

BUILDING A

by Anna Calluori Holcombe with Patrick Taddy

I began using the box format in my work while in graduate school at Louisiana State University in the 1970s. I've continued to use it where the concept of container is important in the series. The idea of something mundane becoming precious by being placed in a box has always fascinated me.

Working with slabs can be frustrating. Stress cracks often develop at the seams if one waits until the slabs are stiff enough to build with, thereby limiting the form possibilities. I was searching for a way to reduce the cracking and give myself more flexibility in my forms. In a conversation with a colleague, the fact that a certain clay artist was using tar paper for the purpose of building with slabs piqued my interest.

In 1985, I was living in a new housing development under construction, and construction workers regularly threw away partial rolls of tar paper. I picked up one such roll and brought it back to my studio to experiment with.

What I discovered from my experimentation is there are a number of advantages to using this technique. One is that I can put slabs together before the leather-hard stage, virtually eliminating stress cracks in the seams. Second, it allows me to construct larger pieces as the slabs are supported by the tar paper. Third, I can form the slabs into shapes that will hold until they stiffen. Last but not least, I am able to paddle, roll and pinch the slabs into shape without marring the surface.

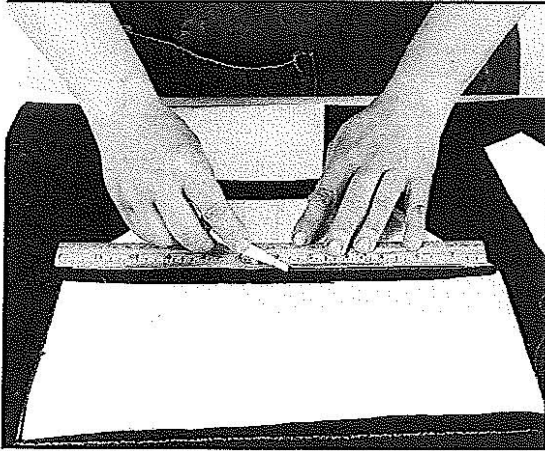
In a classroom or workshop situation this technique allows the student a quick and easy way to construct a box form in a short amount of time. I've had numerous opportunities to teach this technique, most recently in Scotland. There I had to find a substitute, because roofing materials are considerably different in Europe. I found that a waxed stencil paper—a type of waterproofed poster board—worked almost as well, although the tar paper is stronger and more waterproof.

BETTER BOX



"Still Lifebox V," 14 inches in height, earthenware clay, terra sigillata, underglaze, low-fire glaze, electric-kiln fired to Cone 04. My intention in this work is to capture the arcane qualities of everyday mundane objects. This interest in the still life was fired up in 1990 while in Bologna, Italy, where I saw the Giorgio Morandi Retrospective Exhibition. I was amazed at how Morandi could paint such simple everyday objects repeatedly and yet brilliantly capture their mystical qualities.

PHOTOS: RICHARD BERGEN



PHOTOS: PATRICK TADBY

Figure 1
Using a white china marker, trace graph paper templates of the box sides, top and bottom. **Tip:** Designs can be transferred using chalk rubbed on the back side of the design and the image redrawn through the paper onto the tar paper.



Figure 2
Cut the shapes out with heavy-duty scissors.

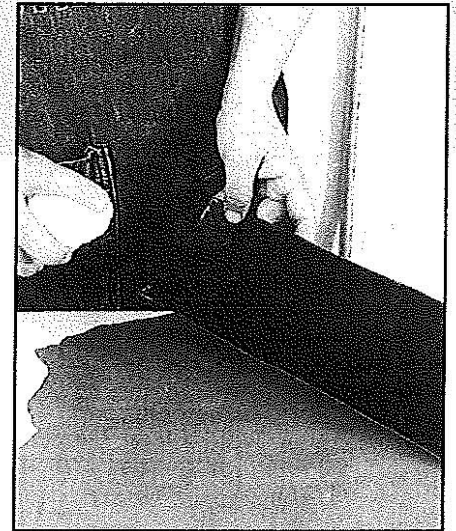


Figure 3
Spray water onto the slab and the back of the tar paper forms.



Figure 4
Press tar paper into place and lightly roll to secure it.

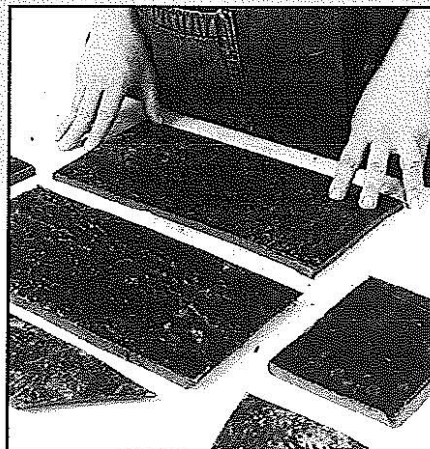


Figure 5
Cut out all the slabs using a knife with a stiff blade. Allow them to set for a while to slightly stiffen, or cover them with plastic and allow them to set overnight.

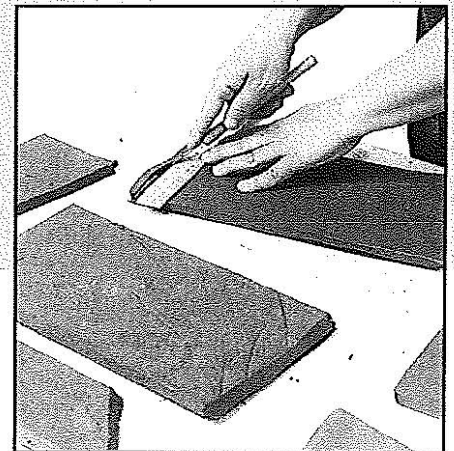


Figure 6
Turn the pieces over and bevel the side edges by using a ruler placed about 1/4 inch from the edge, holding the knife blade at a 45° angle and then cutting.

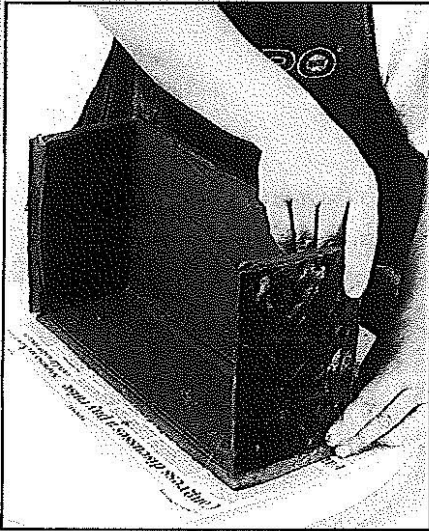


Figure 7

Build the walls on to the bottom slab—scoring and slipping are critical. Paddle the sides together with a wooden spoon, add a coil on the inside seams, then paddle again.



Figure 8

Add the top part of the box. Note: Since the top pieces support each other, have all parts scored and ready to be joined ahead of time.

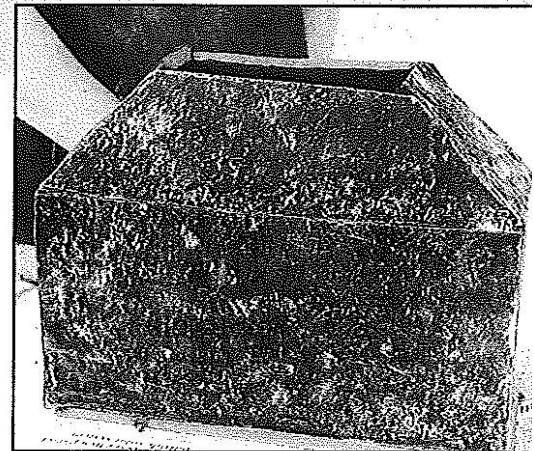


Figure 9

Leave the tar paper on the constructed box until it is leather hard and the sides can support themselves.



Figure 10

Peel away the tar paper and dispose of it since it buckles too much to reuse it.

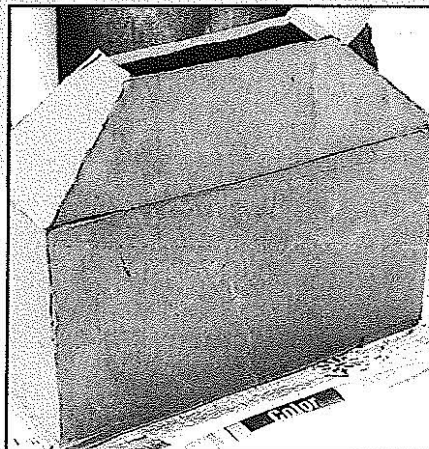


Figure 11

The box is ready to be polished off and finished using metal ribs and Surforms to conceal the seams and square the corners.



Anna Calluori Holcombe is Professor of Art and Department Head at Kansas State University. Her work has been exhibited nationally as well as in Italy, Germany, New Zealand and Australia. She is also a Fellow of NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts).

Patrick Taddy, collaborator and photographer for the process shots, is a graduate of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. He is currently enrolled in the MFA program in ceramics at Kansas State University.