Mandala
or Meditations in Clay
by Byrd Tetzlaff

I have always been fascinated by mandalas. Their beauty and complexity -- which is at the same time simplicity -- pulls me in, and I get lost in them. As a little girl, I would stare for hours at books with pictures of circular patterns. They seemed very foreign and familiar at the same time. I loved the way they would change and grow as they enlarged.

HISTORY

A mandala is an ancient religious symbol found in many cultures. It is usually a complex, circular design, divided into four or eight parts. The design leads the eye around the circle, allowing the viewer to discover new areas and juxtapositions, but eventually draws the eye to the center.

The word "mandala" is Sanskrit for "healing circle" or "wholeness".

Mandalas are used for meditation, as an aid in prayer, and for healing. They are often made for a specific ceremony, then destroyed, such as Buddhist sand paintings. Hindus and Buddhists have the best-known examples, but Native Americans of the Southwest also use mandalas.

In the west, we tend to be more permanent. The beautiful stained glass rose windows found in Gothic cathedrals are based on the mandala. The labyrinths in early Christian churches are mandalas you walk through. Religions which frown on 'representational art' often will use the mandala on walls, tiles or in floor patterns in churches, temples and synagogues.

Mandalas should always be unique; no two should be alike. They are usually made for a specific purpose or person. Traditionally, mandalas are made while the artist is meditating or praying.

These days, making a mandala is often part of art therapy. Several breast cancer survivor groups have created mandalas as part of their healing journeys. Self-esteem groups and those suffering from depression have used the mandala to great benefit. And, of course, all sorts of spiritually-based groups utilize mandalas in their spiritual walk.

Should you choose to make your own mandala, you should know it is a journey of discovery. It works well for those artists who are flexible and enjoy surprises. Mandalas are best when not planned out, but simply allowed to happen.

THE PROJECT

TOOLS

No pasta machine is required for this project (unless you decide to use a sheet of clay for the background -- which I do **not** recommend).

I do use what is called a clean-up tool. It is made by Kemper and is sometimes called a lace tool.

You actually 'pick up' an element with this tool and transport it to your tile. You can also straighten the

elements, or use it to round them (canes can get misshapen easily). If you don't have one of these, use a toothpick to transport elements to your tile.

Other than that, you need your hands and a sharp blade. A clay gun might come in handy, too, but it's not absolutely necessary.

MATERIALS

You will need clay (between one and two ounces) for the background, and a bathroom tile, glazed. The shinier the surface of the tile, the better. You can get white or off-white tiles from Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse or Home Depot.

For our project, begin with a 4" by 4" tile. (They come 4" x 4", 6" x 6", 8" x 8" and 12" x 12". Avoid the 12" x 12" unless you are infinitely patient and have a gazillion canes.)

Have several canes on hand to choose from. I usually prefer rather plain canes (bull's-eyes, jellyrolls and simple leaf canes), but you can use just about anything other than a picture cane. If you do choose to use a complex cane, balance it with more simple canes in the design.

I also have on hand some clay in some of the colors of my canes, to make lines or dots of solid color.

I make lines by rolling out a small log and then tapering the ends (this is called a 'worm'). I make them very small and often cut them very short. A clay gun can be used to make the initial log, but I still taper the ends.

For dots, I make a slightly larger log (only slightly larger) and cut a slice to use as a dot.

You will need some Sobo glue and a tiny bit of TLS.

For finishing, a piece of felt cut to the same size as the tile, and a brass easel to display your work.

COLOR CHOICES

You can use just about any color scheme for a mandala. Traditionally, you use colors that represent what you want the mandala to be used for:

- White for purity
- Black for definition, understanding and focus
- Red for strength, power, and passion
- Pink for love
- Orange for attraction
- Yellow for joy, rapture and playfulness
- Green for health, money, and luck
- Blue for thought or intelligence
- Purple for all things having to do with the divine
- Brown for grounding and common sense

So, for instance, if you wish to do a mandala for a sick friend, you might choose green, and red, with accents of yellow. This would attract strength and health for your friend.

In a small mandala, don't use too many colors. Limit your color pallet and it will be more effective.

You might want to try the traditional color combinations here. Contrasting colors (red/green, blue/orange, purple/yellow) work nicely. Analogous colors (yellow/orange/brown, red/purple, blue/green), or monochromatic (various shades of the same color, from dark to light) are other popular choices.

At the very least, limit your colors to either all warm colors or all cool colors. Remember, there **is** such a thing as a warm blue and a cool yellow.

Tip: If you are very unsure of your colors, get the book Color Me Beautiful and use the colors for any one of the seasons. All the colors in any given season will work beautifully with all the

other colors in that same season.

The book has wonderful color charts for each season. If you are color blind, read the text.

PREPARING THE BACKGROUND

The background sets the stage for the rest of the mandala. I try to pick up the background color in at least one of my canes or in a line or dot, but usually in a darker tone.

I prefer to make the background light to medium, rather than dark. If you do use a dark background, take care that your canes are light, or they will get lost.

Remember to always have one dominant color. You do **not** want an equal amount of all colors. One color should stand out. And use several shades of each color, too.

Most important of all, **use contrast**. You should have some very light parts and very dark parts. The eye should be led around the circle, from interest point to interest point and gently end up in the center. A good mandala will be constantly surprising the viewer.

Most mandalas have a theme: rainbows, healing, joy, summer. Choose colors and canes that will support your theme. However, avoid planning out the mandala entirely; make room for surprise and inspiration.

Step One:

Prepare the tile by smearing a thin coat of Sobo glue on the edges of the tile. The tile glaze does not usually wrap around on the edges so you will need to add some glue to give your clay a texture to grip on to.

Let the glue dry.

For your background, you have a couple of choices. You can put a sheet of clay on the tile, making sure it wraps around the edges. (I tend to avoid this personally, because of air bubbles and because I don't like how it looks, but feel free to suit yourself.)

Then, you would texture the sheet. Personally, my preferred texture is fingerprints. Fingerprints all over, missing no spots, including the edges. It's personal and proof of the artist.

You could also use a texture sheet.

My preferred background is to take a small amount of clay and smear it on the tile, making it as thin as possible. Then take another little bit of clay next to it and do the same thing, running the clay into each other. I mix colors as I go, thus giving the background a more mottled effect.

Bonus: since you are using your fingers to press the clay onto the tile as you go, you are texturing it at the same time!

Make sure your clay wraps around the edges of the tile on all sides.

Step Two:

Bake the tile for 15-20 minutes at the temperature recommended for your clay. Let cool.

BEGINNING THE CIRCLE

Step One:

Put the thinnest coat of TLS that you possibly can on the clay tile. You don't want the tile greasy, just coated.

Step Two:

Using a straight edge, run a thin pencil mark from the top left corner to the bottom right corner. Do the same with the top right corner and the bottom left corner. This will give you an "x" in the middle of the tile and mark your center.

Then add a "+", thus bisecting the "x". These are your guidelines. You will line up your design on or along these lines.

BUILDING THE CIRCLE

Step One:

Start with a cane squarely in the center. This is the most important placement. I agonize over this, but then, I'm compulsive.

Step Two:

Usually, after the first cane slice is in place, I choose the next row of canes and place the cane slices directly over the lines.

Depending on the size of the cane, I will add four or eight canes to this row.

Step Three:

After that, use the guidelines and your particular group of canes to inspire you. You can place the next row going to the outer edge or fill in between what you have already done.

Remember, never plan the design out ahead of time. Part of the wonder of a mandala is finding out what it looks like when it is finished.

Step Four:

Take your canes or logs or worms or dots and build out from the center, one row at a time.

I usually place cane slices directly on the lines, making sure they line up, or else I put them directly between the lines

Now is an excellent time to use different shapes of canes. Often, a round cane just doesn't make it, whereas a triangle of the same cane looks terrific.

Leaf canes, which are usually diamond-shaped, are particularly useful, since they can go on the line or between other canes.

Balance the contrast and complexity of each row. Vary the sizes of your canes. Also, don't be afraid to cut your canes and use just part of them in the design.

Step Five:

If your design allows a pencil line to show through, erase it before adding the next element.

I place elements very lightly on the tile until the entire row is finished, then I double-check to make sure everything is straight and evenly spaced. I also stop to see if that is the effect that I want.

Tip: Pay attention to your cane orientation. Jellyrolls, for instance, should all be going in the same direction.

Sometimes I do a whole row and then decide that it doesn't work. No harm done, take it off and do something else with that layer. Not until I am satisfied with the entire layer do I pat the canes down to the background.

Step Six:

Keep going around the circle, building one row at a time. I usually take the design out to the edges, but you don't have to. It is finished whenever you say it is.

Tip: Always use your clean-up tool or toothpick to carry the canes (or worms, or dots) to the tile. The less you handle the cane slices, the less chance there is of distorting them.

If you are nervous about disturbing your work, you can bake it at any time, but I usually work the entire piece and bake it all at once.

Tip: If your work environment has a lot of dust or debris in the air, you can protect your work by putting a sheet of plastic wrap on your mandala. Then lift up one corner at a time to place your embellishments on it, turning the work as you go.

When you think you are finished, walk away from the mandala for while. Do something else. When you come back to it, look at the mandala to see if it needs anything added or changed.

Sometimes the mandala almost works, but not quite. But if you add just a few yellow triangles, or if you outline some of the canes with tiny dots, or if you just add a few outlines . . You get the idea.

Play with it. Enjoy the process.

FINISHING TOUCHES:

Sign your piece and bake. After the piece is baked, you can make more changes if you wish.

The good news is: you don't have to sand the mandala. Not at all. And in keeping with tradition, the mandala is also probably better without a finish, just the naked clay.

Lastly, apply a coat of glue (rubber cement) on the back of the tile and attach a sheet of felt, cut to size. You can display these tiles on a brass easel, which you can purchase at Wal-Mart for under a dollar. You can also mat and frame the mandala, or include it in a wall of tiles as an accent.

- byrd