

Natural Fiber TEAPOT EMBELLISHMENTS

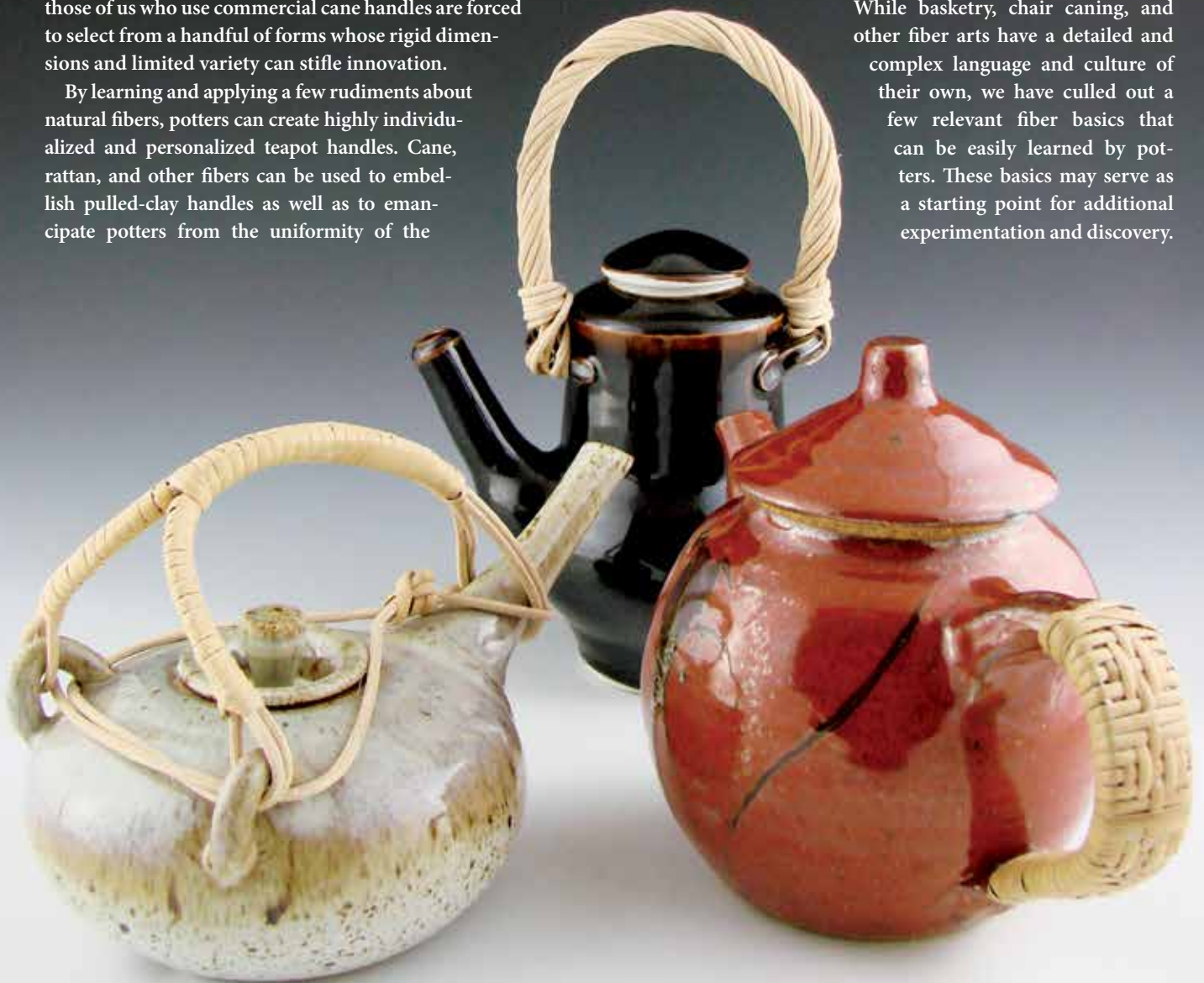
by Teri Lee and Jim Widess

A good teapot calls for creativity, meticulous craftsmanship, and hard work. While one of the most challenging forms to make, teapots often provide the maker with an opportunity to demonstrate personal style and identity. Unfortunately, those of us who use commercial cane handles are forced to select from a handful of forms whose rigid dimensions and limited variety can stifle innovation.

By learning and applying a few rudiments about natural fibers, potters can create highly individualized and personalized teapot handles. Cane, rattan, and other fibers can be used to embellish pulled-clay handles as well as to emancipate potters from the uniformity of the

commercial handles sold in every ceramics supply store. By using natural fibers, potters can create teapots and other forms where the size, shape, and placement of lugs and handles are determined solely by the maker.

While basketry, chair caning, and other fiber arts have a detailed and complex language and culture of their own, we have culled out a few relevant fiber basics that can be easily learned by potters. These basics may serve as a starting point for additional experimentation and discovery.



Clay and Fiber: A Long History Together

The interplay between clay and natural fiber is part of a long and ancient history. Clay fragments from 27,000 years ago found in Europe contain fragments of textiles or baskets. Early basket makers used clay to make baskets more waterproof, and then to protect the contents from hot charcoal when the container was used for cooking. At some point, the woven baskets were discarded and replaced with clay containers. Early clay containers continued to use patterns that imitated the rows of coiling needed to weave a tight basket. Vines or ropes were wrapped or woven around pot exteriors to make handling and carrying easier. Clay lugs were later added to anchor ropes or vines more efficiently. Eventually, actual ceramic handles were attached to pots, eliminating much of the need for vines and ropes. Therefore, this teapot handle project comes full circle, reclaiming and continuing the long relationship between clay and natural fiber.

Best Fibers for Beginners: Cane and Reed

For potters who are new to using natural fibers, we highly recommend that you first experiment with binder cane and round reed as wrapping elements. Round reed and binder cane are flexible enough to wrap around handles and lugs, and they're easy to find at stores (brick-and-mortar as well as online) that sell supplies for basketry, chair caning, and other fiber crafts.

Cane and reed come from the rattan palm vine. Cane is the bark that's revealed when the thorny outer skin is removed. It's the golden-colored skin that you see in commercial teapot handles and rattan furniture. Binder cane is thicker and wider than regular chair cane, and its sturdiness is good for wrapping ceramic handles.

Reed, more porous than cane, is machined from the pithy core of the rattan vine and comes in various shapes in cross section: round, flat, flat/oval, and oval/oval. For teapot handles, round reed is the best type to use.

A brief soaking in hot water is the key to softening reed and cane so they become flexible enough to use. Oversoaking will weaken the fibers. Often, several reeds are bunched and bent around lugs to serve as the handle core, with a long strand of cane or reed used as the wrapping agent.

Many beautiful fibers used for basket-making, including straw or grasses, are problematic for teapot handles. These fibers are too weak to hold the weight of the teapot and also may fray as a wrapping medium. Other fibers such as grape and other vines lack the flexibility to bend around lugs or wrap around a handle without cracking. However, experimentation is highly encouraged. Depending on the size of your piece, the diameter of your handle, and the functionality (or nonfunctionality) of your work, some fibers will work better than others. Some materials that could serve as either the handle core or wrapping elements include white oak, akebia vine, elm bark, black bamboo, honeysuckle, and driftwood. Feel free to experiment with wires, colored string/twine, other vines, leather, or whatever you'd like to try.

MATERIALS AND TOOLS

- Glazed and fired teapot (or other fired form) with a side handle
- 6 strands of 3.5 or 4 mm binder cane (aka chair cane)
- 1 strand, 10 feet long, to serve as the wrapping strand
- 5 strands, the length of the side handle
- Masking tape
- Fid or awl
- X-Acto knife
- Small sponge or spray bottle filled with warm water
- Small bowl of water
- Super glue

Dyeing Fiber

You may decide that you want additional color choices to expand on the natural tones of cane and round reed. Dyeing is an option you can try at home. It's a messy business, but it can provide for a greater creative palette. Round reed readily takes dye because of its flexible and porous nature. Binder cane also can be dyed, but the high amount of silica on the shiny side of the cane makes that side extremely water-resistant. The other, non-shiny side is fibrous and softer, so it will absorb the dye better. A light sanding of the outer bark will help the dye sink in.

After sanding, a five-minute soak in hot water is usually enough to prepare the binder cane for the dyeing process. However, oversoaking the cane will result in the outer bark turning a gray-green color, indicating that it has become weakened. If this occurs, the cane should not be used. Similarly, care should be taken to not oversoak the round reed, which weakens its structure. Fiber artists tend to use Rit™ Liquid Dye because of the large number of color choices, the ease in obtaining more colors, and options of using a hot or cold dye bath. A heated dye mixture gives more brilliant colors while a cool or cold dye bath will result in more pastel colors. Procion dye, often used for batik or tie-dyeing, can be used to capture more brilliant colors, but the process is more complicated.

Diamond-Weave Embellishment

This process creates a repeatable diamond shape from five strands of cane to enhance a handle on a ceramic vessel that has already been glazed and fired. It works best on a side handle that's flat and fairly uniform.

Do you like to bring PMI into the studio to reference while trying out new techniques? Then check out the new TEAR OUT AND TRY poster on the next page for the perfect wall decoration for your studio!

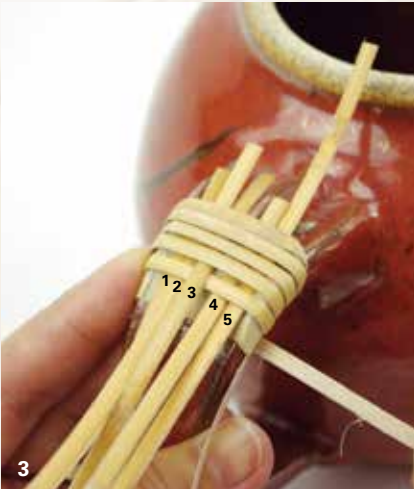
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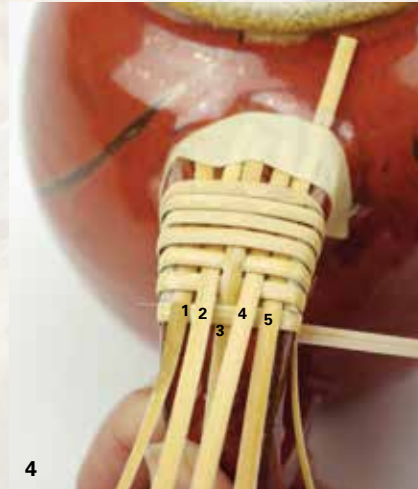
1 Use masking tape to hold the shiny side of the wrapping strand against the handle core and create a 90° bend so the glossy side is facing up and goes across the top of the handle.



2 Tightly wrap the cane about ½ inch above the masking tape. Wrap 4 times around the handle. Insert 5 strands of binder cane under the wrap, so that they protrude beyond the wrapping.



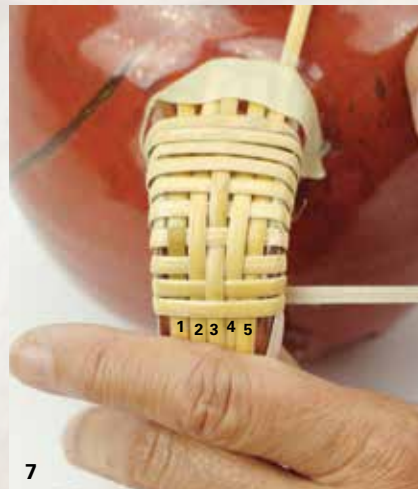
3 1st row: Weave over #5, #4, under #3, over #2 and #1. Pass strand under handle. 2nd row: weave over #5, under #4, #3, #2, over #1. Pass strand under handle. 4 Third row: Weave under #5 and #4, over #3, under #2 and #1. Pass wrapping strand under handle.



5 Fourth row: Weave over #5, under #4, #3 and #2, over #1. Pass wrapping strand under handle.



6 Fifth row: Weave over #5 and #4, under #3, over #2 and #1. Pass wrapping strand under handle.



7 Sixth (final) row in pattern: Weave over all strands. Duplicate pattern as desired by repeating steps 3 to 7.



8 A completed teapot handle embellishment with a diamond-weave pattern repeated 3 times.

Pottery Making Illustrated | Tear Out and Try

All photos: Teri Lee and Jim Wides.



9

To finish, wind five wraps fairly tightly, then loosen just enough to fit the awl through the wrap.



10

Push the wrapping strand up through the space. Note the strand twist so that glossy side is against the handle body.



11

Crank the 5 wraps with your hand to tighten, then pull the wrapping strand up through the wraps.



12

Pull strand tight so the fold at the corner disappears into the wrap. Trim the end of the wrapping strand flush with the wrap.



13

Trim the ends of the 5 vertical strands so they disappear into the wrap. Trim top ends, remove temporary masking tape.



14

The completed diamond-pattern wrapped handle.



Process

Note: We use two basketry terms to identify different ends of the cane strands. The *stationary end* of the strand is the standing end. The end that is manipulated is the *working end*.

Soak the 10-foot-long cane strand in hot water for 5 minutes before starting the project. Don't oversoak the cane. Any more time in water overly relaxes the fibers and can make them weak and bristly. If the cane strand dries out and becomes stiff, use the moistened sponge or a quick misting of the strands from the spray bottle to relax the fibers and make it flexible again.

Lay the standing end of the cane strand against the right side of the handle, shiny side next to the handle. Hold the cane in place, leaving about 3 inches trailing alongside the right side. Wrap masking tape over the cane and around the handle to keep the cane in place. About ½ inch above the masking tape, make a right-angle bend in the cane so the glossy side is up and lies across the width of the handle (1). The masking tape will eventually be covered by the cane wraps as the design progresses.

Wrap the cane four times around the handle tightly so the rows touch one another but don't overlap. Insert the five strands of shorter binder cane under the wrapping strands so they protrude beyond the wrapping (2). Place a temporary piece of masking tape across the tops of the five strands to keep them straight.

Begin weaving the six-row diamond pattern. (The five short strands have been numbered in the illustrations, from the strand on the far left (#1) to the strand on the far right (#5), to serve as reference.) **Tip:** Don't forget to moisten the sponge and run it across the weaving cane as it dries out and becomes difficult to work with.

For the first row, position the wrapping strand over short strands #5 and #4, under the middle strand #3, then over strands #2 and #1. Pass the wrapping strand under the handle, from left to right (3). For the second row, weave the wrapping strand over strand #5, under the middle strands #4, #3, and #2, and over strand 1. Pass the wrapping strand under the handle, from left to right. For the third row, weave the wrapping strand under strands

#5 and #4, over strand #3, and under strands #2 and #1 (4). Pass the wrapping strand under the handle, from left to right. For the fourth row, weave over strand #5, under strands #4, #3, and #2, and over strand #1 (5). For the fifth row, weave over strands #5 and #4, under strand #3, and over strands #2 and #1 (6). For the sixth and final row, loop over all 5 strands and pass the strand under the handle from left to right (7). This step completes the six rows that comprise the diamond-weave pattern. Repeat the six rows to duplicate the pattern as needed for your handle (8).

To finish, tightly wind the wrapping cane around the handle five times. Slightly loosen the wraps to make a space for the awl (9). Slightly moisten the wraps to loosen them if necessary. Trim the end of the wrapping strand to create a sharp edge (which is easier to push through the space). Thread the end of the wrapping strand up through the space made by the awl, with the glossy side sitting against the handle (10). Tighten the five wraps by cranking them with your hand and then pull the end of the wrapping strand up through the wraps (11). Make sure to create a fold in the cane strand so its glossy side remains against the handle. Pull the strand slowly so that the fold at the corner begins to disappear into the wrap. Be careful not to snap and break the strand as you pull. Use the X-Acto knife to trim the end of the wrapping strand flush with the wrap (12). Trim the ends of the five short strands so that they disappear into the wrap (13, 14). If you're worried that the long, working strand will unravel later on, a drop of super glue where the strand touches itself as it disappears into the weave should alleviate those fears.

A Final Word

The inexpensive cost of natural fibers allows you to experiment, discard, and begin again. Don't be in a hurry. Weaving and building with fiber can be as meditative as working in clay. Feel the rhythm and enjoy the journey in learning this new medium.

Teri Lee is a longtime potter and a ceramics assistant at Chabot College in Hayward, California. Jim Widess is the author of over a dozen books on chair caning, gourd craft, and basketry. He is the owner of The Caning Shop in Berkeley, California.