

# The Fabric *of Our Lives*

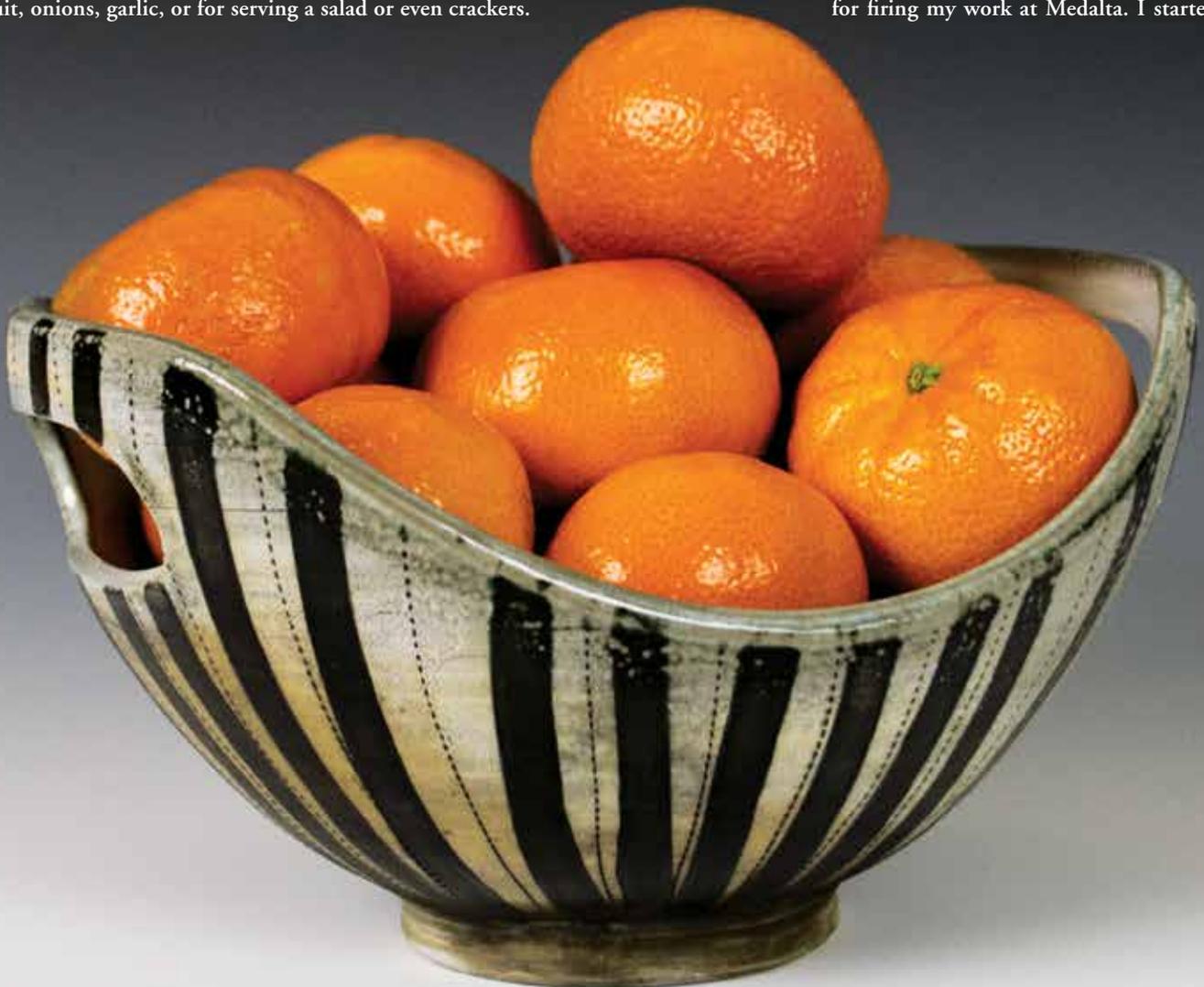
by Susan McKinnon

The use of functional objects provides opportunities for memorable moments, whether it is a vase filled with freshly picked flowers, or a platter used to share a meal. These moments can stem from objects that become part of our daily routine, or from items reserved for special occasions. Pots, like the people who use them, become characters stitched into the fabric of our lives.

I enjoy making forms that are useful in many situations and contexts. Making forms with a multitude of potential uses is an enjoyable challenge, allowing for collaboration between the maker and the end user. These bowls could be used for storing fruit, onions, garlic, or for serving a salad or even crackers.

When I began making these bowls, they reminded me of bread baskets. I liked the idea of bringing something to the dinner table with both hands. I also enjoy having the contents of the bowl tower above the rim, framing the food as a visual cue of abundance.

My earlier work was largely driven by finding new ways to alter and divide forms. I began making these forms while I was an artist-in-residence at Medalta in the Historic Clay District, located in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada. Although I currently have a home studio, I continue to rent the soda kiln for firing my work at Medalta. I started





**Opposite:** Striped swoop bowl, thrown and altered porcelain, painted and inlaid underglaze decoration, soda fired to cone 10. **1** After trimming a bowl thrown from 6–8 pounds of clay, compress and smooth the surface using a soft rib. Make sure the walls are still malleable, then squeeze the bowl into an oval shape. **2** To make a curved rim, create a paper template and use it to make a line on each side to guide your cut. Cut along the line using an X-Acto knife. **3** Use a curved Surform to make sure the cut is even and to round off the cut edges. **4** Trace and cut the handle holds using a template. Repeat on the opposite end. **5** Use a smooth, damp makeup sponge to compress and refine the cut edges. **6** Paint vertical lines of underglaze on the stiff leather-hard bowl, starting at the midpoints and corners first.

making these forms when I was beginning to learn how to soda fire. At the time, I was very interested in the contrasts between glazed, unglazed, and slipped surfaces in soda firing, as well as variations across panels of decoration. I continue to consider these contrasts in my current work.

### Throwing and Altering

I start by throwing a large, wide, and tall bowl with 6–8 pounds of clay. I tend to gravitate toward a taller bowl for these since it typically results in dramatic proportions and the ability to contain more. Then, I cut the bowl off of the bat immediately, so that the tension between the base and plastic bat doesn't cause cracking as the bowl dries and shrinks.

When the rim of the bowl sets up enough to hold its weight, I flip the bowl over and continue to dry it very slowly. When the base of the bowl is soft leather hard, I trim the foot ring. I use a soft rib to smooth the exterior of the bowl after trimming (1). I've found that any bumps or ridges will cause small variations in the painted stripes later on. I check to see if the walls of the bowl are still soft and a bit malleable; if not, I use damp cheese cloth to rehydrate them slowly under plastic until the walls are malleable again. I learned this trick from ceramic artist Joan Bruneau. Then, I gently squeeze the bowl into an oval by pressing the walls inward.

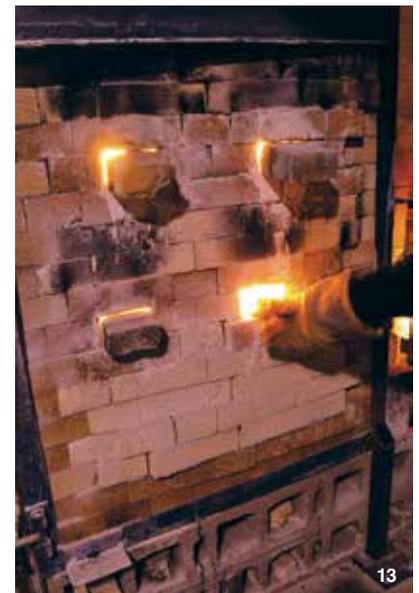
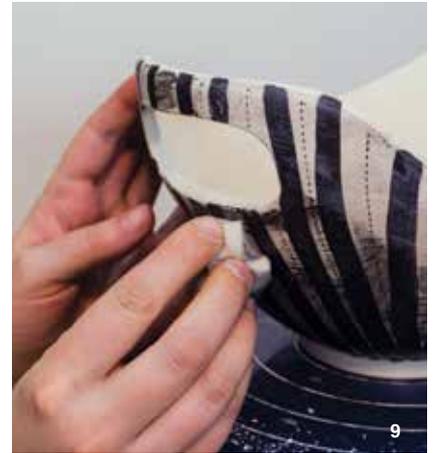
Next, I make paper templates to guide the depth of the cut from the rim and the size of the cut-out handles. I use paper so that I reconsider the shapes and depth regularly, as the template

degrades or becomes rippled from moisture. This process keeps me engaged in making relatively the same form with small variations over time.

I make sure the template is equally spaced. Usually, I use my hands as a measuring tool to make sure the cuts are symmetrical and then adjust if necessary. Next, I trace each shape to alter the rim with a pin tool (2), cut the rim using an X-Acto knife, then I use a curved Surform to even out any variations in the cut and to round off the edges (3). Once the curve of the rim is defined, the placement of the handle holds can be determined. I use a template to get a consistent shape, size, and placement for the handle holds, then trace around them with a needle tool (4) before cutting them out using an X-Acto blade. I use a smooth, damp sponge to compress and refine all of the cut edges (5). I find that using an arrow-shaped makeup sponge for contouring works great. The arrow shape allows for firm, even pressure while keeping a reserve of water in the base of the sponge.

### Decorating the Surface

At the stiff leather-hard stage, I paint vertical stripes of underglaze on the bowl. Vertical stripes have been very popular at various points in history as a marker of good taste. This is likely why pin-stripes are still popular in business attire. I highly recommend the book *Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes* by Michel Pastoureau if you are interested in further reading about stripes in fashion. For painting stripes, I prefer to use a small, flat brush. I used to use a flexible ruler to mark off 1/8-inch intervals for the stripes. Measuring helped



**7** Continue painting vertical stripes around the form. After the underglaze dries to the touch, apply a coat of wax resist to the exterior. **8** After the wax is no longer sticky, roll a stitch roller in between the stripes to impress stitch marks. **9** Brush underglaze into the incised lines. Wipe the excess underglaze away, leaving the black incised stitch marks. **10** Apply diluted underglaze to the bisque-fired bowl, then wipe away some, but not all of the wash for a streaky, varied surface. **11** Glaze the inside of the bowl by filling to just below the lower rim and pouring out the higher sides. Wipe away the excess glaze, leaving the rim unglazed. **12** Make small ¼-pound soda burritos (Gail Nichols Soda Mix, see page 96) in wet newspaper. Allow to set after rolling. **13** Push the burritos into the firebox of the soda kiln at cone 9 using a metal rod, or other fire-safe tool. Amount added will depend on how much residual soda is already in the kiln.

me to understand visual spacing, but trying to stay within the marked lines left my brush strokes a bit timid and wobbly. Recently, I have found it faster to mark the midpoints and corners of each side with vertical lines to start (6). Next, I proceed with painting more stripes, working around the bowl, and then painting a stripe in the middle of the existing stripes. After the underglaze has set up, I cover the exterior in a coat of wax (7). After the wax resist dries, I roll a stitch roller (normally used for making pattern lines on fabric) over the surface to impress stitch marks in between the stripes (8). I need to frequently wipe the wax off of the stitch roller, otherwise it makes an impression while also pushing some of the wax resist into the mark, causing the inlaid underglaze to not adhere well after the piece is bisque fired. Next, I brush off any little burrs made by the roller and brush black underglaze into the stitch marks. When wiping off the excess (9), I occasionally leave small trails and spots of underglaze on top of the wax for a new kind of mark for the soda ash to interact with. When the pots are soda fired, the soda ash picks up the cobalt in the underglaze, leaving small blue speckles.

After the bowl is bisque fired, I rinse and sand the foot ring of the pot. I apply a wash of black underglaze diluted with water to the outside of the bowl. I enjoy when the underglaze remains in the recesses of any throwing lines or texture. Next, I wipe off the excess wash (10) or add more where it could be darker. I glaze the inside of the bowl by filling the inside with glaze up to just below the lower rim (11), then pour the glaze out of the higher sides of the bowl. I wipe the excess glaze off the outside; however, you could also wax the outside to avoid wiping it off.

I touch up any missed stitches with more underglaze and wipe the excess away. I've learned this doesn't work very well if the surface of the pot is wet, so I leave touch-ups to the very end.

### Soda Firing

The bowls are now ready to be wadded and loaded into the soda kiln. I fire to a flat cone 10 and add soda to the kiln using a mix of spraying and adding small burritos of Gail Nichols Soda Mix through the side vents. I have found that using two layers of wet newsprint to make my ¼-pound soda burritos allows the mix to set with minimal cleanup, both while making and after the firing (12). I tend to fire these bowls at the back of Medalta's downdraft kiln, surrounded by taller objects, to protect them from the heavier soda deposits that occur at the front of the kiln. Since I fire in a communal kiln, I always check the residual soda at cones 8 and 9 before I add more to make sure that I don't add too much. Too much soda will cause my decoration to run and drip, sometimes to the point where the surface patterning is undecipherable. I don't mind a bit of movement, but I prefer a drier surface with a light,



Swoop bowls, thrown and altered porcelain, flashing slip, inlaid underglaze decoration, glaze, soda fired to cone 10.

speckled soda buildup and toasty flame markings. The contrast between drier areas and glossier areas with more soda also causes interesting color variations in the decoration. These variations around the form are also enjoyable to handle as there are different surfaces to discover around the form.

I introduce about 1 pound of soda mix to the kiln at a time, letting it volatilize before adding more (13). Depending on how much residual soda is present in the kiln, I typically add about 1–3 pounds in the form of soda burritos and about ½–1 pound of soda ash via spraying. Prior to loading the kiln, I make draw rings to help to gauge a lot of variables, such as whether the reduction is even, if one side is drier than the other, and as a general visual indicator of how much soda has been added to the kiln. These rings are placed in front of the peep holes and are evenly distributed in the kiln. I make a chart divided into four squares to track the results from the four quadrants of the kiln where I've placed the draw rings. The top squares track the rings in the order they were pulled from the kiln, from the top-right and top-left, while the bottom squares track rings pulled from the bottom-left and bottom-right of the kiln. I typically pull rings from these areas, alternating between the front and back to get a general survey of what happened in the kiln from cone 8 to cone 10 before and after adding soda. The first ring in each set always indicates how much soda was in the kiln before adding any soda mix into the atmosphere. This allows me to see what is happening inside the kiln and adjust the firing and methods of soda introduction in response to information read from the rings. I look for changes in the soda residue's gray tones, the speckled texture, and the color of the clay body as information on which to base my decisions during soda introduction and holding at top temperature. Soda firing is a responsive process; a combination of careful monitoring and experience has allowed me to understand the process better and to guide the results of the firing.

**the author** Susan McKinnon is currently the Collection Manager at Medalta in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada. For more information, check out their website: <http://medalta.org>.