

### Shape and Form

The terms “shape” and “form” are often used interchangeably. When referring to design elements, however, shape is a two-dimensional element such as a silhouette or outline. It has height and width, but no depth. Shapes may be drawn upon the surface of a pot as decoration. When you view the profile of a pot in silhouette, you view its shape.

The element of form is three-dimensional and includes an object’s depth. Working with clay is about working with three-dimensional forms, although sometimes clay forms such as tiles can be very flat and take on the characteristics of two-dimensional artworks. Shapes and forms may be geometric or organic, curved or angular, positive or negative, static or dynamic.

**Fig. 1-12. Describe the mood projected by this slab-built form. What did the artist do to create this atmosphere?**

Student work, Andrew Hillmer, *In the End*, 2008. Slab-built earthenware, pit fired and copper accents added.



### Drying Clay

Potters must know how to control the rate at which clay dries. Clay shrinks as it dries and, if it shrinks too rapidly, it can crack. Not all types of clay shrink at the same rate due to their chemical composition. Even some parts of the same work—such as handles—can shrink more rapidly than others due to uneven moisture loss. As you learn to work with clay, you’ll need to monitor the drying process to prevent cracking and breaking.

A potter in ancient times had to consider what type of clay to use, the thickness of the vessel’s walls, and the local climate—among other variables. If the climate was hot and dry, vessels would have to be sheltered from the sun to slow the process. If the climate was damp and cool, the potter might place the work near a heat source.

An experienced potter also knows that moisture affects how clay can be shaped. As clay begins to dry, it loses its plastic properties. Some ceramic pieces must be built in stages, after some of the clay hardens. For example, a coiled pot can be refined with a paddle when the clay stiffens. The upper sections of a large coiled pot can be added only when the lower sections have dried enough to support the weight of additional coils.

Clay that has dried to this point is in the *leather-hard* stage; when pressure is applied to the clay, the form will not easily distort. The potter may scrape the surface of a piece to smooth the walls. Early potters used scraping tools such as shells and sharp-edged stones. After removing bumps and flaws, potters may add finishing touches like handles and decoration.