INTERCONNECTED CRUETS & VASE SET

by Shana Salaff

At an intimate dinner party with family or friends, at the center of the table, a pair of cruets surround a small vase containing fresh flowers.

During the appetizer course, the cruets are passed around the table to gracefully pour olive oil and balsamic vinegar for each individual to create their own simple dipping sauce for warm bread. The cruets rejoin their vase at the center of the table, representing the diners' interconnectedness with each other and with the group. The act of mutually serving and sharing has brought people together.

I've been making cruets for as long as I can remember. A form that contains a complexity similar to that of a teapot, the cruet is less technically challenging because of its smaller stature. It doesn't need to hold a large amount of hot liquid and is easy to hold steady with one hand, thus easier to bring to balance. This gives me the leeway to be much more lighthearted in my design choices. While the weight of a teapot full of hot water requires a specific type of handle and spout to pour it out efficiently and lids must fit a certain way (there is pressure and steam to consider, etc.), I can create a cruet handle and spout free of these design limitations.

When I make cruet sets, I usually have three groupings in progress at once and work on one set at a time, keeping the rest well wrapped in plastic. After each step, I wrap the pieces in plastic and allow the moisture content to even out and the seams to set up before adding additional parts. I finish the same step of the process with the additional sets on the same day to maximize efficiency.

Thrown Components

Begin the construction of this grouping by throwing the basic forms, which are essentially convex cylinders. I use the same shape for the body of the cruets and the vase. Start out with a ¾-pound ball of clay for each piece. After opening and bellying out the cylinder, use a red Mudtools rib to smooth the sides as well as to create the decorative band at the bottom of each form.

Because there are quite a few components that need to match (height, width of both top, middle, and base, and location and size of the decorative band near the foot), small differences arise between forms. Rather than measure each of these points for each thrown piece, throw enough forms to seamlessly create groups of three. The two cruet bodies need to be very similar, while the vase in the middle can start with a form that's taller, narrower, or shorter than the other two as long as the decorative band near the bottom of all three line up (*figure 1*). While still quite wet, oval the rims of each cylinder with a finger pulling outward at either side.

Next, while the cruet bodies are setting up and losing their surface stickiness, create the other thrown elements of the set. The

Create two identical vessels for cruets and a similar central form for the vase. Make sure the banding height matches on all three feet.

Throw a curved bottomless cylinder and cut it in half to create the domed top for each cruet.

Mark the attachment point for the dome, then score, apply slip, and attach the two.

Cut a section from a short thrown ring to create the rim of each cruet, place it on the body, cut it to size, and attach.

Cut rim sections to fit onto the oval vase body. Cut the ends of each section at angles to create a strong seam.

Make a handle by stacking and joining two sections of a cut ring, attach it to the rim of the vase and clean up using a wooden tool.

domed top for each cruet is made from one additional thrown convex cylinder, using just under ¾ pound clay, which is cut in half lengthwise (*figure 2*). Make a number of different short, wide, rings that will be cut up into parts later for the rims of the cruets and vases. These rings start as a small ball of clay that is opened all the way to the bat and then gradually widened out toward the edge of the bat. A ½-pound ball of clay will open out to the width of a 14-inch bat. It can be fun to vary the profile shape of these rings so that the vases for each set will be different. Rather than using a cutting wire, use a thin, sharp Dolan knife to cut the cylinder off the bat without distorting it. Leave it on the bat until it can be transferred without leaving fingerprints.

Now that all of the parts are made, it's time to group and separate them into sets of three bases with the additional bisected cylinder. Keep the low, wide rings together on a bat, covered in plastic until needed.

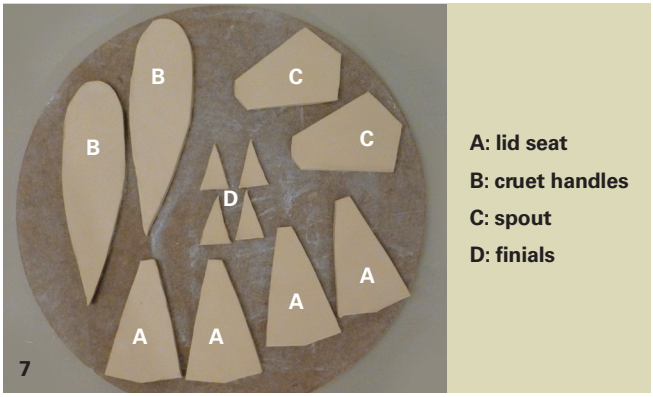
Assembling the Thrown Elements: Cruets

Once the thrown forms are set up to a soft leather hard, it's time to combine them. Position the half-cylinder at an angle across the side of one of the cruet bases. Mark along the edges with a needle tool (*figure 3*). Score and apply slip to the areas that will overlap. Attach the forms, using firm pressure both inside and outside. Move your hands in one direction so as to not create a hidden air pocket. Add small coils to reinforce the corner and inside seams. Repeat with the second cruet, creating a visual match. Let the form set up.

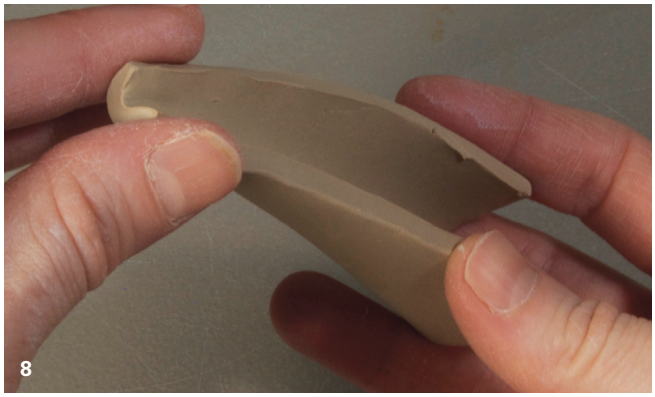
Next, cut the strip that forms the back rim of the cruets from one of your short cylinders. Place it on the cruet, then cut it to size (*figure 4*). Score and slip the edges, and attach. Run a small coil over the seam, then blend it in. Use wooden ribs and a sponge to refine the seams. Cover the two cruets with plastic and let them set up.

Assembling the Thrown Elements: Vase

The vase starts with the same base as the cruet. Cut a length of one of your short cylinders. Curve and cut it to fit on top of the vase base to make it taller, to change the direction of the body's curve, and to create a rim. Cut the ends at angles to maximize the surface area on the seam (*figure* 5). Score and slip to attach, reinforcing with small interior coils. Let set up and smooth out the seams once the piece is drier. For the basket-like handle, cut two shorter lengths of a curvier short cylinder to an equal length and curve them into semicircles. Score and apply slip to the edges, and stack these together to create a double handle. After they have set up, roll a neat, thin coil and reinforce the inside seam. Use your finger to create an evenly curved interior. Let it set up again. Cut this to fit evenly over the top of the vase. Score, apply slip, and attach, then reinforce the interior seam with a coil. Once the seam sets up a bit, clean up and add definition to the joints using a wooden



Cut one complete set of parts from a slab for handbuilt elements, including the lid seats or collars for the cruets (A), the handles (B), spouts (C), and the finials for all three forms (D).



Gently curve each of the four long slabs for the lid seat (A in figure 7) into a cone shape, then score the edges, add slip, and press them together.

Compress the seams with a wet finger, then curve the four lid seat elements to make two sets, one for each cruet. The two pieces in a set should curve in opposite directions.

Form both handles (B in figure 7) into cones, score, slip, and press the seams together, then compress them with a wet finger. Gently curve the hollow forms into semicircles.

rib (*figure* 6). Put the vase with the cruets under plastic until the handbuilt elements are ready to be added.

Making the Handbuilt Elements

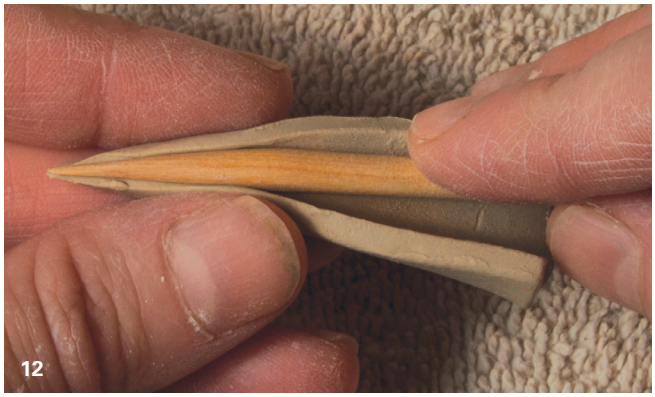
The other parts that you will need are all handbuilt from thin slabs (⅛-inch maximum). Because they are so thin, these parts don't stay soft for more than a day or two, even under plastic. Using a freshly rolled slab, cut the edges of all the elements first, but don't separate them from their slab until you are ready to work with them. That way, the edges stay damp enough to be workable. After cutting one complete set from paper templates (*figure 7*), form the pieces one at a time and keep the rest covered with thin plastic. With the exception of the spouts, all of these will be made into hollow forms with trapped air inside.

I start with the four pieces that will be the seat for the lid. These are the four pieces labeled A in figure 7. Gently curve each into a cone-like shape (*figure 8*). Score and slip the edges, press them together gently, and compress with a wet fingertip then a rib. Lastly, curve each gently, two to the left, and two to the right (*figure 9*).

The hollow handles and the spouts are next. Forming the handles (labeled B in figure 7) requires the gentlest touch. To avoid cracking, curl the edges around toward each other in a series of passes rather than simply folding from the bottom to bring them together. Attach and reinforce the edges, then smooth them into a tube-like shape. Next, gently, and with the seam on the top, round the entire handle into a semicircle (*figure 10*). The slower you go with this, the more even the roundness will be. The bottom spiral is created about halfway through this process, (when the air pressure is enough to add a small amount of volume, but not built up so much that making it distorts the rest of the form or pops the seams). If seams do pop open while being worked on, simply re-close with a damp finger. In order for the spiral to hold, first brush a small amount of joining slip along the point. Curl the spiral starting from the tip (*figure 11*). Finish creating the handle curve. Once the handle is made, brush a few thin coats of the joining slip around the spiral to keep it stuck together without uncurling and cracking.

The spout (labeled C in figure 7) begins with the thinning of the smaller edge using a scrap of newspaper. Repeat on both sides until the edge is almost sharp. Using newspaper keeps the clay smooth and gives a sharper, cleaner edge than a rib. Thinning the edge like this prior to rolling the slab into a tube means less cutting and finishing of this edge later. Bring the long edges together to create an open tube. Make sure that the bottom is a round shape and not an oval, then create a gentle curve, again with the seam at

Dampen your fingers and the pointed end of the handle, then slowly curl the end around into a spiral. This adds an extra decorative element to the handle that echoes the finials added later.



Curve the four finial slabs (labeled D in figure 7) around the end of a pointed wooden tool, then score, add slip, and join the seams. Close the short end seam as well.

Score, add slip, and attach the two lid seat elements around the opening on each cruet, placed so they face in opposite directions.

Form the spout (labeled B in figure 7) into a cone, attach the seams, score the end, cut a hole in the dome and attach.

Press a soft oval slab into the opening on each cruet to create the bottom of each lid.

the top. Reinforce the seam at the tip with a tiny coil that is worked in with a small tool. Do the same with the bottom seam.

The last components to make are the finials for the vase (labeled D in figure 7). I also sometimes use the remaining small cut pieces from the narrow circular bands as decorative elements (as in figure 20). Curve two of the smallest triangle pieces in half so that they are rounded lengthwise, using a pointed wooden tool (*figure 12*). Attach the two sides together, trapping the air inside. Compress the edges the way you did the spout. Curve the spiral slowly and carefully, then curve the bottom edge slightly, in the opposite direction of the spiral. Now that all the handbuilt components are created, let them set up until they're firm enough to hold their shape.

Putting It All Together

Once the pieces are ready, attach the collar elements, starting by attaching a pair to one cruet first (*figure 13*) and then creating a mirror image with the second. Score and slip well and attach, being careful not to crush the delicate hollow forms. Reinforce with coils on the interiors and where the two connect. While these are setting up, position the spout, then, prior to attaching, use a hole maker or knife to cut out a hole roughly ⅜–½ inch in diameter in the center of where the spout will be, which should be at the seam line between the domed top and the vertical side of the form. Score around the hole and on the end of the spout, apply slip, and attach (*figure 14*). Put a reinforcing coil around the spout, but don't work it in until the spout has set up. These reinforcing coils don't need to be slipped and scored into place as long as they are attached while the seam is fresh and plenty of joining slip has oozed from the seams.

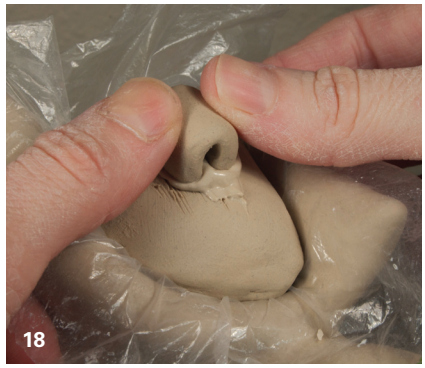
Next, create the two cruet lids using two small, thin, oval-shaped slabs. Slump this down into the opening in the collar, first making sure that the bottom of the slab extends downward at least a bit below the collar (*figure 15*). Moving in a circular direction, fold over the extra edges on top to create a fairly flat surface with even edges and a hole in the center (see image 16). Take care not to push the newly created lid further down into the neck of the cruet. Leave it in place to set up while working on the handle.

Next, attach the cruet handles. Score, apply slip, and use firm pressure to connect both top and bottom, and prop each handle into place using a lump of clay. Run coils around both top and bottom seams (*figure 16*). Let the pieces set up under plastic.

When they have stiffened, take the lids out of the cruets and place them upside down on a small slab. Cut out ovals ¼ inch wider than each part. In order to make these more similar, lay the

Fold the tops of the slabs over, leaving a hole, then attach the handle and reinforce the joint with a coil.

Cut two oval shapes for the top of each lid, then form into a shallow dome prior to attaching to the shaped lid bottoms.



Lay a thin sheet of plastic between the lid and body, then curl a small slab of clay into a semicircle to create the handle.

Add the finials to the vase, and reinforce the joints with small soft coils of clay.

A finished cruet and vase set that has a shorter central handle on the vase, and finials attached to make crescent shapes and added horizontally to the rim of the vase.

two cut parts on top of each other, and cut away the differences so that you have two pieces that are the same size and shape. This way, even though the bottom part of the lids will be different from each other, the visible parts will mirror each other on the two cruets.

Manipulate each piece into a small dome (*figure 17*). Score and slip the edges as well as the edges of the slumped bottom portion. After centering them, attach the long sides first, then the two short sides. You now have two small, hollow, puffy lids that are weighted to the bottom. Put a small piece of plastic on the collar opening, and then reinsert the lids into their seat for further setting up.

Create the knobs for the lids. Use two small extra pieces from your short cylinder. Make sure that these are still soft. Curl the piece around a small wooden tool to form a small tube. Attach these to the lids and press down gently but firmly, making sure you have some thick slip oozing out all around (*figure 18*). Once set, use a wooden tool and small paintbrush to compress and clean up the attachments.

Use a wooden rib to compress and define the seams that have already set up. Attach the two small spiral finials to the vase, and reinforce with a small coil all the way around the seams (*figure 19*).

Final Cleanup and Drying

Use wooden ribs to create clean and reinforced seams. Brush a few thin coats of slip over the top of the spiral on the handle to keep it from drying too quickly. Thin the tip of the spout using a sharp X-Acto knife, and clean it out with a brush. The secret to spouts that don't drip is to make the pouring edge of the tip sharp enough to literally cut the liquid before it drips. Use a soft sponge for final cleanup of all the pieces.

The last step is to create air holes for all the hollow components. Do this at the very end, as any holes made earlier will probably lose their shape or be closed by the making and sponging process.

Keep the plastic in place underneath the lids. Allow the set to dry as slowly as possible with lids in place. When dry, use a scrubby pad to remove any sharp parts and then bisque fire and glaze.

Conclusion

With my cruet and vase sets (*figure 20*), I'm trying to push the visual aspect of artistic ceramic vessels while also incorporating the theme of togetherness. Pottery often gets put away in a cupboard in-between uses. A visually exciting grouping of forms, the cruets and vase can hold their own as objects worth looking at over and over, an incentive to the owner not to stash them away, out of sight.

Shana Salaff lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she teaches at Front Range Community College in Fort Collins, and Aims Community College in Greeley, Colorado. She studied at the School of Craft and Design at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After working as a studio potter for seven years, she returned to school and earned an MFA in ceramics from California State University, Fullerton. To see more of her work, visit www.shanasalaff.com.