AGED CHAMELEON

Using polymer clay and metallic coating to create the look of ancient bronze

I've always been fascinated by ancient artifacts, especially old bronze pieces. All those years of patina -- greens and browns and rusty yellows. The nifty thing is that we can recreate that look of age and history so easily with just a few clever tricks.

A while ago, I ran across some pictures of these wonderful bronze artifacts – chameleon rings from the Senufo tribe (Aftrican, Ivory Coast). I saved the pictures because the lizards were charmingly made and the old metal was lovely - I wanted to recreate that look somehow, eventually. And lo and behold! eventually came, and mimicking the look turned out to be waaaaay easy!

The chameleon is first created with polymer clay, then covered with SwellegantTM metal coating. Finally, a patina fluid adds on the centuries! The polymer part comes first, of course. Sculpting this lil' dude is easy because he's a stylized – the idea of a lizard, but not completely accurate in all those picky little details.

It's always best to condition polymer clay before using it, to make it soft and pliable. All you have to do is roll, twist and fold the clay over and over until it's flexible. If you have a pasta machine, flatten some clay in your hands, then feed it through the pasta machine (set the rollers to the widest setting). Fold and run it through again. Repeat until you're bored or until the clay is soft, whichever comes first.

For This Project You Will Need:

☑ **polymer clay**: I suggest Premo brand clay in any black, green or brown color

☑ **pin back** (straight, with hinged back, 1.25" or 1.5")

☑ **glue** (optional)

☑ **liquid clay** (I recommend Translucent Liquid Sculpey)

☑ **tools**: cutting blade, needle tool, paintbrush, sculpting tool (I suggest some of my favorites – the "Can't Live Without It" tool and the "Wow, It's Awesome" tool!).

☑ **Swellegant Metal coating & patina kit**: I recommend Bronze Metal Coating, Tiffany Green Patina or Gold-Green Verdigris Patina and Clear Sealant.

Since we're going to cover the piece with a coating later, you can use any black, green or brown clay you want to. I used green, just for fun. Condition about 2oz. of clay (the amount in one package) of whatever color you chose.

Take some of the conditioned clay and roll out a smooth ball, about the size of a walnut.

Roll and pinch to turn that ball into a teardrop shape.

Flatten the teardrop with your fingers – but not too flat!

The pointy end of this shape will be the chameleon's snout. Now let's make the tail. Use your fingers to pinch the clay about half an inch in from the rounded end. Pinch all around the clay to create a little blobby stub.
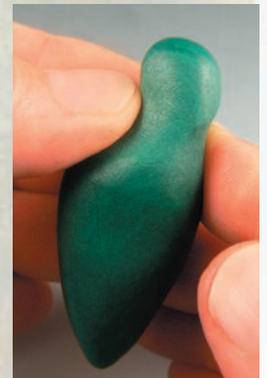
Keep pinching. Add some poking and rolling and maybe a little pulling to elongate the tail until it's about one and a half times as long as the body. If there's excess tail, just pinch it off. Make sure the tip of the tail is pointy.

Put your finger under the tail and push it up.

Now roll up the tail like a cinnamon bun! Perfect.

The chameleon looks better with a nice flat tummy, so take a cutting blade and slice that belly bulge right off so that the bottom of the lizard is a straight line. Use your fingers to smooth the cut edges.
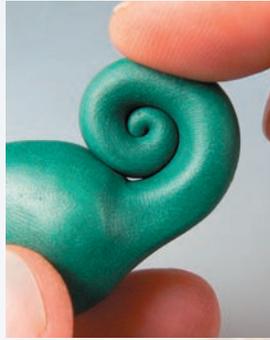
Chameleons have a distinctive head/neck look. To create that, let's use a needle tool to press (not scratch) a line into the clay to make a neck crease. It looks cuter if the head is big, so press the line in about an inch back from the tip so that the head takes up almost half the total body space.

It looks more interesting (and more chameleon-y) if the crest of the head sticks up higher than the neck, so use a cutting blade to straight down along the head line, then up along the back ridge. That should slice off a nice wedge. Now the head will look a bit like the point of an arrow.

Use a tool or your fingers to smooth all the cut edges.

The eye is simple. Just use a tool tip to create a shallow hole in the center of the head. Roll out a small ball of clay, lay it in the hole. Use the tool to press a hole in the center of the ball too. This will give the look of a ring around the eye.

Now roll an even smaller ball of clay and plop it into the hole. I recommend adding just a drop of liquid clay first so you don't have to press the ball for it to attach.

You can leave the head just like that, or add a mouth. Adding a mouth adds more personality. Use a needle tool to press a line into the face, just below the eye area. It can go from the back side of the head, around the tip of the face and then almost all the way to the neck. Curve the end of the line up a little to make your chameleon smile slightly (he's mildly amused at a joke the lemur told him).

Not bad so far for a legless lizard, huh?

The legs are too easy! Just roll out two little, bitty logs of clay. Taper one end, then bend in a gentle curve.

Press them onto the body (tapered end is the foot end). I curved both in the same direction, but you can experiment with leg curvature if you want to.
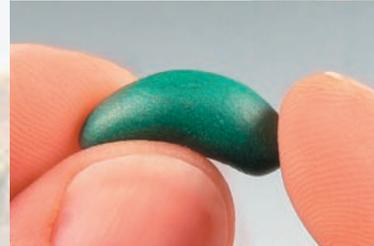
Now add just a bit of decoration. Remember that this will all be covered with a thick coating, so delicate details won't show up. I poked a series of holes in curves across his body. Then I added some balls of clay. You can do the same, or do something else!

Bake him! Preheat your oven. If you're using Premo clay, the temperature should be 275oF (130oC). Place the lizard on a piece of clean, stiff paper and bake for 45 minutes. (For other clay brands, follow the manufacturer's directions). Let the clay cool completely.

Now for the interesting, slightly mad-scientist part. We'll use Bronze SwellegantTM metal coating first to cover the chameleon, then add Swellegant Tiffany Green patina, or SwellegantTM Green Gold Verdigris (or both) to age it.

Brush the liquid metal coating onto the surface of the clay. Get it into every area, leave no clay exposed. This first coating will probably leave some areas streaky and under-coated. Don't worry. Just let that coating dry.

Coat it again! With this coating you'll be filling in thin spots. Use a dabbing motion, instead of a brushing motion for better coverage. Let that dry thoroughly too (at least 15 minutes or longer).

This next coating of metal will be the magic coating. Brush on one more layer, but while that layer is still moist, brush, sponge or spritz the patina fluid on top of the coating. Really saturate it with the patina. The patina will bloom best if the coating stays moist, so you may want to spritz it with a mist of water from time to time, or even add a bit more patina fluid. You can use one or more of the patinas for an interesting effect.

It will first turn a greenish gray, and then the green verdigris oxidation will emerge. It can take several hours for the full coloration to form, so be patient. If it's been over half an hour and nothing has happened, it means your metal

coating got too dry and the oxidation of the patina didn't really take off. Just coat another metal coating right on top of everything and immediately douse it with patina! That will do the trick!

I often leave it overnight to let all the patination occur. If you have more green than you wish at the end of the oxidation process, just use a sponge or paper towel to dab some fresh Bronze metal coating on top. Use fresh paper towel/sponge to make sure it blends naturally so it looks believable.

To make this dude into a brooch that you can wear at the next Daughters of Antiquity meeting (or whatever), add a pin back. I use a dab of glue on the pin back to hold it into position, then add some liquid clay and a flattened bit of fresh clay to sandwich the pin onto the lizard back. This is a much more secure method than just glue alone. Then bake the piece again to harden the fresh clay and attach it to the main chameleon clay. This will also increase the coloring of the patina, so that's cool.

Finally, you may want to coat the surface of the piece with a clear, matte finish to protect the patina (and your clothing!). DON'T use a shiny finish - the whole point of this metallic coating is to make it look aged... shiny doesn't work with ancient, so use a flat, clear coating. SwellegantTM Clear Sealant will work great for that, you can also use matte KrylonTM spray coating.

So, what d'ya think? Who knew that pretending to be old could be so much fun!

Christi is an award-winning artist and author of many clay how-to books. She actually does like artifacts, and has several ancient things in her studio to amuse and inspire her. For more projects, and to see more of her creations, visit her site: www.ChristiFriesen.com.

Resources:

Metal coating/patina kit, tools, pin backs: www.CForiginals.com

pin backs: your local bead store, and online - www. RioGrande. com, www.FireMountainGems.com

to create and sell your own work as influenced by this project. (but please use a "inspired by Christi Friesen" in the display, because it's just polite ; D) It's consid
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what's cool or not, just email me, we'll chat!