

A QUINNTESSENTIAL VASE



by Brenda Quinn

Developing forms that have a utilitarian function and a dynamic design is like trying to solve an evolving equation with an elusive answer. For me, this equation becomes more complicated with the addition of an ever-expanding range of functions, techniques, and glazes to my working vocabulary. The chase for a solution is engaging; so much so that I'm often interjecting more variables into my process in order to keep the chase going. This is why I love learning new techniques and processes. It's like building an inventory of possibilities in my mind. I appreciate how making the same form using different techniques yields distinctly different results.

The designs for my work come out of a number of practices. I begin with sketches of forms and patterns, and often pull ideas from various historical sources. My current body of work started with an assignment I had given to my students, challenging them to combine handbuilding and wheel throwing with consideration for the unique visual qualities each of those techniques carry with them. This idea evolved as I began incorporating a slumping process into my work using an octagonal mold to create a vase. The mold was originally used to make a platter. After creating the platter, it was easy to see the potential in the form to become other vessels.

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All photos: Keith Renner



1 Cut out an octagonal template. With the template supported, drape a slab onto the mold.



2 Cut away excess clay, leaving only an inch of overlap. Tap the clay, mold, and support on the table causing the clay to slump.



3 Using the mold board as a support, flip the leather-hard slab over and remove mold board.



4 Trim the clay to the line left by the board. Draw and cut a line across the middle of the piece.



5 Use a rasp to create a 45° bevel on the edges of the two pieces. Score and slip the edges of the piece.



6 Attach a 2-inch-wide slab to the piece while it's supported by foam. Pinch the slab to shape and refine the form.



7 Score and slip the pinched slab and connect the other half of the slumped slab.



8 Flip the piece so that the opened side is facing down. Add a coil to the base to create a foot.



9 Turn the piece over and add coils to the rim of the opening. Pinch to combine the coils and add texture.



10 Cut the rim into a scalloped edge or desired pattern, and pinch the edges to refine them.



11 Create and attach four small handles and four small petal forms. Attach two to each side by scoring and slipping.



12 Use your finger or a brush to dab underglaze to the sides. Glaze the sides, let dry, and wax the glazed area.



13 Draw a pattern onto the glaze with a pencil. Brush wax over the glaze then remove excess glaze from other parts of the piece.



14 Pour glaze over the belly and let dry. Continue the pattern onto the belly. Brush wax over the glaze and drawing and let dry.



15 Carve away the wax and glaze on the drawn lines. Use a brush to remove wax burs and glaze dust, then clean with a sponge.



16 Brush diluted underglaze into the carved lines. Use a sponge to lift off excess underglaze, let the piece fully dry, and fire it.

Start with Slumping

To create this slab- and coil-built vase, you first need to cut an octagon out of paper to use as a slump-mold template. A variety of rigid materials can be used to make the mold, including cardboard, foam board, or wood. I often make molds out of cardboard and if I want to repeat a form numerous times, I use foam core, which is sturdier and holds up longer to the clay and multiple uses. When choosing what material to use for your mold, take into consideration the size of the cutout—the larger the cutout is, the sturdier the material should be. The forms I'm making are no bigger than twelve inches, and I often retire a shape after a few uses, making it unnecessary to use a more permanent material.

Next, trace the paper template onto your mold board, and allow at least an extra two inches of board around the cutout to provide support during the slumping process. Using a sharp knife, cut the shape out and mark the side of the board that you cut from—ensuring you use the side providing you with a more accurate shape. Find a bucket or box with an opening slightly larger than the size of your cutout, to support the edge of the mold as you work.

Make a slab that is at least five inches larger than the cutout. **Tip:** At this point you can texture your slab or to make it smooth. Carefully lift the slab and place it with the finished side facing down in the mold (*figure 1*). Trim away some of the excess clay, but leave an even ledge of clay about one inch wide around the edge of the cutout. This even lip helps the clay to slump evenly in the mold. If you leave too narrow a strip of clay, the clay may shift and fall into the opening during the next step.

Firmly grab the mold, slab, and support under it, lift them up, and tap it onto the table to force the clay further into the mold.

Since we want an even, symmetrical, concave curve, tap it a few more times, then rotate the mold and tap it again. Repeat rotating and tapping until you reach a desired depth. The thickness of the slab you use, the plasticity of the clay, and the shape of the cutout determines the depth (*figure 2*).

Once the slumped slab reaches leather hard, put a bat on top of it and flip it over (*figure 3*). Cut away the extra clay and draw a line to use as a guide to cut the piece in half (*figure 4*).

Adding Handbuilt and Pinched Elements

Use a rasp to make 45° angles on the edges of the forms (*figure 5*). Score and slip along the edge of the pieces, lay one of the pieces with the concave side facing up on a piece of foam to support it and add a two-inch-wide slab of clay to the entire slipped and scored edge, except the longest edge. Pinching the slab ensures a strong connection and creates texture to contrast the smooth surfaces of the slumped slab or you can make a seamless connection and a smooth surface if desired. Use your fingers to form a corner at each of the octagon's points (*figure 6*). Score, slip, and lay the other half of the octagon on top of the slab and repeat this same process (*figure 7*). Allow the entire form to stiffen under plastic. This helps to even out the moisture content and prevent the joints from cracking apart.

Next, turn the piece so it sits with the open side down. Score, slip, and add a coil to build the foot (*figure 8*). Make sure the foot is sturdy enough to physically and aesthetically support the weight of the piece.

After the foot stiffens, flip the vase over. Score and slip around the rim and add a thick coil. Pinch the coil to connect it to the base and to thin it out, moving the clay up. Continue adding coils and pinching until the piece reaches the desired height (*figure 9*).



Brenda Quinn's slump-molded and handbuilt vase, porcelain, underglaze and glaze, fired in oxidation to cone 6.



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Consider the Details From Start to Finish

Using a ruler, level out the top. Finish the top edge in a number of ways, such as the scalloped edge shown here (*figure 10*). I often consider the two-dimensional design on the surface when making choices about the three-dimensional aspects of a form. Knowing that I'll be drawing a pattern that has a leaf image with a ruffled edge led me to choose a more organic edge for the top. Looking for ways to tie three-dimensional and two-dimensional aspects of a piece together can help bring unity to a piece.

Lastly, make and attach four small handles to the sides of the piece. Using small pieces of clay, I model four petals that are attached to the bases of each handle (*figure 11*). I like the way appendages add visual movement to a piece and also provide a place for an accent color when glazing. After these pieces are attached, allow the vase to dry slowly under plastic then bisque fire it.

Surface Enhancements

After cleaning the bisque-fired surface with a clean damp sponge, use your fingertip or a brush to dab on dots of a light-colored underglaze, covering the ends of the piece (*figure 12*). Pour a colored transparent glaze over the dotted sides. Once the glaze is dry, cover the glaze with wax to protect it from any additional glaze layers. Remove any excess glaze from the surrounding areas by scraping it off and then sponging it clean.

Next, dab on more dots of a light-colored underglaze to the top portion of the vase, both inside and out. **Tip:** Hold the vase at a slight angle so the dots pool to one side, creating an interesting effect and bringing depth to the finished glaze surface. Pour a clear

or light-colored liner glaze into the vase and over the outside of the top portion. Remove excess glaze on the slab area of the vase.

Using a pencil, draw the pattern you want on the glaze surface, then protect the area with wax (*figure 13*). Repeat these steps on the belly of the vase, drawing a pattern after glazing with a semi-matte, darker glaze (*figure 14*), then covering it with wax. The glaze and wax need to dry for at least an hour—the longer it's allowed to dry, the less fragile the wax will be. Use a mini-ribbon tool to carve away the wax and the glaze over the drawn lines (*figure 15*). This creates dust so wear a mask. Use a stiff-bristle brush to gently knock away wax burrs and glaze dust in the carved lines, and a damp sponge to blot the piece and pick up excess dust.

Water down a darker underglaze and inlay it with a brush into the carved lines (*figure 16*). Use a damp sponge to blot away excess underglaze. I choose not to put glaze on top of the underglaze as this leaves the underglaze somewhat raised and a little rough, creating a nice contrast to the smooth glazes.

This multi-technique process can be used to create an endless number of forms. A great way to expand on your own designs is to make numerous slump molds of various shapes and use those parts as building blocks for new forms. By taking a slumped slab, looking at it from all angles, and thinking of cutting it into smaller pieces or adding coiled sections, you will be able to visualize how versatile these pieces can be.

Brenda Quinn teaches ceramics and visual arts at The Fieldston School in the Bronx, New York. Her work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally. She currently maintains a studio in her home in Mt. Vernon, New York with her husband, two daughters, three cats, and two guinea pigs. You can see more of her work at www.brendaquinn.com.