

10 Tips for Selecting the Right Clay



How much thought do you put into selecting a clay body? Do you know anything about your clay? Does it really matter? Clay is clay. Right?

Many factors should be considered when choosing a clay body. Selecting the wrong clay could make your creative process more difficult, it could affect the durability of the finished ware or compromise safety. When you look at the variety of clays on the market, it may appear the only difference is colour and firing range. Don't settle for any clay. Make an educated decision based on the ten tips listed below:

1. What will you be creating?

Decide what kinds of things you plan to make. Will they be large or small? Determine whether the objects will be decorative or used with food. Do you plan to work with a wheel, hand-building, slabs or clay puzzling? Answering this question will influence your decisions regarding the next nine tips.

2. Firing range

Clays come in firing ranges from low-fire (cone 06-2), mid-range (cone 3-7) and high fire (cone 8-10). What you plan to create will help determine the kind of clay you use. If you're making utilitarian pieces, it may be best to use a mid-fire or high fire body for better durability. Low-fire clays are not as durable as the high-fire versions and are generally sufficient for decorative items.

Also think about your colours. How high can they be fired? Many commercial colours can be fired to a wide range of temperatures, but sometimes the colour can change, craze, or have other reactions.

Another important factor is how hot your kiln can fire. Some kilns cannot go to cone 10. Are you prepared to purchase a new kiln based on the clay you select?

3. Texture

While texture in clay can play a small part in the final look, it really has more to do with the stability when working with the clay. Sand and grog are added to clay to help give it strength when building larger objects. Clay without sand and grog is creamy and smooth and perfect for small items. But when you try to make something large, the object can collapse without the added support.

Texture can also play a factor in the shrinkage rate. The larger the particles, the less water will be present. Grog can be made from broken-up fired clay that has already shrunk the first time it was fired.

Many artists have also discovered complications of working with high sand or grog clays with extruders. Thin strands of clay tend to crack and fall apart or crumble when they are bent. So, if the clay seems to be dry when extruded, it may just be the sand or grog giving that illusion.

4. Colour

Not all clay is white. Many natural colours are available at each firing range. How high you fire clay can also produce different shades. The colour of the clay can also change the look of colours used over the top. If you use a translucent colour, it will look much differently over red clay than over white clay. Use the colour of the clay to your advantage by allowing it to show. But test colours before making a lot of pieces.

5. Location of Supplier

Try to find a supplier nearby. The cost of shipping clay can often equal or exceed the cost of the clay itself. Catalog prices from a supplier across the country may seem to be more reasonable than that at a local studio, but the freight can be a killer.

Ordering in volume can also be more cost-effective. The price per pound of clay usually drops the more you buy and the cost per pound for shipping also decreases.

Driving to pick up clay may seem like a money saving measure but look at all of your expenses to do that. Time, gas, and wear on a vehicle can be more costly than paying freight. Remember, clay is heavy. Replacing springs and shocks on your vehicle could be more costly in the long run.

6. Reputation of the Supplier

What do you know about the supplier? Ask other artists in your area where they purchase clay. Are they happy with the products and service received? Is the clay they purchase fresh, or is it dried out and hard to work with? Does the supplier stock a good selection and ship in a timely manner?

7. Age of Clay

Most clay manufacturers try to keep their inventory fresh. Over time, clay can lose moisture and become firm and difficult to work with. Some will stamp the packaging with the date it was manufactured. Don't hesitate to ask the age of the clay before you purchase.

When purchasing from a local supplier instead of the actual manufacturer, ask how long they have had the clay and how old it was when they purchased it from the manufacturer. Maybe they have only had the clay in stock for six months, but if it was already six months old when purchased, it means your clay will be over a year old.

Just because clay is a year old does not automatically mean it's bad. Take a look at where its stored. And if you are concerned, ask to open the box so you can feel how soft the clay is through the bag. IF you can't press your finger into the clay, the clay may be getting too firm. Don't be alarmed if the clay has mold. Remember, its moist clay trapped in a bag. It can grow mold and the mold will burn away in firing without harming the piece.

8. Don't over purchase

A common mistake made is to over purchase clay to get that next price break. Try not to purchase more clay that you will use in six months to a year. You don't want the clay getting hard or going to waste because you bought a three-year supply and saved money. Are you really saving money if you have to try rejuvenating hard clay or throwing it away?

Work with other local artists or studio owners to order together so you can get the better price break or volume freight costs.

9. Sample before you buy

If you are not sure about the compatibility of a clay body with your finished or if you have any questions or concerns, buy small quantities before you buy a skid or truckload. Clay comes from the ground and from different parts of the country. Just because you had good luck with a clay body you purchased in the Midwest, does not mean it will be the same as one purchased on the west coast.

Clay mines and manufacturers try their best to keep clay consistent, but it is possible for different batches of the same clay to vary in colour and composition since the raw materials can be mined a different times and in other parts of the clay mine. Most manufacturers and suppliers allow you to combine different clay bodies to come up with a total weight discount.

10. Price

While price may seem like a major consideration when selecting clay, it should not always be the influencing factor. Make sure you are confident with the other nine tips before allowing the price to sway your decision. Paying a little bit more and having someone to answer questions and the confidence you work will have positive results is worth a little more.