



Utrecht Art Supplies Sculpting Waxes Explained



Ask the Expert: “I have seen sculptures made of wax in museums. What kind of wax do artists use for this?”

A: Wax has been favored since ancient times (and earlier) as a medium for sculpture, though most of the time the wax original is sacrificed in casting a more durable medium, like metal or cement. Wax does have beautiful qualities of its own, however, and artists sometimes choose to keep the wax original.

The use of beeswax in sculpture reaches back to prehistory. It was used to make small fetish objects and eventually in lost

wax casting. In the lost wax process, a mold is made around a wax positive, and the wax is burned out by heat, leaving a cavity which can be filled with molten metal.

Wax offers great advantages as a modelling medium. Unlike clay, wax doesn't dry out and remains workable indefinitely. Beeswax can be molded by hand when warm, or melted and cast. It picks up minute detail, and is firm enough to hold its form in bulkier shapes like portrait busts. For larger works and for elements that project out (e.g. arms and legs), an armature of wire or wood can be used to bear extra weight.

Beeswax can be expensive for larger sculptures, but filler material can be used for bulky masses. When the French Impressionist Degas created his sculptures of dancers, he used scrap materials including wine corks for thick volumes. Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso created sculptures made of wax over a plaster core. Some filler materials including certain synthetic foams will “burn out” in a kiln, and can be left in for lost wax process.

Metal and any filler that would remain in the mold cavity must not be present in kiln firing. Where a wax original is dependent on a metal armature, it's possible to make a mold of the original and then cast wax positives which can subsequently be used in lost wax casting. If the intermediate mold

is made of silicone, the original can often be gently removed and preserved.

Microcrystalline wax, a modern, synthetic material, provides a less expensive alternative to natural beeswax which has its own unique advantages. Microcrystalline wax is a petroleum-derived product with a dark brown color similar to bronze, which can help the artist conceptualize the final casting. Brown wax can be immersed in hot tap water to make it more malleable: fill up a big bucket with hot water that's a safe temperature for bare hands, cut wax into chunks and float in the hot water. The wax won't completely melt, but it will become very pliable. Microcrystalline wax is stickier than beeswax, making rapid buildup of forms easy. When cool, it can be carved with a sharp instrument for details or a faceted appearance.

Preserving and displaying a wax original can be challenging. Since wax remains permanently soft, it's vulnerable to damage from light contact. Wax can't easily be cleaned, and it tends to attract dust, so an acrylic enclosure is often used to prevent dust from settling on the object.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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