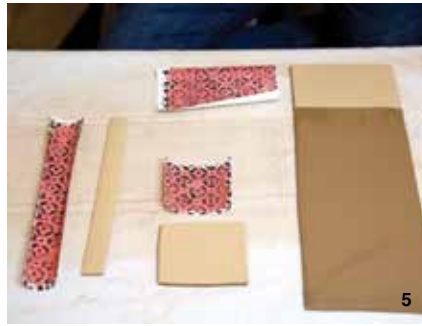
pot, the signature will read correctly. I choose to use my first name with the goal of making my pots more personal.

Firing and Glazing

I wrap the cup in plastic and let the moisture equalize for at least a day, then slowly allow it to dry. After bisque firing the cup to cone 02, I apply a thin layer of clear glaze. Depending on my chosen composition, the beauty of the natural clay allows me to leave some areas unglazed. The final cone 03 glaze firing enriches the colors and makes the cup food safe.

The purpose of my forms and carefully layered surfaces is realized through the use of my pots. My pots are embedded in a tradition that unites people, preserves culture, and conveys the beauty of history.

To see more of Lauren Karle's work check out <http://laurenkarle.com/home>.



- 1 Roll out an even ¼-inch slab, cut out the pattern, and create a lip using a roller or a rib while continuously flipping the slab. This creates a smooth curve that gently comes to a point.
- 2 Make two thin strips for the handle, smoothing the edges to form a gentle curve where the user's hand will contact it.
- 3 Coat the sides, base, and handle while they are flat. Start with a white low-fire slip so what is put on top becomes brighter. Apply an underglaze or wash over as a solid background color.
- 4 With quick brush strokes, apply a deflocculated slip over the laser ink pattern. The plastic quality of laser-printer ink will resist deflocculated slip—making it stick to the white paper and pull back from the ink. If the slip bridges from one white section to another over the ink, just touch it gently with a finger and it will immediately recede.
- 5 All the pieces and parts of the cup are prepped, dry, and ready to assemble.
- 6 When the slip on the pattern is leather hard it is ready to transfer onto the prepared background. Press the paper smoothly onto the clay and brush enough water on the back to barely saturate the laser ink—you will see the pattern through the back of the paper.
- 7 Use a rib to compress and smooth the back of the paper to help the slip transfer onto the slab.
- 8 Peel a corner back to check how well the pattern is transferring. Brush more water on the back or continue to rub if necessary. The clarity of the transferred pattern depends on the balance of these techniques.
- 9 Paint horizontal lines of a colored low-fire slip to give depth and variation around the cup.

- 10 Cut the joints at an angle, score them, add a small amount of water, and score again. This creates slip in the joint without adding more volume that will squish out along the seam and ruin the surface pattern. Press the two sides together to secure them, creating a cylinder.
- 11 Measure five equally spaced sections around the bottom edge. An MKM Decorating Disc is a useful tool that can equally space any number of sections in concentric circles.
- 12 Use a pattern to cut identical equilateral triangles where each dart belongs. It helps to angle the X-Acto blade slightly out from the triangle when cutting so the two edges will meet flush.
- 13 Use a rib to gently bend the flanges in. Then join each dart using the same score, water, score method. Compress the joints without rubbing the pattern on the outside.
- 14 Create a small curve with the thin strip of raw clay. Layer the decorated strip over it and attach them. By attaching them after they curve, less stretching occurs and therefore less cracking.
- 15 After shaping the handle and letting it set up to a soft leather hard, hold it up to the body of the cup and cut at the desired length and angle. Score the cup and handle, add water, score, and attach securely.
- 16 Prior to attaching the base, apply a layer of white slip to the inside while the cup is slowly spinning on the wheel. Set the cup on the decorated 3-inch square base and trace the shape of the inside opening.
- 17 Cut on the lines you traced, keeping your X-Acto knife blade at an outward angle. The angle will match the bottom angle of the cup for a secure fit and provide a small pedestal.



10



11



12

PROCESS PHOTOS: CHASE BRAZZLE



13



14



15



16



17



18



19



20

- 18** Attach the base in the same orientation you traced it to avoid gaps. Similar to the darts, compress the joint without rubbing the surface pattern. Carefully seal the outside.
- 19** Slip-trail a bead of slip along the darts on the inside. Use the same color slip to acknowledge the seams without highlighting them. These lines will contrast nicely with the regularity of the slip applied on the wheel.
- 20** Last, I slip-transfer my signature on the bottom of the pot. By slip-trailing my name backwards on newspaper it reads correctly after transferring it onto the bottom of the pot.

