Master potter Bill Van Gilder's private work can be seen on six continents: his pots are in museums, private collections and galleries around the world. One of his favorite projects is making hand-built bowls. Made from slabs of stoneware clay, these unique bowls are both a creative and rewarding experience to create (**figure A**).

Figure A

Hand-built bowls are fun to make. Because they aren't made on a wheel, hand-built projects are a great way for a beginning potter to begin the experience of working with clay. These footed bowls are constructed using a variety of different texturing tools and glaze combinations, offering yet another opportunity to create one-of-a-kind designs (**figure B**).

Figure B

Tools: (**figure C**)

15 lbs. stoneware clay
rolling pin
2 1/4"-thick lengths of wood
wire knife
painter's trim roller
cardboard tube
hump mold
sprig foot mold
wax-resist emulsion
glazes

Figure C

1. Bill cuts a block of clay into three sections and begins pounding one section into a thin slab with the palm of his hand. After partially flattening the clay, he begins lifting and throwing it flat on the table, stretching it with each throw (**figure D**).

2. When the clay reaches a desired length, he places a 1/4"-thick strip of wood on either side of the slab before rolling it uniformly smooth with a rolling pin. Equal thickness is very important when rolling slabs: if one slab is thicker than another, when layered, the bowl will have an uneven thickness, which can cause cracking (**figure E**).

Figure D

Figure E

3. Bill textures the clay, using gutter guard, corrugated mat and a block print to imprint separate but distinctive patterns in it. When you're using tools to imprint clay, press the tool surfaces firmly into the clay to avoid losing part of the texture or pattern when the clay is pressed over the mold (**figure F**).

4. The corrugated mat is used to texture the elongated bowl. With a fettling knife, Bill cuts two elongated clay pieces, a short piece and two very short pieces of clay. The very short pieces are also textured with the mat (**figure G**) (**figure H**).

Figure F

Figure G

Figure H

5. The bowls are built over hump molds. Made of porous clay, the molds are thrown like a bowl, with a round inside, on the wheel. They are dried leather hard before being trimmed round and smooth on the outside and bisque-fired in a low-temperature kiln. Because they are porous, they will draw water from the clay as it is pressed tightly over the mold surface, helping the bowl to dry quickly (**figure I**).

6. The long clay strips will create the sides of the elongated bowl. Bill textures a section of the remaining slab and cuts it into sections. In much the same way that a quilter makes a patchwork quilt, he connects the textured sections to the long, smooth side sections, slightly overlapping clay seams (**figure J**). (Remember, when assembling hand-built bowls, nothing has to be exact.) Using a wire knife, he trims the shorter piece to fit, leaving a slight gap between the sections (**figure K**).

Figure I

Figure J

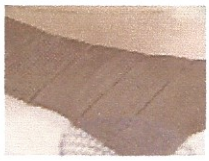

Figure K

7. When the pieces are in place, with the textures facing downward, Bill uses a painter's trim roller to seam the edges firmly together, forming the bowl over the mold and letting a bit of the seam remain visible (**figure L**). He does this with the mold on a wooden slab sitting on a banding wheel; the wheel lets him revolve the mold as he works (**figure M**).

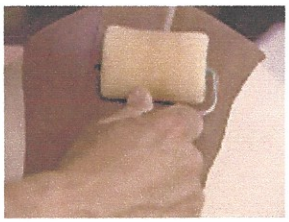

Figure L

Figure M

Master potter Bill Van Gilder is making hand-built bowls. So far, he's rolled out three slabs of stoneware clay, each 1/4" thick. He cut strips from one slab and draped them across a bisque mold. Next, he textured the clay with a corrugated mat and cut two shorter strips from the textured slab. He draped the small sections over the longer sections to form an elongated bowl and used a painter's trim roller to seam the sections firmly together over the mold.

Now Bill is ready to make the second square-shaped bowl (**figure A**).

1. Once again, he shapes the bowl using slabs of clay pressed over a hump mold. This time he forms an X, or cross, pattern through the center of the bowl. The bowl sections around the cross-pattern frame will be textured in contrasting patterns (**figure B**).

2. He cuts two strips of clay, the length of which will determine the size of the bowl, and uses a block tool to create a pattern in the strips of clay. He presses the block firmly into the clay: if he doesn't press firmly, the glaze can obscure the texture (**figure C**).

Figure A

Figure B

Figure C

3. He begins shaping the clay over the mold, placing the textured side of the clay face down on the mold. With the cross-sections in place and establishing the center of the bowl (**figure D**), he uses a wire knife to begin cutting and trimming the corner pieces of the bowl. Each piece will vary slightly in size and shape, lending to the spontaneity and organic feel of the bowls (**figure E**).

4. He textures the clay with a piece of gutter guard and a brayer, creating a fish-scale texture on the clay surface. If needed, the clay is again trimmed to fit before being applied pattern-down on the mold (**figure F**).

Figure D

Figure E

Figure F

5. When the pieces are in place on the mold, Bill checks to make sure each has a double overlap, not three or four overlaps (**figure G**. At this point he uses the small paint trim roller and, pressing it tightly to the mold, begins rolling it from the center point of the clay downward to the rim, stretching the clay outward as he works) (**figure H**).

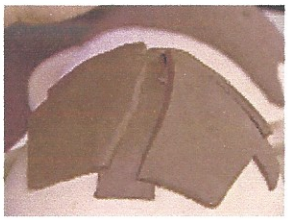

Figure G

Figure H

6. At the top of the bowl, where three pieces overlap, Bill uses a fettling knife to trim away some the extra thickness.

7. To prevent the bowl from rocking and rolling when placed on a table, Bill adds feet, formed in a sprig mold (**figure I**). This small cylinder is thrown on a wheel and bisque fired. It's tapered with a flat bottom and is approximately 1/2" thick. He rolls a piece of soft clay into a bullet shape and packs it tightly into the mold. Next he trims away excess clay from the mold, wets the areas of the bowl where the feet will sit and presses and squeezes the end of the clay feet (still in the mold) before pulling the mold away from the clay. He's careful to keep water away from the mold: as soon as the mold gets wet, the clay will stick to it firmly (**figure J**).

8. The feet have to be level and taller than the centermost point of the bowl. Bill checks the height by placing a ware board on the feet; if there is space between the board and the pot, the design is okay (**figure K**).

Figure I

Figure J

Figure K

Master potter Bill Van Gilder is making hand-built bowls. He started with three 1/4"-thick clay slabs. He cut strips of clay from the slabs and draped them over bisque molds to form the bowls. For the elongated bowl he textured some of the clay using a corrugated mat before pressing the clay firmly to the mold with a roller.

For the larger bowl he textured two strips of clay with an old print block. He draped the strips over the mold in a cross pattern. Next, he textured four pieces of clay with a section of gutter guard and filled in the rest of bowl shape before using the roller to press the clay to the mold (**figure A**).

The bowls will need feet to make sure they sit level on flat surfaces. Bill filled a sprig mold with clay and attached three raised feet to the bottom of the largest bowl. Next, he'll attach a foot to the elongated bowl.

1. A 1" strip of clay is formed into a round cylinder and wrapped around a cardboard tube. Because the tube is somewhat porous, the clay doesn't stick to the surface (**figure B**).

Figure A

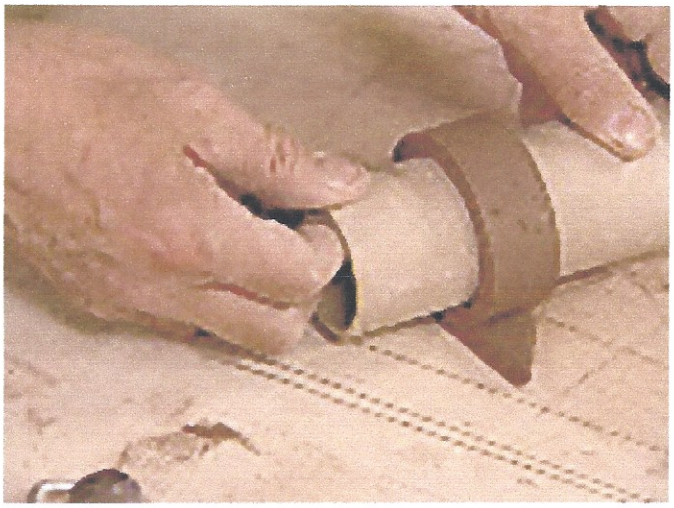

Figure B

2. Bill uses a board to press the foot level, then wets a portion of the bottom part of the bowl, creating a sticky surface for the base of the foot (**figure C**). If he were just to set the foot on the bowl, however, it wouldn't create a secure bond with the bowl. He creates a secure attachment by holding the leg 6"-8" above the bowl and forcefully "tossing" the foot into place on the bowl. If the foot doesn't sit right the first time, the process can be repeated until it's firmly attached and level. Bill levels the foot by pressing on it gently but firmly with a ware board (**figure D**).

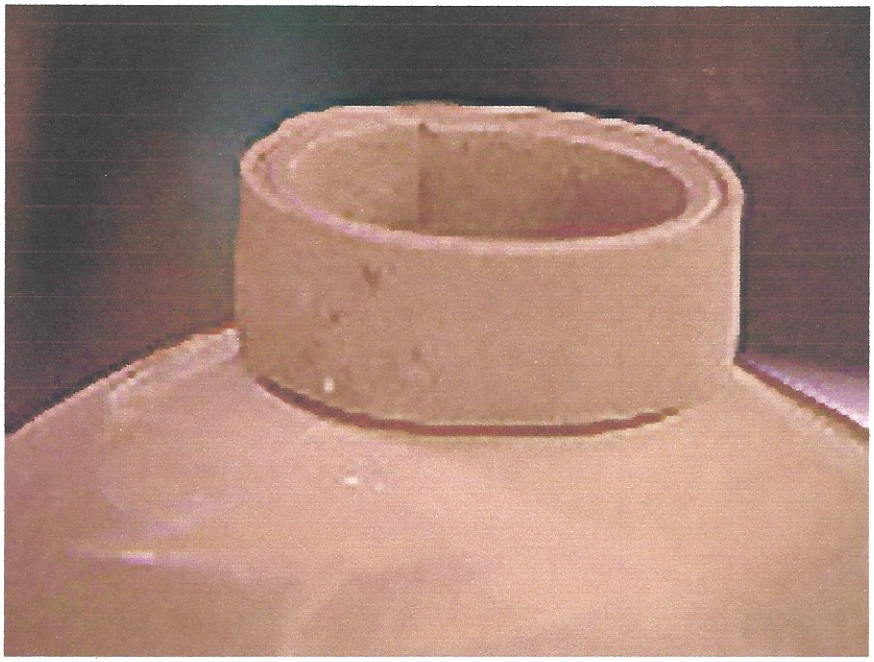

Figure C

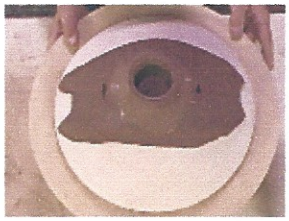

Figure D

3. To further ensure that the foot stays attached to the bowl, Bill uses a small section of dowel rod to make two impressions, directly opposite each other, in the clay foot (**figure E**). He uses the ware board to level the foot and presses his chop, or signature stamp, into the foot (**figure F**).

Figure E

Figure F

4. As a final step, Bill has to remove the bowl from the mold. To see whether the bowl can be easily removed from the mold and support itself, he picks up a small section of the clay edge; the bowl shifts, indicating it's no longer stuck to the mold and can support itself (**figure G**). He places a ware board on the base of the bowl, picks up the mold and the board all in one movement, flips the pieces over and removes the mold (**figure H**). He removes the second board using the same technique (**figure I**).

Figure G Figure H Figure I

Master potter Bill Van Gilder is making hand-built bowls. He started by rolling out three clay slabs. Next, he cut pieces from the slabs and draped them over bisque molds, forming the bowl shapes. He textured some of the pieces with corrugated mat, an old printer's block and gutter-guard wire. For the larger bowl he used a sprig mold to attach three raised feet to the base (**figure A**).

The foot of the elongated bowl is made from a clay cylinder and pressed into the base using a wooden dowel. When the bowls were stiff, he flipped them over and removed the molds, then set them aside until they were bone dry. Now he's ready to smooth the edges with a scrubby pad before the bowls are fired for the first time.

1. Bill smoothes the edges of the bowl carefully. The clay is still very fragile at this stage.

2. The bowls are loaded into the kiln for the bisque firing. The kiln will fire for 10 to 12 hours at approximately 1,750 degrees. It will cool for at least 24 hours before it can be opened and unloaded (**figure B**).

3. Before glazing the bowls, Bill made glaze test tiles and chose two colors, raspberry red and a soft green. When overlapped, the two colors create a milky blue-green color that breaks on the edges (**figure C**).

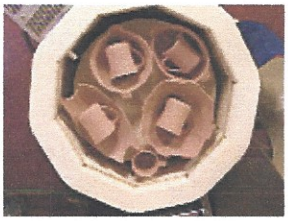

Figure B

Figure C

4. He applies wax-resist emulsion to the foot of each bowl.

5. The width of the elongated bowl is too big to fit the glaze bucket. Bill glazes the bowl in a wide, shallow bucket and sets it aside to dry. He uses a finger dipped in glaze to touch up any rough spots (**figure D**).

6. He dips the second bowl, rotating it in the glaze for approximately three seconds. Again he touches up any blank or rough spots.

7. Glaze drops on the wax resist are removed before dipping the bowl in the green glaze. The feet of both bowls remain red. Layering the colors separates the bowl from the foot and visually lifts the bowl off the tabletop (**figure E**).

Figure D

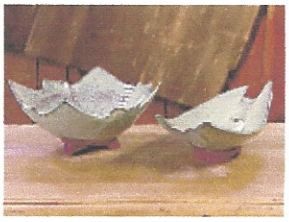

Figure E

8. Bill pours glaze into the center of the elongated bowl, preventing an air pocket from forming, which would happen if the bowl was dipped straight down into the glaze. He repeats the steps with the larger bowl, patching any rough spots before setting the bowls aside to dry.

9. When dry, the bowls are loaded into the kiln for the high-temperature firing. The kiln will fire for 10 to 12 hours, reaching a temperature of 2,200 degrees. After cooling for 24 hours, the kiln can be opened and the bowls displayed.