

Masterclass with Barbara Gittings



Images: Layton Thompson



The ancient Chinese art of Nerikomi involves layering different coloured clays to create pattern and texture. *Barbara Gittings* takes us step-by-step through this fascinating process

I was born and raised in South Africa and after studying Fashion and Design in Johannesburg, I moved to Cape Town. After a couple of years working in the fashion industry, a friend and I decided to open a boutique selling our own designs. We traded successfully for 18 months, but then decided we both wanted to see more of the world.

We travelled around Europe in a very rudimentary camper van for several months, then came to England, where I decided to stay. I was in my early 20s and pursued a career as a designer and pattern cutter in the fashion industry in London.


I came to ceramics rather late in life, having started adult education classes in pottery in 1999. I quickly became obsessed, reading everything I could lay my hands on about clay, ceramics and ceramic artists. Early in my clay journey, I attended a week-long course of smoke firing with Jane Perryman, which set me on my smoke firing path.

At an intensive course at City Lit, I came across a tiny picture of an ancient Chinese Nerikomi bowl in one of the library books and was hooked. I spent the next 12 years learning by trial and error, dipping in and out of various adult education courses. I am now a full-time potter, working from a small but perfectly formed studio in my back garden in Brighton.

I now explore clay as an alternative medium to fabric. In fashion, the layering of textiles and the power of the

cut merge to find new balances and forms, the biomorphic and geometric held in tension. My work in clay continues to explore this. I'm drawn to irregular repetition, primitive mark making and soft, earthy colours. I try to assimilate the poetry of things I see in the world and then allow them to rise up in my subconscious to inform the patterns I put through the clay.

The geometry of patterns in nature is a constant source of inspiration to me. Especially as random chaotic forces, such as growth, weathering and erosion push the initial perfect symmetry towards imperfection. I am always exploring this balance between symmetry and asymmetry in my work, trying to capture the imperfect perfection.

The process of Nerikomi is very slow and exacting, and it is always a challenge to make larger pieces. The danger of cracking and warping, as the different colours react to the stages of drying, firing and smoke firing, is always present, but I am continually pushing myself towards larger pieces. All my work is low fired, unglazed, with the patterns going through the body of the piece. 

For more details visit barbaragittingsceramics.com; [@barbaragittings](https://twitter.com/barbaragittings); See Barbara's work at Cluster Crafts, London, during London Craft Week, 27 April-3 May 2020; londoncraftweek.com; cluster-london.com and with Miar Ceramics & Arts, Hove, during May 2020; miararts.com



1 I use Scarva Earthstone grogged porcelain, adding various oxides to colour the clay. I then use my table top slab-roller to roll out various thicknesses of white and coloured clay. I build up a block, alternating the colours and trying to finish with a fairly regular rectangle.



2 I paint the top layer with slip made with a paper clay version of the porcelain, using the same oxides. I cut the block in half and while the slip is still tacky I join the two halves together to make a bigger block, slipped sides together. I then whack it between damp cloths to close the joins. This process of painting, joining and whacking gets repeated through the process of making the patterned slabs.



3 After cutting in half lengthwise, the two pieces are stood on their sides with the stripes facing upwards and joined.



4 I then use a harp to cut slices of even depth.



5 Two slices are joined together and the block is rolled until it is the same height as my bevel tool. I then use the bevel tool to cut triangular strips along the length of the block.



6 One strip is cut in half and joined and a small triangular strip of the coloured clay is pressed along the join.



7 I cut the strip in half again and join the two halves. I now have a squared strip made up of four triangles, roughly mirroring each other, with a coloured diamond through the centre.



8 Using a paddle, I whack each side to make sure there is no trapped air and the joins are strong. I then continue to make more strips.



9 The strips are joined together, adding a thin coloured triangle along each join. I then use a cheese slicer to cut even thickness slices, just a bit thicker than needed.



10 I lay the slices onto a damp cloth, joining each slice to the next to create a slab, still applying slip between the joins.



11 The slab is then covered with a wet cloth and I scrape across the surface with a firm rubber kidney in all directions to close any gaps.



12 I make several slabs of different patterns this way, creating large squares and some rectangular shapes to give myself a selection to piece together in the mould.



13 The slabs are put through the slab-roller to ensure they are all the same thickness and also to strengthen them.



14 I choose a slab to start with, mitre the edges with the bevel tool and score the edges.



15 Using a damp sponge to press it in, I ease the first slab into the mould.



16 I then start to join more slabs together, cutting to fit, bevelling, scoring and painting the edges with slip as I go. I bring the slabs up to just below the top edge of the mould so that I can add a rim to finish.



17 I scrape the joints with a finely serrated kidney to make sure they are closed.



18 Finally, I prepare a strip for the rim. Getting it into the mould in one piece is the trickiest part as it is important to only have one join on the rim to avoid cracking on the finished edge.



19 After spending a day or so in the mould, well wrapped in plastic, I lift off one half of the mould. I make sure there are no gaps, filling any with thick slip and smoothing it in with a rubber kidney. I scrape the whole surface with a serrated kidney and repeat on the other side.



20 When the piece is leatherhard, I surform the surface and scrape it with various flexible smooth kidneys. This evens out the thickness, cleans up the pattern and refines the top edge. The pot is then wrapped in plastic on a foam block and left for a fortnight or more. I change the plastic frequently to allow moisture to escape slowly. When completely dry, I sand the piece with wire wool. It is then fired in my electric kiln to 1040°C and sanded again with wet and dry diamond paper.



21 Once fired and sanded, I decorate further using wax or other resists, highlighting key areas of the pattern.



22 I then paint on a crank slip and leave it to dry. I wrap the piece in foil and make holes in the foil to allow some smoke in.



23 I fill my smoke-firing bin with crumpled up newspapers, nestling the pot in the centre. After it is lit and burning well, I cover with the lid.



24 When there is no more smoke, I extract the pot from the ashes using fireproof gloves. I then plunge the unwrapped pot into hot water to remove the crank slip.



25 Once all the slip has been scrubbed off, the piece is left to dry. I then warm it in a low oven and wax it with a colourless furniture polish to give it a soft sheen.

See Barbara at work on our video channel at vimeo.com/ceramicreview