

Air Dry Clay Test Sheet

I have been using one favorite air dry clay product for many years but because new products come on the market, every year or so I conduct the same tests that I used to choose my favorite clay years ago. Assign each clay you'll test a letter or number.

Cut Test

Using a sharp paring knife cut a 1 inch cube from each type of clay you wish to test. Take notes on the following

1. Does the clay cut squarely leaving nice straight sides
2. Does the clay squish when cut leaving inward or outward curving sides?
3. Is the clay solid
4. Does the clay have air bubbles or pockets visible when cut.

Dry Test

Prepare a sheet of light cardboard by drawing a 1" square for each type of clay you are testing and take notes on the following.

1. Assess the dryness of each clay cube after 24, 36, 48 and 72 hours without using an oven or fan to speed drying time.
2. Drill 1/2" into the cubes with a 1/8th inch drill bit after 48 hours and compress the drilling dust to assess if it is still moist. If so check the clay cubes every 24 hours until you know how long it takes each type of clay to completely dry in your environment.
3. Observe how much the cubes shrink compared to the drawn 1" squares they are placed on. Attempt to calculate the % of total shrink of the cubes when they are tested to be completely dry. Use ruler with a 1/8th or 1/16" grid to help with this.

Weight Test

Assess the weight of each cube of clay from lightest to heaviest. You can use a scale or just hold in your hand. You are looking for the lightest and heaviest clay cubes the rest may be hard to tell apart. Take notes!

Sanding Test

I sand my preferred clay with 150 grit to really reshape clay parts and 220 grit for leaving a smooth finished surface. Use those grits to test sand each cube of clay, take notes on the following.

1. Does 150 grit leave excessive scoring of the clay or do you have to work hard to even remove rough clay with this grit.

2. Does the 220 grit leave a nice smooth finish on the dried clay cube or does it take too much work to smooth the clay or even have no effect on the clay cubes at all.
3. Does one of the test cubes stand out as easy to sand and giving a nice smooth finish.

Roll out Test

I enjoy rolling out clay and draping like cloth. Use a rolling pin or scrap of pvc pipe to roll out a piece of each type of clay. Work on a firm smooth surface and take your time lifting and turning the clay after each one or two rolls until you have coaxed it to about a 1/8th thickness. Take notes on the following.

1. How easy is it to lift the clay from the surface to turn for the next roll, is it sticky, do you need to slide a spatula under it to lift it up, does it tear easier than other clays?
2. Does the clay really split at the edges even though you are lifting and turning after each roll or two?
3. Do you need to add a film of water to your clay pancake because it is drying too fast to roll out.
4. Can you cut the rolled out clay with pinking shears and get a nice crisp fancy edge.
5. Can you drape the clay over a form like a Styrofoam or wood shape and coax it to the form either by smoothing, pinching or stretching.

Save a rolled out pancake of each clay and dry it for a painting test. Turn the clay over every few hours until it's dry to keep it as flat as possible. Note which clays are easiest or hardest to keep fairly flat.

Painting Test

I gesso all my air-dry clay sculptures, you may prefer to paint directly on the clay but know that bare clay will take paint very differently because it is very absorbent. Take notes on the following.

1. Apply Gesso to 1/2 of your clay pancake for each type of test clay. Note if the Gesso is absorbed so fast that you get brush strokes trying to apply it or if the clay is so non absorbent that it takes more time to dry than the other clays.
2. Note if the pancakes will need to be sanded after Gesso is applied or if you are left with a smooth surface.
3. Mix transparent washes of acrylic craft paints and test them across the gessoed and non gessoed clay pancakes. Note the difference in absorbency.
4. Test other types of surface treatments you like such as dry paste, Oil pastels, colored pencil etc. to see how they work on the different clays.

Choose Your Favorite Clay

After all this testing it may be easy to choose ! Consider the following for help in making the best choice for you and the way you would like to work with air dry clay.

1. Shrink % will have to be accounted for if you sculpt parts over a period of days using one part as a model for the next part like a pair of legs!
2. Clays that are very soft and squishy or have bounce back are much harder to sculpt than clays which hold shape when cut with a knife or scissors or impressed with a tool.
3. Clays that take a lot of work to sand or are easily damaged by sanding are not much fun.
4. Clays that will not adhere to various types of armatures are also not much fun.
5. Most air-dry clays will crack a little as they dry. These cracks are easily filled but if one type of test clay cracks or crumbles excessively it will probably need to score really high on other tests to be your clay of choice.

Working with Clay Companies

Cost is always a factor!

Is the clay easily available for retail purchase and are the packages fresh when opened.

Does the company make it easy for you to order online.

Does the company set a reasonable amount to order at a wholesale price.

Do you have to present a bunch of credentials to get the wholesale price.

Is the company considerate with shipping costs like using flat rate USPS boxes instead of a sliding scale of price depending on your total purchase. Do they ship promptly!

I hope this test method helps you find an air-dry clay that meets your needs and expectations. I have found air dry clays most versatile and they have made it possible to express almost any artistic idea I can imagine.

For more information on my methods of working with air dry clays, classes & workshops please contact me

Kathryn Walmsley
812-527-2870
8041 Shady Road, Oldenburg Indiana 47036
kathrynwalmsley2011@gmail.com www.kathrynwalmsley.com

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