

Wanaree Tanner has burst onto the metal clay scene seemingly from nowhere. During the past year, she's bagged a top award and gained accolades from a wide range of established metal clay artists.

WANAREE TANNER

By Julia Rai - UK

I met Wanaree at the Metal Clay World Conference in July 2011 and asked her about her creative beginnings. "My earliest memory of being inspired to be creative was flipping through a *National Geographic* magazine when I was five. I remember looking at these ancient artifacts, art and jewelry, and feeling awe and wonderment that someone with hands just like my hands

Opposite: "Gate at the Garden of the Gods" was practically a community effort. Steve and I visited The Garden of the Gods in northeastern Thailand last year and took pictures of the gate that leads to the central shrine. They sat in my iPhoto library until Catherine Witherell put out the call for photos of doorways on her *Texture Tuesdays* Facebook page. I posted it on the *Texture Tuesdays* wall and Gordon Uyehara made an offhanded suggestion that I should take the design and make into a cuff. It would have just sat on my hard drive, forgotten, if it hadn't been for the community of artists I've been fortunate enough to be a part of. From there, the project took three months to design and complete. It utilized techniques that I had just begun to develop: cutting clay with the Silhouette CAMEO®, Scratch-Foam® textures, and custom made punches."

Video: <http://youtu.be/yhRDndXlfMg>
Watch Wanaree make the beautiful bracelet on our cover.

created them. I've wanted to recapture that feeling, share that awe and sense of discovery ever since that moment."

Wanaree runs an art jewelry boutique with Steve Rees, whom she describes as her "better half". "[The boutique is] called The Jade Orchid and we've run it for almost six years," she told me. "It's in a late 1800s German-style commercial building in Quincy, Illinois, and we live in the two floors above our shop and studio. It's reminiscent of the way I imagine small business life was in the 1800s to mid-1900s. I sell my work in our boutique and also travel to nearly 20 art fairs and festivals throughout the year. I also sell my work online through Etsy."

I was amazed to hear that Wanaree has never taken a metal clay class. "And I do not have a degree of any kind," she added. "I often hesitate to share this, as it's not necessarily the path I would choose or recommend. Although there is value in learning things the hard way, there's great value in deferring to the wisdom of someone who knows better!"

Wanaree's first experience with metal clay was a familiar story. "I was given a package of PMC® four years ago and it sat around my studio for six months. It took some major inspiration for me to overcome my fear of wasting it!"

Unlike most of us who start by making simple, flat pieces, Wanaree jumped straight in with a complex piece. "The first piece



Tiger Reliquary made from FASTFire BRONZclay™, Art Clay™ Copper, COPPRclay™, and carved antique Thai Tiger totem.

"Tigers are the totem animals for Thai Buddhist monks who seek enlightenment through their meditations with nature. A monk's ability to live amongst wild tigers is akin to a sacred a litmus test; the peace and tranquility from within settles the wild beast, taming nature and instinct. To me, it's a really beautiful metaphor for the process of enlightened transformation."



I made was a three-dimensional box pendant that held a suspended green phrase opalite bead on one side and was worked with a woman's profile on the other side," she explained. "I called it 'The Beauty Within' and I was inspired to make it because a dear and very sweet friend of mine was mysteriously losing her hair at the time. Often I feel my words are inadequate, and somehow this was the best way to tell her she's a beautiful and wonderful woman, with or without hair. Having the piece become solid silver after it was fired was an incredible feeling; suddenly there was this feeling of permanence to my work."

Wanaree's pieces have a very "old world" feel and she explained her influences to me. "I'm fascinated by world mythology and the lessons that symbols, images, and legends teach us," she said. "The idea that there's an elusive mystery waiting to be unravelled by a piece of art absolutely drives me to create. Whenever I design a piece, I feel like I'm writing a story. The story begins with the drawings I work on my sketchpad, and then builds with the function, movement, and dimension of the completed form."

I asked Wanaree about her creative process. "I space out a lot. Everything is elaborately designed in my mind first, and then edited by the constraints of what I can actually do in reality," she said. "All the textures worked onto the metal clay surface are [from] my own hand-drafted drawings, but they are deeply rooted in, and meant to honor, the lineage of knowledge that has been communicated through the world's symbolic languages. This is a language that has been spoken in one form or another for as long as man has been able to wonder at the mysteries of life."

She continued, "I've accumulated hundreds of drawings over the last four years. If I'm creating a really involved constructed form I will sketch out my basic ideas and work out the shrinkage measurements if I'm creating a mixed metal clay piece or setting a stone. A lot of it goes out the window once I'm actually at my workbench, so it's kind of like loosely planned chaos."

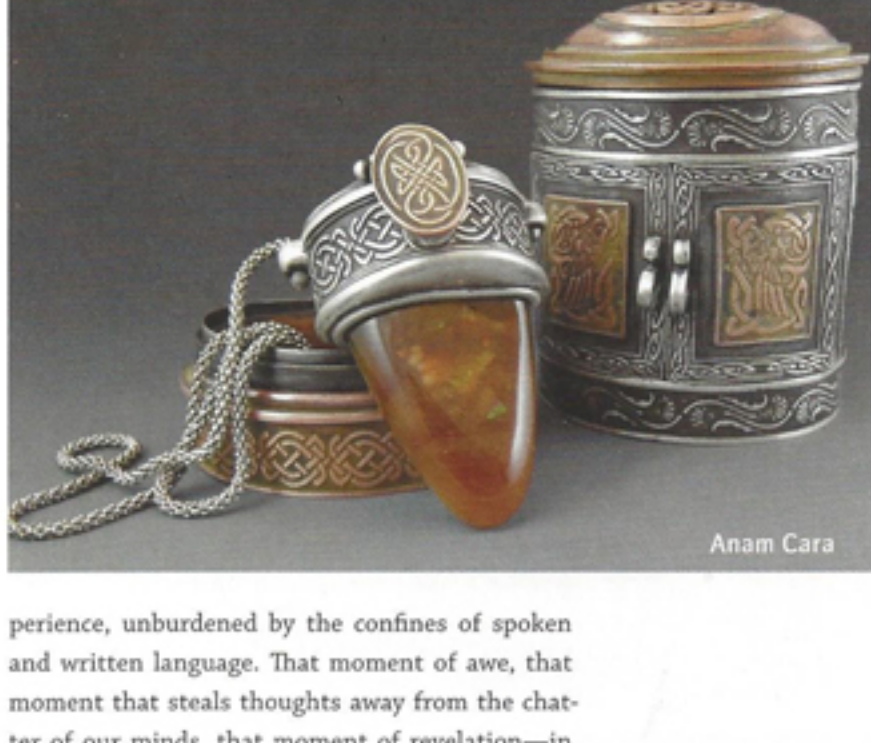
I asked Wanaree which of her pieces she feels most clearly illustrates her influences. "My

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Year of the Dragon



Anam Cara

piece 'Fionn MacCumhil' is inspired by the story of Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge," she explained. "Legend says he who consumes the salmon gains ultimate understanding. Fionn's teacher caught the salmon, and instructed Fionn to cook it. Fionn burned his thumb on the fish while cooking it, promptly placed his thumb in his mouth to cool, and gained ultimate wisdom and understanding, quite by accident. The process of creating this bracelet became a metaphor for this tale. I set out to make this piece, and after a series of 12 re-firings, acquired the experience and a better understanding as to the nature of COPPRclay, even though, that wasn't what I set out to do! My 'Book of Kells' series is a much more obvious and direct expression of my influences, but they're certainly ingrained in every piece, whether subtly or obviously."

The style of Wanaree's work is one of the things that brought her so suddenly to the attention of the metal clay community. I asked her what she feels her signature style is. "When I was asked this question a few months ago, I had a difficult time coming up with just one answer. It goes back to that first creative urge that was inspired by those ancient pieces," she said. "I reduced it down to the idea of creating new relics, or what I like to call 'Nouveau Relique'. 'Anam Cara' personifies this for me. It is the story of emergence, discovery, and how this journey is a common shared human ex-

perience, unburdened by the confines of spoken and written language. That moment of awe, that moment that steals thoughts away from the chatter of our minds, that moment of revelation—in that moment we are all very much the same, and connected."

The precision of Wanaree's work suggests an organized work ethic, as well as a slightly obsessive approach. "I wake and dream of being in the studio, and wouldn't have it any other way," she laughed. "That being said, my studio is a disaster area, absolute chaos! I'm so myopic when I'm creating that I rarely remember to put anything away. I spend 60-80 hours a week obsessively working and none of that time organizing...unless I can't find something!"

I'm always interested in the tools other artists use, so I asked Wanaree what her favourite tool is. "My Makin's® Professional™ Ultimate Clay Extruder™". I use it to create my own loops, hinges, and every imaginable component out of metal clay. I work a lot in COPPRclay and, with a shrinkage rate of 20%, having everything made out of clay ensures seamless joins," she said.

I asked Wanaree what other techniques she uses in her work. "Polymer clay is a wonderful base for metal clay," she explained. "I started experimenting and creating in polymer clays first and it's a fantastic way to hone metal clay skills, particularly how to handle wet metal clay. I also think brief-

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ly dabbling in any or every other medium helps broaden our perceptions of what we can create. A few basic metalsmithing techniques have become really essential in my work, too. Soldering, sawing, forging and fabricating have all helped me become less afraid of working fired pieces. It opens a lot of creative doors."

With such an all-consuming creative process, I asked Wanaree what she does to relax. "I read a quite a lot and dabble at playing music with Steve. I play the Celtic harp, banjo, and autoharp to his very excellent singing, guitar playing and bagpiping."

When I spoke with Wanaree at the conference, she hadn't yet started teaching metal clay but she had some aspirations in that direction. "I've spent so much time in the studio over the last four years, that I'd really like to share and teach some of the techniques I've discovered, particularly with copper clay. I absolutely love it as a medium, and would be delighted to see it become more preva-

lent in our community. There are a lot of issues to address and resolve, because it's still in its infancy. I've heard people say they're happy to get 50% of their work out of the kiln in just one, but I think it should be up to at least 90% if not 100%. Currently I'm pulling 100% of my work out of the kiln completely sintered, and I want that for other artists as well. Hadar Jacobson has really done wonders with her base metal clays. I would hope to have a fraction of that impact with COPPRclay and Art Clay Copper, and dispel some of the fear of working with copper clay." Wanaree started teaching this year and already has become a highly sought-after metal clay teacher. She also shares many of the techniques she's developed or refined on her blog.

Artistically and creatively, she's looking to push the boundaries of metal clay as a medium. "I have specific pictures in my mind of what I'd like to be able to do, and know it's simply a matter of finding the right series of techniques to accomplish it," she explained. "I want to be a part of this new community of trailblazers who don't let the perceived limitations of metal clay dictate what we can create."

The fact that she's joined the Masters Registry programme is also indicative of Wanaree's creative aspirations. "I signed up for the Registry in January 2011 and have been amazed at how much it's inspired and affected my work," she said. "Just the knowledge that some of the best artists in our medium will be viewing my work makes me take it that one step further. Oddly enough, having to consider and create within a given set of parameters actually has removed all the limitations I'd put on my work previously. It was an unexpected but delightful consequence; my belief in what is possible has been blown wide open. I've been so drawn into each project that it may be years before I complete the first ten, but the investment has already come back to me tenfold."

Having completed four levels of the Registry, I was very interested to learn what Wanaree sees as the biggest challenge within the programme. "For one, she laughed, the time to commit to a single project!" she laughed. "My piece 'When Apart Always



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Together' was my answer to the threaded component technique and it took three months to execute in copper metal clay. It forced me to truly learn the nuances and deal with the distortion of firing copper clay. It was an invaluable experience I never would have pushed through if I hadn't tried to answer this challenge."

She has some good advice for other metal clay artists who want to develop their work. "Create work from you and not simply what you think people will buy. If you let your work speak the language of your heart, people will hear it and will respond to it. Be patient, be persistent, be innovative and let the metal clay follow your inspiration." Wise words!

We're seeing more and more of Wanaree's work these days. Her project article about the threaded connection technique she used to create "When Apart Always Together" was published in *Jewelry Magazine's* special issue, *Metal Clay Jewelry 2012*. "Two of my pieces, 'Book Of Kells: Tree of Life' and 'Book of Kells: Guardian Hounds', will be in the fifth and final issue of the PMC Annual."

Wanaree is also an award-winning artist. "I placed second in *Metal Clay Today's* 'Show me the Love' design challenge, with my piece, 'When Apart Always Together'," she told me. "It showed me the creative value of submission and the joy in sharing your work with other artists in your medium." Wanaree submitted "Anam Cara" for Art Clay World's North American Certification and it was exhibited at the Metal Clay World Conference. It went on to win!

See more of Wanaree's work at:
www.jade-orchid.com - www.etsy.com/shop/wanaree
artwarebywanaree.blogspot.com/



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Award winning artist JULIA RAI is one of the most experienced and qualified metal clay teachers in the UK. She is an Art Clay Senior Instructor and holds the Rio Grande PMC Certification and the Mid Cornwall School of Jewellery Higher Metal Clay Diploma. She also holds the Masters Registry credential at level IV, the first person in the world to achieve this level. Her work has been featured in numerous publications and exhibitions. She teaches metal clay related subjects all over the UK. She is the Director of the Metal Clay Academy, an online resource for everyone interested in metal clay, and is a regular contributor to a number of UK and international magazines.



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