

Growing from the Ground Up: Decorative Pottery and Environmental Folklore



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Participants will take turns sharing with their family members or other residents their childhood and family experiences with “growing things.” This can certainly include such subjects as gardening, farming, and flowers.

A list of profound questions can be found within this plan to help spur meaningful discussion. A secondary topic and discussion would revolve around what experiences, knowledge, or memories residents might have had with clay. For example: “Can anyone recall finding clay in a riverbank or field? Have you ever played with it as a child or adult? Have you seen or lived in earthen or adobe homes?” At the conclusion of these discussions, residents will have the opportunity to create one of several types of clay vessels (depending upon the participants’ interests, abilities, hand strength, and motor skills) that can be decorated with imagery or imprints derived from vegetation.

At later sessions, the participants will paint their vessels and then wipe the wet paint off of the vessels, leaving the textured, impressed, or carved lines and designs filled with color (antiquing technique). Once this layer has dried, the vessels will be waterproof sealed (clear brush coat). Seeds may then be planted within the vessel to grow a suitable, low-maintenance plant or flower.

TIME:

Three and a half hours over four sessions. (Perhaps two hours for the first session; thirty minutes for each of the next three sessions. Not counting the optional sessions for decorative plates.)

MATERIALS:

- Air-dry clay (approximately 2 lbs. per person)
- Clay tools for carving/smoothing: Popsicle sticks, plastic forks and knives, pencils
- Texture tools for imprinting designs, such as buttons, stamps, leaves, flowers, etc.
- Paper towels or napkins
- Small water cups (can be disposable)
- Lids, bowls, plates for tracing circles
- Small sponges for clay work, as well as same or medium-sized sponges for wiping off paint
- Small plastic, Styrofoam, or paper bowls for those with limited hand strength/mobility
- Small rolling pins (or large wooden dowels 1” across by 10-12” long) are helpful
- A variety of acrylic paint colors
- A variety of small to medium-size stiff bristle paint brushes (1/8”-1” would suffice)
- Acrylic ceramic sealer
- Soil and plant seeds

- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

(Recommended optional publication: “History of Clay Use in North Dakota,” *Journal of the Northern Plains*, North Dakota State Historical Society.)

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

All three plagues will be addressed through an appropriate application of this activity plan. Participants will be engaged in dialogue with family members and peers through the sharing of personal stories and life experiences. Because clay is a very inviting and controllable medium, it has been shown to empower those who use it through its ability to meet people at their level of experience and understanding. Participants will be successfully engaged through their choice of project based upon their physical abilities and interests. The simplest level of participation could include the formation of a slab bowl or pinch pot, or simply experimenting with textured rollers, stamps, pinching, etc. Helplessness will be addressed as the participants will feel they have control of a medium or are successful in the creation of something material. Being able to create a vessel that can then be used to grow and care for a plant will also help to alleviate boredom and helplessness.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

An art therapy intervention using an eight-session pottery class (based on the Eastern Method throwing technique) was implemented with twenty elderly nursing home residents, the aim of which was to improve their psychological well-being. Following the intervention, the participating group showed significantly improved measures of self-esteem, and reduced depression and anxiety relative to the comparison group.

--Doric-Henry, L. “Pottery as Art Therapy with Elderly Nursing Home Residents.” *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* 14, no. 3 (1997): 163-171.

Cover photo: Clay bowl showing designs impressed from plant materials made by Brad Bachmeier.

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Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

1. On the northern prairies, growing things often played a major role in family survival and livelihood. Specific plants and trees can often bring back memories of locations and specific periods of life. The stage may be set for this discussion by providing a variety of “grown things,” such as aromatic flowers (geraniums, lilacs, roses), garden plants (such as tomatoes or rhubarb), or dried farm crops (such as sunflower heads, barley, or wheat).

2. Potential questions to ask the participants that may bring up profound and vivid memories and life experiences related to growing things:

- Can you remember what types of plants played a part in your life?
- Were there specific fruits, vegetables, plants, trees, or crops?
- Did you grow things for sustenance and survival or to beautify or for shelter?
- How did planting, caring, watering, weeding, harvesting make you feel?
- Did you do it alone or with others? Why/how?
- Who taught you how or why to grow things? Have you ever taught anyone else?

If the participants need further leading or examples, the

activity director should refer to the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* and read the following pages/excerpts:

- Beliefs about plants and planting, page 153
- Sunflower history and use, pages 278-280
- The activity director may choose to read the caption for the illustration “A Little Here and a Little There” or folklore item “81. ‘A Little Bit of This, A Little Bit of That’” (both of which can be found on page 285).

3. The following paragraphs and examples should now be read aloud to the group:

Clay is perhaps the oldest and most universal of materials on Earth. Humankind has made useful objects from clay for the past 20,000 years. Pottery shards have been found in North Dakota that are over 1,000 years old. Both Minnesota and North Dakota are full of such natural clay deposits.

Clay affects everyone’s daily lives, from our toilets and sinks to dentistry, computer chips, brick buildings, and roads. Many farmers experience slippery “gumbo” patches in their fields, where their tractors or machinery could potentially get stuck. Clay can be found along many riverbanks and is often a plaything for children making “mud pies.” Early settlers made earthen or adobe homes

out of the same clay that we still continue to use to this day. Nearly everyone has heard of Hebron Brick Company, which has provided most North Dakota brick structures with their materials while also exporting bricks nationally.

The state of North Dakota has a long and storied pottery tradition which is still carried on to this day through the North Dakota Pottery Collectors Society. The University of North Dakota (UND) has one of the oldest ceramic programs in the nation, resulting in very collectible pottery products. Some of the brands that we may all be familiar with include:

- o Three Affiliated Tribes (New Town)
- o Dickota Pottery (Dickinson)
- o Ceramics by Messer (Bowman)
- o WPA Ceramics (Dickinson)
- o Turtle Mountain Indian Pottery (Belcourt)
- o Rosemeade (Wahpeton)

4. Now take some time to discuss any memories or experiences that participants or their family members may have had with clay or clay products/pottery:

- Farm experiences?
- Childhood memories?
- Experiences with pottery? Uses? Coffee mugs, bowls? Crockery? Planters?

5. Then read the following paragraphs aloud to the group before beginning the studio activity:

Even in North Dakota’s most ancient pots, native makers used everyday materials such as rope and sticks to impress and carve designs and textures into the clay. The air-dry clay that we will be using today is very similar in texture and touch to those clays that you may have played with as a child and that pottery is still made from today.

We also will use our “growing things” theme to decorate and inspire our art work, much the same way several artists whose work is depicted in the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* did. On page 119, for instance, we see a *Slamenky* egg artist with a farm background who is inspired by nature motifs such as wheat, barley, and oat straw to create her designs. On pages 138 and 139 of the same book, we see blacksmiths who forge German-Russian grave crosses inspired by nature. These crosses depict plant and farming themes through their use of a sunburst motif and leaf or flower designs.

In a similar vein, we might impress designs from leaves or from buttons into our pottery pieces . . . or carve simple designs inspired by nature and plants.

STUDIO ACTIVITY:

1. Take a moment to play with a small, golf-ball-sized piece of clay . . . squeeze it, pinch it, poke it, and just re-familiarize yourself with this ground that you've lived on!

2. The activity director will demonstrate three simple and ancient techniques for making clay pottery. We will start with the easiest technique, and then work our way toward the slightly more difficult techniques.

- **Slab bowl.** The activity director will demonstrate how to roll a slab (pancake) of clay with one's hands or a rolling pin (making the correlation with bread or pizza dough might help). This simple slab can be decorated either now or later. It may be pressed into, stamped, drawn, etc. Placing leaves or flowers into the slab and rolling them on will leave behind a great impression/design. The participants could then remove the plant material and decide if they want the patterns/designs on the inside or outside of their bowls. The activity director can use a napkin, paper towel, or coffee filter to cover or line a disposable bowl (Styrofoam, plastic, or paper) to "drape" the clay into. The participants could also drape their clay "pancakes" over the top of a bowl turned upside down to help it take a pottery bowl form. Use your fingers to gently help the clay take form, taking great care not to distort any designs that may have already been created. (See the Clay Techniques Appendix for illustrations and further description.) Additional

design elements can now be drawn or stamped, and pieces of clay such as a coil top or handles can also be added.

- **Pinch pot.** The activity director will make a small pot from a baseball-sized piece of clay. (See the Clay Techniques Appendix for detailed steps and pictures.) This technique is a little bit more difficult, but provides the opportunity to form the pot into more vessel-like shapes.
- **Coil pot.** The activity director will start with a small round disc of clay for the bottom, then begin to roll snakes or coils of clay about the thickness of one's thumb upwards. The activity director will continue to stack and smooth a few coils together to further demonstrate the process. (See the Clay Techniques Appendix for steps, illustrations, and further variations.)

3. The activity director will explain the processes and distribute all tools and materials. Encourage the participants to combine any of the techniques as they understand them and are able to. For example, a coil can be added to a pinch pot to create a rim. A coil may also be used to create handles on a bowl, or added to a bowl to make it higher or change its shape. Remind the participants to keep turning the work as it develops, and to begin thinking about how they might want to decorate it. If a participant wants to continue adding detail but runs out of time, you can preserve the wet clay project for another day by wrapping it with slightly damp paper towels and putting it into a sealed plastic bag (used shopping bags also work fine).

“Growing Things” decoration/design ideas:

- Impress leaves or flowers into wet clay to leave an impression.
- Make simple clay flowers, leaves, or petals to add to the outside of the pottery.
- Use tools like a pencil to carve designs into the clay.
- Use texture tools (buttons, stamps, etc.) to press in designs.

4. Leave clay pots out to dry completely (this may take up to a full week). Before putting projects away to dry, decide if the pottery will be used as a planter and if the resident would like a hole placed in the bottom for water to escape into a drain tray.

SESSION 2 (30 MINUTES):

FOR THE PARTICIPANTS TO PAINT/FINISH THE POTTERY PIECES

1. Explain to the participants that in the making of most pottery we would now have the work fired in a kiln to about 2000 degrees to make it hard and permanent. A glaze would then be painted on it and the work would be fired a second time to make it waterproof and food-safe. Since most sites will be without a kiln, we have chosen to use air-dry clay. This clay has dried and is hard to a degree, but it is still somewhat fragile, so care will need to be taken today in handling it.

2. The activity director will demonstrate how to paint the project thoroughly and liberally with a coat of acrylic paint, being very careful to push paint into all the deep areas of the design/work. Working rather quickly before the paint dries, the paint is wiped off

with a damp sponge that needs to be cleaned fairly frequently. For residents with whom speedy work would be a concern, smaller areas of the piece can be painted and wiped at a time.

The participants should enjoy seeing their textures and designs show up more visibly through this “antiquing technique.” The participants may now add additional areas of color if they would like to. Rims, handles, or other details can also be painted if so desired.

Note: It may be helpful to play a prairie nature sounds CD as gentle background music. Painting has been shown to be very relaxing and meditative, and the soothing and familiar sounds might be a nice, gentle reminder of past times.

SESSION 3 (30 MINUTES):

TO SEAL/WATERPROOF THE PARTICIPANTS' PIECES

1. Now that the work has been painted and dried again, it can be sealed. Any acrylic sealer/water-proofer should suffice. Follow the product directions and ensure that the inside is well-sealed. Once dry and well-sealed, the piece can serve as a planter if the participant so wishes. It is important to note that these pieces are not food-safe, nor dishwasher or microwave safe.

SESSION 4 (30 MINUTES):

FOR THE PARTICIPANTS TO DISCUSS WHAT KIND OF PLANTS THEY WOULD LIKE TO GROW IN THEIR POTTERY PIECES

1. The “Growing from the Ground Up” project can now come full circle, as the nature-inspired pottery made from the Earth can now contain earth to grow a plant. The participants can partake in choosing their plant seeds and in the discussion of their choices. Entrusting a living thing to the participants will help to combat boredom and helplessness, while hopefully providing some peace, color, and life to their living space.

SESSIONS 5, 6, 7, AND 8 - OPTIONAL ACTIVITY (2 1/2 HOURS OVER 4 SESSIONS; PERHAPS ONE HOUR FOR THE FIRST SESSION & 30 MINUTES FOR EACH OF THE NEXT THREE SESSIONS):

1. Use and generally follow much of the same discussion points and clay techniques as described in Sessions 1 through 4. However, instead of or in addition to creating pots, make decorative “plates.” Form a square that is roughly 11” x 11” and ½” thick. When flattening the clay with a rolling pin, work both sides by flipping it from time to time. This will help prevent it from curling later when it dries. Have the participants gather plant materials from the garden, the care facility grounds, or from plants within the facility. Place the plant materials in a pleasing arrangement on the clay. Firmly and evenly run a rolling pin over the plants. Remove the plant material carefully, leaving the impressions on the surface of the clay. (At times it can be

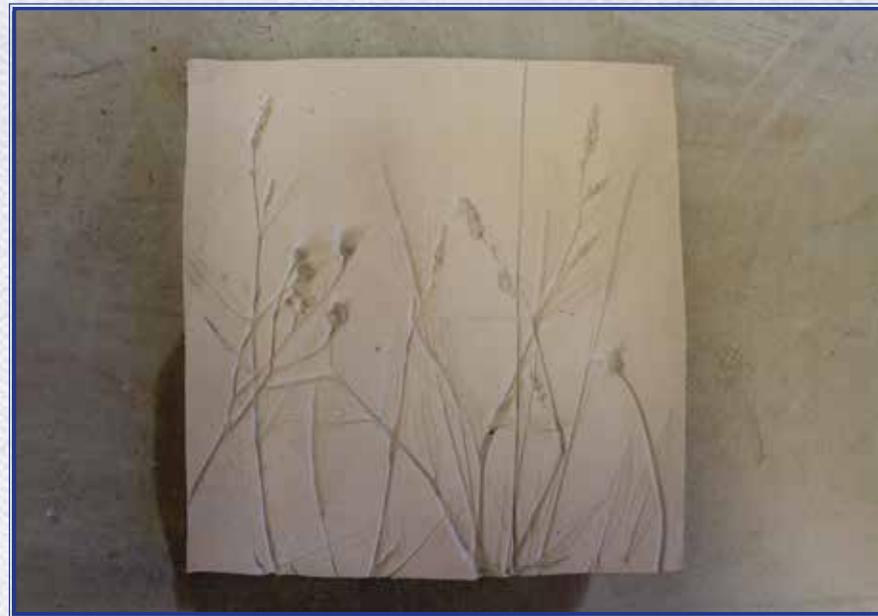
challenging to get men to participate in art activities. To better engage men, especially if they or their loved ones were farmers, obtain grain crops like wheat, barley, rye, and oats on the stem to be used to make the impressions.) Place a rectangular or square plate that is smaller than 11” x 11” over the clay, cutting around the edges and removing the excess to form straight lines. If desired, shaping the edges of the clay will create a more rustic look. The straight or roughly shaped lines will give the piece stability if displayed on a shelf.

2. It is important to put the clay pieces on an elevated rack that allows air to circulate underneath and around them. This will help prevent the clay from cracking and curling as it dries. When dry, the artwork can be left in a beautiful natural state and color, or the pieces can be colored with acrylic or latex paint. (Do not use tempera paint.) If painted, apply a light color to the entire surface. Let it dry thoroughly. Then paint the surface with a darker color paying special attention to getting in all the deep textured areas. While it is still wet, wipe it off with a sponge leaving the darker color in the textured areas. When dry again, the plate can be sealed with a water-based varnish (like modge-podge or floor wax) or sprayed with an acrylic spray finish.



*Clay plates showing designs impressed
from plant materials made by Brad
Bachmeier.*

*The plates were left unpainted in their
natural state.*



Clay Techniques Appendix

There are many surfaces with which to work with clay upon that will resist sticking, such as a sheet of unfinished plywood or sheetrock, cardboard, or several layers of newspaper. Avoid working directly on laminated tabletops, as the clay will stick. Store unused clay in a tightly sealed plastic bag, and cover unfinished work with a damp cloth and plastic bag to keep the clay moist and workable. Clay may be misted with a sprayer if it begins to dry out as you are working on it.

Household utensils make excellent clay tools. Plastic or old knives, spoons, forks, chopsticks, paper clips, pencils, buttons, and many other common household items are perfect to cut, shape, and texture the clay. A damp sponge is ideal for smoothing slab joints (see below). You'll discover many more creative "tools" along the way.

SLAB BOWL:

This clay-forming technique is used to achieve flat, even slabs of clay from 1/4" to 1/2" thick. Clay can be thrown down, flipped, and patted to achieve a "pancake" of clay, or a rolling pin may be utilized to help ease the process. Flipping the clay frequently during the rolling will help to ensure an even slab. Slabs are terrific slates on which to draw designs or capture impressed textures. Once the design work has been created, slabs should be cut into a circle. A circle shape can be traced or pressed into the clay from any plate, lid, or bowl form of desired size. The clay can then be cut using any cutting type tool, such as a plastic knife.

Once an even clay slab has been created, a bowl form can be achieved by either draping the clay into a mold (bowl form) or over the top of an inverted bowl form. For either technique, a paper towel, napkin, or coffee filter should be placed on or in the form to aid the release of the clay from the form. Since the clay will shrink a bit, if you create a drape-formed bowl, be sure to take the clay off the bowl once it is firm enough to hold its shape. If it is not removed, the form might cause the clay to crack as it dries.

Once the form is finished, you can add a coil (or coils) of clay to the base for a foot, or to the top of the bowl for a rim.



A rolling pin is used to flatten the clay to a thickness of ¼" to ½" thick.

In a separate session, elders could be encouraged to go outside and collect plants and leaves that can be placed on the clay to create images of nature. Arrange the plants in any way that is pleasing.





Use a rolling pin to press the plant materials into the clay.

Carefully remove the plant materials from the clay leaving behind impressions.





Place a plate over the clay, cut around it with a knife, and remove the excess clay to form a circle.

Drape and form the clay over an inverted bowl with a paper towel between the clay and the bowl. Decide if the design is to be inside the bowl or outside placing the clay accordingly. In this example, the impressed designs will be inside the bowl.





After the clay has been formed, coils for the base or rim can be added.

A design can be added to the base by impressing one's thumb downward and side by side along the entire rim.





A simple yet artistic base.

Note the impressions from the plant material inside the bowl.



PINCH POT:

Pinch pots are perhaps the oldest form of pottery and they make a great starter project. Begin by shaping clay into a ball about the size of a tennis ball or baseball. Smaller hands should start with a smaller ball. Hold the ball in the palm of one hand, then gently press the thumb of your other hand into the center of the ball. Turn the

ball with short movements until your thumb is about one-half inch from the bottom of the ball of clay. Continue rotating the ball while pinching the sides between your thumb on the inside and your fingers on the outside. You are attempting to create walls of even thickness. Work from the bottom up to form the desired shape. It may take a try or two, but soon you'll be making great pinch pots.



Press thumb into the center of the clay ball.



Press downward and rotate the clay until one's thumb is ½" from the bottom.

Keep rotating the clay working from the bottom up to make the walls of the pot thinner.





Work the sides of the clay to thin it.

*Place the clay on the table to form the base
and keep shaping the bowl.*





Shape and smoothen the bowl.



Finished.

COIL POT:

The technique of coiling is the age-old method of making pots by laying coils of clay one upon the other and then smoothing them together to form the desired shape and size.

Begin by rolling a portion of clay into a ball in the palms of your hands. On a smooth work surface, flatten the ball to ¼" thickness to form a base for your pot. Using a dull knife, cookie cutter, empty can or jar lid, cut out a base to the desired shape and size.

Roll a portion of clay into a long oval, gradually creating a coil about the diameter of your thumb. Thinner coils like that of a pencil may be used, but are more difficult to work with. With gentle pressure, press the coil to the base and smooth it in with your fingers or a tool such as a Popsicle stick. Make another coil and lay it on top of the first coil. Repeat this "layered-coil" process until your pot reaches the desired size and height. You may also create a "continuous coil" pot by joining the end of each previous coil to the beginning of each subsequent coil. Rather than a layered look, this creates a spiral appearance. It is recommended that you smooth the coils together every few inches, so that you don't encounter trouble when trying to reach into the pot to smooth out the coils.

You must at the very least smooth out the coils on the inside of the vessel to increase strength and stability, but you may smooth the outside also if you wish to create a smooth surface for decoration. In the process of building, coils may also be added in the form of short vertical pieces or "coiled snails" of clay if you want to create variation in the size and look of the coils.



Roll a piece of clay into a long snake-like coil working from the center out.

Flatten a small ball of clay to create the base. Attach the coil firmly to the base.





Wrap the coil upon the base, layering it to create height.

The outside of the pot can be shaped every few inches in height by running the thumb downward on the clay or left untouched so the coil pattern shows on the outside.





Then smooth the surface, if desired.

While it is optional to smoothen the outside of the pot, it must be shaped and smoothened on the inside for strength and durability. Shape every few inches as height is added.





To add height, roll out additional clay into a long coil, like a snake, and build upon what was already created.

Again, smoothen the outside (optional) and inside (required) as the pot grows.





If desired, decorative elements could be added by cutting a long coil into shorter lengths and adding them to the pot.

Design elements (optional but encouraged) added to the pot. The outside of the pot could also be inscribed with designs using the pointed end of a pencil or some other utensil.



AUTHOR • BRAD BACHMEIER:

Brad Bachmeier is a native of Anamoose, North Dakota. He taught art at every grade level (K-12) in both Minnesota and North Dakota before becoming a professor of art education at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM). Professor Bachmeier is most well-known regionally and nationally as a ceramic artist. In 2013, Professor Bachmeier received the “Excellence in Research and Creative Activity” award from MSUM. In 2009, upon completion of an MFA degree in ceramics from the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, his exhibit “A Ceramic Humanity” was bestowed the only Award of Distinction for Creative Exhibition ever granted at the school. In 2009, Professor Bachmeier also received the prestigious biannual North Dakota Governor’s Award in Arts Education for his “numerous, significant, and continued contributions to the state and region.” This service includes stints as the President of the Board of Directors at the Rourke Art Museum and The Arts Partnership. Professor Bachmeier’s ceramic works are held in numerous regional and national public and private collections, including the North Dakota Governor’s Mansion, The Microsoft Permanent Collection, The South Dakota Museum of Art, The Plains Art Museum, The Rourke Art Museum, and Michelle Obama’s office in the White House.

(Artwork by Brad Bachmeier. Photos courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

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