

HOW-TO:

Twit-Twoo

Sculpting a miniature owl

By Joy Funnell - UK



Making a freehand sculpture of a bird is a lot of fun. To see a tiny creature appear in your hands is exciting, and it's not as difficult to do as you might think. Practice in polymer clay or paper clay to get the feel of the sculpting process before you create your first bird in metal clay. As you push the bird shape around, changing the tail and head; you will see different birds appear like magic!

Once I have decided what type of bird to make, I spend some time on the internet looking at photos of that bird. I print a few out with views from different angles and have them by me for reference as I work. Plan ahead—it can be tricky to make very thin legs and long beaks strong enough.

This piece will be quite thick in some spots, so give it extra time to dry all the way through. Also, although this project uses low-fire fine silver clay, you could use PMC Sterling™ or a base metal clay instead, if you prefer. Instead of syringe clay, substitute a little very moist clay rolled into thin snakes or coils or pushed through a small, round die in a clay extruder, and adjust the size of the components and the firing method and schedule for the formula you're using.





Materials

- ✓ 20 g of low-fire fine silver clay
- ✓ Small amount of low-fire fine silver syringe
- ✓ Small amount of low-fire fine silver paste (slip)

Tools, Supplies, and Equipment

- ✓ **Basic Metal Clay Set-Up**
(see <http://www.metalclayartistmag.com/freeresources.html>)
- ✓ Photos of owls for reference (from books, magazines, and/or online)
- ✓ Baby wipes (premoistened)
- ✓ Small modelling tools such as clay shapers and wax carvers
- ✓ Diamond coated burrs (AKA diamond burrs) (optional)
- ✓ Hand-held rotary tool that can run at a speed of 5000 RPM or slower (optional)
- ✓ Particulate respirator or dust mask, NIOSH-rated 95 (e.g., 3M™ model 8210) (always recommended, and essential if using a rotary tool)
- ✓ Shop glasses/appropriate eye protection (if using a rotary tool)
- ✓ Waterbrush (paintbrush with a built-in water reservoir) (optional)
- ✓ Tiny ball-tipped burnisher
- ✓ **LOS Patina Set-Up**
(see <http://www.metalclayartistmag.com/freeresources.html>)

■ STEP 1: Form the basic bird shape.

Using your owl photos for reference, use about 15 g of the silver clay to form the basic shape of the owl [1]. Be sure to look at the shape from all angles as you're sculpting it. The wings will be added in the next step, so you may want to make the sides of the body a bit thin to allow for their added thickness. Use a rounded tool (I use the end of a paint brush) to define the neck and eye sockets [2]. Shape the clay between the eyes into a beak. Re-moisten the clay as needed to prevent it from cracking by spraying it lightly with water [3], covering it with a fresh moist baby wipe, and allowing it to sit for several minutes until the clay absorbs the moisture before you continue sculpting. When you are happy with all sides of your owl shape [4] [5], dry it thoroughly.

■ **STEP 2: Form and add the wings.** Take a small amount of clay and push out into a thin wing shape about .5 mm (2 cards) thick [6]. Leave the edges a bit uneven; this will enhance the feather effect later. Paint some water onto the side of the owl where the wing will go and press the wing into place

[7]. Blend the top of the wing into the body at the shoulder using a wet finger [8]. Dry thoroughly then repeat for the other wing. Dry again.

■ **STEP 3: Correct the shape of the owl, if needed.** If you need to fill in or build up any areas (such as the tops of the wings) to get the shape the way you want it, add some paste and/or syringe clay in layers, drying each layer well before adding the next one.

■ **STEP 4: Refine the shape.** Wear a dust mask or a particulate respirator and shop glasses or other suitable eye protection during this step. If you are using a rotary tool, insert a diamond coated burr and then turn on the tool at its slowest speed (no faster than 5000 RPM). Working slowly and using a light touch to avoid removing too much clay, carefully refine the shape of the owl [9]. Switch between different burr shapes to get into different areas or create different effects. If you are not using a rotary tool, refine the shape by hand with needle files and sanding pads. Use a fresh baby wipe to clean up and smooth the clay, and to do additional light



More Examples of My Miniature Bird Sculptures





shaping. Refine the beak area with a moist baby wipe wrapped around your nail [10] or a cocktail stick (toothpick) or with a needle file.

■ **STEP 5: Add a feathered texture.** Paint thin layers of paste onto the bird. When the layers are partially dry, drag the paintbrush through them to create a feathered effect. Work on one area at a time and allow the "feathers" to dry before moving on to the adjacent area [11]. The more layers that are added, the more pronounced the effect will be.

■ **STEP 6: Make the branch.** To make a tiny branch for your owl to perch on, roll out a short snake of clay. Gently push the owl onto the fresh clay snake against your

work surface, flattening the underside of the branch and indenting the top so that it will support the owl when they are joined later. Remove the owl and set it aside. Apply some paste to the surface of the branch to create a bark effect, avoiding the ends, base and the indented area where the owl will be attached. Dry the branch thoroughly.

■ **STEP 7: Add the eyes.** Make two tiny balls of equal size for the eyes. Brush a little water onto the eye sockets and wait a few seconds for the dried clay to absorb the moisture. Place a ball of clay in each eye socket, pressing each ball against the socket gently to attach and flatten it. Press a tiny ball-tipped burnisher into each flattened ball,

making a round dent in the centre of each eye. Use a wet paintbrush or waterbrush to refine the edges of the eyes. Dry thoroughly.

■ **STEP 8: Attach the owl to the branch and add claws and eye details.** Moisten the bottom of the owl and the indented area of the branch and wait for a few seconds to allow the moisture to be absorbed. Then use syringe clay to join them together securely and allow the attachment area to dry completely. Use syringe clay (or tiny, tapered clay snakes) to add the claws onto the branch [12] [13]. Smooth the ends of the branch. Next, gently smooth the eyes to flatten them further into even disc shapes. Then use the edge of a tiny needle file or a needle tool to create a feathered effect in the eye socket area radiating out from the eyes [14].

■ **STEP 9: Fire, burnish, patinate and polish the sculpture.** Make sure the owl is completely dry all the way through before you fire it!

Editor's note: Lay the sculpture flat on top of a mirror, wait for about 15–20 seconds, and then lift the piece off the mirror. If there's even the slightest amount of condensation on the mirror, the center of the clay is not completely dry yet.

Place your sculpture in a cold kiln, ramp the kiln at full speed to 800°C–900°C (1472°F–1650°F), and hold at that temperature for 1–2 hours. Alternatively, you can torch-fire the clay, but you'll need to fire it for at least 10 minutes from the time it starts to glow with a salmon colour. Allow the piece to cool completely and then either burnish it in a tumbler or by hand. Patinate it with a liver of sulphur solution to bring out the details and then remove the patina with a polishing cloth so that it remains only in the recesses. Now enjoy your new feathered friend!



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