

A PIECE OF CAKE

Mastering the Syringe

It's been likened to using a cake decorating tube, and some people take to it like...well, cake decorating. Others, however, struggle to master the hand/eye coordination necessary to achieve the fluid, even lines and controlled loops and spirals. The syringe can be daunting or liberating, depending on which of the above groups you belong to. If you're one of those artists frustrated by flat, broken syringe lines that look like squished Morse code, and end in points deadlier than shark's teeth, here are a few suggestions and tips that might help.

- 1) How you hold the syringe is important. You need to be able to see the clay coming out of the syringe. The majority of people hold it in one of two ways: either like a traditional hypodermic, or across the palm with your thumb on the plunger like you're clicking a ball point pen. It doesn't matter, as long as the feel is comfortable and you remain in control of the syringe. Either way, relax. Don't hold the syringe in a "death grip." White knuckles are not essential to the successful use of the syringe. And breathe. How many of us have concentrated on a particular piece of syringe work only to find, at the end, we've been holding our breath longer than some sea otters!
- 2) Keep the tip of your syringe well above the surface. That means over ½" of space between the tip and the surface of your piece. The tip should NEVER touch the surface, except for starting, and ending your line.
- 3) Touch down first, press the plunger slowly until the clay begins to appear, then lift your syringe. Exert more pressure on the plunger and allow the clay to be suspended in the air. Place the line of clay down, i.e. allow it to fall where you want. Don't pull on the syringe line. That will thin and stretch it. When you want to stop, stop pressing the plunger FIRST, then touch down and lift up. Don't drag the tip of syringe against the surface to end the line. You'll not only leave a tail or smear of clay, but you'll likely damage the tip of the syringe.
- 4) If you're laying a line of syringe around a hollow or solid form, like a bead, make life easy for yourself. Put the bead on a mandrel, toothpick or straw. Then, turn the bead while pressing the plunger. DON'T move your hand. You'll create a smooth, even line every time.
- 5) Don't worry about the little points at the end of your line. Take a paintbrush with a very small amount of paste and tap the ends while they're still damp. They will flatten down easily. Or, let them dry and then sand or file them flat.
- 6) It's very important that you make sure every junction of syringe is solid. That means that any time one syringe line touches or crosses another, you need to put a small amount of paste there to join the two. Otherwise, they may separate when the piece is fired.

Mastering the syringe takes practice. There's no doubt of that. But once you do, you'll look forward to creating all kinds of intricate filigree work, woven and openwork designs, bezels around gemstones and more, just as I do. The syringe can be your most valued metal clay asset, if you give it some time. Then it will be you're turn to tell your students, "It's a piece of cake!"

