

Creations in clay

DEBBIE HALL joins a jewellery workshop in the heart of the East Riding countryside and is amazed at what she creates in a day from metal clay . . .

I couldn't believe it when Tracey Spurgin showed us what she expected us to create by the end of her craft tutorial – three gorgeous silver pendants, all incredibly intricate and very professional-looking.

Some of the class number appeared slightly more convinced (they had been here before) but for a couple of us complete novices, it was a “you've got to be kidding” kind of moment.

Undeterred, as Tracey seemed to have put her faith in us all, even the raw newcomers, we set about learning about the properties of Precious Metal Clay – PMC – and Art Clay Silver, and what kind of exquisite designs can be moulded, daubed or sculpted with these amazing media.

There were plenty of fabulous examples around us, all made by Tracey, to inspire us, and lots of tools and equipment stashed in baskets, on shelves and on worktops to boggle our uninitiated minds.

Tracey, whose Craftworx studio – part of Calf House Studios – is located on the working Cold Harbour Farm, just outside Bishop Burton, launched our beginners' introduction to silver clay by explaining about this relatively new craft material.

“It was invented in the mid-1990s when a Japanese professor had this Eureka moment,” said Tracey, who is a senior art clay and PMC instructor and has been teaching professionally for 12 years.

“He was already recovering metals from industry – things like medical supplies, X-ray film, teeth fillings and component parts for computers – and it was usual for it to go back into those industries.”

The oriental academic, interested in finding a new application for recovered silver, developed a prototype with the help of a top US metalsmith.

And so, in 1996, metal clay was born. Basically it is made from pure silver powder mixed with an organic binder – “like corn starch”, said Tracey – and water.

We got to use it in its lump, paste and syringe form.



Debbie Hall, right, with tutor Tracey Spurgin at a silver clay workshop

Pictures: Rob Stebbing

After an introduction to our tools – we each had a basket containing a snake roller, a tissue blade, spacer bars and a burnishing tool, among many others – we were shown how to quickly massage lump clay into a soft putty-type state and how to always cover the clay with cling wrap if deliberating even for a few moments, as it dries out so quickly.

Stamps and textures can be applied at this stage. We used mini cutters and “non-greedy” textures, treated with Badger Balm as a release agent, to create a patterned and a plain piece of clay – both were applied to a finely rolled backing piece of clay.

When the clay has been shaped into its desired form, it is then dried, naturally, with a hairdryer, or in a dehydrator (and is in a fragile, almost biscuit-like state); it can be carefully refined and polished with wet and dry papers.

At this stage, we were tasked with the (tricky) creation of a slender bail for the back of the pendant – the loop that the chain is threaded through.

Dehydrated again, our pieces were finally fired, at 800 degrees, for 15 minutes.

Magically, it seems, after carefully placing your little grey “biscuits” in the kiln, the binders burn away and you end up with 99.9 per cent pure fine silver.

If you don't have your own kiln, Tracey demonstrated how you can replicate firing with a kitchen blowtorch or on a gas hob.

There was smoke and flames, all exciting stuff, then the hot metal was dunked in cold water. Hey presto, a piece of silver jewellery.

Something I learned on the day is that all silver is white, until it is polished.

We set to work with a wire brush, and polishing papers in various grades to help bring a fabulous sheen to our designs, followed by a rubbing of metal polish cream.

One part of the course called for a mini field excursion on to the farm to find a leaf for a paste clay project. I knew the “right” kind of leaf needed to have a very veiny, not hairy, underside, as this is the surface that becomes the front of a leaf pendant.

I came back into the workshop pleased with the variety of foliage I'd picked but I'd not heard one of the instructions about what size of leaf to pluck.

“It's supposed to be the size of a 10p piece, not a £10 note,” I was told, but very jovially. Fortunately a little sage leaf I'd chosen proved perfect for the job.

During the afternoon session we were introduced to the syringe method of applying clay to a cork clay base, temporarily mounted on a cocktail stick. The cork centre burns off in the kiln and leaves a lovely hollow “squiggly” silver form.

I thought the course was fabulous, and the other ladies were as delighted as I was with their creations.

■ Craftworx Studio is at Cold Harbour Farm, Bishop Burton HU17 8QA. Call 07961 883115, e-mail tracey@craftworx.co.uk or visit www.craftworx.co.uk

FACTFILE



Tracey with some of her work

Tracey Spurgin's workshops and courses range from the basic introduction to silver clay to intermediate and advanced subjects, right up to professional standard.

Tracey also travels around the UK to deliver courses and workshops in galleries, shops, colleges and museums. She also writes for national magazines on the subject of metal clay.

This month Tracey is leading a metal clay jewellery summer school, with beginner and intermediate courses – four weeks, four courses. Cost £495 per week.

■ **Beginners' Week** – 30th July to 3rd August. All the basic foundation skills with step-by-step projects to build confidence.

■ **The Chemistry of Colour on Metal Clay** – 6th to 10th August. Bring life and vibrancy to your metal clay with colour, learn about the options and techniques.

■ **Mixed Metals** – 13th to 17th August. Explore the combinations available, learn how to incorporate copper, bronze and silver into single pieces.

■ **Mixed Media** – 20th to 24th August. The versatility of metal clay allows for the incorporation of glass, ceramics and other materials into single pieces of jewellery.

For more information, visit www.craftworx.co.uk

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Debbie Hall's finished pieces

