

PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL

Donald Friedlich

Precious Metal Clay was first introduced to the American market about a decade ago. Now that the medium of metal clay has had time to mature, this is an appropriate moment to look back at its evolution, to review the current state of its use, and to judge metal clay alongside the history of contemporary jewelry and metalsmithing as well as the concurrent history of ceramics.

In reviewing metal clay, we must first recognize that in all art it is not the material itself, but the depth of the exploration and finally the quality of what is done with the material that counts most. At the same time, the choice of material is a critical element in any work of art. If that choice proves inappropriate, superficial, or otherwise poorly considered, the artistic vision can be compromised. Each time a new art material such as metal clay is introduced, the quality and nature of the work done in the material goes through familiar evolutionary stages. When looking at the evolution of metal clay, it is instructive to first look at the history and the development of another material, reactive metals, for both its similarities to, and differences from, metal clay.

Almost immediately after the reactive metals niobium and titanium were introduced to the United States in the late 1970s, the color palette of blue, purple, pink and green seemed to be everywhere. Many jewelers were seduced by the ease of bringing color into their work and soon these metals became the flavor of the month. Regrettably, the great majority of this work was gaudy, flat, and overly reliant on the process for its impact. Artists like British jeweler Edward de Large, who used the materials to communicate a distinctive artistic vision, were few and far between. The use of reactive metals was pervasive for the next five years or so, and then, for the most part, it burned itself out. While some artists continue to work with reactive metals today, its use has declined dramatically from its heyday.

While the proliferation of artists working with metal clay may be reminiscent of the growth of reactive metals, efforts to guide development along a much broader path have engaged a larger audience. This bodes well for the longevity of metal clay and it does not appear likely that metal clay will flame out the way reactive metals did. In fact, it is already clear that metal clay is not a mere trend or flash in the pan. Rather, metal clay has its own sustainable subculture that is likely to continue to grow for many years to come.

The marketers of metal clay recognized, quite rightly, that the material is very well-suited to self-taught makers and people who are new to metalsmithing. There is a relatively short learning curve associated with metal clay, especially when compared to the extraordinary amount of time required to gain traditional goldsmithing skills. The skills required to work with metal clay can usually be acquired in a matter of days, with advanced training taking less than a week. Further, the use of metal clay does not require much equipment; all that is needed is a kiln and some rudimentary tools. As a result, people can easily work with metal clay in their homes. The minimal equipment demands also mean that the use of metal clay can be taught outside traditional studios. Classes are frequently held in hotel meeting rooms and the like.

In addition to training makers, the manufacturer and distributors of PMC have placed a significant emphasis on training teachers. As the old saying goes, give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. Through a series of Master Classes and the development of a certification program, they took the next step—they taught people to teach fishing. This approach made a huge contribution to spreading metal clay to new audiences.

The big-tent marketing and development of metal clay has yielded a very positive outcome, in large part because the material allows a new point of entry into the world of precious jewelry besides the traditional routes of the university, the art school or the trade. Metal clay also engages a completely new audience and very quickly gets them excited and making objects. In this regard, metal clay has no equal.

Of course, as with reactive metals and other materials and processes, the ability to work with metal clay, or even to teach classes in its use, does not necessarily mean that one can use it in an artistically inspired manner, and despite the impressive growth of metal clay, acceptance by the mainstream art jewelry world has been slow. Some still regard the material with a degree of skepticism. Jewelers and metalsmiths who have spent many years acquiring their much-prized metal skills look down on the ease of working with metal clay and don't consider it "real metal."

In an academic setting, some faculty feel they simply do not have the time to add another process to an already crowded curriculum. Others fear that introducing a material and process to students that is so immediately grasped will play into what is seen as a pervasive MTV-paced, short attention span among students and will preclude those students from developing the needed patience and skills demanded by traditional jewelry processes. While this resistance is somewhat understandable, it seems largely misplaced as well as altogether too familiar. When lost wax casting, electroforming, hydraulic press forming, and other new techniques were first introduced, similar concerns were expressed. Change is a constant in our world and so is resistance to change. Looking back at these earlier experiences, skeptics have been proven wrong so consistently throughout our history, that by now we should realize that new materials and techniques are not, in and of themselves, bad or corrupting, but are more rightly viewed as potential opportunities in need of realization and the artist's touch. It takes time for a field to set aside its own history and preconceptions, and even longer to find a new material's inherent uniqueness and expressive range and to integrate that information into artistic and technical vocabularies. A new material or process (and metal clay is both) should be entitled to a non-judgmental honeymoon period and be given time to develop in the early years of its life. Only later, as it reaches its maturity, should it be evaluated in the context of the full history of the contemporary art practices of its larger field.

In this context, examining an object made of metal clay raises many critical questions. What does the object communicate? Does the object speak with an expressive voice that is unique to this very different material? Has the object been done before to the point of being trite, or is it new and distinctive? Could it be better made in another way, with other materials? Does it exploit the material's ability to showcase the imprint of the hand in ways metalsmithing cannot? When it is inappropriate to have the hand in evidence, does it demonstrate proper technical control and refinement of surface and form? Does it take advantage of metal clay's ceramic qualities and genuinely exploit the fact that metal clay is, first, formable with the ease of clay and then is almost magically transformed, like a caterpillar to a butterfly, into a silver or gold object? With these questions in mind, we shall look at the objects in this book. One of the unique qualities of metal clay is its ability to take on almost any form with relative ease. That said, metal clay's formability can lead to the production of gloppy and unresolved shapes. The work sometimes shows evidence of the hand when this is not in the best interest of the design. A lack of control of the medium is also often evident. Using metal clay in a crisp and clean manner is more of a challenge. Some of the artists in this book are able to control metal clay to such an extent that their forms appear fabricated of sheet, when in fact, the work would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to fabricate. These artists control metal clay, instead of letting metal clay control them.

Excerpt from the critical essay by Donald Friedlich, designer and educator.