

Throwing Tall Narrow Forms

by Annie Robbins



Three tall bottles (the middle one is 27 inches high) that began as tall narrow cylinders. Annie Robbins states "Lucie Rie is the potter I most admire and emulate."

I've always favored tall narrow forms, but no matter how hard I've tried, getting anything over 18 to 20 inches high just eluded me. Then a few years ago, I sprained my right wrist and thumb in a car accident so I didn't work for a while to give my hand a rest. Fearing the worst, I went to a hand specialist and broke into tears. He explained that hand injuries were sometimes worse for artists because we use our hands to express ourselves. He encouraged me to "find a new way" and inspired me to challenge myself. After years of hard work as a thrower and even longer as a very stubborn woman, I left his office baffled.

Somehow I had to take the stress of pulling up tall pieces off my right hand and wrist, and although I hardly expected to come out ahead, I was hoping to break even. The result is that I discovered a technique that allowed me to stretch beyond my previous limits. I'm sure other potters have worked this way, but for me it's still new and exciting!

Tips for Success

- Apply the seven basic “C’s” for throwing: Collar it in, Clean it up/off, Cut it off, Compress, Compress, Compress and, of course, Cheat whenever possible.
- Tall narrow forms can quickly become off center, similar to the rope in a spinning lasso. The faster the wheel spins, the more exaggerated the twirl. Work at a reasonable pace, and when in doubt, SLOW DOWN and collar your piece.
- Water is not your best friend when throwing these tall forms. Water weakens the piece and lessens the integrity of the clay’s strength, so use it sparingly.
Tip: Throughout the throwing process, I usually wet my hand instead of the clay

Process

Begin with well-wedged small balls of clay (figure 1). Form a large centered mass that’s tall and narrow (figure 2). Open the centered clay burrowing your left hand into the mass using very little water (figure 3). Lift your hand out while opening your fingers inside the piece and raise it slowly so the opening is no more than about 4 inches across. Clean off excess moisture on the outside with a metal rib (figure 4). If there is any unevenness at the top of the piece, use a needle tool to trim it off (figure 5). Do not press the unevenness back into the piece.



Now, get ready to cone the clay. A similar technique is used by many potters when centering. The way that works best for my right wrist is to place my palm at 12 o’clock, flat against the piece facing my stomach, fingers aiming in a counter-clockwise direction (figure 6). My left wrist is bent back at 6 o’clock, fingers pointing clockwise. Compress, using the weight of your center, and slowly bring the piece up while gradually collaring the cylinder (figure 7). There should be some friction against the counter-clockwise motion of the clay. While compressing your hands together, move them clockwise to the 3 and 9 o’clock positions (figure 8). With a wheel-head speed of about 60 rpm, this collaring action should take only about 3 to 4 seconds. The compression will make the opening smaller. That’s ok for now.

Bottle, 23 inches in height. Annie believes that “simplicity brings out the beauty in a form.”



Clean off the outside of the piece with a metal rib, open the top a little and cut off any excess at the top (figure 9). Repeat the collaring process at least once more (figure 10). Metal ribs tend to scrape off excess slip as opposed to rubber ribs, which compress the clay and moisture together. Wet your left hand and arm and insert them while opening your fingers just a little on the way down because the opening is now narrow from the collaring (figure 11). The collaring compressed the walls of the

cylinder and made them thicker, but this left compression marks on the inside of the form, which you can feel as the wheel rotates. Use the whole long length of the outside of your thumb and apply pressure in the opposite direction of your wheel's counter-clockwise rotation (go from 3 to 5 o'clock). As you insert your arm down into the cylinder, use this motion as an opportunity to compress the walls from the inside (figure 12). With the exception of the moisture on your hands and arm, there should



be no need for any additional moisture on the inside of the piece. While this step usually lowers the height, the cylinder is still over my elbow! Clean and trim the form (figure 13). Already, you should have a nice tall narrow cylinder, and you're ready to make your first pull.

Stretch your wet hand and arm down to the base. Compress the thumb side of your left hand to the wall and start to pull up (figure 14).

It's hard to get much strength without a bent elbow but don't worry about the thickness of your piece at the base because it needs to be thick to hold up the walls. It also needs to be thick so that, when your piece is finished, it has some weight at the base so the cat doesn't knock it over. Remember, you can always trim it off later if you want. The form will twist as you work your way to the top. Since the clay is not distributed



the same way as it is on a wide piece, it usually takes me three passes to complete one pull. Here's how: Pull up about one-third from the base (figure 15). Right before you sense the twist is near, withdraw your hand. Now, place your hands at 3 and 9 o'clock, directly above the place where you stopped pulling (one-third from the base) (figure 16) and start to collar it

in, bringing your hands up as you go (figure 17). Clean off the piece and trim the top. Note: When I pull, I use a damp sponge on the outside in my right hand. The piece will be hugging your left arm so, if the moisture runs out, be ready to squeeze some water down your arm.

Invert your wet left hand and arm back into the cylinder and go down



(Left) “The Necklace,” 19¾ inches in height. Annie fires all her pieces in an oxidation atmosphere and often fires them multiple times.

(Middle) One of Annie’s favorites is the bottle form with a cup shape on top. This is a tricky form since it is all thrown as one piece.

(Right) Annie allows the lips to speak for themselves and in this way the forms find their own voice.

to the area you started collaring (not lower) (figure 18). Compress and pull up until you feel the piece may want to twist, around two-thirds of the way up (figure 19). Remove your hand and repeat the collaring process from the two-thirds point (figure 20). Cut excess off the top and clean with a metal rib. Insert wet hand and arm down just as far as you last started collaring (at the two-thirds point) and pull to the top and trim the rim. Note: If you compress too hard when you collar the piece, the area above your hands may want to spin like a lasso. The taller the section, the more likely this is to happen.

The next step is difficult and requires terrific coordination between your foot pedal and the speed of your hands. Start at the base and quickly collar up all the way (figures 21). Sometimes, I apply water directly to the piece before this pass. The hand-foot coordination is similar to speeding on a country road—the faster you’re traveling, the quicker you need to twist and turn with the curves. You’ll know right away if your hands aren’t fast enough because the piece will spin out of control.

One fun way to deal with this problem is to recruit a friend! Have that person stand directly across from you (figure 22). Make sure her or his hands are wet. Have your friend place their hands on either side of the cylinder at 9 and 3 o’clock positions, thumbs up about 2 to 3 inches from the top. Be ready for your next motion because if you wait too long her hands could dry from friction. If this person is not a potter, explain they aren’t squeezing, just “spotting” your piece. Collar the form while compressing and raise your hands at a fairly swift pace (figure 23). If my wheel is traveling at 60 rpm, I generally cover the whole upward distance in 4 to 5 revolutions. Be sure to have your friend move her hands up if she feels the piece moving up.

Now clean off the piece with your metal rib, trim the excess, and you should have a nice tall cylinder. This is where the fun begins, so start to create your form (figure 24).

