

# Pulling

## DYNAMIC HANDLES

BY MIKE JABBUR



For me, mugs evoke the smell of freshly ground coffee, the delicious bitterness of espresso, and the experience of starting the morning with a beautiful handmade object. This experience begins—as we pluck a mug from the cabinet—with the handle, which is, at its best, a carefully orchestrated arrangement of composition and ergonomics. There are, of course, many ways to make a successful handle.

What is most important to me is that the handle has to make sense on the cup. Part of solving that design problem is studying proportion and practicing your handling of material; part of it is determining what type of handle is appropriate for your style of throwing or building. My work tends to be fluid, comprised of both hard and soft elements, with dynamic movement. I want my handles to have those same properties.



**1** Start with a cone-shaped lug and pinch out the section that will become the bottom attachment. **2** Slowly pinch and shape the clay along the lug toward what will become the top attachment. Cut the handle off the lug and adjust it to make sure it is symmetrical and the appropriate size. **3** Compress the edges of the handle with a damp finger and smear a drop or two of water on the surface to create some slip. **4** Score an area of the mug as close to the size of the handle attachment as possible. **5** After attaching the top of the handle to the mug, begin pulling, making sure the handle hangs straight down during the process. **6** Once the handle reaches the desired length, support the bottom attachment, turn the cup upright, and press the bottom attachment to the mug without scoring the handle. **1–6** Photos: *Eliot Dudik*.



### Form and Function Consideration

I try to achieve a dynamic quality within the handle by creating transitions from thick to thin in three distinct ways. First, the top attachment of my handle is thick, the middle arc is thin, and the bottom attachment is thick. Second, the top of my handle is wide, the middle arc narrows slightly, and the bottom attachment is wide. Third, the edges of my handle are thin, while the center, or spine, is thick. All of these transitions create visual energy without making the handle appear busy. This concept of a handle also functions in terms of ergonomics, as the thinner edges and thicker center fit the hand more comfortably than a handle that is the same thickness throughout. Extra mass at the points of attachment provides visual and physical strength, while the thin edges create crisp lines that make the profile of the handle cut through space. It is a visual trick that allows a handle to have mass for comfort, while retaining a visual lightness.

### Forming the Handle

The key to pulling a handle with thick points of attachment at the top and the bottom is to start with the right amount of clay. There is no formula for this. Trial and error is the best way to learn. But it is helpful to pre-shape the handle, roughing out the proportions before attaching and pulling. I pull handles from very soft clay, starting with a cone-shaped lug that is large enough to make several handles. I always

begin by pinching out the section that will become the bottom attachment (1). I slowly pinch and shape my way down the lug toward what will become the top attachment (2). Patience is key. Avoid making quick, drastic changes in the shape. I try not to use my fingertips, as they tend to create dents that are tricky to remove later. Instead, I use the pads of my fingers. Many small pinches with light pressure, rather than a few aggressive pinches, will produce a smoother handle. When the handle is the right length, I cut it off the lug and adjust the top attachment, making sure it is symmetrical and the appropriate size. The attachment should be shaped roughly like a football, thicker in the center and thinner at the edges (3). I compress the cut edges with a damp finger and smear a small amount of water on the surface to create some slip before setting the handle aside on a damp sponge to keep it from drying out.

### Attaching the Handle

My mugs usually have a front—a side with a profile that I want to highlight or a gesture to which I want to call attention. I also like to find a point where the mark I made with my rib moves through the arc of the handle. Because I do not blend the connections of my handles, it is important to score an area of the mug as close to the size of the handle attachment as possible (this also helps to keep the handle stuck to the cup when pulling) (4). I score the mug where the

top attachment will go, add a few drops of water, and score again—creating slip. I also score a small area on the mug for the bottom attachment. I recently stopped scoring my handles and instead have been smearing a drop or two of water on the handle to help it stick to the scored area of the mug. (I've pulled about 100 handles so far with this new method and none have popped loose, and there have been no cracks!) Next, I support the inside of the cup while attaching the handle, compressing the handle into the mug with a slight twisting motion that works the scored surfaces together—using a light touch to protect the integrity of the handle. Once I begin pulling, I make sure the handle hangs straight down throughout the entire process (5). Using plenty of water, I start with light pressure, first smoothing out the surface. Eventually, I increase pressure and get some length to the handle. I always pull all the way from the top attachment through and over the end of the handle. But I decrease the pressure as I go over the bottom attachment, careful not to lose the extra mass. All of these motions take practice—they need to be confident and controlled, but also natural and fluid. When I think the handle is long and thin enough, I support the bottom attachment and turn the cup upright. I then press the bottom attachment to the cup, never scoring the bottom of the handle (6). I smooth out any noticeable fingerprints with a cosmetic sponge (7). Placing my index finger inside the handle, I lift upward, adding some angularity to the curve of the handle (8). I use a rubber-tipped tool to define the line where the handle meets the mug (9). When I make pots that are asymmetrical due to added elements, such as handles, I make sure to align my maker's mark with that added element (10). On mugs, my mark goes on the foot ring, just under the handle. Lately I have been stretching the rim of the cup into an oval form to create a more natural drinking area and to add some movement to the rim (11). I arrange my mugs on a drywall board and wrap them tightly overnight. I sponge the handles completely smooth with a cosmetic sponge the next day to remove any unwanted marks.

Because I do not blend my handle connections, I dry mugs slowly on drywall under plastic over several days. I always start my making cycle with pots that have parts, such as mugs and teapots, so that they can dry slowly while I make other forms that can dry more quickly, such as bowls, tumblers, and vases.

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Subscribers can watch a video clip of Jabbur attaching handles from his Ceramic Arts Daily DVD, *Precise Imprecision: Strengthening Throwing Skills to create Dynamic Functional Pottery*, at [www.ceramicsmonthly.org](http://www.ceramicsmonthly.org).



7 Use a cosmetic sponge to remove any noticeable fingerprints left behind from the pulling and attaching process. 8 Place your index finger inside the handle and lift upward to add some angularity to the curve of the handle. 9 Use a rubber-tipped tool to define the line where the handle meets the mug. 10 Add your maker's mark to the foot ring, just below the handle. 11 To create a more natural drinking area, stretch the rim of the cup into an oval form. Place the mug on a drywall board and wrap tightly over night. The next day, use a cosmetic sponge to remove any unwanted marks. After finishing, allow the mug to dry slowly and evenly for a couple of days. 7–11 Photos: Eliot Dudik. 12 Mike Jabbur's mug, wheel-thrown stoneware, fired to cone 9 in oxidation, 2014.