A Crowning Achievement

by Martina Lantin

Large Blushing Crown Jar, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, earthenware, thrown and altered base, pinched lid and handbuilt knob, fired to cone 03, luster, fired to cone 018, 2010.

Detail of *Royal Blue Jar*, earthenware, thrown and altered base, pinched lid and handbuilt knob, fired to cone 03, luster, fired to cone 018, 2010.

Photos of finished pieces by Martina Lantin.

I look back in history for inspiration—largely to the era of burgeoning industry and consumer culture. The forms and decorative strategies of Wedgewood, Derby, and Staffordshire potteries inspire me to work toward a modern twist. I'm interested in the forms championed by industry and the fashion that they began to impart. Collectors of imported ceramics from China displayed these pots as an indication of their status and wealth. These two contexts—industry and ceramics as a display of status—guide my ideas. I explore functional forms that reflect industrial traditions, seeking to make work that may be, in some way, indicative of the eminence of the owner.

Although I began my career as a production potter, I've since left the world of intense repetition throwing and now use the wheel as a tool to create parts for composite forms, rather than as an end in itself. The wheel imparts a degree of fluidity to the thrown elements. Cutting, altering, and adding to the initial form highlights the making process and moves the thrown forms beyond a rigid symmetry.

I work in red earthenware, seduced by the rich quality of this smooth, dark clay body. In considering the forms I make, I also look ahead and imagine how the layer of white slip may enhance the surface created in the making process.

The Crown Jar

Crown was the ubiquitous brand in Canada for canning jars. As containers, my crown jars are equally capable of holding the collected bounty of a batch of cookies or the ideas and aspirations of its owner.

The crown jars evolved from the bases of flower bricks made to mimic the articulations of flower buds. Playing games in the studio with forms, words, and decoration often instigates new ideas, and much of my sketching occurs in three dimensions. The crown presented itself as a playful and logical solution for a knob while working on the jars in small scale. Made large, with elaborate crown knobs emphasized with luster, these jars recapture the collectors' zeal to display their wealth through the ceramic object.

Making the Form

This jar is composed of four parts: a thrown slab bottom, a thrown and altered wall, a pinch-formed lid, and a handbuilt knob.

Working from the bottom up, I begin by centering 1½ pounds of clay and pushing it down to form a flat disk that's between 3/8- and ½-inch thick. I compress the clay several times using a stiff rib, leaving the disk slightly thicker towards the center. **TIP:** Take a caliper measurement of the diameter of the disk as a reference for the diameter of the base. If in doubt, make your disk larger than the diameter of the jar.

Once cut off the wheel, I stretch this disk into an oblong slab for the bottom of the jar (*figure 1*). Grasping the disk between my fingers on one end, I drop the other end onto the wheel head, and tug on the disk to have it stretch. Alternating ends, I repeat the process to lengthen the slab evenly. If this technique is new to you, practice once the disk has started to dry. Score the edge of this slab in preparation for the wall.

Throw the wall of the jar as a bottomless ring (2½ pounds). Center the clay into a thick disk, and then use your fingers to open it up, pushing all the way down to the wheel-head. The first pull is angled inward. Next, the fingers of my left hand pull the clay toward me while the palm of my right lightly compresses the clay that moves upward as the piece is opened. When the desired diameter is reached, I compress the ring downward to ensure it is fixed to the wheel and centered. Extra clay is left at the bottom to help keep the wall fixed to the wheel-head.

The seat for the lid is established early rather than when the cylinder is at its fullest height to prevent any distortion of the wall by the pressure used to split the rim. I use my thumb and the middle finger of my left hand to stabilize the rim while pushing downward with my forefinger to split the rim in two. During each subsequent pull to gain the required height, the lid seat is further refined (*figure 2*). My aim is to have the lid sit quite low in the piece to have room to cut the points of the crown from the rim.

Throw a flat disk of clay 3/8 to ½-inch thick on the wheel, cut it off of the wheel and stretch into an oblong slab.

Throw a low, thick, open bottomed cylinder. Create a lid seat early in the process and refine it as you pull the wall up.

Process images by Lakshmi Luthra.

Use a small curved rib to put a small indent into the seat to hold the lid.

Lift the collar off the wheel, form it to fit the shape of the oblong base, and attach them together.

Use a rib to remove slip from the surface and give the wall a clean finish. The curve of a small rib helps in finishing the gallery for the lid (*figure 3*).

With the wheel rotating slowly, I draw the wire underneath the cylinder edge that's furthest away from me. Stopping my hands there, the movement of the wheel cuts off the bottomless pot. By not pulling the wire all the way through, I avoid misshaping this vulnerable piece. Depending on scale, I lift the piece off, shape it and attach it to the prepared disk (*figure 4*). The wall can also be thrown on a bat and attached to the base after it dries a little. To make sure the bottom is well attached, I turn the jar over once the rim is stiff, and compress the seam, also creating a footring in the process. The seam may be further reinforced with a coil on the inside.

Once the clay has lost some moisture so that it's soft but not tacky, I make marks to divide the base into equal parts (usually 6 or 8) to introduce the facets. Using a cut credit card as a rib (a favorite tool), I push in at the base and pull upward, supporting the facet on the inside with a finger (*figure 5*). I coax the articulation by pushing out with my fingers where the points will be, working my way around the pot (*figure 6*). To keep the edges crisp, I revisit the facets again with a rib as the base dries. The crown points are cut at this stage using a sharp knife (*figure 7*).

It can be challenging to make lids for oval or square forms. For the jars I was interested in exploring the contrast between the structured, thrown base and the soft pinched texture for the lid. Once the shape of the pot is established, I lay a coil in the lid seat (*figure 8*). Taking about a pound of clay, I pinch a low bowl that mimics the shape of the lid seat (*figure 9*). This 'dish' is then attached to the coil (*figure 10*). Occasionally I push the lid out from the inside to achieve a greater sense of volume.

The knob is a handbuilt miniature crown made from a combination of slab and pinched parts. Intended to mimic the shape of the jar itself—this secondary crown emphasizes the royal nature of the piece.

Deflocculated Slip

I slip my work when it is at a very stiff leather hard stage—dipping most pieces in one shot. The slip has been deflocculated to act thinner without additional water—making if perfect for application to drier forms. I start with a batch of slip that's the consistency of thick glaze. The deflocculant, Darvan 7, is diluted with water (1 part Darvan 7 to 4 parts water) and slowly added by the capful until the desired consistency is reached. For each of us, this consistency may be a process of trial and error. I'm looking for something akin to milk that trails from

Start at the base and pull upward using a sharp-edged rib. Support the wall on the inside with your other hand.

Accentuate each facet by pushing each point outward with your fingers.

Following the facet pattern, make the cuts for the crown points using a sharp knife.

After the pot is shaped, lay a coil on the lid seat. This forms the bottom of the lid and defines the lid shape.

Pinch a small, rounded bowl to fit into the seat.

Attach the coil to the pinched bowl.

Test the consistency of your slip. You want it to web between your fingers.

Pour white slip into the jar, then rotate it as you pour it out for a thorough coat.

Recipes

Gloss Transparent

Cone 015 enamel

Lithium Carbonate	19.5 %
Ferro Frit 3134	78.5
	100.0 %

This enamel is fired to cone 015 when used as an overglaze, but when used as a trailed line on bisque ware, I fire it to cone 03.

Opaque Gloss

Cone 015 enamel

Ferro Frit 3134	36.4 %
Pemco P-25 (Ferro Frit 3269)	55.6
EPK Kaolin	8.0
	100.0 %
Add: Tin Oxide	10.0 %

Colorants—stains or oxides. Do your own tests to develop your palette. Start with 2–10%

As with gloss enamel, fired to cone 015 and cone 03.

White Slip for Earthenware

Cone 06–02

Talc	15 %
Ferro Frit 3124	10
Nepheline Syenite	15
Ball Clay	40
EPK Kaolin	20
	100 %

Add 7.5% zircopax or titanium dioxide to warm and opacify if desired.

my fingers as I pull my hand from the bucket and ideally the slip webs between my fingers as I spread open my hand (*figure 11*). Deflocculated slip can be used on drier clay without the risk of over-saturating the piece or having the slip crack due to excessive shrinkage as the piece dries. This deflocculated slip flows smoothly making it ideal for both dipping or brushing. It thins over contours, facets and seams. If the consistency of slip and timing of application is perfect, I am able to achieve the appearance of a veil of white over the red clay.

I wax the lid seat of the jar to keep a crisp contrast between the slipped areas and the clay body. Slip is poured into the interior of the jar and poured out (*figure 12*), swiftly followed by dipping the jar, rim first, into the bucket to coat the outside. Once removed, I hold the piece inverted to encourage a directional flow to the slip.

Decorative Decisions

Each stage of the making process informs the subsequent steps. For example, I look to the throwing for insight on how to piece the form together. Once bisque fired to cone 05, the pieces are ready for additional color. Ideas for shapes and surfaces continue to evolve through the process of working and the absorption of images I collect. I am constantly playing with my palette—scouring the paint chips at the hardware store for new combinations. I hang on to experimental pots for a while, letting the greenware accumulate dust in the studio while the ideas take root in my production.

The jars are decorated in patterns inspired by circus tents and emphasizing the geometry of the facets and rim. I draw with a pencil on the bisqued piece to decide how to divide the form. This is then followed by an outline using a slip trailer filled with a cone 015 enamel glaze. My use of the enamels is limited to outlines and accents because the temperature differential between when it fluxes and the cone 03 glaze firing temperature may make it too fluid. Next, colored glazes are applied using fairly inexpensive mop brushes. If the glaze is a tinted version of my clear base glaze (Woody Hughes Base Glaze), I allow them to overlap. Otherwise, the glaze decoration is waxed over to prevent an unwelcome combination. Once dipped in clear glaze, the pieces are fired to cone 03 in an electric kiln. Luster is applied to accentuate elements of the crown jars and refired to cone 018. ■

Martina Lantin is a potter and professor living in Brattleboro, Vermont. To see more of her work, visit www.mlceramics.com or www.lantinceramics.blogspot.com