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Clay Play Totem Poles

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Task:

Build a small ceramic totem pole whilst learning about different clay building and decoration techniques including pinch pot method, coil building and slab construction. Build three to five small sections so they will fit stacked around a dowel rod that can be displayed in a plant pot in your home.

Visit the exhibition at the Devonport Regional Gallery for inspiration:

An Unexpected River
Travis Bell
Little Gallery Emerging Artist Program
3 July - 7 August 2021
Little Gallery

YOU Will Need

-Portion of clay
-Clay modelling tools such as skewer stick, wooden spoon, etc.
-Rolling pin (optional)
-Old toothbrush
-Dowel rod
-Cutting knife/ Sharp knife
-Acrylic paint

Examples and inspiration

Stick to a theme for your totem pole so it looks cohesive when stacked together. This might mean sicking to a colour palette when decorating or designing the sections around a subject or theme.

Notice how these totem poles have some simple spacer sections between the more figurative shapes… this helps your pieces stack together

Eric Croes, *Totem, Giant Right Leg,* 2019. 215 x 45 x 45 cm. Glazed ceramic, steel and cement

Examples and Inspiration

Kaye Murphy

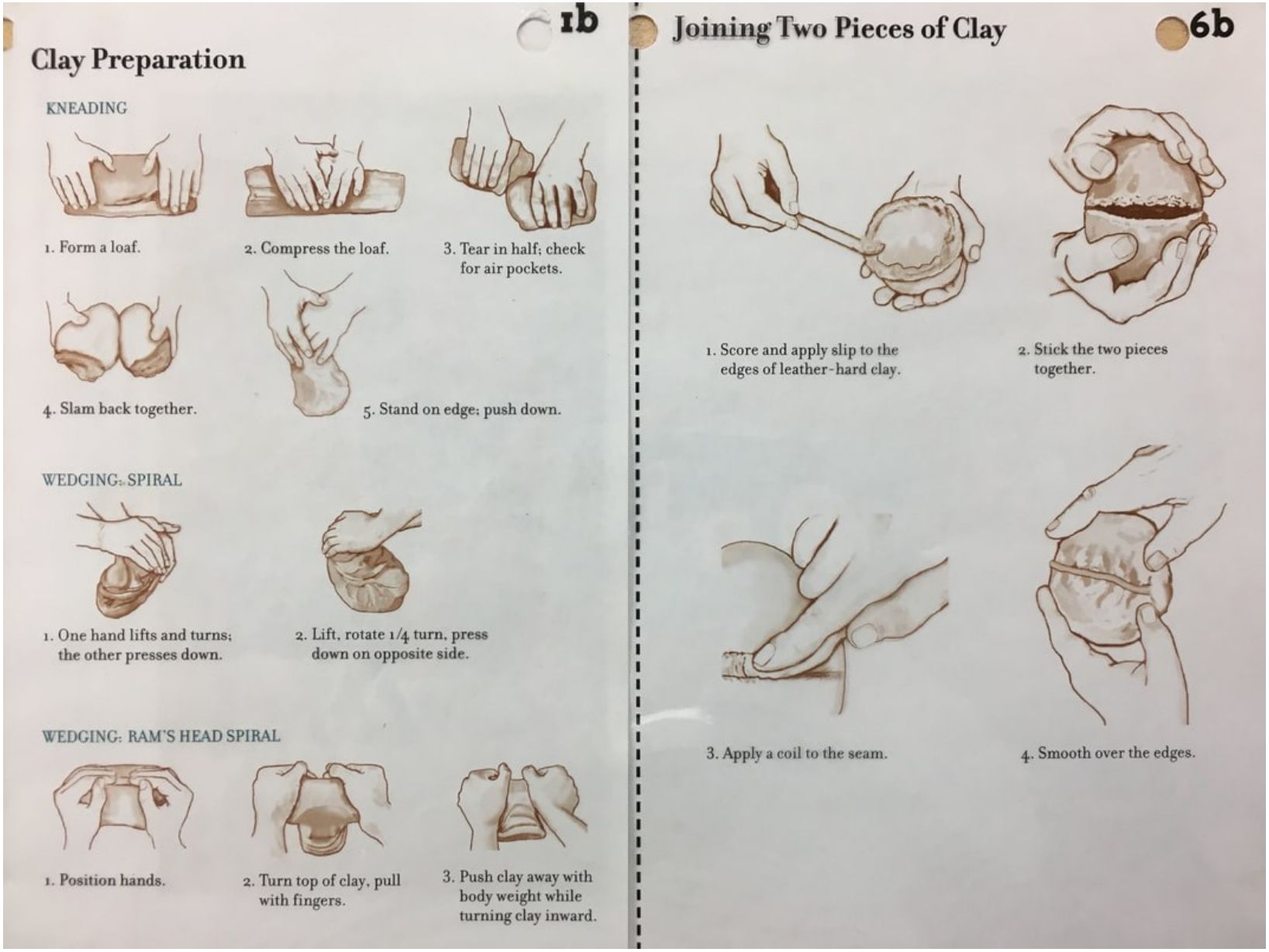
It may help you to think of the separate sections like beads. Construct each bead so they can be stacked together on the dowel rod to form a small scale totem pole. It helps to have some of the sections as simple spacer sections as seen in these totem poles.

** Remember: If you want to get your work fired to make it stronger, thickness of your clay should be no more than about an inch thick. Construct your sections so that they are hollow, but make sure the air can escape! If you are not going to fire your work, thickness is not an issue and can actually help with strength.*

STEP 1:

Preparation.

If you would like to get your clay fired make sure you wedge it first. Wedging is like kneading and it gets all the microbes blended together and helps to get out any trapped air bubbles that can make it blow up in the kiln!



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Clay Preparation

KNEADING

1. Form a loaf.
2. Compress the loaf.
3. Tear in half; check for air pockets.
4. Slam back together.
5. Stand on edge; push down.

WEDGING: SPIRAL

1. One hand lifts and turns; the other presses down.
2. Lift, rotate 1/4 turn, press down on opposite side.

WEDGING: RAM'S HEAD SPIRAL

1. Position hands.
2. Turn top of clay, pull with fingers.
3. Push clay away with body weight while turning clay inward.

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Joining Two Pieces of Clay

1. Score and apply slip to the edges of leather-hard clay.
2. Stick the two pieces together.
3. Apply a coil to the seam.
4. Smooth over the edges.

For a video tutorial on how to properly wedge your clay there is a good tutorial **here.**

STEP 2:

<u>Dowel Preparation.</u>

Use a sharp blade such as a Stanley knife to carefully sharpen one end of your dowel road into a point. This will help to stake it into the ground/ soil. Remember to cut away from yourself when doing this. If unsure, ask an adult to help.

STEP 3:

<u>Making the totem sections</u>

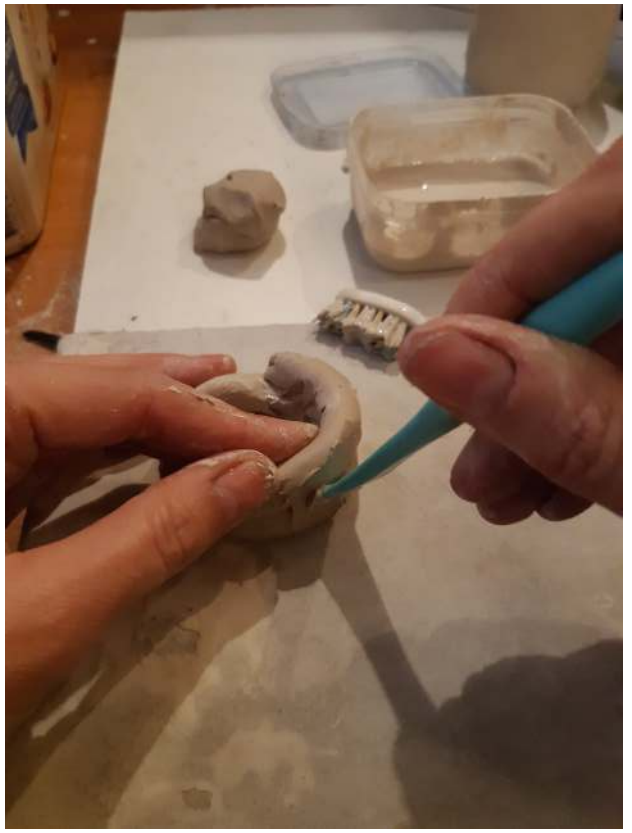
After you have wedged your clay as needed, make your first section. The following pages describe different methods for clay construction. You can choose one or incorporate all methods into your build.

**Remember: the piece of dowel provided in art packs is quite short which means the totem pole is only going to be small scale. Each section will only need to be small. When stacked on the dowel together there should be some length left in the dowel to spike into soil (unless you make a sturdy base for it to stand). It's a good idea to keep checking as you go.*

Pinch Pot Method

The pinch pot method simply requires using your hands and fingers to pinch and manipulate the clay in your hands into the desired shape. Use a pinching action between your thumb and fingers to create pots such as bowl shapes and cylinders. This method is good for constructing smaller scale pieces such as the sections for your totem pole.

Coil Building Method

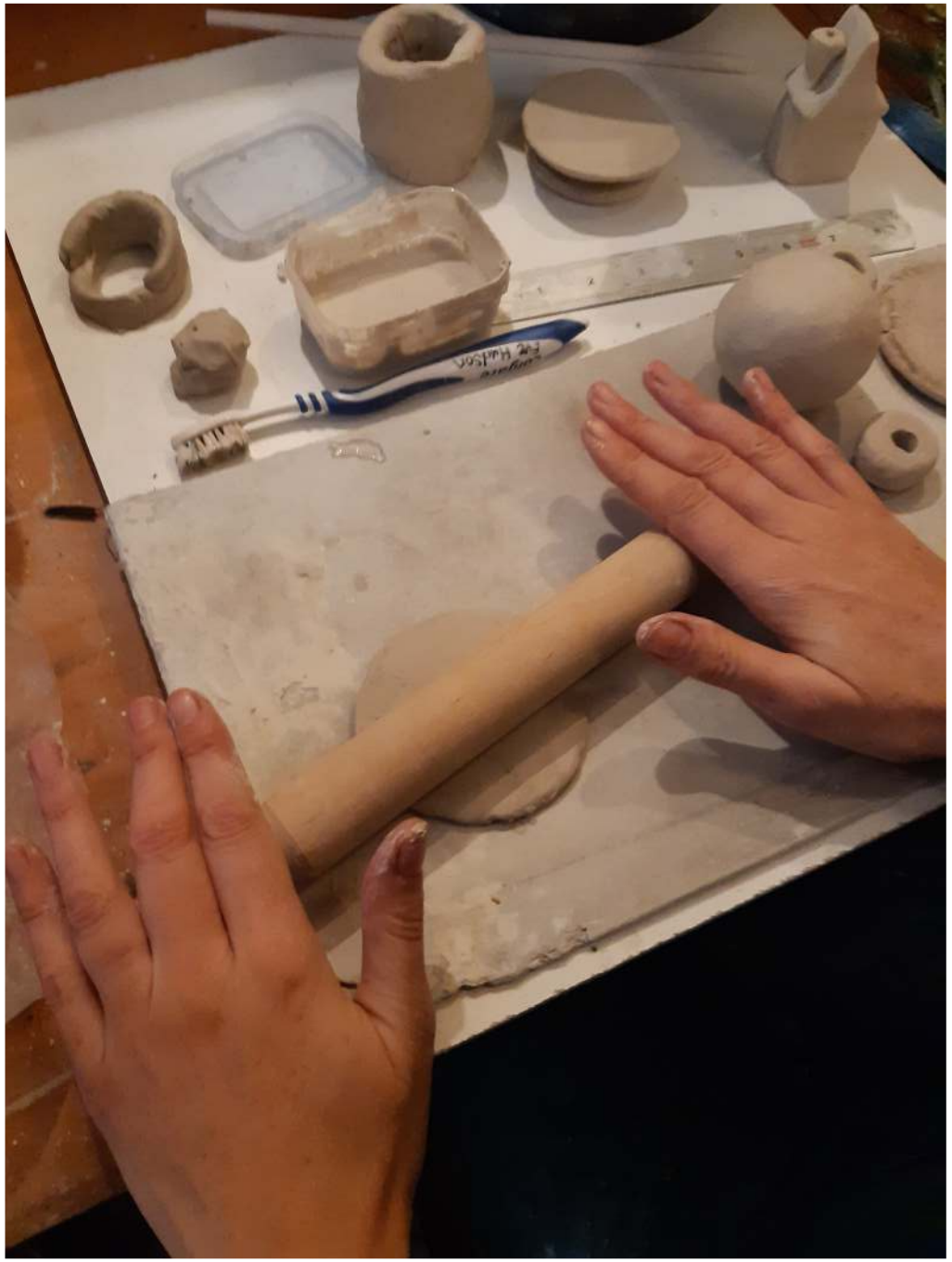


Coil building requires rolling out individual coils of clay that are then joined one on top of the other to build up your piece. This method is usually used for larger scale pieces or long shapes that you cannot build using the pinch pot method. It is good for constructing long coil shapes.

**Remember to use the score and slip method (see page 12 & video page15) when joining each coil. Use a tool or your fingers to smooth seams inside and outside to add strength.*

slab construction

Slab construction requires rolling out slabs of clay, waiting for them to become leather hard (a stiffer consistency to work with) then cutting out shapes and joining them together using the score and slip method of joining (mentioned previously). This method is good for making box shapes and for creating flat shapes. Rolling in texture can also be effective for decoration.

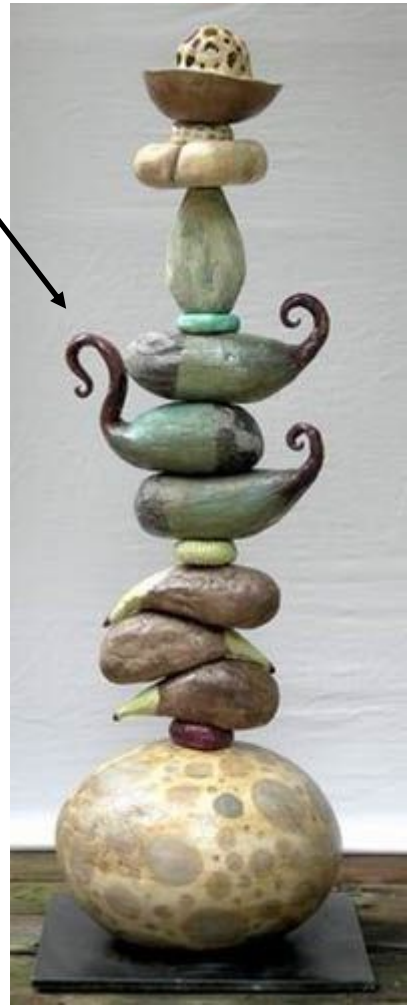


Joining Technique

To join two pieces of clay together the clay will need to be still in its wet state. In a small container mix together a little water and some clay. You can dry out some small bits of clay beforehand to make it easier to mix together. Mix until it forms a thick paste. This is called slip. The slip is used like a glue when joining pieces together. Use an old toothbrush or rough surface to score/ rough up each surface of the clay in the area to be joined. Use some of the slip and press together slightly wriggling together until it grips. You can then leave to dry or smooth the seam using your fingers or a tool.

STEP 4:

Avoid thin parts like this if you are not going to get your pieces fired.



Once you have constructed the basic shapes for your totem pole you can add textures, scribe or carve into the clay, build up patterns on the surface by adding small amounts of clay to create pictures and pattern (don't forget to use slip: see joining technique). If carving into your clay it's best to leave it until it is at the leather hard stage. This could take a day or two. It should be dried enough to be like leather to the touch and like soap to carve into.

**Remember: If you are not going to get your clay fired it will be very fragile when dry. For this reason it is best not to add thin parts that stick out as they can easily break off.*

Also, unfired clay will break down when wet. Once dried and thoroughly painted/ varnished, it will help protect it from water.

You can carve into and add some surface textures and patterns to create decoration and form on your pieces.

Add surface Decoration

Clay can be carved into when dried to a “leather-hard” state. This is the stage where clay is still damp and feels cold to the touch, but is no longer sticky, as modulable and is more like leather or soap when carved into.

STEP 5:

Once you have finished constructing all of your clay sections, make sure they can be stacked together around your dowel. At this stage you can construct a stand out of any left over clay if you don't want to put it in a pot plant.

**please note, if you plan to get your sections fired for durability, remember that they will need to be constructed without any air pockets trapped and the clay cannot be too thick… no more than an inch thick to be safe, otherwise it can explode in the firing process. It will need to be completely dry before firing.*

It's a good idea to keep checking the height of your sections to make sure they will fit on the length of dowel you have.

Remember, you can stack your sections in any order that you think works. You could swap it around as you like too.

Tutorial Video

Watch a tutorial video on the different hand-building techniques and how to construct your clay totem pole.

Watch my instructional video

HERE

STEP 6:

Drying & Firing

Allow your clay pieces to dry somewhere over a few weeks. They will need to be left to dry out fairly slowly to avoid cracking.

Once you are sure they are dried through, you can either take them to be fired (there will be a cost for this service) or paint them using acrylic paint/ varnish to protect them from water.

Clay firing services:

- Tin Shed Launceston

13 Russel Street Inveresk, PH: 03 63342889

tinshedpottery@gmail.com

- Deloraine Creative Studios Pottery Hub. Ph: (03) 6362 4455

(Priced according to shelf $20 per shelf)

www.delorainecreativestudios.com.au/pottery-hub

STEP 7:

<u>Decoration.</u>

Once your clay pieces are thoroughly dried and/or fired its time to decorate them using acrylic paint/ varnish. This paint layer will also protect the clay and act as a water-proofer as clay left unfired can damage easily when wet.

*It's important to lay the paint on nice and thick and do a couple of coats to protect it. You can just paint it white if you do not want to colour it.

SHARE with our online community

Share your totem pole creations with our creative community! Send in photos of your works and process to

artgallery@devonport.tas.gov.au

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A note from the author...

Thank you

This is my last *Home Is Where the 'Art Is* online art activity for the Devonport Regional Gallery as the Creative Learning & Public Programs Officer as I am moving interstate. I have really enjoyed my time working on the projects and seeing all of your creations! Thanks for sharing and inspiring me. I'm sure the next CLPPO at the gallery will have many fun and exciting activities for you to participate in.

Stay creative!