

# SCULPTING WITH *Flair* by Jo Taylor



My ceramic sculptures are created using a combination of wheel-thrown and handbuilt pieces that I developed over several years while studying for my master's degree at Bath Spa University, Bath, England. This period of study allowed me to take risks and make mistakes, there were many disasters along the way but I now feel confident combining these methods to make something unique.

## Inspiration

Inspiration comes from decorative architectural features such as ornate plaster ceilings, elaborate wrought iron, stone façades, and carved wood. I live near the Georgian city of Bath in England, and I'm influenced by the local architecture and country house interiors. I've also travelled around Europe and found inspiration in the extravagant palaces of Potsdam near Berlin, Germany, Gaudi's unique architecture in Barcelona, Spain, and

the villas and gardens of Rome and Florence, Italy. I enjoy how the ornate comes to life with light and shadow—there's a sense of organic growth frozen in time. I aim to capture this in my work, to show how soft the clay once was while suggesting energy and movement.

## Throwing

My background is that of a functional maker; however, I came to find the repetition stifling and now enjoy the freedom of not having to create identical forms. The first stage of building a sculpture is to complete the thrown parts, as these take the longest to reach the leather-hard stage. I use the wheel to make individual decorative pieces I would liken to drawing, or even doodling; it's less controlled and there's plenty of room for what I call a happy accident. I throw rings, which can be



1 Cut thin sections from the thrown and textured forms with a wire tool.



2 Gently lift off the cut section then place it on a board to firm up.



3 Someone gave me this tool, which was originally used for making butter curls!



4 This flexible rib with cut grooves is made from an old credit card.



5 Use a flexible, grooved rib (or notched credit card) to contour a thrown ring.



6 Use the shaped end of a sculptor's tool to create a continuous groove on the ring.



7 Cut a section from the ring with a wire tool held taut against the bat.



8 Make a small sized ring, then use a sculptor's tool to add detail.



9 Cut off the top of the ring as a complete round piece, and set aside to firm up.



10

Use a round ended sculptor's tool to create a ring with wider grooves.



11

The ring is cut, gently lifted off, and curved while being moved.



12

Use a sharp tool to create a criss-crossed surface of thin lines as the wheel spins.



13

Form pieces on a bisque-fired slab using small coils and damp fingers.



14

Once some of the water is absorbed from the clay, gently lift them off of the slab.



15

When the pieces are leather-hard and smoothed, they're ready for assembly.



16

The sculpture is assembled piece by piece, by selecting each piece and placing it first to see if it works visually.



17

Thoroughly score each surface before joining, the same way as you would join a handle to a mug or jug.



18

Each work is at least two sided, so all sides must have equal attention to ensure physical and visual balance.



Blue and white wall piece, 13 in. (33 cm) in height, handbuilt with wheel-thrown and mold-made pieces, 2014.



*Guardian of the Promenade i*, 63 in. (1.6 m) in height, handbuilt and wheel-thrown stoneware, 2014.



*Capricious*, 13½ in. (35 cm) tall, handbuilt with wheel-thrown and mold-made pieces, Audrey Blackman porcelain, 2014.

sliced to make arches—a strong form to build on both technically and aesthetically, and a reference to the same principle in architecture (*figures 1–2*). I vary the scale of the pieces—some pieces are larger and thicker to provide stability for the structure, others are smaller to carry movement around the piece. I use the speed of the wheel and various tools to create marks that suggest direction and energy in the finished work.

My favorite tools for mark making are an apple corer and an old credit card with arches cut in the edge. I also have a great kitchen tool used for making curls of butter (*figures 3–5*). For small marks I use a needle tool, sculpting tool (*figure 6*), or sometimes just my fingers. As I carve lines, I'm careful not to cut too deeply into the clay, so that the arches stay intact once they're cut free from the bat (*figure 7*). Small loops are thrown off the hump, carved (*figure 8*), then cut off and set aside to firm up (*figure 9*). Some thrown rings are left intact after being textured (*figure 10*) and are placed onto the bat either flat or curved into shapes (*figure 11*). Criss-cross patterns can be made by moving a thin tool from the center of the wheel head to the outer edge while the wheel is spinning (*figure 12*).

## Handbuilding

While the thrown pieces are firming to the leather-hard stage I continue with the handbuilt pieces. I form them on bisque molds, which have been fired to 1832°F (1000°C) so that they're still porous and absorbent. I press coils onto the mold, adding little pieces to make a motif, then use my hands and some water to make it appear more joined and fluid (*figure 13*). Some of the motifs directly reference inspirational forms from photographs or drawings, but quite often I follow the same process of drawing or doodling. As these pieces firm up, they can be removed and sometimes gently twisted to add extra movement (*figure 14*). Once all the pieces are leather hard they're smoothed and refined on all sides to eliminate any unwanted blemishes (*figure 15*).

## Construction

I build the pieces on a kiln shelf, so that the works can simply be placed in the kiln when dry to minimize breakage. The largest parts are used first to give stability to the structure and are joined with a standard score and slip process (*figures 16–17*). Sometimes the join is reinforced with a small coil of clay if extra strength is needed to support the structure.

The building process continues organically—there is no specific plan (*figure 18*). By joining and adding parts, the work slowly evolves until a decision is made to stop.

## Drying and Troubleshooting

Each piece is dried slowly as there will be shrinkage in different directions from using both wheel-thrown and handbuilt parts. To control the drying, I use thin sheets of dry-cleaner plastic. The plastic is draped over the work, which stops the thinner pieces at the top from drying too quickly and allows some air to get to the larger, thicker pieces at the base. The work is checked daily for cracks, and if any occur, often where a handbuilt part has been joined to a wheel-thrown part, they're gently corrected with a curved tool and a coil of clay if needed.

Once the work has dried it's once fired, slowly, to 2300°F (1260°C). The initial stages of the firing incorporate a drying cycle if the work is thick, to ensure all water is evaporated. I soak the kiln at 86°F, 140°F, and 194°F (30°, 60°, and 90°C) for at least an hour each, depending on the thickness of the piece. Then I raise the temperature to 1112°F (600°C) at 140°F (60°C) an hour, then up 212°F (100°C) an hour to the top temperature of 2300°F (1260°C).

*Jo Taylor is based in the United Kingdom and divides her working week between her ceramic practice and teaching. She developed her distinctive sculptural style while studying for her Master's degree at Bath Spa University. She graduated with distinction in 2012 and her unique sculptures have been exhibited extensively since then.*