

Clay

T I M E S

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THE JOURNAL OF CERAMIC TRENDS & TECHNIQUES

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CERAMIC BASKETS

WITH AN ORGANIC APPEARANCE

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY J.D. RIGGS



Coil-built stoneware basket with cedar handle. 12" x 10"; cone 10 reduction.

Marilyn Stover, a talented ceramicist and potter, has had an interesting and varied career. After obtaining a degree in Spanish, she worked as an international flight attendant for Pan American Airways for over 15 years. Her many travels to South America instilled in her a strong interest in Mayan, Aztec, and Inca cultures and art forms. In 1989, she attended a pottery open house that introduced her to the medium of clay, allowing her to express her memories of foreign cultures in an artistic fashion. Marilyn subsequently developed a style of ceramic baskets with an organic appearance. Her baskets are unique in that she first obtains the "handle," usually a piece of oddly shaped driftwood, then she custom forms the basket to fit the handle.

Marilyn's baskets were initially inspired by a trip to the Pacific Northwest several years ago. Along the coast she found a multitude of unusually-shaped driftwood. Having always enjoyed combining elements, she

sought to join, in union, the ocean weathered wood and clay. After depleting her supply of Pacific driftwood, she had to find a local and easily replenishable source of wood for the handles. She has since used North Carolina driftwood, grapevines, kiwi vines, and even a native wood called Quichiahuara from the Island of the Sun in Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. Presently, her favorite wood is seasoned coastal cedar found in North Carolina's maritime forests. The prevailing winds on the barrier islands create weathering and gnarling of the branches that is not found inland.

Of course she only selects branches from trees that have been dead for many years, and the bark has been worn away. Hurricane Fran added greatly to the availability of this wood.



Coil-built stoneware basket with seasoned coastal cedar handle drilled with dowel and two beads, fired to cone 10 in reduction.

CLAY TIMES



Marilyn Stover of Rocky Mount, NC, custom-builds each of her baskets to suit their unique weathered wood handles.

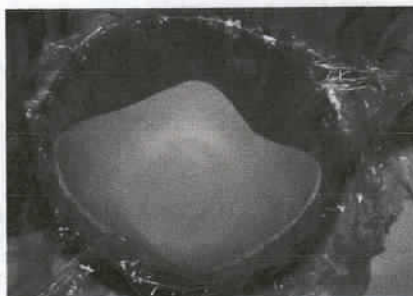


An example of one of Marilyn's baskets, featuring a handle made from the wood of the Quichiahuala tree.

How She Does It

Following are illustrations and a description of how Marilyn creates these one-of-a-kind baskets. First, she selects the wood piece for the handle. The body of the basket is then designed to fit the piece of wood. She starts by placing a slab of clay in the bottom of a bowl or basket lined with a thin sheet of plastic to prevent sticking [see photo 1]. Coils of extruded clay are then added to build up the sides [photo 2]. Unlike the traditional methods of coil building, Marilyn does not compress and smooth the coils to form a smooth wall. Instead, she tries to maintain the shape of the coils to create the illusion of an organic basket woven with vines. She tries to keep the coils moist by misting periodically so that it is unnecessary to use slip to join the coils. To prevent separation between the slab and the first coils, Marilyn fuses them together by pressing down with two fingers. She compresses only from the inside, smoothing with a rubber rib [photo 3], while maintaining the organic look on the outside. As she builds, Marilyn frequently refers back to the handle, creating lines and movement within the basket that will follow the natural curves of the wood [photo 4].

To form the holes for attaching the handle, she either makes loops or



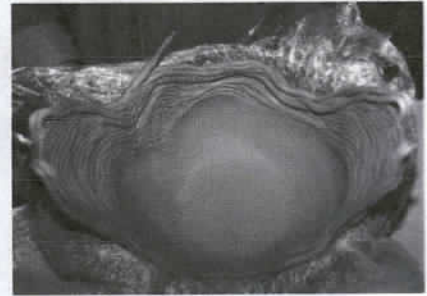
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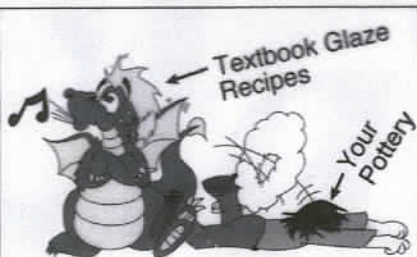


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punches holes in the coils. After firing, she weaves reed or caning through the holes to secure the handle to the basket. To add another dimension to the handle, she sometimes adds another branch to it, securing it with a wooden dowel and covering each end of the dowel with a glazed bead. Many different interpretations for Marilyn's technique can be applied by

the individual artist. Although we can't all go to the Pacific Northwest or the Island of the Sun to collect Quichiahuala wood, we can always find something available along the roadside or in our own backyards. We are only restricted by the limits of our imagination (or wood supply, perhaps...)

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Ceramic Baskets.....

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Basket Building Tips

1. Plastic wrap, from the dry cleaners, works well between the clay and the bowl.
2. For a form, use a bowl or basket that is a little bit smaller than the handle. This allows you to flare out your bowl to meet the handle.
3. If the sides extend higher than 4" above the rim of the bowl, a thin piece of cardboard can be placed between the plastic and the bowl to support the clay.
4. Treating the handles with mineral oil sometimes gives a richer tone.
5. Marilyn usually uses stoneware fired in reduction to cone 10. However, some of her baskets have been fired in an anagama (wood kiln), as well as a raku kiln.
6. Select earth-tone glazes, usually matte, that compliment the natural wood.



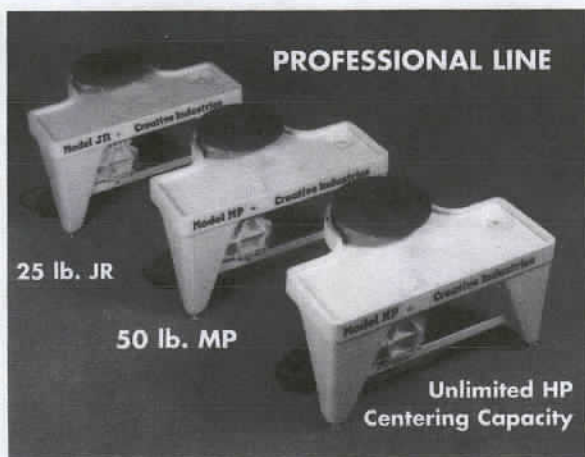
This 16" x 18" coil-built stoneware basket by Marilyn Stover features a handle made of coastal cedar.

Marilyn Stover can be reached at her e-mail address: marilyn5131@aol.com. ■

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