

Porcelain as a Material for Ritual

An Exploration of Handmade Judaica

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Introduction

Growing up in a household with a lot of art, I was taught at an early age that art is not static, but rather a living creation, morphing meaning as personal identity, time, and politics evolve. Bringing art into the home is a way of bringing beauty and understanding of certain periods of history into current day contexts. Although not all artworks evoke history, and many would be considered ‘modern,’ the artworks that I was surrounded by growing up were pieces to make you think — works in constant dialogue with the viewer and the world around them.

I seek to evoke a dialogue, both between the object and the user/observer, and also the object and time. I am interested in how ceramics can actualize connections to community through the facilitation of ritual by focusing on specific elements within the objects that enhance ritual practice. Most ceramic objects are made for the home, a space in which both daily and religious rituals are commonly practiced.

Rituals, often defined as a prescribed series of actions to achieve a heightened experience, can be enhanced by decisions in form, shape, and color that directly influence the manner in which they are practiced. By engaging and refining these subtleties, I aim to make objects that enhance rituals. I focus on the relationship of the handmade objects and their influence on Jewish ritual practice.

In what follows I will explore how my unique designs of specific ceramic objects can influence and elevate the practice of Jewish ritual. Through research and study of Jewish law and rabbinic interpretation, I set a framework for developing the seven ritual objects that make up

this collection. In the following sections, the formal design choice and inspiration for each object are explained.

Judaica and Judaism

Hiddur Mitzvah

Hiddur Mitzvah or “Beautification of *Mitzvah*”¹ means “taking the time and making an effort to create or acquire the most beautiful ceremonial objects possible in order to enrich the religious observance with aesthetic dimension.”² I have taken this notion to heart, and it serves as an inspiration in the design, making, and finishing of these objects as it is one of the ways that helps me connect to Judaism. Rabbi Zera, a rabbi featured in an early source of Jewish law and text called the *Talmud*, taught that “one should be willing to pay even one third more [than the normal price]” for items related to ritual practice.³ This concept highlights that Judaism places a value on obtaining the most beautiful objects for ritual. In addition to Rabbi Zera, other sages in the *Talmud* reference *Hiddur Mitzvah* as, “beautify yourself before Him (God) in *mitzvot*.”⁴ According to this, one has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* unless it has been performed as beautifully as possible.⁵

The principle of *Hiddur Mitzvah* is found throughout Jewish ritual practice. Strict rules often define how the ritual should be practiced, particularly for observant Jews. Alternatively,

¹ The direct translation of *mitzvah* is “command” but is commonly used to mean “a good deed.”

² “Hiddur Mitzvah: The Case for Beautiful Ritual Objects,” *My Jewish Learning* (blog), accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/holiday-art/>.

³ “Hiddur Mitzvah | Texts & Source Sheets from Torah, Talmud and Sefaria’s Library of Jewish Sources.,” accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.sefaria.org/topics/hiddur-mitzvah?tab=sources>.

⁴ “Hiddur Mitzvah | Texts & Source Sheets from Torah, Talmud and Sefaria’s Library of Jewish Sources.”

⁵ Dr. Adin Reisner, Interview with Dr. Adin Reisner, January 5, 2023.

Jews who do not adhere to strict legal guidelines, may have different connections and dedications to *Hiddur Mitzvah*. In this way, ritual manifests differently for each person, and why the objects associated with the rituals can be so meaningful. I have chosen to apply the principle of *Hiddur Mitzvah* by making objects that elevate the nuanced beauty that shines during each of the rituals and sought to make (or create) objects that both showcase the purity and elegance of the ceramic medium when used in conjunction with food and wine. It is with this understanding that I sought to create a deeply meaningful engagement between the user and the object.

Holiness Within Empty Space

Dating back to the times of the First Temple, holiness was represented in the Holy of Holies, or the inner sanctuary of The Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people believe that this was the holiest place, the center of ritual and a place only accessible by high priests once a year on Yom Kippur. The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant, consisting of a wooden box guarded by two *Cherubim* sitting on top. According to rabbis, the holiest space for the Jewish people is not inside the Ark, but between the two *Cherubim*. It is this space, more specifically, the ‘empty space’ which is the holiest. Through the sanctification of empty space, holiness and religion are represented. Historically, entering the Holy of Holies was only reserved for high priests, and with the destruction of The Temple, the whereabouts of the Ark of the Covenant was unknown. A new form of practice, known as Rabbinic Judaism, established the need for ritual objects that could represent that holiness in the form of Judaica around 200 CE.⁶

⁶ Rabbi Ethan Witkovsky, Interview with Rabbi Ethan Witkovsky, June 10, 2022.

Judaica and Ritual

The seven ritual pieces of Judaica I chose to make were originally designed by rabbis to be used in conjunction with the prayers written in the *Talmud* to facilitate ritual. These objects represent the rabbis' vision for conducting religious practice. My pieces are a direct interpretation of their insights. I have made design choices that aim to further heighten the user's experience, such as the curvature of the *challah* tray in relation to the shape of the bread, which I explore throughout this paper. Jewish law and *Hiddur Mitzvah* inform my designs with the intent to create work that enriches ritual practice.

In the case of Jewish practice, rituals not only give the person a sense of purpose and faith, but can also bring communities together to strengthen personal connection. When a group of people have the same rituals, it can provide a sense of belonging to all involved. Ritual provides a scaffolding for making special, and possibly holy, moments in people's lives. The respective objects are integral to facilitating the practice. These moments can happen without the objects, but the objects can be a good tool.

Another important aspect of ritual is its use as a tool for teaching and passing down history. We often employ rituals to tell stories, teach life lessons, and speak a common language. As such, much of Jewish religious practice is based in domestic settings. While some ritual objects will be seen or used in the synagogue, the objects I chose are designed for use in the home and around a table. For this reason, I chose to build a table to display the work to help emphasize the importance of the role of the family table and the gathering of community.

Community and communication are integral to Jewish practice. Most Jewish rituals require members of the community to gather together in order to practice. In fact, the most

important holidays and prayers cannot be done without a *minyan*,⁷ providing the foundation for the religious practice in the community.⁸ Some prayers are also a conversation. The *Kedusha*, a part of Jewish daily prayer practice, is a call and response with the leader of the prayer; a conversation between the individual and the community.⁹ We stand with our feet together to emulate angels, as angels are the closest being to God. It is through this conversation that we aim for holiness surrounded by community.¹⁰

Judaism is a religion about the people, and the rituals that have been created over generations are the basis for how Jews gather together. As discussed above, the rabbis of the *Talmud* have provided us opportunities for the community to further its spiritual practice through gathering. Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar, is a day of atonement and repentance. This day is observed inside a synagogue, centering around people to people contact. Even on what is considered a sad and mournful day of the year, the community is still required to join together as one. The objects I decided to create are used when community joins together.

Judaica

I have chosen to focus on seven objects because of their relationship to tradition and ritual. Each object was developed by the rabbis to establish and sustain a new connection to Jewish ritual practice after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. This

⁷ A gathering of 10 Jews.

⁸ “Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 8:1,” accessed February 4, 2023, https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah_Prayer_and_the_Priestly_Blessing.8.1?ven=Mishneh_Torah_trans_by_Eliyahu_Touger_Jerusalem_Moznaim_Pub_c1986-c2007&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

⁹ Cantor Arielle Reisner, Interview with Cantor Arielle Reisner, January 5, 2023.

¹⁰ Mourner's Kaddish is another example of community call and response. This prayer also requires a minyan. In this prayer, the mourning individuals stand and recite the prayer along with the leader. The community joins in during certain moments of the prayer to show support for the grieving individuals. The community is there to provide support; a support that helps communities survive and thrive from generation to generation.

cataclysmic event not only dispersed the Jews away from Jerusalem, but it required them to adapt to ritual that was no longer centrally organized in one place. A new practice grew in Israel and around the world as rabbis discovered ways to fill the empty space created by the destruction of The Temple. Out of this comes new prayer practices, family dinners, and other moments of ritual all focused in the home.

Given the high importance of ritual and the notion of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, ancient Judaica was often quite intricate and made out of precious metals in beautiful, ornate ways. This has resulted in a rich history of craftsmen and artists who create Judaica that help Jews fulfill *mitzvot*. These historical objects tend to feature intricate carvings and patterns. Some are even custom made for individual families such as the silver candelabra that my great grandfather had made for my family, pictured on page 14.

While Judaica has its roots in clay, it quickly transitioned to non-breakable metals such as silver, pewter, and stainless steel due to durability and longevity, and of course, *Hiddur Mitzvah*. Additionally, Judaica is used in a temple to decorate and dress the Torah. Breakable items are not allowed near the scroll as they can break, and their shards can cut the parchment. This led the transition away from clay and glass into metals. Since the Judaica I have made is for the home and not the temple, this precaution is unnecessary.

Kiddush Cup

A *kiddush* cup is a vessel for holding wine on Friday nights and festivals. Any cup can be used, but it is common to use a cup specifically for the purpose of blessing the wine. As the Torah tells us to remember and to sanctify the Sabbath, we use wine in a *kiddush* cup to honor this commandment and welcome God into the home for the holiest day of the week.

Rituals regarding the *kiddush* cup include saying the prayer over wine, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגֶּפֶן (boreh p'ri hagafen), and holding the cup for the duration of the prayer.¹¹ Depending on customs, the leader might drink from the cup after the prayer, then pass the cup around. In my family tradition, each person has a cup and together we raise it while the leader recites the prayer. Jewish law also states that if wine is spilled from the cup, instead of saying the prayer over again, you say בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגֶּפֶן then continue the prayer.¹²

The tradition around *kiddush* also has a profound relationship with space. According to Rabbi Rema, another *Talmudic* rabbi, “One must eat in the place one makes *kiddush*.”¹³ This directly ties the prayer and the vessel to a specific place in which the ritual is performed, commonly the table. Like most of Jewish practice, the place described is in reference to the home and around the table.¹⁴

The *kiddush* cup below is a fine example of a Western European traditional cup. This particular one was passed down from my maternal great, great grandfather, and was recently used with joy in both my brother’s and sister’s weddings. The inscription on the side says “*Hashabbat*” or “the Sabbath,” designating its use for Jewish Sabbath ritual.

¹¹ This section of the prayer thanks God, the creator, ‘who creates the fruit of the vine.’

¹² “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim,” accessed January 28, 2023, https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Aruk,_Orach_Chayim?tab=contents.

¹³ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”

¹⁴ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”



Fig. 1: Unknown Artist, *Kiddush Cup*

Challah Tray

One of the defining moments of the history of the Jewish religion is the story of the Exodus from Egypt. For years, the Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians and with God's help,

Moses led them to freedom.¹⁵ On their way to the “promised land,” the Israelites struggled to survive in the desert where God provided them with a portion of food, called manna. *Challah*, a traditional Jewish bread, is based on these portions of food from the Exodus story. On a traditional Sabbath dinner table, *challah* is placed on a *challah* tray. It is an integral part of the *Shabbat* rituals which features two, braided loaves. The two loaves are placed on the tray and covered with a piece of cloth, typically made of silk, until everyone is ready to say the prayer. The cover is then removed, and the loaves are held together for the duration of the prayer.¹⁶ On *Shabbat*, the bottom loaf is then broken and divided.

The blessings and tasting of the *challah* are the last of the three main rituals for welcoming the Sabbath, which include lighting the candles, blessing the wine, and breaking bread. This order puts more emphasis on the blessings for the wine and candles, to help highlight their role in the ritual. This helps with ensuring that the rituals themselves are done in the right order. By keeping the *challah* covered, it remains apparent that it should be the last as it is kept out of view.

The trays for the *challah* are typically wooden boards or silver trays. Some of the older *challah* trays depict stories in the Torah, but this custom has been phasing out since the 17th century. Modern day trays typically have simple designs and patterns as they are covered by both the *challah* and the *challah* cover. They are often no more than one inch thick, thereby keeping the *challah* close to the table. It is also common to see trays with space for salt or honey, common accoutrements for *challah*.

¹⁵ “Rashi on Exodus 16:1:1,” accessed February 14, 2023, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Exodus.16.1.1?ven=Pentateuch_with_Rashi%27s_commentary_by_M._Rosenbaum_and_A.M._Silbermann,_1929-1934&lang=bi.

¹⁶ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”

Below is an example of a traditional oval *challah* tray. The oval inset shape reflects the shape of the *challah*, leaving a silver border to frame the loaves of bread.



Fig. 2: A large Silver Challah tray. Germany, c. 1890. Crimped border. Chased with biblical passage with commandment to “Remember the Sabbath”. Marked 800, crown, moon. 16” x 11.2”. J Greenstein & Co. Inc.

Seder Plate

The *seder* plate is a tray, typically round in design, and is the centerpiece of the Passover *seder* table. Used as the prominent tool to tell the Passover story, it displays the symbolic foods for the spring holiday. Passover is a festival holiday also held in the home, featuring a dinner where guests gather once or twice to tell the foundational story of freedom and redemption.¹⁷

¹⁷ “Passover (Pesach) Themes and Theology,” *My Jewish Learning* (blog), accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/passover-pesach-themes-and-theology/>.

The *seder* plate serves as the vehicle by which the story is told and its usual place in the center of the table indicates its importance. The plate itself has 6 recesses, often labeled to designate a place for each of the symbolic foods which include: *maror* (bitter herbs); *charoset* (a mixture of nuts, apples, and red wine); *karpas* (vegetable, usually parsley); *zeroah* (lamb bone); *beitzah* (roasted egg); and *chazeret* (vegetable, usually celery or lettuce).

This *seder* plate is the oldest known in existence. Featured in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, this plate was one of the first pieces that I focused on in my research due to its significance to the history of how Jews began to commemorate this event. There are errors in the spelling, likely a result of being made by a non-Jewish artist.



Fig. 3: Unknown Artist, *Seder* Plate from Pre-Expulsion Spain, 1480, Ceramic Lusterware, Diam. 57cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Chanukiah

Hanukkah is a holiday remembering the miracle of *Hanukkah*, both the historic victory of the Maccabees to restore The Temple in Jerusalem and also witnessing a small supply of oil that burned for 8 days, instead of one. The *chanukiah* is a nine branched candelabra that is lit for eight nights to commemorate the miracles of the flame lasting so long. Each night at sundown, the ninth candle, called the *shamash*, is lit and used to light the other candle(s) to designate the next day of the holiday. On the eighth night of *Hanukkah*, all nine candles are lit, creating a beautiful spectacle of light.

Every night new candles or oil have to be used, to ensure a clean *chanukiah* for the telling of the story. The *chanukiah* also has to be made of non-porous materials such as metal, glass or glazed ceramic. Therefore, earthenware is not permitted according to Jewish law since it absorbs the wax or oil from the candles and can't be cleaned.¹⁸

It is customary to place the *chanukiah* in the window to share the light with others and bring people into the home.¹⁹ It is also popular to light candles with your family, further cementing the notion of community and gathering for this holiday, as the flames burn brighter each night as a candle is added.

My great grandfather had this candelabra made in Western Europe, likely Germany. It features intricate carvings and an eagle perched on top. My great grandfather's family name was Adler, which translates to eagle in German.

¹⁸ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”

¹⁹ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”



Fig. 4: Hanukkah Lamp, Sterling Silver. Made in Germany.

Candle Sticks

Shabbat candlesticks are lit Friday at sundown to welcome the Jewish day of rest. This ritual lighting demarcates the end of the work week and the beginning of *Shabbat*, traditionally a 25-hour timeframe to cease work. Historically, oil lamps were primarily used, but today, most people use paraffin or beeswax candles. The number of candles is often dependent on family customs, but the majority of people just light two candles on Friday night. Some add an additional candle for each child in the family.

The placement of the candlesticks is important to prevent the flames from being extinguished. Candlesticks should be placed away from a door, so the flames don't get blown out. The placement is also important because “it is forbidden to move a candle that was lit on *Shabbat* even after it has gone out.”²⁰ This even applies to candle holders that consist of multiple parts, since each of those parts can be moved individually, none of the parts can be moved at all. Laws such as these ensure the practitioner observes the day of rest properly. Similar to the laws regarding the *chanukiah*, the oil/candle also has to be new when lighting for the respected *Shabbat* and cannot be reused.

Below are a pair of candlesticks from Germany. There are many similarities in form and design to my great grandfather's *Hanukkah* candelabra. These stand 12” tall, higher than most.

²⁰ “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”



Fig 5: A pair of candlesticks. Germany, c. 1890. The bases are embossed with floral designs. Some wear of the bulbous designs. The main section is baluster in shape. Marked with a 13 loth mark (812). 12" tall. J Greenstein & Co. Inc.

Havdalah Set

The *havdalah* set is used on Saturday evenings at sundown to welcome a new week after *Shabbat*. *Havdalah* or ‘separation,’ signifies the return to the week. There are four components that make up a *havdalah* set: a *kiddush* cup; spice box; candle holder; and a tray. The ceremony is intended to engage all five senses: feeling the cup; passing the spice box; seeing the flame of the candle; smelling the spices; tasting the wine; hearing the blessings and the sound of the candle being extinguished.

During the candle lighting, it is customary to hold both hands up to the fire and gaze at the reflection of the flames on your hands. At the conclusion of the ceremony, it is also customary to extinguish the candle by lifting and dunking the flame in the glass of wine. This results in a wonderful sound that awakens more senses, helping welcome in the new week. The spice container is traditionally filled with cloves, but many other aromatics can be used, as long as they have a sweet smell. The spices, called *besamim*, are stored in this container and passed around for everyone to smell.

Below is a silver *havdalah* set, featuring the *kiddush* cup, spice box, and candle holder on a tray.



Fig 6: A Silver Havdalah Set. Germany c. 1900. Modernist. The rim of the plate cut out in Hebrew "Separates the Holy from the Mundane" and a Magen David. With cup spice tower and candle holder. Cup and spice tower 4.5" tall candle holder 5.7" tall. J Greenstein & Co. Inc.

Honey Pot

A honey pot is used primarily for *Rosh Hashana*, the holiday that denotes the Jewish New Year. Honey is central to the holiday, as it represents the hope of a ‘sweet’ new year. It is customary to utilize a dedicated dish for honey to help highlight its relationship with the holiday.

Honey is also used in relation to specific events and holidays. For example, it is customary to put honey on *challah* during *Shabbat* when a celebration is in order (weddings or Bar/Bat Mitzvahs). Similarly, married couples traditionally put honey on their *challah* for the year following their wedding. This is to help cement the sweetness of the *simcha*, or happy occasion, and the future ahead.

The honey pot pictured below is a beautiful example of a handmade sterling silver version. A specifically designed glass container fits inside, making this pot easier to clean.



Fig. 7: Regency Period Antique Sterling Silver Honey Skep or Honey Pot from 1810. Height: 5.52 in (14 cm)Width: 3.55 in (9 cm)Depth: 3.55 in (9 cm). 1stDibs.

Material and Design

The concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah* inspired me to use premium materials to make these vessels. I developed a porcelain clay specifically for this body of work. I sourced the purest ingredients that fully vitrify and fire to a pure white color, giving me control over small effects in the glaze. Given its purity, this porcelain is bright white and translucent, allowing light to pass through, creating an added dimension in each piece as the color will slightly change depending

on the type and angle of the light. This is particularly noticeable in the objects that are picked up and held, such as the *kiddush* cup.

I sought to develop a glaze that would not only accentuate the beauty of the clay itself, but would highlight the forms as well. I created a variation of a Chinese blue celadon, a glaze originally developed for porcelain vessels. Early celadons, similar to the one I created, were reserved for Chinese imperial wares during the Yuan Dynasty. Like the clay, its color comes from reducing trace amounts of iron left in the ingredients to create a natural slight blue hue in the glaze. The reduction happens by precisely reducing a manually controlled gas kiln to turn the iron blue. Paired with my porcelain clay, this glaze creates slight color variations depending on the part of the piece. On the rims and edges where the glaze thins, a halo-like effect is revealed as the white porcelain breaks through around the edges. This adds a dimension to the work as it provides a slight contrast to help accentuate the form. Within the surface of the glaze, there are a multitude of micro bubbles. These bubbles have the effect of adding depth to the surface and bending the light differently, making the glaze look like it is part of the vessel, rather than applied on top. This helps integrate the elements into one homogeneous piece. The glossiness of the glaze also changes how the work interacts with the light, whether the pieces are used in daylight or by candlelight.

Each piece has white gold luster applied to the surface inspired by traditional Judaica that was made from silver while also complementing the color of the clay and glaze. Luster is applied onto the glaze and fired onto the surface for the third and final firing. The luster has a brilliant sheen that enhances the white clay and soft celadon blue glaze beautifully as the platinum color is complemented by the blue and white hues. To adhere the letters for the blessings on the *kiddush cup* for instance, the application is by utilizing custom made vinyl stencils. Further, the

use of the white gold for the prayers highlights the importance of the prayer itself and emphasizes that both the prayer and the vessel work in harmony to enhance the ritual. Most of the Judaica I grew up with was made from silver. I wanted to reference those pieces in my own work through the use of white gold luster which leaves a similar surface.

To incorporate the element of empty space, I intentionally designed the pieces to be double walled. Each piece may appear to be quite heavy but is deceptively light for its size and shape. To achieve this attribute, I adjusted the time that the clay sits in the mold so that the walls of the pieces are about half the thickness that they typically would be. The wall thickness is important to me because I want the physical weight to be significantly lighter than the visual weight. The goal is to add to the user experience so that when they first handle the pieces, they receive a wonderful surprise. This might also spur the handler to further explore the work, such as the feeling of the glazed surface or the way the work changes in different light.

All the works transmit a feeling of fullness, almost like they are a flower about to bloom. At this stage, a flower has a fullness that is bursting with energy, about to open and show its beauty. I believe that through use, these pieces can achieve a similar blooming effect for the users. The *challah* tray looks like it is full, almost as if it has been inflated, awaiting the *challah* bread to be placed on the tray to provide balance. The *kiddush* cup looks like a tulip at the moment before it blooms; tight, but full of energy.

The doubled wall element in all the work also helps it serve as its own pedestal, elevating the pieces. For example, the design of the *challah* tray helps lift the *challah* off the table to help show its importance. The light of the candles in the candle holders illuminate those gathered to help spread the light. The wine in the *kiddush* cup is suspended in the cup, bringing it higher and

closer to the lips. Elements such as these help showcase the ritual purpose the vessels are intended to fulfill.

The Ritual as Commemorative

I have always been drawn to the idea of commemorating important milestones in each individual's journey through Judaism and life. Around the time of my own Bar Mitzvah, my best friend gave me a handmade *kippah* for the occasion of his Bar Mitzvah.²¹ It is a blue, white, and black knit *kippah* with my first name embroidered in white thread along the edge. Inside was a label that stated: “*Handmade in Israel for Zev’s Bar Mitzvah*” along with the date. This has consistently been the *kippah* I have worn, and continue to wear for almost every Jewish holiday. Although I have several *kippot*, this specific one is the most meaningful and offers me an opportunity for reflection every time I place it upon my head.

Similar to the inscription on that *kippah*, I plan to incorporate and expand commemorative elements into this collection. Since Judaica is often bought as gifts, I plan to offer personalized inscriptions such as the name and dates of weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and other special occasions to forever mark the importance of that date. Using white gold will further reference traditional Judaica as it is the closest available luster to silver. Since Judaica is also passed down, this commemorative art will remain embedded as a memory for the next generation.

²¹ A traditional head covering traditionally worn by men at all times except when sleeping or bathing.

The Pieces

Kiddush Cup

My *kiddush* cup was designed to perform the blessing over wine. Therefore, this cup would serve secondary to a wine glass as wine glasses are designed to cater to the wine itself. According to rabbis, the *kiddush* cup is supposed to hold ‘a cheekful of wine.’²² Since the cup is quite small relative to a standard glass, its use should be used to facilitate the ritual, calling attention to the prayer.

An important design component is that this piece is double walled. This creates a unique feature where the inner portion for the wine is suspended, separating the hand from the wine itself. Further, having the wine physically elevated above the empty space also means that the wine is sure to be seen, showcasing the beauty of the wine, and also enriching the ritual. Typically, red wine is used for the blessing, creating a deep color contrast to the light celadon glaze. I chose to leave the bottom of the cup open, allowing access to the hollowness during the duration of the blessing. Accessible only when the cup is lifted, the user can explore and deepen their connection to the time and space in which the ritual is practiced.

With the double wall, the added weight of the wine puts the center of gravity closer to the top, creating a slight imbalance. I focus on this imbalance in order to add on another opportunity for awareness about the cup. The most secure way to hold the vessel is to cup it with both hands, referencing the notion of ‘giving hands,’ referencing generosity to those gathered around the table. It also naturally requires the user to hold it closer to his or her heart for control and support and thereby deepens reflection and intention.

²² “Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim.”

Another critical element of this cup is the placement of the ending of the blessing, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן (boreh p'ri hagafen), along the outside of the rim. I have developed two versions, one with white gold luster and another etched to form a matte relief on the surface. In this collection, only the white gold luster is included. The white gold is highlighted by the brilliant porcelain and color of the blue glaze and the inclusion of the Hebrew inscription designates the cup as a ritual vessel.

The etched, sandblasted version, while not included in this collection, is barely seen, but can be felt. Unique to this approach is that the sandblasting nearly makes the prayer disappear. Although you can see it with a close eye due to the contrast between the glossy glaze and the matte letters, it is most noticeable when the first sip of wine is taken, and the bottom lip literally feels the blessing. In a most unusual way, the act of sipping activates the sense of touch, with the intention of drawing an emotional response of surprise and wonder.



Fig 8: Porcelain *kiddush* cup with celadon glaze and white gold luster.

Challah Tray

Due to the large scale and limitations of the clay I was using, I ended up making the trays out of maple hardwood. I was able to get one tray out of the glaze kiln, but the result was the wrong shade of blue due to differences in the clay material and glaze.

This tray is designed to be slightly larger than most *challah* trays in order to better accommodate two large loaves of *challah*. When two loaves are placed on the tray with a cloth on top, the tray looks bountiful, accentuating the significance of the Sabbath and the gathering of people for a shared meal. Since one *challah* is typically consumed right after the blessing, a single loaf is nestled perfectly in the soft curves of the tray, as if placed on a soft pillow.

Since this tray's intended use is for *challah*, I intended to luster the Hebrew word for *challah* in white gold in the center of the tray. When the tray is unused, the bread would cover the white gold, as its intended use is apparent. When not in use, perhaps stationed on a nearby table waiting for the next *Shabbat* to arrive, the word and luster would distinguish the tray from everyday use, as it is to be reserved for the respected ritual.

Given the size and scope inherent in this design, the best way to pick it up is with both hands out on both sides. One can imagine the symbolic motion of 'giving hands,' similar to the *kiddush* cup. This is particularly important as the tray is brought to the table and presented before everyone. Given the nature of the design and construction, it is surprisingly light as it is completely hollow. The volume and height of the tray also gives the illusion that *challah* lifts off the table, proving its importance. Grand in appearance, the tray ends up serving as a pedestal for the bread.



Fig 9: Maple *Challah* tray

Seder Plate

Given the similar scale as the *challah* tray, I also made this final tray out of hard maple. I was able to make one porcelain tray, but the finished result was the same shade of blue as the *challah* tray, resulting in a less desirable appearance.

Similar to the *challah* tray, I sought to lift the *seder* plate up off the plane of the table so that it establishes itself as the centerpiece of the *seder*. During a *seder*, the table is busy, filled with place settings, drinks, books, and the endless shuffle of people impatiently waiting for food. Within this commotion, there is *seder*, or order, that grounds everyone, all centered around the *seder* plate. *Seder* plates, with their low profile, risk getting lost on the table. This is why I designed a tray that is larger than most, ensuring its significance as the key feature on the table. Since food is placed in each of the indents, I label each one instead of including imagery because of its aesthetics and the different customs regarding the individual items. For example, since my family is vegetarian, we replace the traditional meat bone with a root vegetable, usually a beet. Since substitutions can be quite common, just having the words in Hebrew allows for more flexibility and personal interpretation within this part of the holiday.



Fig 10: Maple *Seder* plate with sandblasted text

Chanukiah

The holiday of *Hanukkah* celebrates both miracles and the spectacle of light. Designing my work to play with both the ambient light and the light cast from the candles was paramount. This was achieved by alternating the angles of the pieces. With this alternation, the candelabra not only casts its own shadow on the surface it is placed on, but also on each consecutive piece. The shadows are enhanced when the candles are lit and start to burn down. Since the entire candle has to be used each night, the way the light that is cast from the candle will change dramatically depending on how long the candle has been lit.

This complicated piece is assembled using 9 individual alternating segments, creating about one-inch gaps between each element. This creates a space for the light to reflect off the highly glossy glaze, while also casting shadows at the same time. This juxtaposition deepens the depth of the piece. The ridge on each piece creates a thin spot on the glaze, allowing the porcelain to break through, revealing more of the white clay underneath. Furthermore, where the pieces are joined, the glaze has pooled slightly, creating a slightly richer blue. This produces a gradient of color between the apex, soft curves, and joining points.

The *chanukiah* is finished with white gold on the top, with the center-most piece finished in yellow gold to designate it as the *shamash*. When there are no candles, the gold is quite apparent, creating a termination point for the viewer's eye. When candles are inserted, the gold border surrounds each candle. Enough gold border is left so that as the candle burns down and gets shorter, it will reflect off the highly glossy surface.



Fig 11: Porcelain *Chanukiah* with Celadon glaze and white and yellow gold.

Candle Sticks

When designing the candlesticks, I wanted a set that was taller than most. On average, Shabbat candlesticks range in size from one inch to over twelve inches. I wanted a pair that would be just around or above eye level when seated at the table. If placed in the center of the table, the light from the candle would then cast over those who have come to gather and celebrate.

The candle holders are two independent pieces and two different heights. By designing two different heights, they can be arranged in different ways depending on the user's preferences. Modern and unusually thin by design, the holders on their own are strong and confident forms which are highlighted by their relationship with each other. As the candle in the shorter holder burns down, it will cast its light on the taller holder.

Further, the bi-level holders offer the opportunity to stage with unlimited flexibility. The user can display them differently each week which can change the relationship between the two holders. Also, since it is customary to add an additional candle for each child, one can add more individual holders to observe this custom due to its modular nature.

Similar to the *chanukiah*, these candlesticks have white gold on top. This will achieve a similar shimmering effect as the candles burn down and the color of the glaze changes. This effect will influence the reflective quality of the glossy glaze and the light.



Fig. 12: Porcelain Candlesticks with Celadon glaze and Platinum Luster

Havdalah Set

When designing this set, my goal was to build components that work in harmony. The *havdalah* set is made up of a tray, *kiddush* cup, candle holder, and spice box, each fulfilling very different roles. When looking at them straight on, one notices that the *kiddush* cup and spice box intentionally have the same exterior curve. Set in the middle, between the cup and spice forms, the candle holder exhibits the inverse curve. This is designed so that the negative space on either

side of the candle holder draws your eye up towards the light of the candle that resides in the middle.

The tray unifies all the pieces, providing a home for them. Similar to the challah tray, the curves of this tray help highlight and frame the objects placed on top. The tray also easily transports the whole set, as its volume and sweeping curves create a substantial place for your hands.

The candle holder in this set was designed to hold the traditional multi-wick braided candle specially designed for the *havdalah* service. I decided to make the shape of the candle holder oval to match the oval shape of the candles. This ensures that the holder is secure when holding a burning candle. The oval shapes are featured in a few pieces in this collection due to the way that light is reflected.

The *kiddush* cup is the same one that I have included as a solo object on the table. I have used the same silhouette of the *kiddush* cup to design the spice box, but I chose to invert the interior shape to be more conducive to the smelling of aromatics. I made this change by reducing the depth of the interior curve and adding vent holes for the spices, making it easy to smell the

spices as they are passed around.



Fig. 13: *Havdalah* set

Honey pot

When designing the honey pot, I wanted a vessel that highlighted the color and quality of honey itself. As a result, this double walled bowl has a thick rim that is angled inward, drawing the eye of the viewer towards the center of the bowl to the honey. This is also where the bulb of the honey dipper rests. This directs the eye to the center, elegantly framing the honey. In the rim, I designed a notch that is also angled towards the center, providing a place for the stem of the honey dipper to rest. This prevents the dipper from rolling around or falling down when the pot is passed around. I left the dipper unglazed, showcasing the simple purity of the porcelain. Since this clay is fully vitrified, it remains food safe even without glaze.

Honey pots are mainly used in the celebration of *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, so I decided to luster a common greeting for the holiday, שנה טובה ומתוקה (*Shana Tova Umetuka*) which translates to a “sweet new year.” The Hebrew letters are applied along the thick rim to frame the honey.

Attention to detail on the outside curvature of the pot also provides a comfortable grip for the hand. One can easily hold it from the side and wrap a thumb around the rim for security. The bowl itself is elevated, suspending the honey above the empty space within the vessel.



Fig. 14: Honey Pot

Table

Different in material yet integral in function, I decided to design and build a display table from the ground up to highlight the Judaica collection. I came to believe that a modern, wood

table would provide a warmth that would also balance the color and space of the overall display of the objects. This table is built out of cherry, a wood known for its rich reddish-brown color that darkens as it ages. Is it one of the most popular woods used in furniture making in America due to its durability and grain pattern. Cherry's rich color helps balance the white, blue, and silver tones of the porcelain Judaica. The notion of warmth also references the comfort of having a 'full' table at home and the symbolic references regarding the home and community. Perhaps nothing complements a home-based collection of ritual objects utilized on or around a table, more than the table itself.

Displaying the Judaica on a table is a natural way to display the collection, as this is where the objects typically might be set. This is to reference the table being full, as if everyone was here to gather around the table. Since almost all of the objects are used for different holidays and rituals, I am not attempting to portray how they typically function or address their specific uses. Instead, I chose to display each piece where a place setting would be set, making the table appear full and in use.

Made of solid hardwood, this table helps reinforce the idea of a semi-permanent structure that is an integral part of the home. The tabletop is over an inch thick, featuring a 15° bevel on the underside. This provides a bit of an illusion since the top appears a lot thinner at first glance, juxtaposing the visual and physical weight. The top floats above the base by half an inch, playing with the visual and physical weight. With the floating top, the base starts to disappear, prominently featuring the Judaica. This also creates a subtle relationship between the table and the Judaica as they follow similar design elements. Influenced by the concept of empty space, a similar dialogue between the objects and the table ensues.

The legs are made from 2.5” solid hardwood. They provide a physically and visually sturdy base that facilitates a sense of grounding. The horizontal stretcher between the legs on the ends of the table has the same 15° angle. This angle is mirrored between the stretcher and the top, heightening the feeling that the tabletop is floating. The bevel is also cut onto the bottom of the stretcher, which makes it appear thinner than it is.

The table is finished with a natural oil/wax finish, highlighting the natural characteristics of the wood grain. Due to sanding to a high grit, the table feels very smooth providing a highly refined feeling when sitting at the table. This finishing process penetrates the perfect surface for the satin finish, subtly reflecting light and highlighting the natural grain of the wood.



Fig. 15: Cherry Table

Process

Design and Prototypes

All of the pieces are made in plaster molds, either slip casted or press-molded depending on the size of the object. This method allows me to create more precise objects that are both thinner and lighter than other methods of making. In slip-casting, a plaster mold is made from a positive model and slip is poured into the mold for a specific amount of time then poured out leaving a shell of clay in the mold which results in the final piece. When press molding, a sheet of clay is draped over the mold and pressed to form the curves. Since I had previous mold making experience, I knew my main challenge would be creating prototypes that were rigid and refined enough to work in this process. This led me to Rhinoceros, a computer-aided-design (CAD) software, that allowed me to design the work online in order to make prototypes. Rhinoceros allows finite adjustments to curves, something that is not common in CAD software. I can refine subtleties in the lines and curves of my pieces, something I would normally do by hand.

Once I created files for each piece, I either used a 3D printer or computer numerical control (CNC) machine to make the forms. Due to the limitations of the machines, all the smaller objects, such as the *kiddush* cup and individual components for the *chanukiah* were 3D printed. The larger *challah* tray and *seder* plate were cut on a CNC machine from a laminated block of fiberboard. Both results required refinement and sanding to ensure a smooth surface for the mold making process. The final *challah* tray and *seder* plate were made using this process.

High emphasis is placed on this part of the process since the molds are the key tool to form the pieces. Clean, precise molds allow for extremely precise casts, resulting in refined

finished pieces. The plaster mold process also mirrored the notion of ‘hollow space.’ The negative space inside the mold is where the slip is poured in to produce each piece. The forms are ceramic, but the majority of the process is not in clay.

Clay and Glaze

While designing and creating prototypes, I was concerned with the limitations of material, given the hidden complexity of some of these forms. I knew I needed a clay body that highlighted the beautiful qualities of porcelain, while also being extremely durable. Since porcelain is a clay that is fully vitrified, I was also taking into account how the clay might behave during the firing process. I knew that I would have to create a clay recipe from scratch in order to achieve these requirements. After many tests experimenting with different ingredients and firing temperatures, I ended up with clay that had all the properties I desired. The final product was surprisingly simple and contained only three ingredients. Each ingredient was sourced globally, due to their whiteness and purity, to ensure the desired level of whiteness and strength. This final clay body is one of the whitest clays in the industry, extremely durable and pairs beautifully with glaze. According to Edmund De Wall, “For centuries, porcelain has transfixed emperors and alchemists, philosophers, craftsmen, and collectors – all eager to learn the recipe for this versatile and valuable substance. Porcelain was melted, smashed, or snapped into pieces as men struggled to decode the secret of ‘white gold’.”²³ I set out to create a clay body similar to one that had the world transfixed for decades, a clay that is incredibly white and enchanting.

Once I had the clay body, I began testing glazes. I sought a glaze that would highlight the qualities of this beautiful clay. I chose a glaze that was glossy, had a slight blue hue, both due to

²³ Edmund De Waal, *The White Road* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015).

its relationship with historical porcelain and its ability to enhance the porcelain clay through the added subtle depth to the surface. I started testing glaze recipes, slowly refining color and fit to achieve a harmony between clay and glaze. The final glaze subtly reveals the clay underneath where it is thin on the edges, but remains a soft blue where applied thicker. This produces a gradual change in color throughout the whole piece. This color is produced by reducing the trace amounts of iron present in the glaze in a gas kiln that subsequently turns the iron blue. By manually firing these kilns and making small adjustments to the reduction throughout the firing, I am able to influence the blue hue of the glaze. This provides a natural color, homogenous to the work. Upon close inspection, micro bubbles are also apparent in this glaze. This effect helps add depth and complexity to the surface and slightly changes the way the light reflects off the surface.

Surface Treatment and Finishing

After I have the final glazed piece, I place custom stencils and adhere white gold luster to add text. The luster is applied directly to the fired glazed surface. The piece is then fired for a third time, melting the gold onto the surface. Once the pieces are lustered, I sand all of the unglazed areas, such as the bottom or foot of the work to 400 grit, creating an extremely soft surface that will not scratch the surfaces on which they are placed. It attains a nice, finished surface, is fully vitrified, and feels almost like polished glass.

Conclusion

Designing and producing these works of Judaica has reestablished both my relationship with the Jewish and the ceramic communities. Creating objects that facilitate ritual in the home

brings me great satisfaction as an artist and member of the Jewish community. As discussed throughout this paper, rituals have the ability to provide a scaffolding to teach and understand what is an everyday object and what is special. Being a maker of these ceremonial objects, understanding what their impact may be, motivates me to produce and design new works.

Although unexpected, this collection was the most technically and conceptually challenging body of work I have yet created. I started making Judaica during the pandemic in search of a deeper connection to community. At that time, I did not expect to dedicate the next two years, and possibly decades, to handmade Judaica. This surprise has led me to start my own company, Green Judaica, and to keep pushing boundaries for myself, and with the materials themselves.

In creating this body of work, I used a lot of techniques that I was already proficient with, such as wheel throwing and slip casting, but quickly realized that some of the forms I designed pushed the limits of my technical skills and the materials' abilities. What followed was endless material testing and refining to produce characteristics that until now, I have not been able to achieve.

Throughout this project, I was not sure which pieces would prove to be the most challenging. Due to its complexity, I expected the *chanukiah* to be the most difficult, but it came together within a couple iterations. On the other hand, the *seder* plate and *challah* tray ended up being the two most difficult constructs I have ever attempted due to the combination of size, shape, and material.

The culmination of this project has left me with the product line that will be the basis for Green Judaica. As important as making these pieces are to me, sharing and getting them into the homes and hands of members of my community is where these pieces will contribute the most. I

hope to continue developing new forms to help further the observance of Jewish rituals and enhance the meaning and beauty of these rituals in the homes and hands of its practitioners.



Fig. 16: Straight on view of show



Fig. 17: Side view



Fig. 18: Side view



Fig. 19: Detail



Fig. 20: Detail photo of show



Fig. 21: Detail photo of show



Fig. 22: Detail photo of show

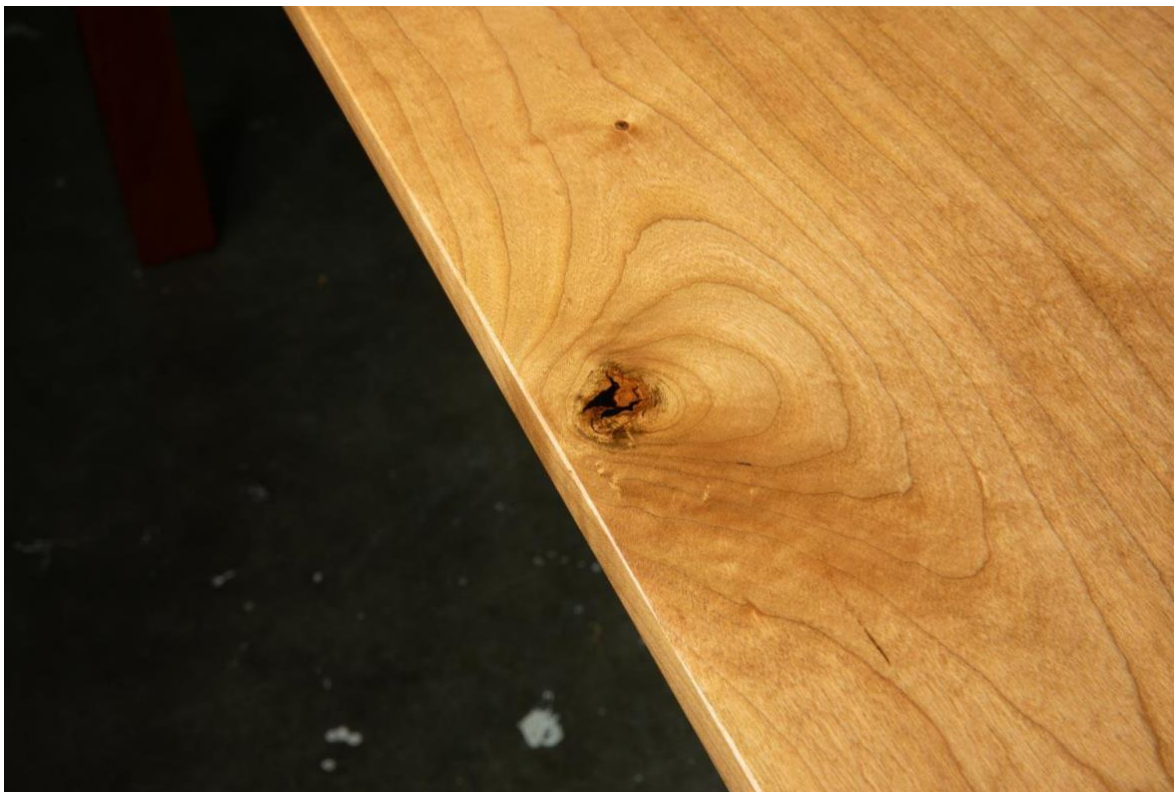


Fig. 23: Detail of wood grain



Fig. 24: Detail of underside of table



Fig. 25: Detail of floating tabletop

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Technical Statement:

Clay Body Recipe: Δ10

New Zealand Halloysite	50
Mahavir Potash Feldspar	25
Silica	25
Total:	100

Glaze Recipe: A variation of Derek Aus' Mahavir Clear

Mahavir Clear (Grolleg) Δ10:

Silica:	25.10
Wollastonite:	24.80
Mahavir Potash Feldspar:	24.60
Grolleg Kaolin:	23.50
Talc:	2.00
Total:	100.00

Pictured below is an image of my slip casting station. The table is made of fiberglass with wooden dowels to allow my molds to drain out. The fiberglass is angled so that the draining slip runs towards the center where there is a hole in the table with a bucket underneath to catch the slip.

On the shelves are plaster molds and tools such as timers for timing each cast to ensure even wall thickness. The tools hanging on the wall are those I use most frequently for this process, kept within arm's reach for better workflow.



Fig. 25: Slip casting station with plaster molds and casting tools.

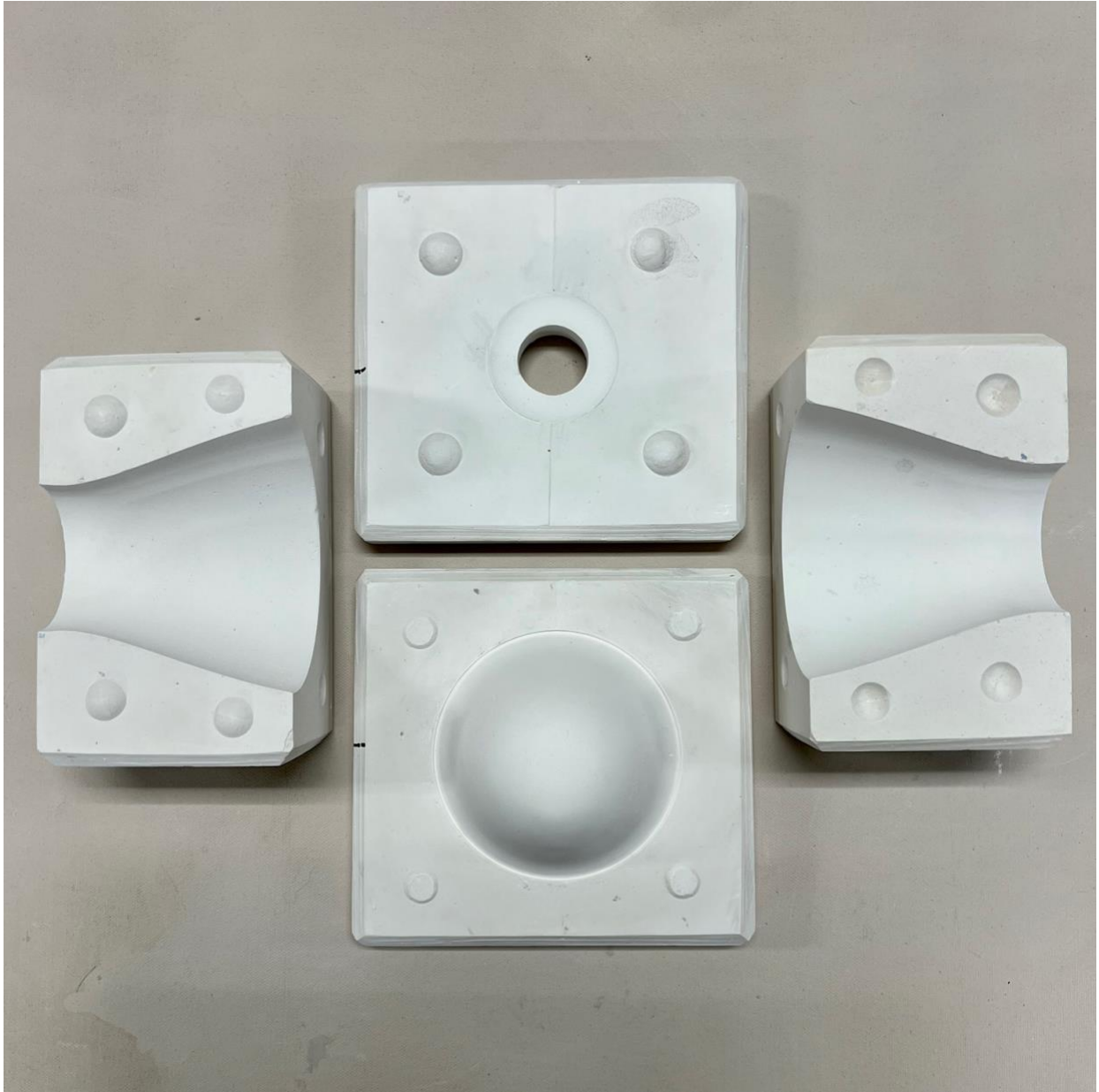


Fig. 27: Photo of plaster mold