Polymer Clay Cane Making

Contributed by: Tina Wissen

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POLYMER CLAY CANE MAKING by Tina Wissen (MrsPTownSubbie)

Supplies / Tools Recommended – please feel free to research other clay brands and tool options

- *Polymer Clay : I use mostly Kato*
- *Pasta machine: I use both an Atlas 150 and Atlas 180*
- *Slicing tool : I use thin flexible tissue blades (various brands)*

The Joy of Polymer Clay

Polymer clay provides a material design flexibility to create unique flowers and other elements for your pen designs. It is exciting to see what can be made with a little practice and inspiration. I have been asked to write this tutorial to explain the basic cane making knowledge and techniques needed to help you get started in making polymer clay canes. Happy Claying!!
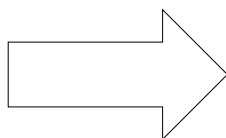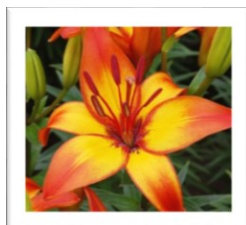

Polymer Clay Canes

Polymer clay canes are 3D clay images that have been reduced (stretched to a smaller diameter) for polymer clay projects. Polymer clay cane makers use similar techniques originally learned for millefiori in glassware and beadmaking. Canes are not required to make polymer clay pens, but it's a popular technique used to create the layered floral scenes (flowers, butterflies etc) and many other unique elements. The polymer clay pen maker slices these canes into thin raw cross-sections (as shown above) and applies them to a pen tube covered in a thin clay background.

Cane Designing – aka Cane Mapping

To make any flower cane, I evaluate the basic structure (shape, dimensions, and markings) of one petal, because in most cases, petals are duplicate components from the same design. Based on this picture provided below, I needed a yellow-red blend to make a basic five petal flower cane.

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STEP 1: CONDITIONING THE CLAY

Conditioning: act of restoring the clay to a state close to its original factory-mixed condition.

Polymer clay will last for years if stored at cool temperatures and away from direct sunlight, but even at cool temperatures, polymer clay will naturally "advance," or change over time. Advancing makes the clay stiffer, as ingredients shift toward their original wet or dry states, hence the need for conditioning.

Most conditioning is done simply by working the clay with your hands until it reaches a good working consistency. The warmth of your hands combined with the physical process of stretching and compressing makes it softer and more pliable. If the clay is dry or crumbling, there are additives you can use such as liquid clay with your pasta machine to assist in restoring condition.

STEP 2: BLENDING CLAY COLORS (aka Skinner Blend)

This technique was developed by Judith Skinner. Skinner blends are created to add shading or gradual transition from one color to the next. You can make a polymer clay cane without a Skinner blend, but it will help to achieve more realistic lighting effects for your canes.

Color Basics Applied to Polymer Clay

Mixing clay is like mixing paint. Understanding the color wheel will assist you in making the right blending choices. Polymer clay colors can be neutralized with complements which are opposites on the color wheel. Making your own recipes for colors provides you a unique palette to create your designs. Using a pasta machine helps to speed up the mixing process, but you can also mix colors by hand.

How I Make a Skinner Blend

Figure 1 - Preparing a Skinner Blend

For this tutorial, I prepared a three colored sheet of yellow, orange, and red. I first conditioned the three colors separately. Since I did not want a deeply blended sheet for this example, I cut the edges of the colors fairly straight, but angling the edges more will change the effects of clay blending.

Next I ran the three color sheet through the pasta machine length wise, making multiple passes starting with the largest to smallest settings.

I folded the clay sheet once each time to increase the thickness enough as I passed it through again at the next lowest setting. Blending can take dozens of passes through the pasta machine to get the effect you are looking for. I always rotate the blend in the other direction for the last couple of passes. The end result is a long gradient colored sheet of polymer clay. (See photos below)

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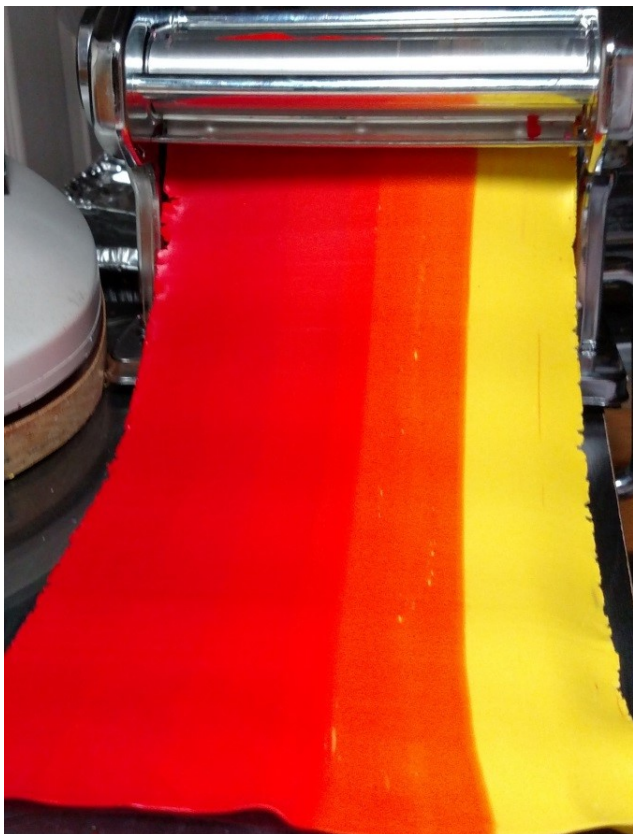
Figure 2 – blend first goes through length wise

Figure 3 - final result of clay blending

The last step for making any Skinner blend is to fan-fold the long piece of clay sheet (as pictured above) to make a thick block (shown left). Square the block by slicing off any excess scraps. The scraps can be used to make the cane center or other projects.

Figure 4 - Example of a finished Skinner Blend

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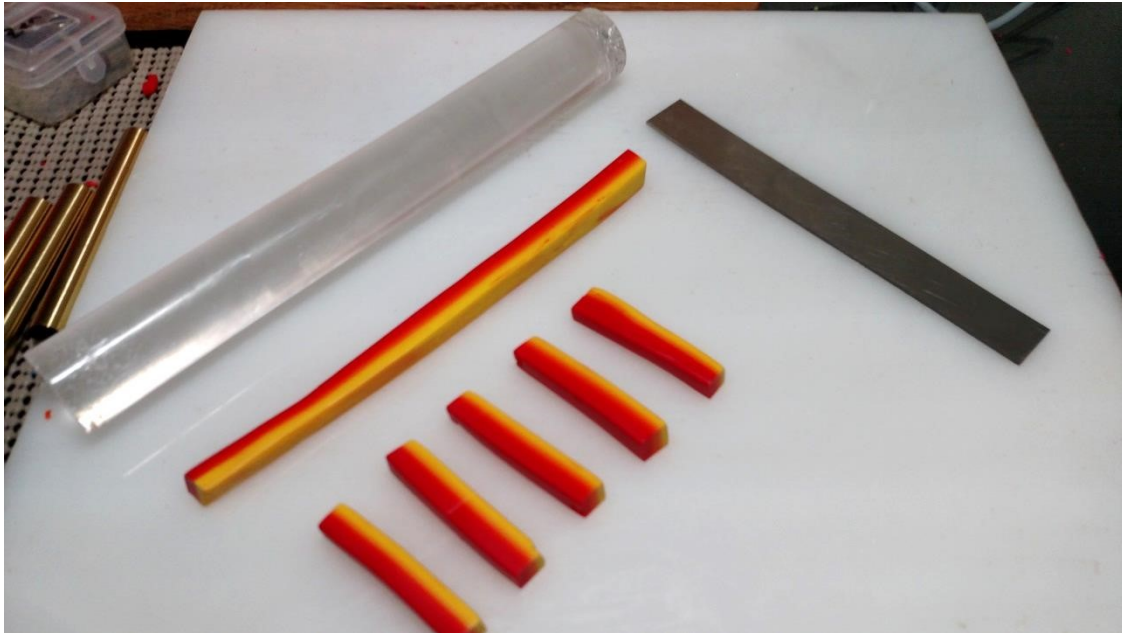
Using the Skinner blend block from the previous section, I reduced it into a thinner rectangular block about 12 inches long (size may vary depending on how much clay is used to make your Skinner blend).

After cutting five segments about two inches long, I pinched the yellow side into a triangle formation. I rounded the red side to make the petal curve for the outside. Each segment represents one of the cane's flower petals. To make the center cane, I used some leftover scrap clay, rolled it into a small rod and covered with black sheet, bundling together several multi-colored segments.

Figure 5 - Final Steps of Cane Assembly

After arranging the center and five petals in the outline pattern chosen, I backfilled the empty spaces with translucent clay to help maintain shape while reducing it to the appropriate diameter (1/4 – 3/8 inch). You can also add contrasting features into each petal, such as border outline or stems.

For comments or questions about polymer clay, please contact me at info@ptownsubbie.com

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