



December 2001  
Volume 2, Issue 12

## The Tools We Use for Polymer Clay

[print version](#)

[Editor's Letter](#) | [Letters to the Editor](#) |  
[Beginners' Corner](#) | [Artist Interview:](#)  
[James Lehman](#) | [The Tools We Use](#) |  
[Video Review: Judith Skinner](#) |  
[Holiday Wish List](#) | [Using Paper](#)  
[Punches](#) | [Easy Greeting Cards](#) |  
[Christmas Candy Canes](#) | [Elements](#)  
[of Polymer Clay](#) | [Polymer Covered](#)  
[Push-Pins](#) | [Issues in the Crafting](#)  
[World](#) | [Email Us!](#) | [Home](#)

Here are some less ordinary tools, but I'm not sure if they are unique enough to mention: I use metal wax stampers - the kind you would use with sealing wax to close envelopes with for making clay impressions. I have always loved using regular rubber stamps too. I bought some surfacing sheets to create textures, and I regularly use dental tools for carving.

Carol





I'm a tool junkie. I believe in you can never be too rich or have too many tools. I also have a Post-it on my monitor at work that says, "It's not my tools that need improving."

My most-used tools, besides my hands and my (Thomas Scientific) tissue blades, are a burnisher and a cut-type nail. I found the nail, which I'm pretty certain is molded and therefore a reproduction, not an antique. It makes wonderful square holes for cord, in mokume gane pads, to be backfilled, wherever.

The burnisher was part of a beginner's jewelry kit; its original purpose was to burnish metal bezels against stones in traditional jewelry techniques. I use it to burnish thin slices of mokume gane or cane onto a base or slightly round cut edges of flat shapes or - wow! - burnish a clay bezel around a pin. I usually press, rather than rub, and the tool leaves a very smooth surface that blends edges

and needs little sanding before buffing.

Susan Kunze (in Savannah)



I do miniatures for stores. So the most unique tool I have is a metal glue tip. I use it for indenting into a tiny face for eyes.

Tamara Marble



Regarding tools, I use the sharp end of a broken meat thermometer to make perfect sized holes in my scrap beads. It works great.

Candace Howell  
MT PC fanatic



I use turkey lacers for beading holes. I also use them to make "sleeping" eyes and other textures. The turkey lacers are the metal skewers ( come 10 to a package) that you buy at Thanksgiving to close up the turkey. You should be able to find them at the grocery store.

Linda Hess



I use leatherworking tools, hardware pieces (like screws or nails), rocks, sponges with texture, old kitchen utensils (I like to use a fork to create a neat pattern).

Fran Saperstein  
Freelance Writer, Artist, Designer, Instructor  
[Elegant Notion](#)



One of my favorite and least expensive tools is a hair comb. I use the comb to mark my canes so I can make even slices. My comb has very fine tines on one end, and wider spaced tines on the other end. So it is great for getting two different sized slices.

Kellie Robinson



I like my marble lazy Susan (once used for cheeses ) as an excellent work surface. Being a turntable makes it more useful. I also saved an oval cap off a deodorant stick as a cutter for oval pendants: just the right size. Look for one with no seams.

Kathy Parker



My favorite tools are used dental tools I got from my dentist. They were chipped or nicked and he was throwing them out.

Jeannie Bench



Most of my tools were from other crafts or art techniques. However, one of my cheapest ones is plastic straws in various sizes from coffee stirrers to jumbo slurpy sizes. I cut them in about 3" lengths, but make sure that the next size smaller is about half an inch longer. In other words, the jumbo size has a standard size straw as a pusher, a standard straw has a skinny straw pusher, and so on.

Also, I found some tiny brass square hole punches from a regular clay supplier to make tiny square holes. These also have a pusher that fits inside.

And a large rock tumbler has made my life easier. After going through the grits, I help them get a shine by cutting up squares of polyester felt into 1" squares and dry tumble them. Saves time and fingers.

And a dog comb or icing comb makes easy nonpareil designs in clay.

Patty Barnes, President  
South Texas Polymer Clay Guild



Here's my tool. I use this 9/16 diam. drill bit for cleaning out my clay guns. The sharp edges scrape against the inside and clean out all the leftover clay very quickly and efficiently.

I began questioning how to find a good and fast way to clean clay guns and came upon this method. I first used a smaller drill bit, but it was still too much work. ;-) The key to choosing a drill bit for cleaning a clay gun is to find one that is very sharp. This one will cut skin if you're not careful, but it is a wiz at cleaning. That means paying for a good tool. I paid \$16.00 for this quality bit. I was willing to pay this because as a professional, I believe in having quality tools.

After trying some inexpensive ones I had around, I was amazed at how much difference it made. One of the benefits is that I use my clay guns more frequently, now that I don't feel overwhelmed by the process of cleaning them.

Jacqueline Gikow

Although I appreciate your asking for my opinions, I am afraid I don't have any other than my favorite three: healthy hands, sharp blades, and a controlled environment, (heat/AC). With that I am a happy camper!

Klew  
[Klew Expressions](#)



Am I allowed to answer my own question? My favorite unusual tool is my wedding band. It's a perfect beveled circle, so I can make pin-sized suns and moons.

Deirdre F Woodward



I use something that I don't know the name for, but I really like it. It is a wheel with points on it that is normally used in sewing, to trace over the patterns. I use it to make a "sewn look" on patchwork clay pieces. I know this is a bad explanation, but it's the best I can get.

Maybe its called a tracing wheel?

Jackie  
Daytona Area Polymer Clay Guild



I'm on the prowl for a cigar I will never smoke. You see, I want the plastic holder it comes in to use as a mold to make a tiny little vessel. That tiny little vessel itself will never be used for any practical purpose, which seems rather fitting when you think about it. Am I crazy? You bet – crazy about polymer clay!

Linda Sickler



I use a cuticle remover to carve out raw clay. When the piece is formed, I put it in the

fridge to chill it through and when chilled carve away. It does make some clean cuts to be backfilled later or carves away a layer to reveal another color underneath.

I also use all kinds of things for texturing (which most people do): old buttons, old silverware handles, various kitchen gadgets and I have a set of fondant carving tools that work great for texturing and shaping.

If it's not nailed down, it can somehow be used for clay!

Sam Parcels



Since I love textures, I find many uses for mundane things found around my house. Household sandpaper is one of my favorites. I usually texture the backs of pins and pendants using: fabric (lace, burlap), plastic vegetable bags, rubber stamps, buttons, drywall mesh, corrugated cardboard, etc.

When our new front doors were installed recently, I had my husband save a piece of the old 1970's "bottle glass" Plexiglas inserts for use with clay. Although I was a bit disappointed with the effect (the pattern was a bit large), someday I'll find a use for it!

Karen Sexton  
MHPCG, RMPCG, Colorado



A tool that I use all the time is a simple Starbucks coffee press. They make several kinds, but I like the short handled one that fits easily into the palm of your hand. It has a nice smooth, slightly rounded burnishing end (the press) and a handle that actually has a rather neat texture on it. You can get nice even pressure using this tool. I use it to burnish sheets of stamp patterns into clay, or to burnish transfers onto clay.

A favorite tool that I use for stencils is a broad brush-sized "Color Shaper" tool. It is soft and flexible and perfect for pushing paint through the stencil mesh. This is a wide one: 1 1/2 inches wide.

Finally, tools that I make myself are a set of smooth tapered "dowels" that I make from scrap polymer clay. They are imitations of paintbrush handles and I use them to open up the loops of polymer clay as I weave them together for the loop-in-loop chaining technique.

Nan Roche



I have used cake decorating tips with my clay. I have made a few pendants by pressing the tips in patterns, baking, then going over the pendant with a wash of acrylic paint.

Skye Devoe



Deciding on a favorite tool is hard for a gadget freak, so I think I'll go with tools I'm especially fond of right now. The first one would be the dip & drip system I've set up for sealing and glossing my little [Bottles of Hope](#) (small, covered, glass bottles, which are given to cancer patients) using Flecto Varathane Diamond Wood Finish (Interior, Waterborne). The dip & drip system is comprised of two parts and I used simple materials for each.



First I made the "spring hooks" which fit down into the bottles; these allow me to dip and hang them without any disturbance to the outside surface.

I used a 5 1/2" length of 19 gauge, dark annealed steel wire, which is fairly sturdy, and wrapped it twice around a needletool barrel (or crochet hook, etc.). After the second wrap, I continued rotating it until it crossed over the first "leg" of wire

again.

Pressing the legs together afterwards allows them to be inserted into the bottle, but the legs are still stiff enough to keep the bottle from falling. I cut the legs an even length,

making some of the hooks short and some long (longer ones allow taller bottles to be dunked with more control).

The smaller hooks for dipping and drying the tops were made from large Christmas ornament hooks, unbent, then cut in half and re-bent. I pressed a wad of raw clay around the larger loop for each. The bottom part of the bottle top can then be pressed into the raw clay and the unit acts as a holder/hook.



For the drying setup, I bent two pieces of cardboard so they would support a rack laid on top; using two allows space to reach in and catch drips from either side. (I generally put aluminum foil in the bottom.)

For drips, I use a wet sponge brush, which is parked in a prescription bottle with water until needed. (The spice bottle in the tumbler holds the Varathane.)

I set a timer for 5 minutes, then press the damp brush to the bottom of each bottle to soak up drips, then set the timer again and repeat; sometimes twice. Bubbles are minimized with this method, but someone from my guild said that any that do happen can be popped by giving them a quick blow (works!).

Also, any excess sealer that collects in nooks or crannies can be soaked up with the torn edge of a paper towel. I usually (re)bake the bottles to "harden" the finish even more (10 min. at 250°).

The other tool I'm really enjoying right now is a simple acrylic block (paperweight?), appropriated from my husband.

This simple block has all kinds of uses but just now I'm using it to roll over my little bottles, many of which have necks. I like to eliminate some of the necks for easier covering, so I put a rope of clay in that area then roll the bottle with the block to get the clay as smooth and even with the sides as possible.

After that, I cover the whole bottle with a sheet of patterned or textured clay. Then I use the block again, rolling over the entire bottle to get the covering as smooth as possible so it won't need to be sanded (a light touch is best for controlling the bottle when rolling).



Acrylic blocks can be found or cut for you at plastics stores (look for Plastics in the yellow pages). The blocks shown here are approx. 3" x 3" and came from the scrap bin (I had one cut into two pieces); they were very inexpensive, between fifty cents and \$2.00 each.

Smooth, opaque acrylic blocks can be used, but transparent blocks can be more useful. Aside from rolling things with the blocks, they're useful for pressing down on clay slices (possibly on a ball of backing clay) or on other patterns in order to make them larger on the surface without the distortion usually caused by a pasta machine.

Just press straight down over the clay with the block. This also allows thicker clay pads to be made than are possible with a pasta machine. You can also press down on filigree spirals to create a different appearance. (Metallic leaf can be crackedled this way, but be aware that larger cracks will result than with other methods.) Longer blocks can be used to flatten lettering, rope "vines," or other long clay designs evenly. In order to have the



thickness of the clay pad as even as possible, three or more small cubes or other small items of the \*same height\* can be placed under the block before pressing.

All kinds of things can be found around the house which allow you to make different clay pad thicknesses (jewel boxes for tapes, corks, etc.) If you can't find three of the same thing, cut one thing into three pieces, or try two open books. This might be an efficient way to make sure that heishi-

type beads or checkers, e.g., are all the same size/height. Another way to use the blocks is when making push molds or pressing charms, etc., into clay permanently. Using a clear block allows you to see the process as it happens so that you can stop when you want or make any corrections. It also leaves the top and bottom of the mold very flat, which is often helpful later.

The edges and points of the block can be used as texturing tools, too! One last thing ... putting a block on top of a lazy Susan really helps when making Balinese filigree. I got mine at the plastics store, but they are also available at hardware stores.

Diane Black (Diane B.)

[Glass Attic](#)



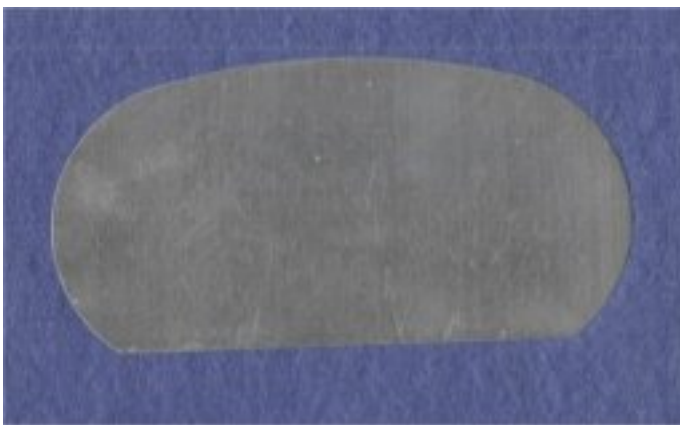
While browsing a garage sale one day I found this tool and for the life of me couldn't figure out what it was used for at the moment but knew it would be wonderful for making stitch marks on a dress or animal. Later I realized that it was a sewing tracing wheel. It makes perfectly spaced stitch marks.

I also use a fine toothed comb to make ribbing on a hat or sweater.

I did ask my daughter the other morning what she thought was the most unusual tool that I have in my workroom. She said 'floor wax'. She said that one day she was in my workroom and was looking around and saw the floor wax, and wondered what I used that for since my workroom has carpet in it.

I let her know that I got that idea from the Internet and that many polymer clay artists use it for a finish on the clay.

Helen Hughes



I use a potter's lift. It's 3.75" x 2", made from thin and very flexible aluminium, and is great for sliding under sheets of raw clay that may have 'stuck' to the work surface and for lifting cured pieces from baking surface.

I also find it invaluable for lifting small design elements, such as cutouts, from the work surface. Prevents undue distortion!

Jenny Dowde

