

Painted shells



Moulded shells make great earrings; simply add a dash of colour and finish off with classic pearls. By Julia Rai

Julia runs the Metal Clay Academy and teaches metal clay classes at the Mid Cornwall School of Jewellery. She holds the prestigious Metal Clay Masters Registry credential at level four. Moulded shells are popular with metal clay beginners. This project will take the technique one step further to make a pair of stud earrings using shell moulds with embedded fine silver wire, and a pearl added after firing. Colour is added to the earrings using glass paints and pigment powders but you could oxidise them for a completely different look.



materials:

- 5-10g of silver metal clay
- 4cm of 5mm fine silver wire
- 3mm half drilled pearls
- Sterling silver earring peg with flat disc
- Two-part moulding compound
- Old playing card
- Cocktail stick
- A small shell
- Two part epoxy glue eg. Araldite
- Small needle files
- Small paintbrush
- Clay shaper
- Pin tool
- Tweezers
- Small piece of glass or ceramic tile
- Tumble polisher or brass/steel brush
- Pebeo Vitrea 160 Glass Paint
- Pearlex pigment powders



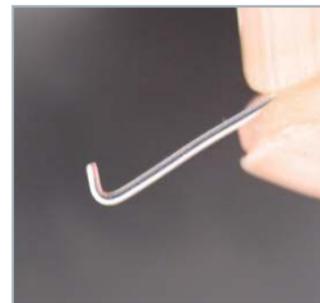
STEP 1

Choose a suitable shell. For stud earrings you need small shells, preferably symmetrical in shape. This allows you to use the same shell for each earring and they will still be a matching pair. Make sure that the shell has a good surface texture; it's not necessary for the shell to be perfect. It's a natural object so small imperfections can add character to the finished piece.



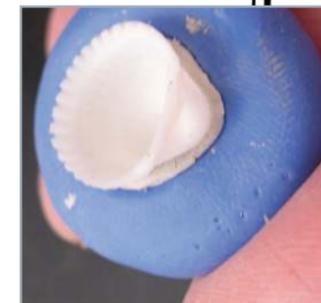
STEP 2

Make a mould of the shell using two-part moulding compound. Take an equal amount of each colour and mix together until the colour is solid. Roll into a smooth ball, put on a playing card and gently flatten the top. Push the shell in, making sure that it doesn't come over the sides and leave in the mould until it sets. Poke the compound with a cocktail stick to test it.



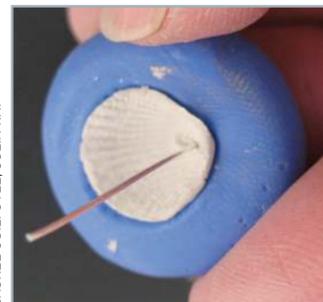
STEP 3

Ease the shell out of the mould, and then make another one the same way so that you have two matching moulds. Prepare the fine silver wire, which will be embedded into the wet clay. Cut a 2cm piece of wire for each earring and with pliers, bend a small 'L' in one end of each wire. This will give the wire some grip when it is embedded into the clay.



STEP 4

Take a small amount of well-hydrated lump metal clay. Flatten it into a thick patty and gently push it into one mould making sure that it goes all the way in. You need just enough clay to thickly line the mould but not so much that it comes up over the sides. Gently push the shell into the clay to make an impression on the top while it's still wet.



STEP 5

Hook the 'L' into the end of the fine silver wire into the clay at the thickest part and straighten it up. Be careful not to push it too far in. Gently press the clay around the base of the wire with a clay shaper or pin tool, following the pattern of the impression. Repeat these steps with the second mould. Leave the clay in the moulds to dry completely.



STEP 6

When they are dry, flex the mould away from the clay and gently pop them out. Be very careful not to knock the wire or it may become loose. If this happens, use a very small amount of syringe clay to fix the wobble. The thinnest nozzle, (usually the blue one) is best for this as you can get in very close and use just enough to stabilise the wire.



STEP 7

Check that the wire isn't poking through the back; if this happens you will need to start again. Refine the edges as necessary using small needle files. If you are using the peg and flat disc earring posts, file a flat area on the back of the shells slightly larger than the disc so that you can fix these after firing. If you are going to solder posts on, leave them shell shaped.



STEP 8

Kiln fire the earrings as normal or torch fire. When torch firing, avoid the wire or you may melt it. After firing, check the wire is stable and if necessary, fix it with a syringe and re-fire. Trim the wire to around 7mm long and tumble. It's safe to tumble the wire but if you use a brass or steel brush, be very careful or you may snap the wire off.





STEP 9

Use two-part epoxy glue to fix the earring post to the flat area on the back. Araldite is readily available from DIY and hardware shops and has a range of setting times. For this job, choose a quick setting variety suitable for metal. Take care not to get it on your hands and use it in a well-ventilated area. Alternatively, you can solder the posts to the earrings.



STEP 10

Pebeo Vitrea 160 comes in a wide variety of colours and can be mixed to create exactly the shade that you want. I used Azure (36), Lemon (30), and the Frosted Medium, mixed to create blues and greens. I also added texture using Pearlex pigments in Duo Blue Green and Spring Green. Dispense a small amount of the paint to a glass or ceramic surface and mix the pigment powder in.



STEP 11

Apply the mixed paint and powder into the shell texture with a small paintbrush using thin coats. Allow the paint to dry for a few minutes between coats. It takes at least 24 hours to dry completely. When the paint is completely dry, bake the earrings in the oven at 160°C for 40 minutes to harden the paint. It is water based, so clean up with warm soapy water.



STEP 12

Test the length of the wire for the pearls. Trim the wire slowly, taking a little away at a time and testing so that you don't make the wire too short. The pearl should be just touching the surface of the shell. Apply a dot of mixed two-part epoxy glue to the end of the wire and slide the pearl onto it. Clean up any excess immediately and dry thoroughly.

designer tips

- Shells make great embellishments to a wide range of metal clay projects. Make a variety of shell moulds of all sizes, especially small and interesting ones, ready to add to your work
- Press the shell into the clay while it's in the mould; this will cut down the amount of clay you use, making your jewellery lighter and less expensive
- Take care not to mix up Pebeo Vitrea 160 and Pebeo Vitrail glass paints. The two don't work well together as one is water based and the other is solvent based

resources:

Silver metal clay: www.bluebelldesignstudio.co.uk
 Two part moulding compound: www.metalclay.co.uk
 3mm half drilled pearls: www.manchesterminerals.co.uk
 Pebeo Vitrea 160 Glass Paints and Pearlex Powders: www.metalclay.co.uk
 Fine Silver Wire and Sterling Earring Peg and Disc: www.cooksongold.com
 Two part Epoxy Glue – Any good hardware/DIY store



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Make a ring

Use the shell moulds to make embellishments for a ring. Make the ring band in the normal way and when the shells are dry, file a flat area on the back and stick them to the ring band with thick paste. Add tiny balls as further embellishment, then fire and polish.



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fashion inspiration



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