Salt Dough Ornaments with Courtney Cerruti

Chapter 1 - Salt Dough Ornaments

Overview

- Hi, I'm Courtney. I'm an artist and an author and I love to craft during the holiday season. Although the holidays can be very frantic with planning your menus, cleaning and decorating your home, I still love to craft during this time but I like to keep it really simple. That's why making salt dough ornaments is something that I enjoyed as a kid, but continue to enjoy as an adult. This particular method will use all ingredients that you should have already in your kitchen. I'll share my favorite recipe for making salt dough ornaments. We'll talk about the ins and outs of baking or air drying your dough. I love the rustic look of these ornaments plain but I'll also show you some ways that you can decorate them using watercolor and acrylic paint. Once you've made your ornaments, you can choose to use them on your Christmas tree, put them on a wreath, add them to your mantle scape, or even use them to adorn a package. They're so versatile for almost any project you have planned during the holiday season. (bright music)

Materials

- There are many variations of a basic salt dough recipe. The one that I like is two cups of all-purpose flour, one cup of salt, and anywhere between 1/2 and 3/4 cup of hot water. I also have a little bit of extra flour for dusting my surface. I have parchment paper to roll on as well as for my cookie sheet. To shape my ornaments, I'm using a variety of cookie cutters. Because this is a craft that is not edible, they don't have to be food grade. These ones are vintage and found from thrift stores. You'll also need a sharp knife, a spatula, and baking sheet. I'll show you a handy little hanging technique using any paper clip and wire cutters. I've also included these bird shapes I've drawn. You'll wanna print them on card stock and cut them out on the solid line. These little Vs, you'll also need to cut with an X-ACTO knife, and these will be our little handles for removing and working with the templates. To roll out your dough, you can use whatever baking roller you have. This happens to be a fondant roller and it has these depth guides. Here's a mini version. You can use a regular wooden rolling pin. If you don't have these rolling guides, you can also use something like chopsticks, so that you get an even depth and dimension when rolling out your dough. You'll need a skewer. And for decorating, I have watercolor, metallic paint, a few brushes, and water on hand. You'll wanna work in a space like your kitchen because you are gonna get a little bit messy. Flour will sort of migrate over your surfaces. And for this project you can either use an oven on a very low setting, like 150 to 200 degrees, or you can let your ornaments air dry which is my preference.

Make the dough

- We're going to start by making our dough. I have my two cups of flour already in my largest mixing bowl. To that, I'll add my one cup of salt. If it's not obvious by now, this is not an edible dough. The excess amount of salt is going to preserve our ornament. Now I'm going to add a little bit of warm water. You might want to use anywhere from half to three quarters of a cup, depending on how wet your dough is. So let's just start with about half a cup. Just using a spoon. I'm eventually going to use my hands. It's going to come together like a bread dough. It's still pretty crumbly, so I think we can add a little more water. Warm water to hot water is best, because the amount of salt will cause the dough to be grainy. And when you go to cut it with the cookie cutter, you won't get a

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nice clean edge. So if you can do something to dissolve some of the salt by using the warm water, I would recommend it. It's better to get in there with your hands at some point. I still think this could probably use a little bit more water. All right, that's coming together pretty well. We still have all these crumbly bits, so we might want to add a few more drops of water. You don't want it to be too sticky just 'cause it's harder to work with. If your dough feels too wet, you can always add a little bit of flour. We're not eating this. It doesn't have to be super precise. (bowl tapping) All right, once you've got most of your bits of dough into a main ball here, you can come out of the bowl and be more effective at your kneading. I feel like this could use a tiny bit more water, but not so much that it makes it too sticky. So I'm just going to dip my fingers into the water and get like a few drops, and you can reflour your surface as needed. And just like a bread dough, you're going to knead this for a few minutes until it really combines and feels a little bit smoother. It might still be a bit grainy and that's fine. Depending on how thick you roll your dough and the shape of your cookie cutters, you'll probably get about two dozen ornaments from this recipe. You don't have to make all of your ornaments at once. I like to take about a third to a half of the recipe and roll it and shape it into a ball to work with. And the other half, I'll wrap in Saran Wrap, and put in the fridge for later use.

Cut ornaments
- Working with a smaller piece of dough, I'm gonna start to roll out a layer. I'm working with a fondant roller. Again, you could just use a regular rolling pin. This is very similar to regular cookie dough. If your dough feels dry or cracked, you can sprinkle a bit of water. And if it's too sticky, you can add a bit of flour to your surface. This rolling pin has these depth guides. So as I roll, eventually these guides will hit the table and then my sheet of dough will be the even depth all along the way. But if you don't have that, you can use something like chopsticks. Whoop. These are just those takeout chopsticks. They're the same level all the way across. And using your rolling pin, you can roll down until you have the depth of these chopsticks. This is easier, so I'll use this pin. You can use whatever depth feels comfortable to you. I would say keep it like a normal cookie, like a sugar cookie. I think somewhere between a quarter and an eighth of an inch is good. If it's too thin, it is liable to crack or break. And if it's too thick, it'll take forever to bake or dry. Okay, I think I'm getting down to the level that's matching the fondant markers here. So I'm getting a nice consistent depth. That's pretty good. And now I can start to cut out my shapes. Using a cookie cutter is obviously very straightforward. You can just shimmy that down. And if you notice a lot of texture along the cut edge, it may be because your salt hasn't dissolved much. You can see there's some crystallization in the dough itself. And I don't mind this. You can always experiment with using the finest salt you can find and slightly warmer water, but I think that little bit of variation is not a problem. I'll just put that directly onto my cookie sheet that is lined with parchment paper. If you wanna use your template, you'll just place it and the little V that you cut out, you can just press back and this creates a handle so that it's easy to lift up your template and you don't have to get your finger under it and mess up the shape of your ornament. So using a knife, I'm half cutting, half dragging the blade around the outline. Careful not to put the blade toward your fingers. Whoop! That's fine. You can just realign your template. This is a very forgiving, creative process. And in these little corners, you may need to just re-trim like at that little beak point. You can see the thickness of the dough, probably around a quarter of an inch. This one definitely has more irregular edges. So you can just use your finger, you can add a little water to your finger, and smooth out those edges or leave them if they don't bother you. But you can also smooth them out so they're less rough. Diamond. Depending on the shapes of your cookie cutters, you can really use these

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ornaments for any celebration. They could go in a window, on a package. They can be an ornament for anything, not just a holiday tree. Let's see what else is gonna fit here. We've got another star. You can hear the crunch of that salt. A little heart. You can also get vegetable cutters that are really small for areas like that or you can just re-roll your dough. If you need to add more water because your dough is drying out, you can do that. I might just wet my hand a little bit. This time we'll work with a smaller roller just 'cause it's a smaller piece. I don't have the guides on this one so I could use my chopsticks or I can just go by feel. Now if you are baking, you wanna make sure that anything that goes onto the baking sheet is the same thickness so that these bake evenly. If you are air drying, it's not as crucial. And I prefer to air dry, so. But I do think that's about a quarter of an inch. We could do our winter tree. Got a tiny little gingerbread man. Or I've got a heart here. It's a bit of a wonky heart, but I think it's cute. I'm trying to maximize my dough. And I can continue to roll out this dough or I can just try to get as many of the little air pockets out of it and just add it to the original ball of dough and put it into the fridge until I'm ready to work on my ornaments again. Now before I bake these or place them to dry, I need to add holes or hangers so that they can become ornaments or used as package toppers. An easy thing to do is to take your skewer and just make a generous hole. Some people will use straws but I think that's too large a hole. If you're air drying, the shape and size of the hole will not change. If you're baking, the hole might close up a little so you wanna make sure it's big enough. Let's see. Moon. Tree. For anything that has a point, that's the top. I think this, creating a hole in the dough itself is the easiest. But, for other things, like maybe the rounded part of this heart or the top of the bird, for example, I can show you how to create a hanger using a paper clip. This is pretty easy. Definitely wanna be careful because you are using wire cutters. And I'm just gonna cut the paper clip in half and it'll give me at least two hangers. So this little U-shape and this little U-shape. I like to kind of close my hand around it so that any little small middle pieces don't go flying into my face or someone else's. Be careful not to pinch yourself though. So, like, don't hold it so tight that you could clamp your skin into the wire cutter. So in that case, I wound up with three, but I think that's a little too shallow. And this is really simple. You just find where you want the top of your ornament to be and you wanna just sink it in evenly until you have a little bit hanging and you wanna make sure that you haven't punctured the back. You really wanna sink it in evenly. I can do maybe this heart, if I want it to be a little asymmetrical. And then for this one, I think we'll just use our skewer. Once you have all of your ornaments on your tray with parchment paper, you have the choice to either bake or air dry. If you are gonna bake them in an oven, you want it to be the lowest possible setting, anywhere from 150 to 200 degrees, for about two hours. And you can check on them and flip the ornaments maybe every 30 minutes, every hour if you don't have a timer set. You're not gonna hurt them. I found that in my old oven that baking was a bit too irregular. I had spots that were brown and spots that were puffy where the dough had risen and I preferred the air dry method. So for air dry, depending on your environment, the humidity, the season, you probably want these to dry for around six days and I like to flip them every one or two days. The way that you know that they're done is that they will be hard to the touch and they will sound dry. You'll hear like a hollow noise. If you've ever watched anybody knock on the back of a bread loaf and there was this kind of hollow noise, that's sort of what you're looking for. So give them a little tap, pick them up, make sure they're rigid, they're dry, they're sturdy. Flipping them will allow the sides, top, and bottom to both dry evenly. And once they're completely dry or completely baked, you can decorate them.

Decorate with paint

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- I experimented with many ways to bake or air dry the salt dough, and I wanted to share some of those experiments with you so you can learn from them. I baked the salt dough in my home oven, which is pretty old, at about 150 to 200 degrees for several hours, flipping every 30 minutes. I did this three times, and I got a lot of variation in color. The elements became very puffy. Because it's dough, it rose. And it was very inconsistent. I also experimented with a toaster oven at the lowest setting in 20 or 30-minute intervals for days. It took two days of baking them in this way to get them to dry out. You can see that they're also puffy and irregular in color. You can tell that they're done- (ornament clicking) Because they have that hollow sound. (ornament clicking) They're very durable, which is what's great about salt dough. These are the ones we did together. You can see they have a light, creamy color. They're slightly whiter than the dough was originally before it dried out. (ornament clicking) Also durable, hollow sound. You can see the hangers really do stick once everything is dry. And I even experimented with using cinnamon. This is the same dough recipe we did together, and I added three tablespoons of cinnamon. I was really excited about this dough. It smells amazing. It has a really rich brown color. But then when everything air dried, it barely transformed the overall look of the ornament. So you can see it's really only a shade or two difference. It is a little bit warmer, a little bit tanner, almost like a warm cement color. So if you like that and you enjoy the smell of cinnamon, you can definitely do it. You might get a better result with baking these. The color might last a little bit better. But I found that the recipe that we did together and the air dry method of six days worked the best, had the most consistent results. You definitely wanna make sure that everything is totally dry before you move on to the next step of decorating. I've selected a few ornaments to start with. They're sitting on wax paper, or you could use parchment paper here, just so that we can paint the edges without damaging the surface of our table. I have gold acrylic metallic paint and a brush, and then my watercolor palette here. I'm using a large, round brush because I'm gonna cover some of these birds in blue. This is a Primo watercolor set. You can use almost anything. These are very forgiving. This is pretty wet. One pass of wet paint is not gonna damage your ornament, but you wouldn't wanna continue to saturate your ornament with water, because then you will undo all of the drying time that you were so patient about letting happen over six days. You can see I'm using multiple blue colors here for this effect. And I would like to do the edges as well since they're white and a little bit distracting with the dark blue. The dough is a really great canvas. It just soaks up the paint. You can also use acrylic paint, and I'll show you that as well with our metallic later. You can do the back too, but I'm not worried about the back. Just the front and the edges. For our other bird, let's do an orange color. Maybe mix with some red. Seeing a little bit more pigment I think is nicer. Some texture of the salt dough I think is fine and pretty, but I don't like to go too light or too little pigment. Again, doing the edge here. You can see this is not precise at all. Which makes it super easy to do during a busy holiday season. It's just a fun activity. I think the metallic paints and the acrylic tend to be a little bit more opaque and saturated and have better coverage. But you can also experiment with metallic watercolor if you like that. It's a little thin there, so once this dries, I might do a second coat. And again, painting the edges. You'll see because this paint is thicker, it's not soaking into the ornament the way the watercolor does, which is neither here nor there. It's just the reality of the paint. One is not advisable over the other. They both work well. If you have a little thumbprint, you can just cover that up when you put it down on the wax paper. You wanna let those dry before you add any additional elements, but this is a star that had the same metallic acrylic on it. Here's a little gingerbread we can add a second layer to now. And here's the same bird painted in a similar method with little bits of gold acrylic paint, using a much finer brush to get this star element. Let's see, for our gingerbread man who's already

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dry, we're gonna mix a dark brown. That's purple. Seeing a little bit of blue. Green. It's like kind of close to black. I don't really like to use black straight from palette. I like to mix a really dark color. You can't really wipe this away, so just go slowly. You can look up an image of a gingerbread man if you don't have one in your mind's eye. Two little eyes, and then we'll do a mouth. I don't want this detail there to be super watery. I want it to be fairly thick paint so it can really sit on the surface. Give him some buttons. Use green, maybe mixed with a little bit of our darker color for a more foresty green. Can have a little bow tie. A crooked bow tie. And you can add some little decorative elements here. Maybe go back to our red. Do like a little scallop. If I use a finer brush. This is a liner brush. This gives you thinner lines. Can maybe do like a little bow. I feel like that would've been cuter up there. Maybe we can do a little scallop on the edge of his bow tie. Give him some eyelashes with this little, or little eyebrows, you do a nose. I mean, you could add as much detail as you like to your gingerbread person. I also have an example of one where I left it plain. I added the hanger to the top, and then little holes with a skewer, and then created these rainbow tassels. So you could hang this as an ornament, but you could also try using this to make a mobile. You could just use it as wall decor. These salt dough ornaments are a blank canvas for your creativity. You can make them any time of year for any celebration just using simple ingredients from your kitchen. I love that you can leave them plain for a rustic elegance, or decorate them with paint, ribbons, and threads to elevate the look entirely.

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