**Sanding & Polishing Baked Clay**

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Sometimes, the naturally occurring matte finish of FIMO® (my preferred and recommended brand) and other types polymer clay is exactly what is desired. Occasionally, you may wish to give your clay a satin or high gloss finish. My Magic Glos™ one-step, quick cure resin is an excellent and easy way to give a glass like finish to flat or slightly domed surfaces. Other products like Water-based Varathane and FIMO® Varnish can be added for shine. Never use nail polish! When using Varathane or varnish specifically made for baked polymer clays, surface imperfections are highlighted unless a sanded/polished finish is done first. Magic Glos™ is dimensional and layer-able, so sanding/polishing is not necessary for this product.

Cylindrical objects such as pens or beads don’t always accept glossing products well. Surface treatments such as resin and varnishes can be difficult and even impossible to add to these types of surfaces. Since viscosity (thickness) and drying time vary with these types of products controlling flow and dripping is a typical problem.

Begin by wet sanding baked clay with automotive or jewelry grade sand paper. It’s preferable to use grits from all the same brand. For clay surfaces that are coarser, start with 400 grit paper, sanding in water. If the surface is fairly and smooth even to begin with, you can often start with 600 or even 800 grit and work your way up towards finer grits. The higher the grit number, the finer finish it will create. Not all sandpapers are created equal - like shoes, a size 9 can vary in actual size between brands and styles. I recommend sand papers from 3M® or ones that are labeled “lapidary grade.” 3M® automotive grade sandpapers are great and can be found in auto supply stores everywhere. *Tip: Light finger buffing before baking or smoothing with a roller can help make the process of sanding and polishing easier.*

Sand in a basin filled with water or a sink with water. For safety purposes, it’s advisable to wear a dusk mask. Wet sanding is preferred. It not only keeps airborne dust from entering your lungs, but it helps speed up the sanding process and allows the paper to last longer. Once used, most of the grit will be gone. Fresh sand paper should be used for each new project. Also replace water before moving to finer grit. You can pick up sand particles from heavier grits and scratch the surface.

Cutting the paper into smaller pieces will help make it more manageable to handle. For larger pieces, it may be necessary to use more than one piece of sandpaper get the surface as smooth as possible before moving to a higher/finer grit. Move or rotate the area being sanded often to prevent flat spots from occurring.

Once the piece is as smooth as it seems can get with one paper, rinse the clay and select the next, higher grit. Continue working through 800, 1000, 1200, 1500 and 2000 if desired. Higher grits are available, but are not usually needed if properly sanded. I personally use 600-1200-1500-2000 for most of my sanding/polishing.

The clay will appear and feel smooth, but buffing can create anywhere from a semi to a high gloss finish. Vigorous buffing with piece of denim or cotton cloth is the most economical method. A higher gloss shine can be reached with a loose stitch muslin wheel mounted to a bench grinder or jeweler’s buffing wheel. If stitching extends outward from the wheel’s hub, it should be removed to open up the layers. Tightly stitched wheels can actually scratch and abrade the clay.

Buff in an area without breakable objects. Wear a dust mask and protective eyewear at all times while buffing. New wheels are especially bad at sending fibers and small threads into the air. Secure any loose hair and clothing before starting. Turn the wheel on at full speed. Push the clay against the outer edge of the muslin wheel with the lightest pressure. It should barely touch the wheel during buffing. Always hold the clay firmly while buffing to prevent the clay being pulled from your hand and becoming a flying projectile. Move and rotate the clay often as you buff. If the clay becomes more matte in appearance as you buff or starts to have flat spots, that’s a sign that you are pressing too hard against the wheel.

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