

# Ceramics

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# Lee Middleman

by Diane Chin-Lui



"Mihari Tower—Winter Series," 13½ inches (34 centimeters) in height, handbuilt from wheel-thrown and textured stoneware slabs, double glazed.

Portola Valley, California, potter Lee Middleman's complex work integrates seemingly simple pottery forms with sophisticated manipulations of the vessel surface. According to Middleman, "this allows the patterns [of his work] to evolve as the clay twists and expands," to create vessels that "intrigue the eye and demand to be handled."

Five years ago, Middleman, who has a doctoral degree in physics, quit his job as vice president for research and development of a major medical instrumentation company to begin his ceramics career. Now he is involved in research and development of a different kind: exploring the plasticity and texture of clay, and the nuances of glaze. His study of texture began when he attended a workshop in Mashiko, Japan, and met Tatsuzo Shimaoka, one of Japan's Living National Treasures.

When he returned home, Middleman tried to recreate the rope-impressed inlay work for which Shimaoka is widely known, but he found that impressing the rope into the clay distorted the shape of the vessel. He began experimenting and developed a technique that "result[ed] in the texture evolving during the expansion of the vessel." Using this technique, he could make patterns that "gracefully twisted around the surface and spread its pattern" without distorting the vessel shape.

Instead of using a rope, Middleman created an impressing tool—a bisqueware strip of clay with square teeth. With this tool, he forms different geometric patterns on the exterior walls of a wheel-thrown stoneware cylinder with a flat base. After the cylinder dries to the stage at which it will hold the impression yet not be leather hard, Middleman "rethrows" the cylinder, using a soft rib inside to form a vessel shape while maintaining the integrity of the exterior texture.

While experimenting with this new process, Middleman discovered that the impressed parts of the cylinder would stretch out and expand more than the unimpressed parts, which appeared as protruding shapes emerging from the stretched areas of clay. The more he stretched the clay to create the body of the vessel, the farther apart he would push the protruding shapes. This process created a visual tension between the projecting shapes of the unstretched clay and the smooth surface of the vessel walls. It also created an interesting swirling pattern as he reshaped the cylinder into a pot.

Middleman uses glaze to enhance the high-relief patterns on his vessels. The swirling patterns on the surface of the pots create small valleys where glaze collects. This results in the glaze being thicker on the walls and thinner



"Southwestern-Style Vase," 7½ inches (19 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown and hand-textured stoneware, with celadon glaze.



"Wings—Desert Series," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown and hand-textured stoneware, thinly glazed to retain microtexture.

# recipes



"Chain Vase—Winter Series," 9 inches (23 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown and hand-textured stoneware, double glazed, by Lee Middleman, Portola Valley, California.

on the raised areas. He states that the "thinly glazed surfaces highlight the macropatterns and reveal the stoneware clay's microtexture [that was] created during the expansion process."

While ceramists are attracted to Middleman's experimentation with the vessel surface and application of glaze, others may see the influence of nature in the vessel forms. The "Sunflower" series resembles the whirling geometric spiral of seeds from the center (corolla) of the flower. Yet to his Japanese viewers, his Sunflower series brings to mind Japanese iron teapots (*nambu tetsubin*).

Middleman's construct is the interplay between the inner and outer spaces, which creates tension as the walls appear to occupy

more space than they actually do. The tactile quality of the small projecting shapes from the smooth hand-thrown vessel walls captures our immediate attention. Through his experimentations, his work has evolved to handbuilt ceramic structures that reflect his continuing interest in Asian and Native American influences. The body of work that Middleman has developed in the last five years has been keeping him busy. Currently, Middleman is president and juried member of the Association of Clay and Glass Artists of California, which represents over 500 artists.

For further information about the work of Lee Middleman, see [www.lemiddleman.com](http://www.lemiddleman.com).

(Cone 10)

Bone Ash	6.9 %
Dolomite	15.0
Whiting	9.3
Custer Feldspar	46.6
EPK (Edgar Plastic Kaolin)	22.2
	100.0%
Add Zircopax	9.6%
Red Iron Oxide	1.0
Rutile	1.0

This glaze is thinly sprayed on work to retain the micro-texture of the clay surface while highlighting the hand texture.

## Winter Series Glaze (Temmoku)

(Cone 10)

Whiting	20 %
Custer Feldspar	33
EPK (Edgar Plastic Kaolin)	15
Silica (Flint)	32
	100%
Add: Red Iron Oxide	9 %

The Winter Series is actually double glazed. An underglaze of Temmoku is first sprayed or poured over the piece. Then the Desert Series Glaze is applied on top. This highlights the texture and adds an interesting visual texture to smooth surfaces such as the lips.