

# USING AIR-DRY CLAY

## Free Resources | Tips & Techniques



*Air-dry clay is fun for artists of all ages!*

### Air-Dry Clay

Anyone who has ever been around children when clay makes an appearance knows what a huge hit it is. Yes, children love to play with clay! No big surprise there. But did you know that air-dry clay is quickly becoming a popular art medium for adults as well? The recent surge in popularity is partly due to the simplicity of working with air-dry clay — no kiln necessary — as well as the versatility of air-dry clay and the endless possibilities of artsy objects you can mold. Moreover, clay offers tactile gratifica-



tion, which reduces negativity, anxiety, and stress while awakening the brain's creative side. So grab a glob of all-natural, air-dry clay! Whether it's a lump of grey, white, or terra-cotta — putting the following tips into practice will have you creating clay masterpieces in no time!

### Tricks of the Trade

#### • 1 • Prep Your Work Surface Well

Clay is sticky, so as you can imagine, it is a magnet for foreign objects like dog hair, small pieces of lint, crumbs from last night's dinner. If you want to keep your clay uncontaminated, make sure that you start with a clean work surface. And even at that, you may still find yourself pulling off the occasional dog hair. In addition to protecting your clay, you should think about protecting your work surface as well. Ensure that the area you choose is non-porous or cover the surface — a kraft paper bag and waxed paper both work well to protect the surface and make clean-up a breeze.

#### • 2 • Textured Work Surface

Choosing a textured work surface is a technique that allows you to transfer an interesting overall texture to your clay masterpiece quickly. It works particularly well

when rolling clay. You may use materials like wicker, burlap, woven sisal, corduroy, etc., as your textured work surface. The material you choose may be porous, so be sure you're okay with it staining. And keep in mind, working on fabric surfaces may lead to fibers shedding onto your piece, which you can limit by dampening the fabric first. You may remove any stray fibers with your fingers before drying — or brush them off after the clay has dried.



#### • 3 • Proper Cover-Up

Working with air-dry clay is so hands-on that it can be difficult to keep it from getting on everything — especially your clothes. Because fabric is one of those porous surfaces, be sure to wear old clothing or cover up with an apron or art smock.

#### • 4 • A Sticky Wicket

As with most sticky things, it never fails that they seem to stick where we don't intend. In the case of clay, it's on our hands. However, a little hand lotion before creating with clay should help minimize the stick. Working with moist hands will also keep too much clay from sticking. Place a small bowl of water near to re-wet your hands when necessary.

#### • 5 • Prepare Your Clay

Now that you've prepared everything else for the clay — it's essential to prepare the clay for everything else! Upon removing the beeswax encasement, knead the air-dry clay with moistened hands until it's smooth and soft. This step is known as 'conditioning' the clay, which combines tiny platelets in the clay, spreading them evenly and making the clay more pliable. This might be difficult at first — keep going it gets easier.



If, after kneading, your clay still feels a bit stiff and appears dry with cracks forming at the folds, you may add water in small increments to rehydrate.

#### • 6 • A Little Water Goes a Long Way

Use water sparingly; excess moisture will prolong drying time and can contribute to cracking as water evaporates from the clay.

#### • 7 • A Little Color Goes Even Further

To color white clay before creating your masterpiece, add a few drops of food coloring (a little goes a really long way) and knead through the clay until you have consistent color. You may find yourself with stained hands — a toothpaste rub usually does a pretty good job of removing some of the dye.

#### • 8 • Low to High

What is the difference between low-relief and high-relief sculpting? Low-relief sculpting is when you remove clay or make impressions into the clay. High-relief sculpting is just the opposite — clay is added to specific areas, thereby building up the surface. High relief requires the score & weld method to attach the pieces.

#### • 9 • Joining Pieces of Clay

To attach two pieces of clay, you should use the score & weld method. Begin by mixing a tiny amount of clay with water (several drops at a time) until the clay becomes the consistency of heavy cream — this is called slip. Using a clay tool, score or roughen with hatch-marks both attaching surfaces, then apply the slip to both attaching surfaces before pressing the pieces firmly together. Once you have connected the pieces, gently crimp and smooth the seams together using a wooden tool. This step ensures a strong

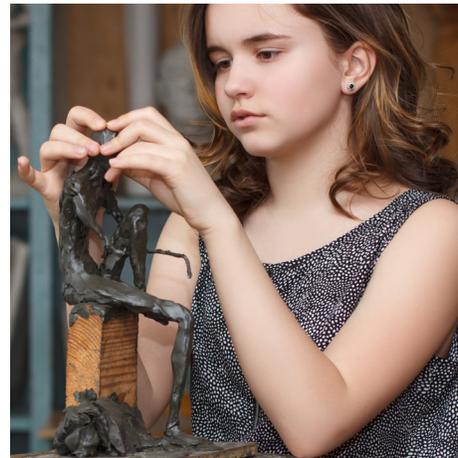
bond that is less likely to crack or break.

#### • 10 • Lay it on Thick

As clay dries, it shrinks. When a piece is too thin to start, it is more prone to cracking and breaking as it dries. Rolling and sculpting pieces to an even thickness of between 1/4" and 3/8" will help to prevent drying disasters. However, small thin pieces are sometimes unavoidable in designs — especially when sculpting. In this case, secure and strengthen small details with a (1:1 ratio) wash of PVC glue and water before drying. A simple overall white school glue and water (1:1 ratio) wash before drying may help reduce the risk of cracking.

#### • 11 • Support Your Clay

You may need to create an armature (a framework) to support longer, thinner pieces of clay in some cases. Think of it as an artsy skeleton to keep your masterpiece stable. Depending on your artwork's size and configuration, you can construct your armature using wire, toothpicks, or dowels attached to a solid base board. Choose whatever stabilizing material you happen to have on hand, and works for you.



#### • 12 • Bulk-Up Technique

As a general rule of thumb, if you plan to create air-dry clay art larger in volume than a grapefruit, it's best to first bulk up your art with foil or newsprint and masking tape or whatever you happen to have on hand that works for you. Using your bulking material, create the general shape of your subject matter. Add a 1/4" to 3/8" thick layer of clay to it. And then add any fine details to your clay masterpiece. The technique of bulk-ing-up makes large sculptures lighter, hastens drying times, helps prevent cracking from shrinkage (less clay = less shrinkage),

and not to mention; you'll conserve lots of clay with which you can mold many more masterpieces.

#### • 13 • Water on Hand

It's handy to have a spray bottle for misting your artwork while working to keep the clay pliable. If even with misting, small cracks appear, or you wish to remove other minor imperfections — dampen your index and middle fingers in a bowl of water and gently smooth out the cracks using small circular motions. \*Reminder: be careful not to over-saturate your artwork with water because it will increase drying time, leading to cracking.



#### • 14 • Tool Up

Generally speaking, use wooden clay tools for shaping and smoothing. A wooden rolling pin helps you keep a consistent thickness for slabs of clay. Steel-tipped tools are a great go-to for removing clay as well as precise modeling and adding fine details. Working on a board or piece of cardboard will help you move your art around without having to lift it up, potentially damaging your work.

#### • 15 • Speaking of Moving Around

Consider that three-dimensional artwork will be viewed from all directions by your audience. Changing your perspective while working helps you ensure that your masterpiece looks good from every angle.

#### • 16 • Preserving Clay in the Process

You may not have time to finish your clay masterpiece in one session. In this case, it's important to keep the air from drying out the clay. Wrap your artwork in a damp towel. Then, place it in an air-tight container or create an air-tight environment around the piece. When done properly — depending

on the size of the piece and condition of the clay it can stay workable for up to as many as four days! Periodically, misting with water can help too.

#### • 17 • **Drying Air-Dry Clay**

Drying the clay at room temperature can be a long process. Depending on the size of the piece and the environmental conditions, it can take up to 72 hours or more to dry a work in its entirety. To properly dry, the clay should be exposed to air on all sides at the same time. This step will help prevent warping and cracking. A screen or cookie rack works well. When dry, the clay will be visually lighter in color and will not feel moist to the touch.



#### • 18 • **Speed Dry Your Clay**

Don't have time or patience to wait for your masterpiece to dry at room temperature? Believe it or not, you can use a kitchen oven to speed the process along! First, line a baking sheet with aluminum foil. Then, place the clay art on the baking sheet. Place the baking sheet into a cold oven and turn it to its lowest possible setting (150-200°F). Be sure to check your piece frequently for dryness. The exact baking time depends on the size and thickness of your clay art; between 1/2 to 2 hours should be expected.

#### • 19 • **Take a Crack at it Dry**

Blend out small cracks that appear as the clay dries with water. If you notice larger cracks appearing, don't panic. Let the clay dry out completely. Create a wet mix of clay and fill the gap. Blend any edges back into the artwork. Once you've filled the crack, let the clay dry again. The damage should be virtually invisible.

#### • 20 • **Perfection**

If you missed smoothing out any tiny im-

perfections or you want to make minor adjustments to the overall shape of your clay art, you can use a little fine-grit sandpaper to do so. Just remember not to get too aggressive — there is no putting back what you take off.



#### • 21 • **Protecting Your Masterpiece**

Because your clay will not have been fired in a kiln, it's best to apply a protective coating to your masterpiece. You may do this one of several ways. If you wish to add color to your piece, you can paint your project using acrylic paints plus an acrylic glaze on top of that. If you prefer to keep your clay masterpiece natural clay color, it's best to apply a layer of acrylic glaze. While this step will not make your clay waterproof, it will strengthen the clay and help to protect your masterpiece. And remember, no matter what you're applying to the clay — make sure to allow plenty of drying time between layers.

#### • 22 • **Clay Art That Weathers the Storm**

If you wish to create clay garden art, you will need to 'seal' air-dry clay with a waterproof coating instead of a water-soluble acrylic glaze. Coating your clay art with varnish, a waterproof acrylic sealer, or liquid epoxy resin will protect it from the elements. Many of these products are highly toxic, so adult supervision of children is strongly recommended.

#### • 23 • **Storing Left-Over Clay**

Your leftover air dry clay can be saved and used again! Keep it in an air-tight container, stored in a cool dark place, to help it retain moisture. If stored properly, unused air dry clay should last indefinitely. However, sometimes clay dries out. No worries. If this happens, you can rehydrate clay. Break up the clay into smallish pieces. Place the

pieces in an air-tight plastic bag with 1-2 tablespoons of water for every pound of clay. Next, place the sealed bag in a large bowl and fill the bowl with water to the top of the plastic bag. Let this sit for 1-3 days — depending on the amount of clay you wish to rehydrate. Once the clay has been rehydrated, knead until it's smooth again.

#### • 24 • **Don't Forget It's Fun**

Working with clay is perhaps one of the most fun, artistic mediums with which you can work! Creating with clay should be anything but stressful. Always remember that there is no right or wrong way to express your creativity through art. Your art and your artistic journey should be unique to you. Therefore, never compare your artwork to someone else's — it simply wouldn't be fair to your artsy self!



#### • 25 • **Practice Practice Practice**

Anything worth learning to do is a process. Sculpting with clay is no exception. The more you practice, the more accomplished and confident you will become with the tools and the medium. Try to practice every day, even if it's only to dig in for a few minutes.

#### • 26 • **Track Your Artistic Journey**

Take pictures of and record notes about your artwork. Photographs not only provide visual documentation of your artistic journey, they also come in handy for creating social media posts and portfolios. Jotting down information, inspiration, and observation is always helpful for future creative endeavors.