

LIGHT, INTENTION, & ATMOSPHERE

by Marty Fielding



Candelabra, 11 in. (28 cm) in height), handbuilt with cone-3 red clay, underglaze, and glaze, fired in an electric kiln, candles, 2022. Photo: Ali Schrubba.

I have been fortunate to travel and teach in Italy in recent years. The country is full of inspirations: Etruscan pottery, classical sculpture, and Renaissance art. Churches are common venues to view paintings, architecture, and ornamentation. Being drawn to rituals and the objects that accompany them, I find the practice of lighting votive candles in Catholic churches especially intriguing. Of the many reasons votive candles are lit, the one that resonates most with me is the intentional act of lighting a candle for acknowledging, celebrating, and grieving friends and loved ones that I've lost.

Drawing on experiences in Italy, I have made several versions of candle holders, including a candelabra for multiple taper candles. The form is composed of a group of intersecting tubes that is finished with a floor, foot, and added rims. The taper candle that I use as a guide has a 0.85-inch (2-cm) base. The interior diameters of the tubes are about 1 inch (2.5 cm), giving some room for shrinkage.

Constructing the Cylinders

As I began to execute the idea for this piece, I considered throwing and extruding the cylindrical parts, but decided on slab building. Any of these methods will work well and the assembly of the form can follow the process described below.

Start making a group of tubes by rolling a $\frac{1}{4}$ - to a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick slab. I used $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch and 1-inch dowels as forms to build the tubes around. It requires a slab about 4 inches wide to wrap around the 1-inch dowel. Determine the height of the cylinders needed and cut rectangular slabs to match. I often use a square and a ruler to make straight sides and 90° corners. Cut parallel 45° bevels on the long ends of the slab, score, and slip the bevels for attachment. I found it helpful to place a ruler under the edge of the slab to help lift it all at once as I began forming the slab around the dowel (1). Join the ends together and use the dowel for counter pressure as you compress the seam (2). Try not to wrap the slab too tightly on the dowel. You want it to release with minimal encouragement. As the cylinders are formed, set them horizontally on foam and allow them to reach soft leather hard prior to assembly.

When the cylinders become firm enough to hold their shape, decide on how to arrange them. Be sure the bottoms are level and adjust with a rasp if needed. When joining two cylinders of



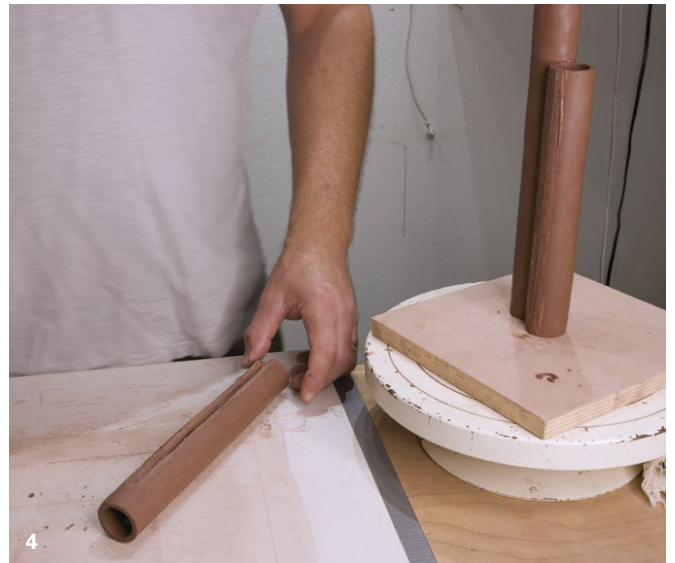
1 Roll the clay slab around the dowel, making sure to not wrap it too tight. Bevel the edges for the attachment.



2 Slip, score, and join the beveled edges. Compress the seam with a soft rib.



3 Cut the cylinder open with beveled edges, making an area where a second cylinder can attach to it.



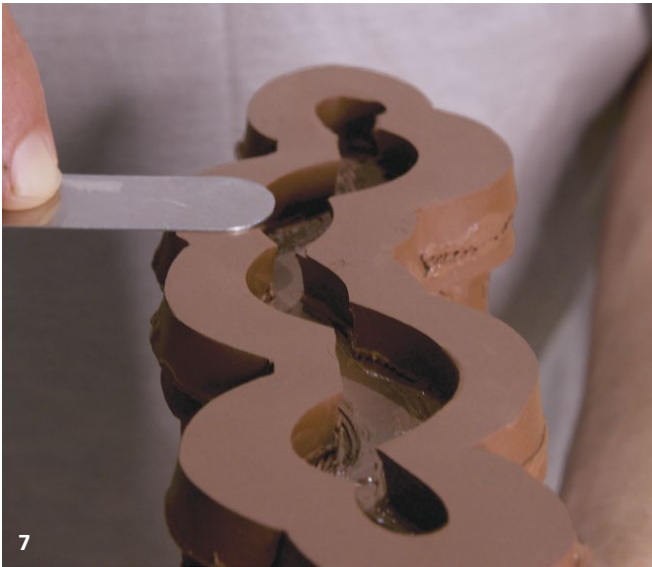
4 Score, slip, then attach the cylinders to each other. Make sure the joints are cleaned and refined.



5 Repeat step 4 until all your tubes are joined together and your candelabra top is complete.



6 Trace the base of the joined candelabra top onto a slab, then cut out the interior for a foot ring.



7 Apply pressure from the bottom to attach the foot to the base of the candelabra.



8 Slip, score, and attach a ring to the top of each cylinder to finish the rims.



9 Layer various shades of underglaze plus a coat of borax wash to the surface. Photos 1–7: Richard DeShetler; 8–9: Tiffany Rhynard.

varying heights, use the shorter one to trace the area where they will be attached to the taller tube. Cut out the traced rectangular shape (3). For the vertical cuts, bevel each side so the face of the bevel is visible as you look at the opening. This will mimic the curve of the tube to be joined and create more surface area for the attachment. Score and slip the areas to be joined and press the parts together (4). If possible, the dowel can be used again as an internal counter pressure while attaching. If the tube has become too small for the dowel, use one with a smaller diameter. Repeat this step as you attach the remaining tubes (5).

Slab Building the Floor and the Foot Ring

There are two parts to the bottom, a floor and a foot ring. Once all the tubes are joined in place, trace the bottom of the constructed form on the ¼-inch, soft leather-hard slab. Cut out the shape about a ¼ inch wider than the traced line. Slip and score both parts and join the floor to the body. Carefully support the piece while applying pressure from the bottom.

To make the foot ring, repeat the previous step using the ½-inch, leather-hard slab. This time, draw an offset profile of the shape ⅜–½ inch inside the traced line. I like to hold a needle tool or knife between my thumb, forefinger, and middle finger and let my ring finger slide along the outside of the slab to guide the line or cut. Cut out the interior of your slab to create the negative space inside the foot ring (6). Slip, score, and attach the foot (7). Once the foot has had a chance to become leather hard, use a rasp, knife, or rib to cut away excess clay, refine the shape, and finish the interior and exterior edges.

Completing the Top

To finish the tops, use a compass to draw two concentric circles on the leather hard ¼-inch-slab: the outside circle around 1½ inch and in the inside circle ⅞ inch. Cut out the ring and attach it to the top of the tube (8). Repeat for each tube. Some extra shaping of the ring is required for the shorter cylinders connecting taller tubes.

The Layered Surface

I want the surfaces of my work to relate to paintings, showing the layering of colors and brush strokes. These candelabras are monochromatic, but I use several colors or shades to create the overall hue. For this one, I started with a layer of maroon underglaze to give a deep undertone. I then layered a couple of shades of red, leaving the maroon visible in places and allowing the reds to blend on the surface (9).

After bisque firing, glaze the interior of the candelabra and the inside of the foot ring, then brush on a layer of borax wash, which adds variation and gives the underglaze surface a sheen.

Conclusion

Lighting a candle creates an atmosphere in our space or allows us to manifest our wishes for the future. As potters we can embellish that atmosphere or ritual through our aesthetic, conceptual, and design choices. Enjoy the process of considering how to interpret a candle holder through your own artistic lens.

Marty Fielding is a studio artist and professor at Florida State University. He and his family live in Tallahassee, Florida.