

Sgraffito Tools

by Nancy Gallagher

Clay is rough on tools. Fortunately some of the most used tools in the box are quick and cheap to assemble right in your own studio.



Bend various-sized staples to the shapes that will work best for your sgraffito work.



A steel measuring tape is easily cut into thin strips with scissors.



Assorted handles fitted with various metal tips.



Bent and shaped office and utility staples carve lines of varying width.



Loop tools work well for thicker lines and for carving away larger areas of clay.

Like many ceramic artists, I enjoy trying new tools. I do, however, get weary of buying replacements. Not long ago, a classmate asked me to pick up some clay carving tools for her while I was at the store, as hers had become dull. As I was not familiar with the type of tool, I took one with me as an example. "Hmm," I thought, as I rolled it over in my hand, "not much to it but a blunt stick and a bit of wire." After finding them at my local clay store, and seeing the price, I set out to make my own.

Start by gathering dowels, pencils, or brushes that can be used for tool handles and taper the ends with a pencil sharpener just a bit so the edges don't cut into your clay surface while you're working. Drill a 1/16th-inch hole into the tapered end.

Smaller Carving Tools

Both utility staples as well as office staples make excellent carving loops. A straightened utility staple makes a great traditional needle-type stylus for sgraffito, which creates nicely tapered lines when the chiseled edge is held at an angle. An office staple is easy to bend into a small carving loop. Using a pair of needle-nose pliers, bend the staples to the shapes that will work best for your sgraffito work.

Put a small dab of Gorilla Glue in each drilled hole, then insert the wire shape into the hole. Note that Gorilla Glue expands while it dries. Dry the tool in an upright position for 12 hours. I use a small block of clay to support my tools while they dry.

Larger Carving Tools

For creating thicker lines or carving away larger areas of clay, I like to use loop tools made with spring steel from a measuring tape. Cheap measuring tapes from a dollar store work fine for this process and one tape will make hundreds of tools!

Unscrew the back of the tape with a Phillips-head screwdriver. Remove the inside tape—remove it slowly as it is under pressure and the steel edges are sharp. The tape is easily cut into thin 1-inch strips at varying widths with a household scissors.

Cut a 1/4-inch-deep slit into the end of your dowel. Loop your strip of steel tape so the ends meet, dip the ends in Gorilla Glue, and place them into the slotted end of your dowel. Let the tool dry upright for 12 hours.

For my needs, both the smaller and larger tools work best with leather-hard clay.

Materials and Tools:

- Dowels, pencils, or old paintbrushes (keep the brush end intact and use it to whisk clay bits away while carving)
- Utility and office staples
- Tape measure (with a steel tape)
- Phillips-head screwdriver
- Drill and 1/16-inch drill bit
- Needle-nose pliers
- Pencil sharpener
- Gorilla Glue

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