



Building with soft slabs and accentuating seams gives this body of work by Margaret Bohls a fabric or pillow-like feel and a casual elegance.

Soft Slab Teapot

by Margaret Bohls

Process is a primary source of inspiration for me. A sense of inventive play while folding, cutting, and assembling clay slabs provides a stream of new information with which to work. My soft slab work is made simply and assembled relatively quickly, giving it a soft, casual simplicity. For me, each pot is like a three-dimensional gesture drawing. Each form is defined by the edges of the slabs from which it was created. These edges or lines create a drawing in space that defines each form. When making each piece, I'm conscious of the quality of each of these lines defined by its weight and direction. The form language is simple, and soft, satin and matte glazes allow one to see and feel the quiet nuances of shape and shadow.

Prepping the Slabs

I use porcelain slabs rolled out using a slab roller. Rather than canvas, I use SlabMat (www.slabmat.com), a dense smooth paper that doesn't leave a texture. I sandwich my

clay between two pieces cut to fit my slab roller, one for above and one for below the clay.

After rolling the slabs and compressing them with a large plastic rib to align the clay particles, I allow most of them to stiffen slightly, flipping them occasionally, until they are about halfway between wet and leather hard. I save one wet slab for making the handle and spout. The slabs range from about $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch—thicker for the main volume and thinner for the spout and handle.

Building the Teapot Body

Begin by creating the main body of the pot, which consists of a dented cylinder and a bottom slab. First, cut a rectangular shape from the thicker slab. The length of the rectangle will be the circumference of the body; the width will be the height. Since the edges of the slabs are an important visual element of the finished piece, carefully smooth and compress each edge with your finger, thinning it slightly and softening it.

Rather than beveling edges, use the small end of a pony roller to further thin the edges to be joined. They will overlap so that the edge of the slab will remain visible. Score and slip the edges to be joined and assemble the cylinder, carefully pressing the edges together first with your finger from the outside, and then with a small curved rib on the inside of the seam. To create a sense of volume and to soften the silhouette of the shape, roll the bottom edge of the cylinder on the tabletop (*figure 1*), pushing the bottom edge in and under, and then gently drop or tap the form onto the table once or twice, making it slouch a little.

To close the top, cut four darts (*figure 2*). Rather than measuring, simply cut out one dart and use it as a pattern for the other three. The depth and width of the darts can vary; however, the resulting opening should be roughly the size needed for the neck of the pot. The edges of these darts are also thinned and smoothed, then scored and slipped, overlapped and pressed together (*figure 3*).

Cut the bottom from a slab that is just a little thicker than the slab used for the walls. Loosely trace the bottom, cutting a soft rectangular shape to wrap up over the bottom of the cylinder, softening and thinning the edges as with the first slab. Wait a bit to join these two parts.

Creating the Spout

The pattern for the spout resembles a whale tail (*figure 4*). This shape creates a spout that has a bulb at the bottom and a soft outward curve. The spout is cut from a fresh, soft slab, thinner than that used for the main cylinder. Once the spout is cut out, thin the narrow end of it further using a pony roller, so that the slab is thicker where it will attach to the body of the pot and thinner where the liquid will pour out.

Thin and smooth the edges, score and slip them, then gently curve the spout into a cylinder (*figure 5*) and tack together the larger end. Hold the spout upside down and run your thumb down the inside along the length of it. This helps to emphasize the outward curve of the finished spout.

Set the spout down on the table and gently overlap and join the edges, starting at the bottom and working your way up to the top. Use your thumb again to push out the bottom end of the spout from the inside, making it fuller and more bulbous. Using your fingers, pinch the bottom edge inward, and then gently tap the bottom of the spout on the table as you did with the main volume, making it soften and slouch slightly.

Rolling a Slab Handle

Make the handle from a rolled up slab that's then flattened on one side. Begin with a very soft slab cut into a trapezoid (*figure 6*). Thin and soften the edges. Be careful to rib the outer surface well to help prevent cracking. Coat the inside surface with a thin layer of slip and fold the very edge over with your fingertips making sure not to trap air, then roll it up the rest of the way using the flats of your fingers in one smooth motion. Once you have this round roll, flatten it on one side and stretch it out by slapping it on the table (*figure 7*), pulling it toward yourself as it comes down, in the way one would stretch a slab. Bevel the wide end and cut the handle to the appropriate length. Bend the handle into shape and set it aside (*figure 8*).

Making the Neck and Lid

The lid of this teapot is a *cap* type lid that sits down over a neck that projects up from the mouth of the teapot body. This is a very snug lid, since you can make the neck and the flange of the lid at the same time. To ensure that the lid fits well, keep the two parts together as much as possible throughout the drying and firing process.

For aesthetic reasons, the neck is made similarly to the handle. Cut a long soft rectangle of clay, soften the edges, rib the outer surface, and slip the inner surface. The strip is rolled up lengthways and flattened. This time, hold both ends of the piece while you slap it onto the table. This ensures that the piece remains consistently thick rather than becoming tapered. Curve this flattened strip into a ring that's the same size, or slightly larger than the opening at the top of the teapot body. Then bevel the ends of the strip and score and slip them together.

Cut the flange of the lid from a slightly stiffer slab. When made into a ring, the flange should be slightly

taller than the neck of the pot. Smooth the bottom edge and wrap the flange strip around the neck ring. The two should fit snugly together. **Note:** Make the inner ring from slightly softer clay, so it shrinks a little more than the outer ring. The ends of the flange strip are thinned and softened, scored and slipped together. Make sure that the two rings still fit together.

Finally, make the top of the lid from four overlapping triangles. This creates a visual continuity between the darted shoulder of the teapot and the lid that sits on top of it. To make the four triangles, first cut a rounded rectangle of clay, slightly



Espresso pot with cups, XX in. (XX cm) in height (teapot), porcelain, flat matte black glaze.

the process



1

Roll the bottom edge of the cylinder on the table top to create volume.



2

Cut darts out of the cylinder to close in the top.



3

Join the dart seams by slipping, scoring, and overlapping.



4

The template used to make the spout, shown with a finished spout.



5

Cut the shape from a slab, address the edges, then join the spout's seam.



6

Cut a tapered slab for the handle and smooth the surface with a rib.



7

Flatten one side of the handle and stretch it out as you would thin a slab.



8

Bend the handle into shape after bevelling the wide end.



9

Cut a rounded rectangle for the lid (shown here under the rim and flange rings).

the recipes

These pots are fired in an electric kiln to cone 10.

PORCELAIN CLAY BODY

Cone 10

Grolleg	26 %
Tile 6	26
F-4 Feldspar	21
Silica	16
Pyrotrol	11
Total	100 %

Add:

Bentonite	2 %
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WHITE SATIN MATTE

Cone 10

Custer Feldspar	43 %
Gertsley Borate	12
Dolomite	7
Talc	14
Kaolin	5
Silica	19
Total	100 %

FLAT MATTE BLACK

Cone 10

Cornwall Stone	42 %
Dolomite	15
Whiting	10
EPK Kaolin	23
Silica	10
Total	100 %

Add:

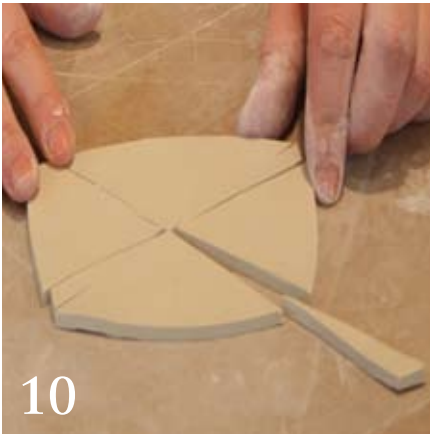
Yellow Ochre	6 %
Cobalt Carbonate	2 %
Chrome Oxide	1 %

ST. JOHN'S BLACK (SHINY)

Cone 10

Alberta Slip Clay	80 %
Nepheline Syenite	20
Total	100 %

Add: Cobalt Oxide 4 %



10 Cut the rectangle diagonally into two X patterns to create even darts.



11 Assemble the top of the lid by overlapping the four triangles.



12 Make a print with slip on the slab for the bottom of the pot.



13 Attach the handle to the opposite side. Add a coil if needed.



14 Compress the seam on the lid. Add a coil if necessary.



15 Trim the spout, creating a sharp edge to prevent drips.

larger than the flange you have already made (*figure 9*). Cut the rectangle from corner to corner in an X, making four triangles. Then turn the rectangle slightly and cut a second X, removing the clay between each triangle (*figure 10*).

Smooth and thin the edges of the triangles, then score and slip them together, with each triangle slightly overlapping the one before it (*figure 11*). Once those seams have been allowed to cure a little, dome the top of the lid slightly by pushing out from the inside with your fingers or a small, curved plastic rib.

Assembling

Teapot body. Now that all of the separate parts have been made, they're ready to be assembled. It's best if all of the parts are at a soft leather hard stage. **Note:** Especially when using porcelain, avoid joining soft clay to stiff clay.

Begin by attaching the bottom slab to the cylinder. Score and slip the bottom edge of the darted cylinder to make a *print* on the bottom slab (*figure 12*). This mark tells you where to score, and helps to avoid creating superfluous score marks.

Score the slab just on the "printed" slip ring, then apply slip. Press the darted cylinder firmly onto the slab. Lifting the piece in one hand, use the thumb of your other hand to press and smooth the edge of the slab up over the bottom edge of the cylinder. The edge of the bottom slab is stretched and thinned slightly in this process. Go over this seam with a damp sponge to ensure that it's truly joined all the way around. Use your fingers or a damp sponge to press the seam together on the inside of the pot as well.

To add the neck, first trim a small amount off the edge of the top opening and score and slip that flat edge and the bottom of the neck-ring. The two are pushed firmly together and the seam is smoothed slightly on the outside using a sponge. Join the seam more thoroughly on the inside using a round wooden tool to smooth around the inside of the joint.

Spout and handle. First score and slip the bottom edge of the spout and press it against the pot to make a print. Cut a hole just inside the "printed" slip ring. Smooth and thin the edge of the hole, score and slip, and press the spout around the hole. Now score and slip the handle onto the other side of the pot (*figure 13*). To score

critical areas like the handle joint, I use a scoring tool that creates deeper scoring than the serrated rib.

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Lid. To join the two parts of the lid, first place the flange ring over the neck ring, already joined to the pot. Dust the surface of the neck ring with corn starch first so that the two parts do not stick together. The top edge of the flange ring should stick up higher than the neck. Slightly bevel the outer edge at the same time so that it is flush with the slanting angle of the inside of the lid. Score and slip the inside top of the

lid and press it down onto the flange. Lift the entire lid off of the pot. This process helps to ensure that the flange does not warp and the lid fits snugly.

Compress the seams of the lid inside and out using a round wooden tool (*figure 14*), then clean them up. Thin, smooth, and shape the edges of the lid. Sometimes it's necessary to smooth a soft, thin coil into the joint between the flange and the top of the lid on the inside. After dusting both the neck of the pot and the inside of the lid with corn starch, place the lid back onto the pot and gently re-shape it to exactly fit the neck.

Finishing Touches

As a handle for the lid, make another tiny, rolled, flattened slab, then bend and attach it to the peak of the lid.

For the spout to pour well, it needs to have a sharp edge. Once the end of the spout is quite hard, but not yet bone dry, trim off the very end of the spout at an appropriate length and angle. Use a sponge to smooth and soften the outside of the spout tip, then ream out the inside of it with a very sharp knife, being sure to leave a sharp interior edge, which will help prevent drips (*figure 15*).

Wrap the finished pot in plastic and allow it to sit overnight before allowing it to dry completely. Lift the lid once or twice during the drying process to make certain it isn't sticking. ■

Margaret Bohls is a studio potter and educator living and working in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She has been teaching ceramics at the University of Minnesota since 1998, during which time she has also been visiting faculty at Ohio University, Penn State University, and NSCAD University in Halifax. Bohls has also taught many community classes and workshops at art centers and universities across the country. In her studio, Margaret makes hand-built porcelain pottery, which she shows and sells both locally and nationally. See more of her work on her website www.margaretbohls.com.