

# Masterclass

with

## Sasha Wardell

Ceramist Sasha Wardell takes us step-by-step through the mould-making process behind her bone china bowls, created with multi-layered slip-casting

Images: Layton Thompson



I had always been interested in art at school, but didn't consider it as a career initially. After studying for my A levels in Art, French and German, I was planning on becoming a bilingual secretary, but then an inspirational art teacher suggested I consider art school training instead – so I left a career in languages behind.


I had formal art training, which included a Foundation course in Cambridge in 1975, a BA at Bath Academy of Art (where I had originally applied to study graphics but transferred into the ceramics department) and subsequently an MA at Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent.

While working in a couple of factories during an exchange scheme in Limoges, France and at Royal Doulton, I realised I was completely fascinated by the problem-solving aspect of ceramics, such as working out how moulds function and the idiosyncracies of bone china as a ceramic material. I graduated in 1981, set up my studio in 1982 and have been working for myself ever since.

Although I look at the natural world for pattern and decoration, and light and form play an equally important role, I consider my work to be process-led above all. I have always held a fascination for the methods used in the ceramic industry, as well as by bone china itself. I aim to exploit the material's inherent qualities of whiteness and translucency within my own practice. In 1998, after several years of working with airbrushed decoration on

bone china, I felt I had reached a point of saturation with the technique and so undertook a period of research at Bath Spa University. I wanted to develop new and different decorating processes that were aimed at maximising the translucent qualities of this material.

I became interested in multi-layer casting methods after looking at various glass techniques and in particular those of Murano glass, which included the Sommerso and casing and overlaying processes. I felt this could easily be adapted to working with bone china using moulds and slip casting. The fact that these methods took advantage of the inherent qualities of bone china without the need to 'apply' decoration appealed to me, as it would ultimately mean a reduction in the number of firings required. The whiteness of the clay body offered a completely blank canvas for any addition of colour, however small, so coupled with its translucent properties, it served as a perfect material for colour experimentation too.

The following photographs describe the processes required to produce a simple drop-out mould with a removable reservoir ring, which is indispensable for the multi-layered work I make. 

*Sasha runs ceramic courses in the UK and France, for more information about these or about her work, visit [sashawardell.com](http://sashawardell.com)*





**1** First of all I make a model for the mould out of damp plaster. This is the prototype that determines the size and shape of the final piece. I find plaster moulds incredibly useful for reproducing the shape I want quickly and exactly.



**3** I then pour plaster onto a sheet of glass to make a moulding batt. This is a flat piece of plaster, cut to size, that determines the size and diameter of the mould.



**7** I measure the diameter of the model accurately in order to ensure the mould is the correct size.



**2** I create the model by turning it on a lathe, using a chisel to shape the plaster into the desired form. If you don't have a lathe, the model can be made out of clay, either thrown or handbuilt, and this can be used to create the plaster mould.



**4** A second sheet of glass is placed on top until the plaster is set. I rest the glass on three spacers, each measuring approx. 1cm thick. The size of the spacers determines the thickness of the plaster.



**5** Once the plaster is set, the moulding batt is cut out and trimmed to size. The total size is the diameter of the model plus eight centimetres.



**6** I use a surface-forming tool called a Surform to make the moulding batt as circular as possible.



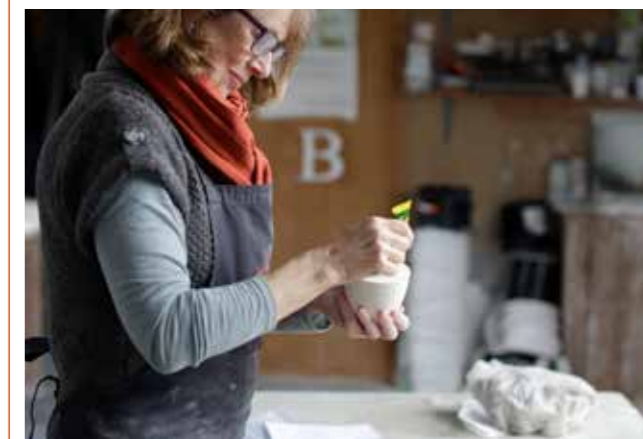
**9** I soft-soap, or 'size', the moulding batt three times as this acts as a barrier between the two layers of plaster. This will help release the mould later; if you don't use soft-soap they will stick together. I add the soap with a brush, then use a damp sponge to remove the excess.



**11** The model is then soft-soaped three times and the whole thing is buffed with a dry brush.



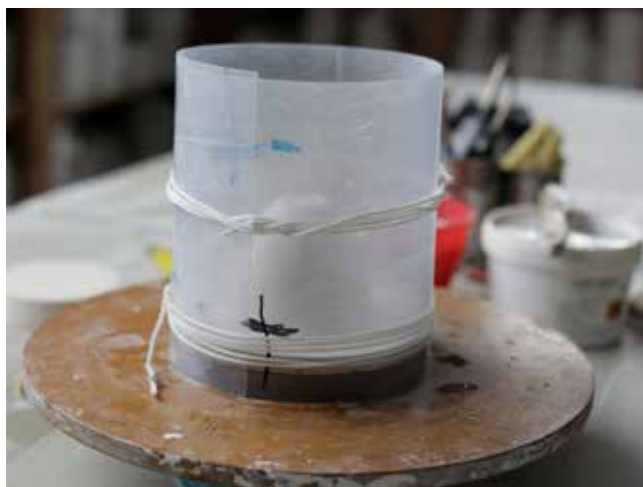
**8** The moulding batt is then raised up with clay by around 2cm to make securing it easier and to prevent slipping. The diameter of the model is then plotted onto the moulding batt using an indelible blue pencil and a compass.



**10** After soft-soaping the underside of the model three times, I apply three dots of UHU glue to secure the model upside down in the centre of the batt.



**12** The next step is to place 'cottling' plastic around the model and batt, securing it in place with a peg and string. Cottling plastic is a flexible sheet of plastic that is used to create a retaining wall around the mould to hold the plaster in place while it sets.



**13** The cotted model is now ready to accept the plaster that will form the mould.



**15** The plaster is added gradually to the measured water.



**17** I pour the plaster into the cottle and leave it to set, or cure. In the case of the plaster I use, this takes approx. 5 minutes.

**19** I then carefully remove the first part of the mould from the clay platform.



**14** For the first part of the mould, I measure the water and powdered plaster: one pint of water to one and three-quarter pounds of plaster. In this instance I'm using Newcast 96 plaster.



**16** I mix/blend the plaster for around 15–20 minutes.



**18** Once set, I remove the cottle. I then bevel the edges using a metal kidney to soften or remove sharp edges.



**20** The mould is turned the right way up in preparation for the creation of the reservoir ring. This is a separate removable ring of plaster that acts as a reservoir for the casting slip on the top of the mould. It also allows for variable casting thicknesses, which is indispensable for multi-layered casting and neat rims.



**21** I then soft-soap the spare, which is a turned plaster disc that is 2cm larger than the diameter of the model.



**23** The natches are made using a forged steel tool, or sometimes I use a half penny coin to gauge the size.



**25** The top of mould is then soft-soaped.



**22** I plot the position on top of the mould for the location points/natches for the reservoir ring and spare.



**24** This is the top of the mould with the natches in place.



**26** Three dots of UHU glue are used to secure the spare in position, following the pencil-marked guidelines.

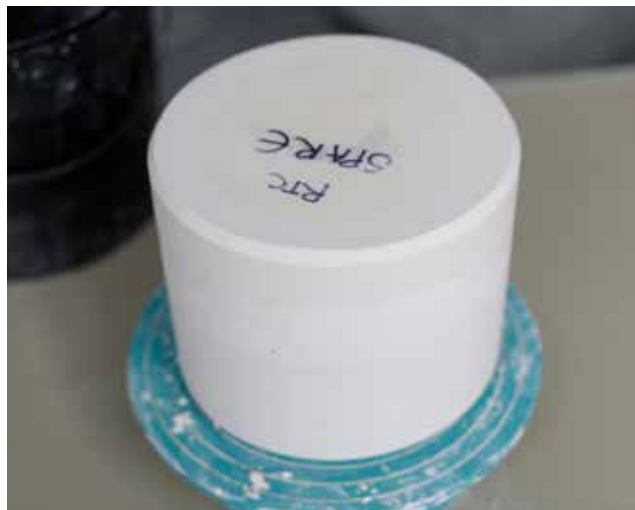
See Sasha at work on our video channel at [vimeo.com/ceramicreview](https://vimeo.com/ceramicreview)



**27** Cottling plastic is placed around the top of the mould and plaster is poured between the spare and the cottle.



**29** As soon as the plaster is set, or cured, I remove the model, spare and reservoir ring from the mould.



**28** The reservoir ring is bevelled to avoid sharp edges.



**30** The finished mould with its model, reservoir ring, spare and moulding batt. It is now ready to be used for slip-casting.



**31** Once the mould is completely dry, I pour casting slip in through the reservoir ring.



**32** I cut off the 'spare', or surplus slip, with a scalpel or sharp cutter to reveal the rim.