

Workshop review

Mastering polymer canes

Polymer clay artist Alison Gallant teaches cane making at the Millefiori Studio, in Ross-on-Wye. By Helen Kaut

Like most jewellery artists I love to learn new skills and I aim to attend at least one course per year. I admired the beautiful projects of regular MJ contributor and polymer clay artist Alison Gallant and wanted to learn to work with this medium. However I couldn't get my head around how big the canes were reduced, what reducing actually meant (lengthening the canes by rolling them as I learnt) and found the prospect of teaching myself from books daunting. When I found out on her website that she teaches one-to-one and small groups of up to six people I contacted her and booked myself on the course. Three weeks later I found myself together with another student in her cosy studio in a converted farmhouse in Ross-on-Wye. Alison asked us in the run-up to the course what techniques other than flower and kaleidoscope canes we would like to learn and at my request she added Mokume Gane to the day's programme.

Although all tools and clays were supplied, I brought my brand new Atlas Pasta Maker so I could learn which settings to use for creating thin even layers of polymer clay sheet. The pasta maker turned out to be an invaluable tool and at the start of the lesson Alison showed us her "secret" weapon to avoid repetitive strain injury – a motorised handle for her own pasta machine. This is a very useful tool when you produce a lot of sheets on an almost industrial scale.

Learning the basics

Alison has worked with polymer clay for over 20 years and is a fountain of knowledge. She explained the pros and cons of the different brands of clays that she mainly uses – Premo and Studio Sculpey - and that corn starch and polyester quilt wadding are useful when baking the clay to prevent it getting stuck on the tray. She also provided us with instruction sheets and named suppliers.

Alison first showed us how to blend polymer clay of two different colours – Fuchsia and Cadmium red - to achieve a cherry red. The next step was creating Skinner blends, which are used a lot in cane making. She explained that it is always best to start with the lightest colour – in our case, white and to wipe the pasta machine rollers in between colours, to keep the clay sheets clean. After mastering this essential technique we moved on to create a 'bullseye' – a length of rolled out clay wrapped in a thin layer of different coloured clay and a 'jelly roll' – two different coloured sheets rolled together. The bullseye was used for creating a lace cane, which was part of the kaleidoscope cane. We then moved on to create our kaleidoscope cane from the components we had made so far.

Making Mokume Gane

After lunch we continued the lesson with Mokume Gane – which is a Japanese metal working technique adapted for polymer clay. For this we chose four complementary colours, rolled them into even layers of sheets of the same size and stacked them together several times, making sure to eliminate any air bubbles. We then used cutters and other tools to press into the layers. Slicing the first few layers off with a clay peeler (essentially a potato peeler) revealed stunning patterns. Before moving on to the final project of the day, the flower cane, we created a couple of pendants and beads with the canes we made which were then baked in Alison's table top oven at 130°C.

Time passed so quickly that we actually finished at 5 instead of 4.30pm. I enjoyed the day thoroughly and found in Alison an engaging, warm and entertaining tutor. I came away with three different canes, which I can use for my own pendants and beads, three beautiful pendants and the confidence that I can now use these new skills on my own.



Alison teaching the class



Kaleidoscope cane



Striking pendants

CONTACT DETAILS

Alison Gallant
www.millefioristudio.com
 Courses cost £75 if you are part of a group up to six or £125 for a one-to-one course

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