

Biedermeier Kachelofen



Many, many moons ago, I was invited to spend my school holidays in a grand country house that had beautiful tiled stoves in each bedroom. The stove in the main bedroom was, in my then young eyes, the most fantastic thing ever, sort of a giant wedding cake all made of meringue and whipped-cream. My amazement must have been quite evident, 'cause I remember the owner commenting to my parents that I "had fallen in love with the *Biedermeier!*" For years I believed "Biedermeier" was the generic word for stove and only a lot later did I realize that it described the artistic style -namely the style that flourished in central Europe between 1815 and 1848, with the rise of a then new urban middle class (I think it's called Empire style in France and UK). In fact, the term itself means something like "petit bourgeois-style". I certainly wouldn't have minded being a "petit-bourgeois" back then!

I am including a picture of said stoves here in order to give you an idea of the look I was trying to achieve; the one in the pic is not the wedding-cake wonder of my childhood. What I personally like about this stoves, is the playfulness of the design and the contrast between the decorative elements, grooves, wreaths, ornamental borders... The ones I have seen are not "tiled" in the exact sense, but constructed of glazed ceramic parts that fit together like a puzzle.

I built my miniature one over the course of one weekend, using odd bits and ends I had at home. You probably won't have exactly the same bits but, as you know, the only thing that can't be replaced is one's own imagination!

List of materials:

- A tealight holder for the base. Mine was a family heirloom but similar ones are available online. Optionally you may want to build a stove without legs.
- Corrugated cardboard, the sort that has thin grooves.
- Plain cardboard / Foam board 0,3 cm
- Piping, lace trim or similar border
- Bottom part of a wooden, lathe-turned eggcup. A big chess piece should also work well.
- Washer or similar circular round shape, slightly bigger than the stove's diameter. Alternatively, a circle of foam board or wood
- Plastic cap (or a goblet-shaped thing). Don't remember where mine came from, but I know it was something rather prosaic, like toothpaste.
- Bits of jewelry, embossed card, paper ornaments
- A tealight or a piece of soft metal (i.e. from a soda can) for the door.
- A sequin



- Gesso
- White glossy paint
- Gold paint (I use a permanent gold marker)
- Clear beeswax, pastel crayons and acrylic paints (raw umber, black) for aged / distressed look (optional)
- Craft knife, ruler, scissors, rubber bands
- Glue! Mind that you will be gluing together very different materials. I used regular wood glue for the cardboard and Uhu gel instant-glue for other materials like plastic (it has the big advantage that it is not runny, so you won't end up gluing together your fingers!) For gluing plastic to plastic, there are special glues available.

My tealight holder was silver, so the first thing I should have done (but unfortunately did not, rest assured that it was a real pain to do this afterwards!) was to paint gold the legs and lower part.

Done that first? Right. Now cut a rectangle of cardboard and roll it into a tube. Calculate the height according to the room you will be placing your stove in. Keep in mind you will be adding bits on top which will increase the total height! (my stove is 19,5 cm high; 5,5cm for the base, 9cm for the middle, grooved part, 5cm for the top. The first cardboard tube was 13cm high). I inserted my tube into the tealight holder, so the tealight holder determined my tube's diameter. If you are not using one as a base, the diameter is up to you. Something around 4 cm should do.



Cut a rectangle of corrugated cardboard, approx. 2/3 the height of your stove. My corrugated cardboard came from a gift box and was rather sturdy. If that is the case, it is better to bend each groove gently with your fingers before rolling the rectangle into a tube. Wrap now the corrugated cardboard around your first tube and paste it on it without overlapping the ends.



For covering the bottom part (that is, the tealight holder), I used leftovers from a sheet of miniature copper-tiled ceiling I had used in my dollhouse (actually plastic, see picture below). Embossed card or any material with reliefs / patterns should work well too. Leave uncovered the square where the door will go, so it sits flush afterwards.

Paste the border or lace trimming to strips of cardboard, then wrap them around your tube and cut to size. Avoid overlapping the ends. I prefer to curve and paint mine with gesso first but that is just me (see picture left). Add as many strips as you like, I put one around the base and one covering the edge between tealight holder and cardboard tube. While the glue dries, keep them in place and in shape using rubber bands.

My washer had a nice concave shape but it was too thin, so I glued it to a piece of foam board, cut the foam board around the shape, then added a strip of embossed paper (you can use just a strip of plain cardboard, or some trim) around the edge to cover up the irregularities. Then I glued the circle on top of the cylinder (mind that it is well centered) and on top I glued the foot of the eggcup (mine were old wooden ones that are just inserted into each other, you may have to cut off the base of your eggcup with a wood saw first).



For stability, I pricked a tiny hole in the top of the eggcup foot, inserted a pin through the plastic cap and into the hole. You may just want to try gluing your cap on top instead. If you can't find a suitable cap, remember that any shape resembling an amphora or goblet will do. Or perhaps a tiny acorn, many of these stoves had a pineapple-shaped finial on top. Add whatever ornamental elements you like now.

Once you are pleased with the general shape, give the whole piece at least two coats of gesso. Let it dry well, then sand gently until you achieve your desired smoothness. Paint with one or two coats of glossy white paint using a soft brush (I tried nail lacquer first and it went ok but I wouldn't have had the required quantity) The cheap paint shown in the picture above, on the other hand, worked like a dream! Or you can spray-paint it, if you prefer...

Cut a square out of the soft metal and bend it into shape. Glue thin strips of metal or cardboard on all sides and add some jewelry bits or embellishments of your choice. I used a clip from an earring as handle. Paint the door and the sequin gold. If your gold is too bright and you prefer an aged look, dry-brush some umber and black acrylic paint on the gold. Glue the door and the sequin on the stove. You can finish your piece with a coat of acrylic varnish now.



I like giving my pieces an aged look and for achieving a “used” effect, I simply treat them to some... regular dirt. Really! This time, I added a thin coat of clear wax and rolled the stove on dusty garden earth. It did get dirty indeed, even a little too dirty for my taste!

Another method I like is to scrape with the craft knife on pastel crayons (preferably several nuances of brown) until acquiring a very fine powder. Then I apply the powder with a bit of wax on a cloth and rub it well into all crevices and nooks. However, perhaps you know of a better method, or just favor a clean, pristine look.

There are a million possible variations -ok, a “million” is perhaps an exaggeration- of this stove. In my opinion, the most distinctive features they share are the color (most are white or off-white, though pastel colors like green, light blue or a buttery yellow are also possible), the vertical grooves and the finial on top.

If you happen to build one of your own, I’d be delighted to see the result. Check my pinboard on Pinterest, “A dollhouse on Betelgeuze” and send me a message there!

Wishing you all a peaceful Advent season!



** Betelgeuze **