

5.0 Character design/Sculpture

Character design is really up to you, however you must still bear in mind how you will animate the puppet. Generally I only do preliminary sketches for my characters. Most of the time I just start working the clay and see what I can come up with. If you are planning on doing a caricature of a personality it is probably better to do an initial drawing to identify the character traits you want to emphasize in your sculpt. Having said this though, you need to keep in mind that scale drawings (front view and side view) are imperative if you are going to be building several puppets for a production. it's the only way to ensure the scale stays the same. make actual size drawings and use them to build the armatures. then you can let your imagination go when you do the sculpt or fill out and dress the puppet.

Your sculpture may be for a claymation puppet or it may be a maquette for making a plaster mold for foam latex casting, the principles are still the same. If you are going to be making a mold of your puppet sculpt, begin by making a very simple armature out of a wire hanger or other stiff wire. this will support your puppet sculpt during the mold-making process. sculpts that are going to be molded can be made out of sculpey and hardened prior to beginning the mold, as it is much easier to mold a hard object than a soft one. you might have to pick the sculpture out of the mold at the end, but it's worth it.

Just like doing a sketch, start by roughly building the puppet shape with small bits of clay. This is much easier than starting with a big lump of clay and sculpting that. As you start to finalize the basic shape you can start adding smaller bits of clay and start smoothing the clay with your fingers. There are lots of different sculpting tools but the best are your hands, trust in your own artistic sense and don't be concerned if the tools don't work for you. I only use tools for fine detailing or to give a sharp edge. As you build the shape of the head place your eye beads in the clay. These will help as a reference point for other facial features as you work.

After you have finalized your shape now comes the long process of smoothing the puppet. Again most can be accomplished with your hands but as a final finish to the surface you can use a little oil or turps with a fine brush to get a real smooth look. Rubbing alcohol also works on sculpey only. The final stages involve the little details that help bring out the character like wrinkles and lines in hair.

It is very important to sculpt in a clean dust free environment. I would work on a bench covered with laminex and near natural light if possible. If you are sculpting with sculpey with the intent of making a mold, make sure you mix a light grey or light brown color, don't just use the white sculpey. it's very hard to see details and bumps on white even in good light. I always have a packet of baby wipes on hand and I keep cleaning my hands as I work. Try not to touch your clothing while sculpting as even the smallest fibers will stick to your fingers and end up on the sculpt. If you are sculpting over a couple of days cover the puppet with cling wrap to stop dust getting on it. It is very important to clean hands when changing colors of clay. I normally use

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Written by Marc Spess

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soap and water for this. There is nothing more frustrating when you accidentally blend the wrong color onto your sculpt. To remove the small bits of fabric and dirt that do end up on the puppet I use a pin or a small scalpel blade and pick it off or slice it off like a tumor, then I smooth it over with the brush and oil.

If you are making a claymation puppet then you will always need to clean both your hands and the puppet as you animate or the puppet will progressively look worse as the shot continues. You may not notice as you animate but you will get a nasty surprise when you play back the animation.

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