



# American MASTERS

*Dave the Potter: Poetry in Clay*



## What We Learned:

- Dave was a slave in the 1800s in Edgefield, South Carolina, which was known for its glazed pottery.
- He was taught how to throw clay on a potter's wheel and made at least 40,000 pots in his lifetime.
- Although it was illegal in South Carolina to teach a slave how to read and write, Dave knew how. He signed or marked many of his pots and even wrote couplet poems on some of them.
- The stages of the production of pottery are preparing, shaping, drying, firing, and glazing the clay.

## Art Activity: Clay Coil Pot

Although we talked about thrown clay on a potter's wheel, the students used hand molding to make their pots. This was a way for the students to feel and work with clay for a better understanding of this art medium. There are three methods of hand building clay—pinching, coiling, and slab building. Each type gets progressively more refined. The students made a coil pot.

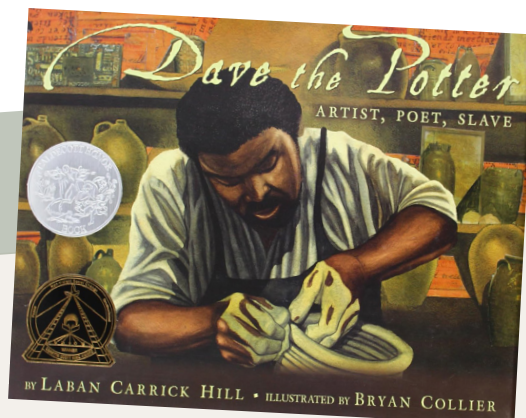


## Book Nook

*Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave*  
By Laban Carrick Hill

OR watch the Read Aloud book with  
pictures here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aph7Pi149rY>



# Connections at Home: Pinch Pots

## MATERIALS:

- Air-drying clay (can get colored clay)
- Acrylic paints, if not using colored clay
- Black permanent markers for details

## DIRECTIONS:

- Pinch off some clay—roughly an amount that fits in the palm of your hand, reserving a small portion for use later—and roll into a ball.
- Using your thumb make a hole in the middle.
- Using your thumb and forefinger, start forming the walls of your clay bowl.
- Once you have your bowl shape, gently squeeze the top and bottom.
- Form the stems and leaves out of the reserved portion of clay and attach using a little water.
- Let the clay dry, then paint or add details with your marker.



## Field Trip: Visit the Greenville County Museum of Art (GCMA)

GCMA has “the largest institutional collection of pottery vessels by David Drake,” including a large jug with a couplet. You can learn more here: <https://gcma.org/david-drake/>.

Earlier this year, GCMA exhibited 60 Edgefield face vessels also made by slave artists:

<https://gcma.org/pages/see/exhibitions/default/0/133>

## Field Trip: Town of Edgefield

Edgefield, South Carolina has been associated with stoneware for more than 200 years. Learn more about the region and plan a visit: <https://www.sciway.net/south-carolina/edgefield-district-pottery.html>

## For Parents:

Our featured artist is David Drake, also known as Dave the Potter. Dave was an American-born slave, and the information known about him comes from legal records and documents. The first record of this talented man is a receipt stating that at the age of seventeen he was purchased by Harvey Drake in Edgefield, South Carolina. Drake (and his family members following his death) owned and operated pottery factories. By the time he was eighteen years old, Dave learned to throw pottery on a potter's wheel, and he grew to become the best potter in the area. Although it was against the law in South Carolina for slaves to be taught to read and write, Dave did both. He signed or marked much of his stoneware, and at least twenty vessels are inscribed with his clever couplets.

The art of pottery has several steps: preparing, shaping, drying, firing, and glazing the clay.

**Please note:** As M&G's host location for *Homeschool Days*, Mack Library will feature books each month for parents to reference as resources. We hope these additional features will further support your teaching at home.



# Words and Word Pictures

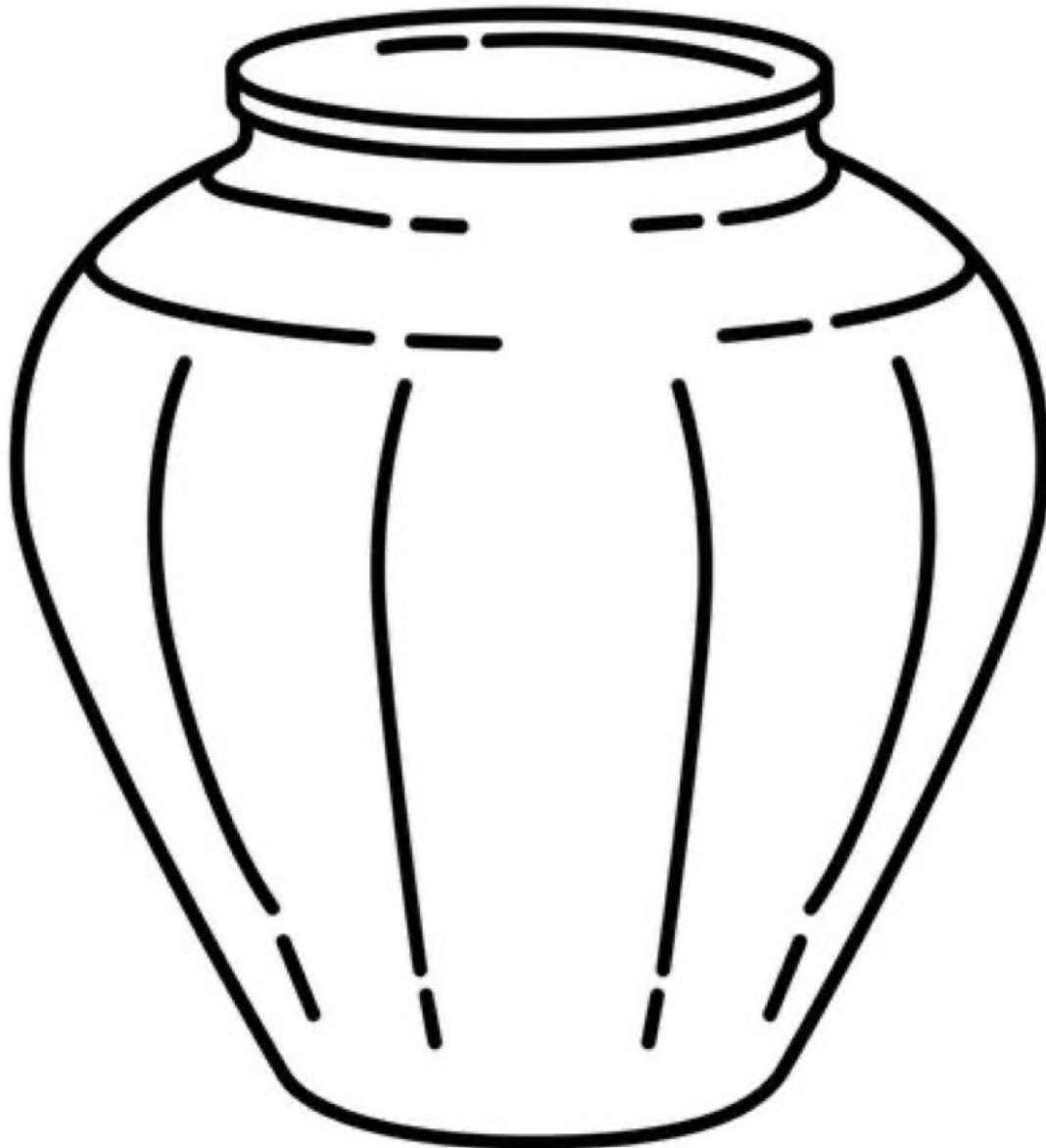
A couplet is a two-line rhyming poem. Dave the Potter created at least 20 couplets and inscribed them on his pottery. You can read samples of his work here:

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text5/drakeverses.pdf>.

Write your own couplet in the space below. Then “inscribe” it on your vase and decorate the vase.

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# Additional Resources

To learn more about the art of pottery, click on the links below:

- A short informative video about pottery: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08mkqd7Skmw>
- A simple video on clay history: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7dFLHc-jwc>

To learn more about Dave the Potter, click on the links below:

- One of Dave's pottery jugs sells at auction:  
<https://www.antiquesandthearts.com/crocker-farm-smashes-american-pottery-record-with-1-56-million-dave-jar/>
- The Lowcountry History Hall, a permanent exhibit in the Charleston Museum, includes some of Dave's pots and other Edgefield pottery:  
<https://www.charlestonmuseum.org/exhibits/permanent/1/lowcountry-history-hall>
- This article by the Smithsonian American Art Museum provides more insight into Dave the Potter along with further reading: <https://americanart.si.edu/blog/david-drake-potter-poet>
- National Gallery of Art recently acquired "one of the largest surviving storage jars" created by Dave: <https://www.nga.gov/press/acquisitions/2023/david-drake.html>

Due to the changing nature of web resources, M&G strongly urges you as the parent to preview these sites before your child accesses them. The fact that these sites are available on this handout does not imply that M&G endorses their content from the standpoint of morals, philosophy, theology, or scientific hypotheses.



## M&G Educational Mission:

Through tours, events, and publications, the Museum & Gallery seeks to partner with educators in fulfilling all of the National Visual Arts Content Standards. By integrating art into the core curriculum, M&G's goals are to teach children to value the arts, to communicate through the arts, to become creative problem solvers through the inclusion of STEAM-related concepts and fully-developed STEAM units, to understand history and culture in light of the arts, to improve literary interest and understanding through visual storytelling, to critique the arts, and to develop an aesthetic awareness of the arts. Through fulfilling the mission, M&G is able to help develop citizens who have the ability to think, feel, and understand the world in which they live.