Exploring with clay

By TeacherPlus | Nov 14, 2012

Working with clay gives children an opportunity to make contact with the earth. It is something that all children can and must do. Playing with clay is a great stress reliever, affordable, and most importantly, fun.

“Prometheus used earth’s clay to make images, small statues of the gods. They were the first fine art, the first copies of reality made for no reason other than to delight.” And Athena breathed life into them as did Parvathi into the clay Ganesh she sculpted. So the stories go. Clay has about it a primordial quality. It was used in the world’s most ancient civilisations, and is our proof today of their very existence – terracotta, earthenware bricks and pots.

Clay work is what all children can and must do. Clay brings together function and form. The mind and hand are working in unison, freed from the inbuilt standards and facile judgment associated with Art with a capital A which has no part in the school curriculum.

The simplest clay form is the ball of clay rounded in the palm with the fingers wrapped around or rolled between the palms. Almost by instinct the thumb is inserted and moulding begins between thumb and fingers supported by the other hand – a pinch bowl emerges. No training is required to introduce a second thumb, placing the bowl on the table ensuring that the walls are even. The bowl becomes wider. Two pinch bowls fused together make an interesting hollow egg-like body that can serve as the head of a monster, bird or beast, with head and legs sculpted, moulded or attached separately.

Care should be taken while attaching two clay bodies together. This includes scoring (cutting lines on both the edges to be joined) the edges to be bound, applying slip (clay mixed with water to a liquid consistency) and finally “fastening” the edges such that the two clay bodies merge together into one.

**Coils**

Coils are exactly what they claim to be – lumps of clay rolled to the required thickness and length. Coils can be made to intertwine effectively for the contours of a hill; rolled around moulds for bangles and adorned with matchstick holes; wound round and fastened from the inside and the outside and on to a flat base to create yet another kind of bowl. Coils rolled around damp newspaper (which make effective moulds) make pillars for model houses that can later be completed with slabs.

**Slabwork**

Slabs, once again, are what their name suggests – sheets of clay made by flattening overlapping coils with the palm or by rolling the clay between two wooden guides so as to maintain uniform thickness. They are also made by simply cutting well kneaded lumps of clay with a wire-like string. Flattened into a slab and propped on to a newspaper or any other mould roughly circular in shape, slabs can be used to create a variety of masks. Ears, eyes and the nose can be carved out with a bit of iron or hacksaw or fastened on to the moulded slab surface to produce protruding or etched features on the mask. Ornamentation is the most exciting; necklaces made of conical balls with hollows and lines made with twigs and matchsticks. The mask becomes a playground for the child’s imagination. A hole in the top centre is useful to hang the baked mask on the wall.

Similar slabs can be used to mould a fish form – gills and all. On the slab carve out the outline. Turn the edges of this flat surfaced fish upwards by pinching the sides. Fill the now fish-shaped bowl with newspaper mould and fasten on it another fish-shaped bowl of similar size. Once this basic hollow fish form is ready, adorn the fish with etched out scales. Creative slab surfaces can be made if the slab is flattened on an unusual surface such as sacks or corrugated paper.

Other interesting objects such as elephants, birds, or piggy banks can also be tried by joining two slabs around a newspaper mould and adding the trunk, snout, beak and legs. A slit on the top, cut when the clay is hard completes the piggy bank.

Any local potter will bake the children’s ware. Building a kiln is a project by itself. But even if these can’t be fired, unfired clay can be used. Clay work when baked is permanent. Give children the opportunity to make this contact with earth with clay work.

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