

# What a Relief: Make a Great Impression with Slab-built Ceramic Wall Art

By [Paul Andrew Wandless](#), July 4, 2011 [Read Comments \(44\)](#) [Print This Post](#)



Explore different textures and images around your home or studio to find hidden compositions for wall art.

*Where do you find inspiration for your art? For some it is in nature, for some inspiration lies in the work of a favorite artist, for others, it can be found in their friends or family. But inspiration doesn't always have to come from things traditionally thought of as beautiful or profound. As ceramic artist David Gamble demonstrates, mundane objects can serve as inspiration too. All you have to do is look around with an open mind.*

*Today, we'll show you how David turned manhole covers and sewer grates into wall-worthy art. Plus, as a follow up to a request from a Ceramic Arts Daily subscriber, we'll show you a great way to hang wall tiles. Enjoy! – Jennifer Harnetty, editor.*

## Looking down

Artists often look for hidden compositions existing in the mundane, ordinary and commonplace objects of everyday life. When ceramic artist David Gamble looks at manhole covers and grates, he sees pattern, line and low-relief opportunities for terra-cotta wall pieces. The process of lifting/pulling a relief from a textured surface is an image transfer technique. It's very similar to making a charcoal rubbing except you substitute clay for paper. David uses AMACO's terra-cotta clay no. 77, a heavily grogged clay. The grog opens up the clay body and promotes even drying, which keeps his wall pieces flat during the drying and firing process. He also enjoys the rich, dark-red color of the terra cotta after it is fired to Cone 03, and the contrast it provides for his gold luster glazes.

### **Step 1.**

David starts by rolling slabs that are about 1/2 inch thick. This allows him to get a deeper impression and still maintain an adequate thickness in the recessed areas to prevent cracking. If the slab is too thin, it merely conforms to the surface and doesn't actually receive an impression. If you use canvas while rolling the slab, smooth the surface with a soft rib so it is clean, clear and ready to receive the image.

**TIP: Roll out a few extra slabs for test prints and for constructing walls later in the process.**



### **Step 2.**

Place the canvas-backed clay slab on a large wooden board and carry it to a manhole or storm-drain cover. Take a brush in case any debris needs to be removed from the cover or grate. Stand the board on edge and position in front of the area of interest, flop the slab down onto the grate, and rub with mild pressure to create a deeper relief. Extra pressure works especially well when pulling a complex texture from the asphalt surrounding a grate.

### **Step 3.**

Gently but quickly pull the slab from the grate and lay it back onto the board. Take a look at the image you just pulled to see if it has the detail and depth that you need for your wall piece. As is the case with most new endeavors, your first transfer may not meet your expectations. Make a test print or two to practice how much pressure is needed for the relief, and how best to line up your slab to get the

section you desire.

#### **Step 4.**

Since David's manhole reliefs are part of an ongoing series, he has a board precut to specific dimensions so they are consistent. Place the board over the relief and crop the areas of interest to determine the orientation. Besides pulling the print, this is the most important step of the process. Careful consideration goes into determining the compositional balance of shape, form, line and space.



**Step 5.**

It's important to figure out in advance how you will install or hang the piece to ensure your work can be hung easily and securely. For hanging brackets, David attaches small slabs of clay with holes punched through them. To do this, turn the trimmed relief over and score the perimeter with a wire tool. Cut four rectangular slabs for each edge of the tile, then score and spray them with apple cider vinegar. Build walls with the slabs around the perimeter of the piece, and firmly press and smooth them during the construction process.



**Step 6.**

After determining which end is the top, cut, score and spray two clay gussets to be used as hanging brackets. The gussets should be placed approximately a third of the way down from the top and trimmed to match the height of the walls. For added strength and structural integrity, press and smooth a coil into all the interior seams. Poke holes with a pointed tool through the center of the hanging brackets for heavy gauge wire to be strung through when ready to hang.



David finishes with stamping the date and number of the print on the back, and signs his name with a rubber shaping tool. The wall piece needs to stiffen to leather hard before it's turned over to avoid sagging. Once flipped, smooth the corners by hand to remove the sharp edges. The rounded corners also help the surfaces dry more evenly and avoid unnecessary cracking or separating.

**TIP: Instead of joining slip, David sprays straight apple cider vinegar over the scored areas.**

David Gamble lives and operates his studio out of a former church in Plainfield, Indiana.

The author, Paul Andrew Wandless, is a studio artist, workshop presenter, educator and author. Visit his website, [www.studio3artcompany.com](http://www.studio3artcompany.com).