

To Hold in the Hand

Sharon McKittrick Boyle

One of my most popular lessons involves egg-shaped clay boxes that beg to be touched. It is also a big hit with me, because through this lesson students begin to recognize the importance of good artistry and planning.

Students first plan their designs by drawing a two-piece, egg-shaped form. They must also sketch an animal-shaped handle that will be attached to the upper piece of the egg.

Making the Clay Sphere

Students begin by making two separate pots out of clay. They first make two ball shapes of equal size and then make them into two pinch pots of the same size, making sure that the walls of the pots are the same thickness.

Have students use a toothbrush and slip to seal the two pinch pots together to make a hollow sphere.

Stress that they should not add water to the outside of the pots; wetting the outside unsettles the clay and does not heal any cracks. If there are cracks in the sphere, students should use a toothbrush and a moist piece of clay to fill them and smooth them with a clay tool.

Let the completed sphere rest overnight after storing it in a plastic ziplock bag.

At the next class meeting, have students carefully remove the clay sphere from the plastic bag and mold it into the shape of an egg using a wooden paddle. They should gently tap or paddle the hollow form into the chosen shape. The air trapped inside the form keeps the soft paddling technique from breaking the form.



Adding a Handle

Clay animals or insects are added using standard scratch and slip techniques. Students should build the animal on the form before the top is cut open. Suggest that students choose animals that sit close to the form like frogs, turtles, ladybugs, and lizards. These work better than long-legged creatures. Keep the pieces in a moist environment until they are complete. An inexpensive plastic dropcloth works well for covering the class work in progress.

Cutting the Top

Once the clay works are completed they should be lightly covered to dry slowly. When they are stiff but not leather hard, use a fettling knife held at a 45° angle to cut the lid. Suggest that students avoid cutting through the attached animal body if possible; the aesthetic is better if it is left whole. The bevel should go toward the inside of the form because if the tops are cut straight they will slide off the box and break. The tops should also have at least one tab, which makes the re-seating of the top easier.

Firing and Glazing

Leave the completed pieces exposed to the air without any plastic covering to dry out thoroughly. They may seem dry, but leave them for another week after they feel dry to the touch. It is crucial to be sure they are completely dry before firing them. Bisque fire the dry pieces, and then have students use underglazes

or alternative finishes as desired on the "handles." An iron wash (50/50 iron oxide red and Gerstley Borate) will stain the hands so have students wear gloves. The iron wash dry powder stores well and mixes with water when you are ready to use it.

Students can glaze the pieces of the pots with low-fire (cone 06) glazes but stilt them individually so they do not stick together. They should not put glaze on the bottom of the work or on the two edges where the pieces fit together. Fire the pieces again.

Assessment

When the work is complete, have students discuss the differences between

the shapes they drew and the forms they constructed in clay. You could have them draw the finished pots

from observation and display both drawings with the work. I ask my students to write an artist statement for each work in

which they discuss their intentions and choices. This is a great way to engage students in thinking and talking about their own work and using art vocabulary. ↻

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students create multiple solutions to specific visual arts problems that demonstrate competence in producing effective relationships between structural choices and artistic functions.

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