

Clay-Puzzled BIRDBATH



By Michael Harbridge



SOLID PUZZLING

Nature's Birdbath



Combine clay-puzzled pieces like this vase and bowl to make a birdbath. The vase can be filled with sand or other items to weight the shape down so the wind can't blow it over.



This birdbath was created using a solid clay puzzling technique and combines the use of a Bisque Puzzler Mold and a bowl form. The bowl used could be made of ceramic bisque, glass, plastic or almost any material which can handle the pressure of pressing clay against the surface. You can work directly on the surface of Bisque Puzzler Molds, bisque or ceramic casting molds. You'll need to place newspaper or a thin towel between the clay and a nonabsorbent surface like glass or plastic.

Clay

Lesson Plan

Objectives

- Work with clay
- Puzzle in molds and over alternative surfaces
- Press materials into the clay to create designs

Materials

Bisque Puzzler Mold: by ClayPuzzling.com

BP312 Large Cylinder Vase

Clay: by ClayPuzzling.com

Low-Fire White

Leaf Forms: by ClayPuzzling.com

LA200 Large Leaf Assortment

Colors: Your Choice of Manufacturer

Three Shades of Green Bisque Stroke (From Mint to Hunter)

Brown Bisque Stroke

Clear Glaze

Miscellaneous:

Assorted Brushes

Dried or Natural Flowers/Weeds

Sponge

Towel

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Step 1 Dust the interior area of the mold and surface where you will puzzle.

Step 2 Tear off pieces of clay and flatten them to the desired thickness. This can be accomplished by pressing clay between your fingers and thumb or by rolling over the surface with an object like a rolling pin or dowel. Try to get uniform thickness with each piece of clay. Note: If the thickness of clay varies drastically from one area to another on a creation, uneven drying can occur and items can crack.

Step 3 Press the flattened pieces of clay into the cavity of the mold or against the surface you are puzzling. Each piece of clay should touch or slightly overlap. When using a mold, do not go past the seam line where mold parts meet. Going past the seam line could result in the mold parts not fitting to-



gether properly. Optional: If you want to have impressions of wheat or other natural materials in the base of the birdbath or vase, place the natural fibers in the mold before pressing the clay over the surface.

Step 4 Press a towel over the clay surface, forcing the clay chunks together filling any gaps with clay. Continue to step 5 if you are working with multiple-piece molds. If you are working on open surfaces, allow the piece to become firm (not dry) before removing. Pull away any paper, plastic or fabric sticking to the clay. Small amounts of paper will burn away in firing. Optional: If you'd like to have leaf designs in the top of your bowl, press the leaf forms into the clay while it is moist. Press over the forms with a towel to make sure a good impression is made. Remove the leaf forms from the clay.

Step 5 Place a long coil of clay along one side of the mold parallel to the seam line. Going past the seam line will result in the mold parts not fitting together properly.

Step 6 Lift the half of the mold without the coil and turn it over slowly, making certain the clay is stuck to the mold and will not fall out when completely turned over. If the clay appears to want to fall out, drip some water randomly between the clay and the mold to dampen in a few spots and then press the clay.

Step 7 Place the mold halves together and wrap the Velcro strap around the mold, securing tightly.

Step 8 Reach inside the mold with your hand (if it fits) or use a wooden dowel with a sponge attached with tape to the end and press the coil of clay so it attaches the clay on both mold parts.

Step 9 Remove the Velcro straps and gently pry the mold halves apart, exposing half of the clay-puzzled piece. Do not force the mold parts if they do not come apart easily. Sometimes the mold will need to sit for a while, allowing the clay to firm up before the mold will come apart. Forcing the mold apart could cause the piece to split.

Step 10 Once you have one part of the mold removed, the item may need to sit for a while until it is firm enough to stand on its own. Remove from mold. Try to remove as much of the natural material as possible from the clay. Small remnants will burn away in firing. Smooth any imperfections or areas where clay is raised along the seam line.

Step 11 Allow sufficient drying time before firing to cone 04.

Step 12 Thin the Brown Bisque Stroke with an equal amount of water and brush one coat over the entire vase and bowl. Use a damp sponge to wipe back most of the color, leaving it mainly in the crevices. Allow to dry.

Step 13 Apply a thinned (one part water to three parts color) layer of your lightest green to each leaf in the bowl. Shade around the edges of the leaves and the veining with the darker greens. Try to vary the leaves, with some darker and others lighter so they don't all look the same. Use a liner brush and various thinned greens to stroke on the grass



3b



growing up the base of the birdbath. Use an old toothbrush or fan brush to splatter some of the darkest green over the bowl and vase.

Step 14 After allowing the colors to dry, apply the appropriate number of coats of clear glaze to the entire piece and fire to cone 06.

What did you learn from this project?

- Almost any surface and shape can be used for clay puzzling.
- If you place paper or a towel between plastic, glass or nonabsorbent materials, it will make it much easier to remove the clay creation.
- Objects like dried flowers can be used with clay puzzling for making impressions in clay.
- Plastic leaf forms make it easy to create leaf patterns in clay. FA

Business Tips for Studio Owners

Why should you introduce clay puzzling in your studio?

Clay puzzling is a fun and easy technique for anyone of any age. Best of all, you can make money! Clay is inexpensive in comparison to purchasing bisque. The cost for clay to complete this birdbath is under \$10. What would you pay for large bisque shapes like this?

What's my investment and how much can I make?

Your investment in puzzler molds (which are reusable) is less than \$100. If you charged customers \$75 to make a birdbath, you'd have your entire investment back after only two customers. You'd make enough to cover the colors and firing. After that, you've only got the cost of clay (around \$10), colors and firing. At \$75 or more each time, the profits add up!

Don't forget, the base puzzler mold makes great vases and puzzling can be done up to any point in the mold, so you can make tall shapes or short shapes. Add an extruder and make coiled shapes. Combine coils and solid puzzling to achieve unique creations.

How do I determine pricing for puzzling?

Most studios will have certain bisque shapes set aside for puzzling. If the all-inclusive price to create the bisque shape is \$25, then it's \$25 to use the shape with clay, fire and glaze. HUGE profits can be made because the bisque form can be used over and over. If working with puzzler molds, determine the price by the size and shape. Compare it to something you already have and make the price comparable. In many cases you'll discover it only takes one or two uses to cover your investment. After that the profits really roll in!

What about firing?

Allow sufficient drying time for clay and don't rush it with fans or heat initially. Drying clay items too quickly can cause them to crack. Once they look like they are dry (in about a week) place them on top of

a firing kiln so the heat can work out any remaining moisture. Fire clay shapes to the recommended cone supplied by the manufacturer. Most low-fire clay bodies are fired to cone 04 and the glaze is fired to cone 06. Don't fire clay in with glaze items because if all the moisture is not out, and the item pops, the chunks can stick to glaze items.

Do I need to fire the items twice?

It's best to fire the clay, apply colors and fire again. This also brings the customer back into your store a second time...not a bad thing! However, if your customers want to build and paint in one setting, offer clay-based underglaze products that work on wet clay. That way the customer can do it all in one sitting. Once dry, you fire it to the clay temperature and then dip and fire a second time.

How much space do I need?

You probably already have a large selection of bisque shapes and you can simply place signs next to the items you're offering for clay puzzling. Keep the puzzler shapes on a back shelf or in a cabinet. You'll need a little space for clay which usually comes in boxes that can be stacked wherever you have small spaces. Pressing towels and tools can be placed near the sink by other sponges, brushes and tools. So you really don't need much space!

Do I need a special clay work area?

Some studio owners who have the space have separate areas or tables reserved for clay work. Others will only offer it on certain days or at scheduled times. Clay can be a little messier and may require a little more clean up than traditional painting techniques.

Why will my customers love clay?

Your customers will love the chance to try something new they can have success with. Unlike free-form hand building or wheel throwing, your customers have a shape or form they are using so they get consistent results. They also walk away saying and knowing they made the entire piece from start to finish. They will encourage friends to give it a try and bring you new customers.