

Clay - African Ritual Pots

After learning about ritual vessels from West Africa, the children make and combine clay pinch pots and decorate them with African style figures. For ages 9 to 13. Plan 6 sessions.

KEY IDEAS

- Learning about vessels, figures, and symbols from West Africa
- Using the pinch method to make pottery
- Working three-dimensionally

LANGUAGE

pinch pot, lip, three-dimensional, scratch and slip, bisque ware, underglazes, glaze

RESOURCE

Click [here](#) for more information about working with clay. Scroll down [here](#) to see four examples of ritual vessels from West Africa. Click here to see [symbols](#) from Ghana used to decorate cloth and pottery. Elsy Leuzinger's book, *The Art of Black Africa*, has examples of figures used in African art.

BACKGROUND

According to Dogon tradition, ritual vessels were made for a hogon, or spiritual leader, at the time of his installation as the chief, priest, and leader of a village. The vessels were used to hold food during the investment ceremony and were either newly made or handed down from the previous hogon.

YOU WILL NEED

- 12- by 18-inch Masonite boards (one per child) or canvas to cover the work surface
- Clay (see note below)
- Clay needle tools
- Clay knives
- Containers with a small amount of slip or water
- Underglazes
- Clear glaze
- Brushes for applying underglazes and glaze
- Plastic bags and trays for drying the projects
- Pictures of West African ritual vessels and figures

Note: The children will each need three balls of clay – two sized to fit comfortably in the palms of their hands so they can control the clay while pinching the pots, and a third for making the figure on top of the pot.

THE PROJECT

First Session

Preparation

- Set out Masonite boards or cover the work surface with canvas.
- Set out two balls of clay for each child plus a few extra.
- Display pictures of the ritual vessels.

How to Begin

- Tell the children about the West African ritual vessels and explain that they will be creating similar vessels using clay. In this session, they will be constructing two *pinch pots* (pots made by pinching clay) that will be combined in the next session to form the vessels.
- Demonstrate how to make a pinch pot by rolling a ball of clay between your palms to make it round. One hand (usually the less dominant one) will hold the clay, while the dominant hand does the pinching. Place the ball of clay on the less dominant hand opened flat so that the fingers will not be in the way while pinching the clay. Using only the thumb of the other hand, press it into the center of the ball until it is about one-half inch from the bottom. Emphasize that only the thumb will go inside the pot. To make the hole larger, place your thumb all the way to the bottom of the hole, and with two fingers on the outside, pinch gently with the fleshy parts of the fingers (rather than the tips) to avoid causing the clay to break off. Rotate the pot about one-quarter-inch after each pinch. Work slowly to avoid stretching the clay too quickly and concentrate on the feel of the clay as you continue pinching and turning until reaching the original starting point on the ball of clay. Each time a pinch is made, it must be repeated all the way around to the starting point to maintain the pot's roundness.
- Make the *lips*, or top edges, of both pots even by trimming them and/or pressing the pots upside down on the work surface.
- Have each child make two pinch pots with the same lip diameter, keeping them about three to four inches wide and no more than six inches tall when the two pots are combined.

Note: Allow the pots to harden slightly and then cover them with plastic to keep them from becoming leather-hard before the next session.

Second Session

Preparation

- Set out slightly hardened pots.
- Set out clay knives, needle tools, containers of slip or water, and some extra clay for filling in recessed areas on the pots.
- Prepare two slightly hardened pinch pots for demonstration.

How to Begin

- In this session, the children will be connecting their pinch pots, cutting the lids, and carving designs into the clay.
- Demonstrate how to join the pots using the *scratch and slip* process—scratch the lips of both pots, apply a small amount of slip or water, and press the two pots together. Blend the connection by gently melding the clay, using extra bits of clay to fill in recessed areas.
- With a needle tool, draw a guideline for cutting the lid. Include a “v” notch, as seen in the

pot below, to make it easier to find the correct placement of the lid. Cut along the line with a clay knife or needle tool and smooth the lips on both sections of the pot.

- Make a flange to hold the lid firmly on the pot by rolling a coil to fit along the inside edge of the bottom section of the pot. Press the coil flat and attach it, letting about one-quarter-inch rise above the lip. Place the lid on the pot to be sure that it fits comfortably over the flange.
- Tell the children about the West African symbols used on fabric and pottery. Explain that they can use similar symbols or create their own to carve designs on the pots with a needle tool.
- Have the children connect their pinch pots, cut the lids, and carve designs.

Note: Store the pots with the lids on under plastic wrap.

Third Session

Preparation

- Set out Masonite boards or cover work surface with canvas.
- Set out one ball of clay for each child plus a few extra.
- Set out needle tools and containers of slip or water.

How to Begin

- Show the children examples of African figures used in art. Explain that, in this session, they will be making figures for the tops of their pots.
- Tell the children that they can make figures similar to the traditional African figures or create their own. The figures must be *three-dimensional*, or viewable from all sides, sturdy, and able to sit securely on the pots. Encourage the children to include extra items, such as the bowl being held by the figure below or the fish in the ibis' mouth pictured above. Be sure the children understand that when making attachments to the figures, they must use the scratch and slip process.
- Have the children make figures and attach them securely to the pots.

Note: Dry the pots with the lids on very slowly under plastic wrap, loosening the wrap gradually. Leave the lids on the pots and bisque-fire them in a kiln.

Fourth/Fifth Session

Preparation

- Set out bisque-fired clay pieces.
- Set out brushes and a variety of underglazes.

How to Begin

- Explain that the clay has been fired in the kiln and is now referred to as *bisque ware* which is very fragile and must be handled carefully. The children will be adding color to the bisque ware using *underglazes* that are paints for clay.
- Demonstrate how quickly underglazes dry when applied to the bisque ware. The children will need to dip their brushes often to avoid scrubbing and to cover all areas. They should carefully dab into any cracks or rough areas on the clay surface, brushing away any puddles. Explain that designs can be put directly on top of dried underglazes and that the last color painted is the one that will show.

- Discuss ways to integrate the figures with the pots, such as through color and repetition of design.
- Have the children apply the underglazes to their pots and allow the pieces to dry overnight.

Note: If time permits, low-fire the painted pieces before applying the clear glaze. However, if done carefully, the glaze can be applied directly over the dried underglazes.

Last Session

Preparation

- Set out clear glaze and brushes.
- Set out the painted clay pieces.

How to Begin

- In this session, the children will be applying a clear *glaze* to their pots which will give the clay a shiny and strong surface. Explain that the clear glaze will cover up the colors temporarily. When the clay is fired in the kiln again, the glaze will melt and turn clear, allowing the colors to show through.
- To avoid putting on too much clear glaze, which will cause the colors to become cloudy after firing, be sure the children understand that when the glaze is first applied it will look transparent. As it dries it will become opaque. (The number of coats will vary according to the glaze instructions, but usually one coat is sufficient.)
- Explain to the children that glaze should not be applied to the bottom of the pots because it will make the pots stick to the kiln shelf. Do not put glaze on the lids or the lip of the pots so that the lids will not stick to the pots after being fired. If glaze does get on any of these areas, it can be wiped off with a damp cloth.
- Have the children apply the clear glaze to the pots.

Note: Let the pots dry overnight and glaze fire them in a kiln.

NOTES

- Letting the pinch pots harden slightly makes them easier to handle while joining them.
- It is better for the children to apply the clear glaze after the underglazed pieces have been low-fired to avoid smearing the colors.
- Fire the pots with the lids on so that they will shrink at the same rate. Be sure that there is no glaze on the lips of the lids or pots so they will not stick together in the glaze firing.

LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR WORK

- Discuss the ways the figures relate to their pots.
- Are the pots and figures viewable from all sides?
- Review the pinch pot process.

What the children might say...

- *I didn't scratch enough designs in my pot when the clay was wet. Can I paint some on now that the clay is bisque-fired?*
- *I want my pot to look like a nest for my bird so I don't want to add symbols.*

- *Monkeys have very long arms, but I'm afraid the clay will break.*

What you might say...

- *Designs can be added with the underglazes on the bisque-fired pots. This is a good opportunity to coordinate the colors with the figure on your pot.*
- *If you don't want to add symbols to your pot, you might consider adding lines that would relate to a bird's nest.*
- *Supporting the monkey's arms by attaching them to the pot will give them extra strength.*