

# Tool Time!

By Michael Harbridge

**W**hen I first started this article, actual tools with handles came to mind. But then I realized that I use a number of tools that don't have handles. As I started going through my workspace, I came to realize I have way too many tools. I discovered things I'd forgotten I had and found things that I couldn't remember what they were for. Many items had never been used. I have a tendency to find unusual items and purchase them, thinking I will come up with a use some day. So this month, I'm going to show you some traditional tools and some unique things.

The most valuable tool I think I have is my imagination. People always ask how I come up with projects and workshops. Sometimes it's a real struggle! I hear people comment that they aren't creative and can't come up with new ideas. Sharing ideas is one of the reasons this publication exists! But even if you don't think you're creative enough to come up with new ideas, try these things I do and see what happens:

*Lighten up and let go.* Sometimes you get set in your ways, getting in the habit of just doing what you're comfortable working with. Try something new. Years ago, I was a traditional mold-cast artist who never did anything with moist clay. Today, most of what I do involves moist clay.

*Walk through craft and home decor stores.* Look around. Don't just glance — really look at everything. Look at trends, colors, and shapes. I'm not suggesting you copy other work, but many times it will spur ideas in your mind.

*Look at things differently.* One of my most successful workshops involves creating fish from vases. Look at basic shapes and think about what you could turn them into if you turn them upside down, stack them together, or set them on their sides. What could you add to them or how would you pinch and twist them to alter the shapes?

*Don't do what everyone else does.* If you're teaching or selling your ware, why would you want to compete with everyone else by doing the same thing? I'll use Santas as an example. Antique-style Santas used to be really popular, and they were a lot of work to paint. Big box stores were bringing in detailed figures that were painted pretty well and selling them for around \$20. I can't compete with that! Why try to sell finished items or teach workshops when many people will look at a \$40 price tag and opt to purchase the mass-produced piece? Instead, come up with something unique or a special way of creating something so that it's different. Or even adapt something popular to ceramics.

Zentangle is a popular art trend right now. It's a method turning doodling into art. We've all doodled when we've been on the phone or sitting in a classroom. Much of Zentangle's popularity is due to the fact nearly anyone can do it. So how do you adapt it to ceramics? It can be done with a brush, underglaze pencils, or writer bottles. If you have a hard time coming up with patterns, you can certainly get ideas by doing a simple Internet search of Zentangle designs.

See the Designer Doodling lesson plan on Page 42 of this issue for an example. That project uses one of my favorite tools, Mayco's Designer Liner. The metal tips on the bottles make them easy to control and apply color in detailed patterns. I've done similar techniques with Duncan French Dimensions.





A few years back, I discovered I needed a surface that worked well with clay when teaching workshops. Clay sticks to plastic table covers, and it wasn't practical to travel with the project boards or pieces of drywall I used in my studio. So off to the craft store I went in search of a lightweight, inexpensive surface. The solution I found was sheets of craft foam — normally, it's used as raw material for crafting projects. But the large pieces are the size of a placemat, don't absorb much moisture, are lightweight, and can be rinsed and reused. The foam sheets are sold individually or in packages of a dozen or more. At less than \$1 each, they are ideal. And with the addition of some duct tape, you can fasten two sheets together on one end and turn them into a pocket for rolling clay slabs by hand or with a slab roller.

Until recently, I had stacks of drywall scraps to use as work surfaces at home. They were great because they were inexpensive, absorbed moisture, and were light but strong. The disadvantage was that crumbling edges left plaster deposits that occasionally got embedded in the moist clay — though applying duct tape around the edges helped prevent that.

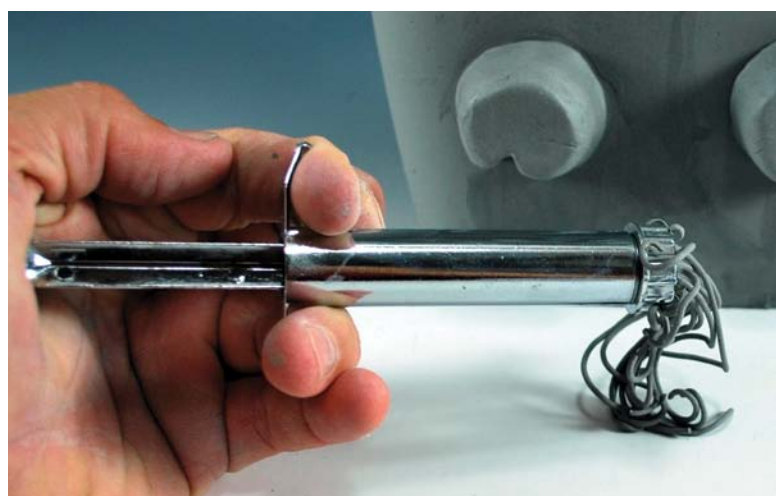


Then I discovered Continental Clay's project boards. While they look like ordinary wooden boards in various sizes, they are so much more. I was skeptical at first — I didn't really believe I could place wet clay shapes on the board without having the wood swell and stick. But much to my surprise, they can be used for working with clay, and clay shapes can be left on the surface to dry without sticking or cracking. I'm not sure what the wood is, but these boards work great, clean up easily, and don't crumble like drywall. I use them all the time and can easily place an entire board holding a project on a banding wheel.

While we are on the subject, let's talk about banding wheels. My favorites are made by Shimpo. Those blue beauties are heavy, stable, and have smooth turning motion. There are lighter, less expensive brands, but if you're serious about banding, these are the wheels to have. I like the 25H model the best, because I can get my hand underneath to turn. The lower models are excellent quality, but I find the high model easiest to use and teach with.



Have you ever been working on a clay creation and discovered that the bottom is a little too wet to support the weight or withstand the pressure while you work? Or perhaps you have an appendage sticking out and you need to firm it up a bit so it doesn't break off. I keep a heat gun handy for cases like this. Yes, a hairdryer will also do the trick, but a heat gun gets much hotter and can firm up clay quickly. You do have to be more careful, because the end of the gun does get very hot — avoid using it around children and make sure the cord isn't hanging down where you can catch it. When you need to firm up an area, fire up the gun and work it back and forth over the area. Don't hold it too long in one spot. The goal isn't to actually fire the item with the gun, and drying small areas completely could cause cracking. Just wave it back and forth for a few minutes and you will be amazed at how well it works.



Do you have an extruder? Well you should! In fact, you should have a minimum of two extruders. Mini extruders can be held in the palm of your hand and easily shoot out strands of clay in a variety of shapes. Most mini extruders come with a dozen or more dies so you can create everything from fine hair to clover-shaped coils. I'll admit, I've never used half of the dies that came with mine, but the ones I do use get a *lot* of use.



Mayco Magic Metallics — items done with the rust finish look like old, rusting metal.

Vinegar also serves a few other purposes in my studio. I add a little bit (a couple tablespoons) to my water bowl when I'm cleaning greenware. It helps remove and smooth the clay quicker. I also brush it over obvious hot spots in the greenware stage to break up the spot, and then smooth it with a sponge. And since vinegar eats away at clay, it goes in the wash bucket when I clean the floors, counters, and sink. If I have a dried-up slip spill, I'll pour straight vinegar on top — it breaks up the clay so it can be washed away easily.

I steal things from our kitchen all the time — most things make it back. But one thing I had to replace for my wife was the strainer. I could never give that up. I use it every time I cast molds to remove lumps and foreign objects from the slip. I place the strainer over the top of one empty bucket while I pour the other buckets of slip through. I'm amazed what I find in the strainer sometimes. One time I found the knife I use for trimming (after spending a great deal of time looking for it).

In addition to the mini extruder, every clay artist needs a larger handheld clay gun. They hold a lot more clay and have endless variations of dies, from simple coils to intricate moldings. Once you load the chamber with clay, you can extrude yards of clay designs with the squeeze of the trigger. I use these coils for my clay puzzling methods, and for creating handles and trim work. This is one of those tools that will make you wonder why you ever rolled coils by hand.

This may sound like a strange tool, but how about vinegar? I go through gallons of it every year. If you want to add cool texture to greenware, simply brush, dab, or spray it on dry ware and watch it start to bubble. To add more texture, just add more vinegar. I prefer using a spray bottle so I can really douse the shapes. You do have to be careful not to get the items so wet that they're sitting in a puddle of vinegar or you may see your item shrivel and shrink like the Wicked Witch of the West. If you want a more controlled design, apply it with a brush or sponge. These textures work great with raku and finishes like





Sprig molds are great to have around. So many different designs are available, which makes it super-easy to dress up something plain, whether hand built or cast. Some people will pour these with slip since they look like an open pour mold. It's quicker to press moist clay into the cavity and pull it out. This also prevents the mold from getting so wet that it's in danger of losing detail. On the cast vase shown here, I used Creative Paradise's

SG34 Reindeer sprig to make the additional parts. Then I used my mini extruder to add the hair. In a matter of minutes, this vase went from plain to unique. Kids love to use these! Throw or cast bowls and let them add sprigs to the edges. With this sprig, they could make a reindeer feed bowl to use around the holidays. There are literally hundreds of sprig designs to fit any fancy, and they can be made to adapt to nearly any shape.



## “My Paragon kiln practically fires itself, giving me more time to make pots” —David Hendley

The Paragon kiln was already ancient when David and Karen Hendley bought it in 1995. Since then David has fired about 20,000 pieces of bisque in his electric Paragon.

“For the last 20 years I have been glaze-firing all my work in a wood-fired kiln,” said David. “I enjoy the excitement of the firings, and my friends and customers like the random fire flashings and ash deposits.

“What they don't know is that every piece is first fired in my Paragon electric kiln. While accidental and chance effects can enhance a wood firing, consistency is the key to successful bisque firings.

“For those firings, my Paragon has delivered reliable and consistent results year after year. It practically fires itself, giving me more time to make more pots.”

The Paragons of today are even better than the early ones. The digital 12-sided TnF-27-3 shown at right is only 22 ¼” deep for easier loading. Lift the lid effortlessly with the spring counter-balance. Enjoy the accuracy



David and Karen Hendley with their ancient Paragon A-28B. It has fired about 20,000 pieces of bisque. The Hendleys run Old Farmhouse Pottery in Maydelle, Texas.

and convenience of the Orton controller.

To learn more, call us or visit our website for a free catalog and the name of the Paragon dealer near you. Sign up for the Kiln Pointers newsletter.



**Constantly finding better ways to make kilns.**  
**Paragon Industries, L. P.**  
 Better Designed Kilns™  
 2011 South Town East Blvd.  
 Mesquite, Texas 75149-1122  
 800-876-4328 / 972-288-7557  
 Toll Free Fax 888-222-6450

Paragon is a proud sponsor of Clayart, the pottery and ceramics email forum. [www.ceramicist.org](http://www.ceramicist.org)

[www.paragonweb.com](http://www.paragonweb.com)  
[info@paragonweb.com](mailto:info@paragonweb.com)



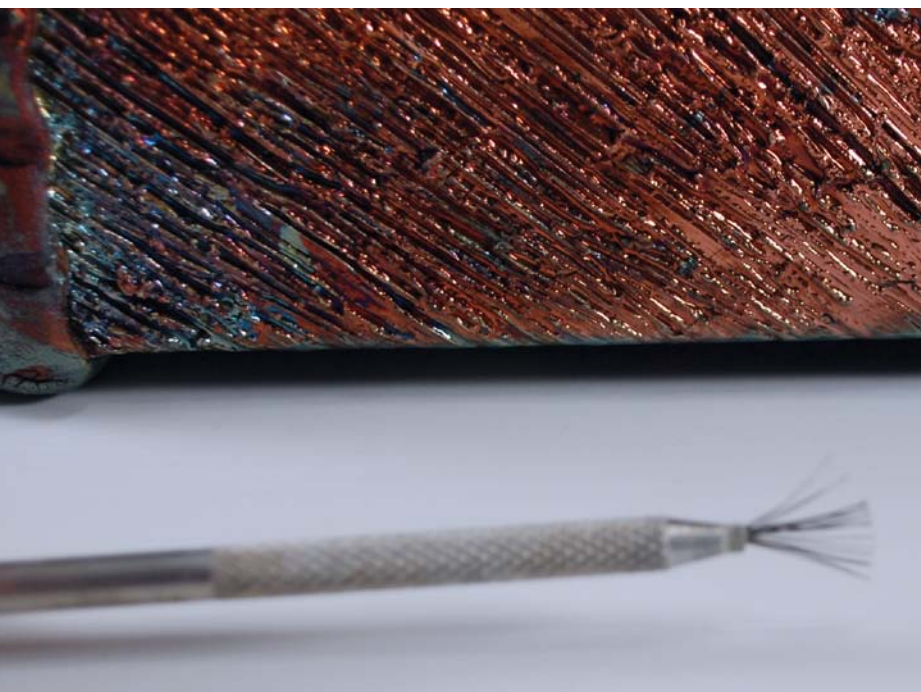
vents the clay from sticking to the roller, plus it also rounds the edges of the clay strips or tiles. These are also great with kids because the rollers are plastic and they aren't sharp.

I love my hair tool! At least that's what I call it. This fun little tool has wires sticking out the end. It's designed to quickly score clay, but I love to use it to add texture, as well — it's particularly effective in making hair texture.

Do you ever make holes in clay? Then I hope you have hole cutters, because they make it so much easier to get uniform holes. Royal & Langnickel has two versions. One has a complete round shape; the semi-round is only a half-circle. The semi-round cutter is inserted straight into moist clay and twisted to make a full circle cut. The nice part about these is the clay cut out won't get hung up inside the tool. However, they do have sharper points on the tips, so are not recommended for young children and children or adults who may want to show off their sword-fighting abilities. The fully round cutters have blunt tips and create perfectly round holes, but clay can get stuck inside. Once it dries, it usually falls right out.

So do I have any favorite little hand tools? Of course I do! Amaco came out with rollers that cut uniform strips of clay in a couple of sizes. Roll out a slab of clay and place plastic wrap on top. Roll the cutter over the clay with light pressure and it cuts uniform strips of clay. Roll again at right angles to the first cuts and you have perfectly square tiles. The plastic wrap pre-

vents the clay from sticking to the roller, plus it also rounds the edges of the clay strips or tiles. Stencils have been around for a long time. But I've come across a line of stencils with modern designs by The Crafter's Workshop I really enjoy working with. I've used them with raku and traditional finishes, and I keep coming up with more ideas. I have some fun combinations with vinegar coming up soon.



I could keep going with my favorite tools, because I have so many. But I only have so much room, so perhaps I'll leave you with: To be continued!

**Michael Harbridge** has been teaching fired-arts workshops for more than 35 years and is the educational arts manager for Royal & Langnickel Brush and the creator of clay puzzling. He can be contacted by mail at P.O. Box 108, Iola, WI 54945, by phone at (715) 281-6450, or by e-mail at [info@claypuzzling.com](mailto:info@claypuzzling.com). Visit his website at [www.claypuzzling.com](http://www.claypuzzling.com).

## Sources

Amaco: [www.amaco.com](http://www.amaco.com)  
 Continental Clay: [www.continentalclay.com](http://www.continentalclay.com)  
 The Crafter's Workshop:  
[www.thecraftersworkshop.com](http://www.thecraftersworkshop.com)  
 Creative Paradise: <https://creativeparadise.biz>  
 Mayco: [www.maycocolors.com](http://www.maycocolors.com)  
 Royal & Langnickel: [www.royalbrush.com](http://www.royalbrush.com)  
 Shimpo: [www.shimpoceramics.com](http://www.shimpoceramics.com)



## Projects to Inspire You!

**12** digital AND print issues of *Fired Arts & Crafts* for just

**\$24.95**

Subscribe to

**FIRED ARTS & CRAFTS**

for \$24.95 and you get

- Royal Brush set with folding holder (\$20 value)
- Colors for Earth Gift Certificate for \$20.00 on \$60.00 retail order
- Clay Puzzling Lesson Plan booklet and \$10 merchandise certificate on a \$20 or more purchase at [www.ClayPuzzling.com](http://www.ClayPuzzling.com)
- Jubilee Creative Gift Certificate for \$25.00 on \$100.00 retail order

**All for FREE with a paid subscription**

Offer expires June 30, 2014. Limited quantities available.



**\$146.00**  
**VALUE**  
for **\$24.95**

Call (855) 347-3327, ext. 1, or visit [www.firedartsandcrafts.com](http://www.firedartsandcrafts.com)

use code GLASS24