

ANN VAN HOEY'S ÉTUDE GÉOMÉTRIQUE

by Andrea Marquis

The work of Belgian artist Ann Van Hoey consists of sculptural earthenware vessels and a line of bone-china dinnerware that she designs for the European firm, Serax. Inspiration for her forms comes from *Étude Géométrique* (geometric study), which for Van Hoey is about “the marriage between the circle and the square.” Origami is also an inspiration and Van Hoey’s terra-cotta vessels are often darted in three sections to create a dynamic tension between the circle and the triangle.

Most of her forms are unglazed and the finished surface mimics the leather-hard stage when Van Hoey explains, “the clay is full of life.” In her *Structure* series she investigates textured surfaces, she does this by texturing the molds that she uses to build her vessels. Despite her primary focus on unglazed surfaces, she has also experimented with color on some of her forms. These vessels have been professionally enameled at an auto body shop with car paint, producing a luscious surface that goes above and beyond glaze. The eye-catching forms tap into the psychology of our deepest desires through her choice of colors with serious caché, like Ferrari red and yellow.

While in the studio, Van Hoey engages in the making process with focus, precision, and intensity, but also with a sense of humor. She is very aware of the tension between her meditative clay process and the demands of the tech-savvy world outside the studio walls. There is evidence of this awareness and humor in her work, if you look closely on the side of the vessels in her *Social Clay* series, she has embossed the phrases, “Sent from my iPad,” “sorry for the briefness,” and “join me on Facebook.”

The simplest forms are deceptively complex to make and for Van Hoey there are no short cuts or tricks. Her forming process has evolved over time through trial and error. Ideas for new pieces come naturally from the evolution of working in her studio, where patience and repetition are critical in achieving geometric perfection.

Ann Van Hoey transforms round shapes into a variety of forms inspired by origami and geometry, like those shown here from 2011. *Photo: Dries Van den Brande.*



Hand Rolling Slabs

Van Hoey's forms begin as slabs and she uses commercial clay straight out of the bag. She prefers the clay to be soft and it's important that the clay be pliable but not sticky. After working with the Dutch artist Netty Janssens, she doesn't wedge her clay, preferring to align the clay particles by gradually thinning the slab as it's rolled out.

After every pass over the slab Van Hoey carefully pulls the clay up and off of the canvas to allow the slab to expand evenly and to allow the clay platelets to align, strengthening the slab. She then uses a soft red Mudtools rib to repeatedly smooth the slab throughout the rolling process. She carefully removes impurities and large grog particles as she makes her final passes over the slab. The clay slab must be perfect because most of her vessels are not glazed and the finished surfaces come from the fired bare clay.



Tips for rolling slabs out by hand:

- Start with a slice of bagged clay that is pliable but not sticky.
- Use wooden slats of varying thicknesses (starting with two thicker slats and replacing them with progressively thinner slats as you work) to gauge and even out the thickness of the slab as it's rolled out.
- Begin rolling at the center of the slab, moving to the outer edges.
- Flip the slabs over after every roll to compress and align particles on both sides.
- Roll and thin the slabs gradually to keep the clay particles aligned.
- Once the slab has reached the approximate desired size and thickness, roll it one way, in the same direction.

Filling the Mold

To create her vessel forms, Van Hoey pieces her rolled slabs into a half spherical plaster mold, usually 11–19 inches (30–50 cm) in diameter, that she purchased from her local clay supplier. In preparation for construction, she works with a paper pattern, developed through trial and error, to approximately fill her mold. She first lays the pattern on the slab (1) and then over the mold, eyeing the shape of the pattern to fit the interior curve of the mold. Using a modified knife (see figure 4 inset), she cuts out a piece of clay that is approximately the same size and shape as the pattern (2). Next she uses a plastic circle with dividing lines as a guide to create marks on the top of her mold to aid in equally dividing the circumference of her vessel (3).

The mold and slab are cleaned and then inspected for contaminants and irregularities. As Van Hoey readies the cut piece, she flips and reverses the slab to ensure the perfect side faces outward and the finished surface is without imperfections. She carefully presses her cut slab into her mold; slowly expanding the slab into the curved shape (4). She notes that it's important this be done gradually and she takes great care to rib the clay up and down, and then back and forth with horizontal strokes.

Next, she trims the slab, cutting it on the top edge with her modified pen knife that allows the blade to be inserted at an angle (5). She locates the dividing marks

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on the mold that were created with the plastic circle template. Using each mark as a guide, she draws a line in the clay with her knife that only goes halfway through the slab—this prevents scratches on the interior of the mold. Then she removes the excess clay (6).

Van Hoey uses a total of three slabs to complete her form. When joining two slabs she compresses the edge of the slab, beveling it with her finger in order to create more surface area for the thin slab pieces to connect. She scores the edges, taking care not to scratch the mold. With light pressure she uses her finger

to feel where the slabs overlap and cuts the top slab to fit. She removes the leftover piece with her pin tool and applies slip to the bottom slab.

Next, she gently compresses the slabs together with her finger (7). Using a semi-circular custom-made rib that she cut out of an old credit card, Van Hoey repeats the above step with more pressure. During this process she removes a little of the overlap of clay to make the wall thickness uniform. After the clay has been carefully ribbed, she removes the top edge with her modified knife.



1 Lay the paper template over the smoothed out slab.



2 Cut the slab to the approximate shape and size of the template.



3 Use a circular dividing tool to mark the edge of the mold with guidelines for cutting the slab sections.



4 Press the cut slab into the mold, slowly expanding it to match the curve.



5 Trim the top using a modified knife that allows the blade to be held flush with the top of the mold.



6 Score a line through the excess clay along the edge of the slab then remove it.



7 Compress the slabs together gently before repeating the compression process with a rib.



8 Repeat the compression, refining, and smoothing process after adding the bottom slab.



9 Flip the mold upside down onto a bat and gently tap the bottom of the mold to release the form.



10 Use a soft rubber rib to smooth and compress the seams and to compress the entire outside of the vessel.



11 Cut darts into the form with heavy-duty scissors. The length and width of the darts guide the final shape.



12 Gradually overlap the clay cuts, score and slip within the overlapped area and join.



13 Refine the seams using a wooden sculptor's thumb or rubber-tipped tool.



14 Scrape the rim with a metal rib to bevel it, then smooth and compress the edge.



Object, 10 in. (26 cm) in length, slab-built and press-molded earthenware, 2015. Photo: Dries Van den Brande.



Object from the Earthenware Ferrari series, 16 in. (40 cm) in length, slab-built and press-molded earthenware, automotive paint, 2014. Photo: Dries Van den Brande.

She repeats this process, rolling out slabs, cutting out patterned pieces, joining them and then refining the form to produce the sides of the vessel.

She fills the bottom by approximating the shape and repeats the above steps, beveling the edges and scoring the clay form in the mold. Before attaching the bottom piece of clay to the form in the mold, Van Hoey stamps the bottom of the slab with her chop (potter's mark) and places the slab into the mold face down—this way impressing the stamp won't distort the final form. Compressing the slabs together she repeats her refining and smoothing process (8). The refining process is very meditative. She notes that though it has been a slow evolution repeating the same technique, with practice she's been able to hone and continue to improve her forms.

Van Hoey smooths the bottom of the form, then moves the mold onto a pottery wheel for more clean up. She centers it by eye, then secures the mold to the wheel head with clay wadding and continues to compress the clay form against the mold and refine the thickness of its wall. She trims the top edge of the vessel one more time with her altered knife and then compresses it with her finger to finish the top edge.

Removing the Vessel Form

Timing is critical for Van Hoey's altering process. The clay must be at the perfect stage—firm enough to be handled out of the mold,

but plastic enough to fold without cracking. The vessel shape must be evenly pliable so it's important to avoid a draft that can lead to uneven drying. She lets her piece set up in the mold with a bat over the top and places them in a cardboard box turned on its side. With the box closed, which protects it from drafts and helps to equalize the moisture in and around the piece, she lets the vessel set up for an hour or two.

Van Hoey removes the piece from the mold by flipping it upside down on a bat and gently tapping the mold to release the form (9). The upside-down form and bat go onto a banding wheel. Using the flat, wide side of a metal rib, she cleans the outside of seams where the slabs were joined together. She inspects the outside surface of the form for any irregularities—popping air bubbles and then using a red Mudtools rib to smooth the exterior surface (10).

Darting

Using her hands, Van Hoey flips the clay form right-side up and cradles it in a pillow. With her circular dividing tool (see figure 3), she establishes three equidistant points on the top edge of her form and makes a mark. Next, she measures how long she wants the dart to extend toward the bottom of the form as well as how wide she wants them to be, both of which will affect the final shape. These marks guide her as she cuts her darts.

With large, sharp, heavy-duty scissors, which create a cleaner, straighter cut, Van Hoey cuts through her form (11). She cuts next to the seams between the original slabs of clay used to make the form so that the seam will be underneath the dart and therefore concealed by it when the clay walls overlap. Next, she gradually folds and smooths the clay cuts until they overlap. Then, with a needle tool, she marks the outline of the overlap. She scores and slips each side (12), making sure there's ample slip in the corners of the overlaps, which keeps the darts from pulling apart.

Finishing the Form

Van Hoey uses a wood sculptor's thumb to refine the seams (13), compressing them so there is absolutely no gap. The edges of the darts get dabbed with water and compressed. Small holes often appear at the bottom of the darts due to the movement of the folding process so she repairs them by touching them up with water and then using a wooden tool to compresses the area inside and out. She then smooths all of the seams' sides and joints with a red Mudtools rib and repeats this process until perfect. The clay form then gets covered in loose plastic and she smooths the rim the next day.

To finish the piece, Van Hoey scrapes the rim with a metal rib (14), beveling it slightly, and then refines the overlapping top edges with a wooden tool. She uses a damp sponge to smooth the exterior, removing finger marks on the outside edge—the inside doesn't get sponged. Finally, the bottom gets tapped slightly to flatten it out (this keeps it from rocking) and the finished piece is slowly once fired to cone 1.

Ann Van Hoey holds her first degree in economics from the University of Antwerp. At 50, she went back to school, received an art degree from the Institute for Arts and Craft in Mechelen, and set up a studio. She has an extensive exhibition record throughout Europe, America, and Asia, which includes receiving the silver prize in the 2013 Cheongju Craft Biennial in Korea. To learn more visit www.annvanhoey-ceramics.be.

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