

# Masterclass

with

Jack  
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The potter takes us step-by-step through the processes he uses to throw a large porcelain bowl at his studio in Cornwall, which he then soda-fires in a gas kiln


Images: Layton Thompson

I finished my ceramics training in Belfast in 1971 and have worked as a potter for almost 50 years. Someone recently mentioned to me that it is unusual these days for someone to spend their working life in the same job. While making pots has always been at the core of my life, ceramics has given me many opportunities beyond the studio. To learn new things, to travel and teach, and to be involved in projects that have created new opportunities for makers to promote and sell their work.

I was Chair of the Craft Potters Association (CPA) for a total of 12 years and was involved with the first CPA fair in Cheltenham and one of the small team who helped establish *Earth and Fire* at Rufford. I was a founder member and Chair of the *Ceramic Art London* organising committee. At that time, I felt very conscious of the need for a fresh platform to celebrate the expanding range of contemporary ceramics. A highlight of that period was my year as guest editor of *Ceramic Review*. In November 2019, I will be leading the first *International Soda-firing Ceramics Festival* at Fuping in Shaanxi, China.

My work life (I refuse to call it a career) has for years been on a geographical downward slide. It started at the top of the map of the British Isles, I was born on the north coast of Northern Ireland, but have gradually slipped south via Kilkenny, Armagh and Herefordshire to Cornwall. I went to St Ives as the first lead potter and creative director at the refurbished Leach Pottery. I now live and work in Mousehole, Cornwall.

Over time, my making process has become simpler. Porcelain clay, copper, and a single firing with sodium bicarbonate are self-imposed limitations that have in many ways provided a wealth of colour and surface quality. I have found working with fewer ingredients is not restricting but means I have to use them more thoughtfully, finding new colours with layers of the same slip. Learning about the changes to the surface and colour that varying the kiln atmosphere or firing the kiln half a cone higher or lower will make.

Everything I make has a domestic context in one way or another. The pots I admire the most are pieces that have often been made for a specific and sometimes mundane purpose. However, through their connection with people and being made using a magical combination of materials, extraordinary skill and chance, they have become objects with emotional and spiritual value. For me, the truest form of ceramic art. 

For more details visit [dohertyporcelain.com](http://dohertyporcelain.com) International Soda-firing Ceramics Festival 2019, Fuping, Shaanxi, China, 26 October–26 November; [sdfiring.com](http://sdfiring.com)



# Making



**1** Porcelain is not difficult to use, providing you remember that its physical properties are different from any other type of clay. I've used the same porcelain clay for many years – 1149 HF porcelain from Potclays. I mix the new clay with an equal quantity of reclaim in a de-airing pugmill. I like to mix and store the clay for as long as possible, it is then wedged and kneaded to remove the air before use.



**2** For my larger forms the clay is prepared in amounts weighing roughly 10kgs. This is a comfortable quantity to knead thoroughly by hand and I often use these pieces in multiples. The first piece of clay is placed on a dampened wheel head and slapped firmly into place.



**3** When I add the next piece, I take care not to trap any air. I smooth the surfaces that will be joined with my fingers and squeeze the clay to form two convex shapes.



**4** The second and any subsequent pieces are added and joined using a rhythmic beating action with both hands slapping inwards and downwards. This begins to amalgamate the clay into a homogenous lump and is done while the wheel is rotating slowly.



**5** Centring starts when the clay feels smooth and close to the centre of the wheel. At this point you can feel how well the clay has been prepared and any unevenness in the consistency of the pieces will be apparent. I use the wheel running fast at this stage and apply pressure with my hands in as balanced a way as I can.



**6** For me, coning the clay is an important stage in throwing porcelain. It helps to remove any remaining unevenness left after joining the pieces and compresses the clay, which helps to prevent cracks forming during drying and firing.



**7** Returning the coned clay to a centred lump has to be done with firm but controlled downward pressure. I use my fist supported by the other hand, while the lower part of my arm, which is just touching the outer edge of the clay, helps to keep it centred.



**8** As I re-centre the clay it forms a mushroom shape. At this early stage I use my right hand on the top to press downwards and my left on the outside to stop the clay from folding over and trapping air.



**9** The first stage of opening the centred clay is done using my fist supported by the other hand. I try to make this opening movement as close to the centre as possible. During the throwing process the clay will be re-centred several times, so it helps to start in a controlled way.



**10** This rough shape is further hollowed and widened with my fingers, starting in the middle and working towards the outside. This pressing and stretching movement pulls the clay to one side, so I use my hands over the rim to keep it under control.





**11** Porcelain clays have their own extensive vocabulary of drying and firing cracks. To help avoid them I take every opportunity to compress and consolidate the clay, such as using a flexible rubber kidney, shown here, to press hard on the inside of the form as this part will have the thickest wall in the finished piece.



**12** The first pulling up movements involve moving quite large amounts of clay. Therefore, I use a damp sponge in one hand to help spread the pressure from my fingers and prevent heavy finger marks that make the wall of the form uneven.



**16** Thinking ahead is essential and I find it very helpful to plan the structure of the form and go through the stages of throwing. For this piece, I'm planning an extended rim, so I make sure that the top edge of the form is compressed and controlled. After each upward pull I use the sponge and my fingers to consolidate the rim.



**17** The wide rim is started by thinning the top section of the form and then bending this almost horizontally. It's a tricky operation as the clay is now very soft. Any clumsy pressure or movement will make the thinned edge collapse. Throughout this stage I support the rim with gentle finger pressure underneath.



**13** I continue to pull up the clay wall, stretching and thinning it towards the top. In order to stand up while they are wet, porcelain pieces of this size need to have more clay at the base so I take care not to thin this part of the pot too much.



**14** Porcelain clays absorb water easily and can become too soft very quickly, reaching a point where the form will slump. I try to use just enough water to keep the clay slippery while trying to avoid dry patches. Some potters like to throw with slip, I prefer water, finding that this turns to a thin slip very quickly on the porcelain surface.



**18** When it's dry, the surface of the form will be covered with porcelain slip. The slip is applied in a fairly uneven way, which creates a subtle texture. I like to start the slipping process with a smooth surface, so I use a plastic card on the outside and pressure from my hand on the inside to take away finger marks and excess slip.



**19** The final shape of the rim is angled downwards. Again, I use the plastic card to do this. Very light pressure is needed, with a slow wheel speed. If the form seems very soft I can return the pot to the wheel after a couple of hours and finish the rim when the clay has dried slightly.

**15** I continue to throw with the damp sponge on the outside for as long as I can. It keeps the outside just wet enough and allows me to apply a strong controlled pressure that helps draw up as much of the clay from the base as possible.



**20** The last shaping movement is always done from the inside. Moving from the base to the rim, I use either a rib or my fingers to gently stretch the clay and expand the inside space. Great thrown pots always seem to have been formed from the inside, the internal volume seeming to stretch the clay taut like a balloon.



See Jack at work on our video channel at [vimeo.com/ceramicreview](https://vimeo.com/ceramicreview)

**21** I have a number of tools and broken items that I use to make this last shaping mark or gesture. This has become a finishing, signing off action. It changes the shape of the pot in a subtle way, breaking the symmetry and making a focal point within the form.



**22** As I often return pieces to the wheel to work on at different stages – adding sections coils for example – I use a wheel head with studs and drilled batts. This method makes it easier to handle large heavy forms and put them back on the wheel on-centre.



**23** At this point the pot will dry for a short time still attached to the batt. When the clay is firm enough to hold its shape, I return the piece to the wheel and work on it 'the right way up' using a loop tool to cut away the excess clay from the base area. I enjoy this process, clarifying the shape, taking away the unnecessary clay and finding the form that I want. Later the pot is wired from the batt, turned upside down on the wheel and the base and foot ring are either turned or added from a thrown coil.

