

Mask Making Basics

Below are written instructions on how to create your own Halloween type masks. Please don't confuse this technique with foam latex as these are two completely different techniques. Liquid Latex Mask making is also called "Slush Casting" because you pour liquid latex into a mold and swish it around, the latex clings to the mold walls and forms a skin, it is this skin that becomes the mask. Foamed Latex is much more complicated and is the kind of technique that's used in film work. Quality masks and molds are only constructed after knowledgeable experience, get some good books or a video on the subject if you intend to seriously pursue this discipline.

INDEX to this SECTION:

Introduction

Sculpting

The Mold

Drying the Mold

Casting

Removing the Mask

Finishing

Supplies Needed

INTRODUCTION:

Mask making requires basic experience with sculpting, mold making and casting. These three skills most often used in creature special effects. Before starting a large complicated project it is wise to practice on smaller projects until you master each basic skill. The Shrunken head kit we sell is a excellent place to start, it is basic mask making on a small scale. There are many things a person learns through basic experience, practice will give you the confidence to meet any mask-making challenge.

SCULPTING:

What you sculpt will determine what your finished piece will look like. Don't count on paint to hide your mistakes. Plan ahead, start with a sketch or a photo and then calculate the size of mask you want and make it slightly larger to compensate for shrinkage of the mask latex.

You will need to support your sculpt or it will become damaged as you work on it and move it around. Make a base and connect a dowel or pipe to it. Make an armature by attaching the dowel to the square base with the screw. You can use a Styrofoam wig holder as a base,

but remember, everything you sculpt must be later pulled out of your mold.

TIP: Clay becomes easier to work as it gets warmer, keep some in the palm of your hand as you work.

For this project we recommend oil based clay.

Start with a rough outline in the shape of mask, begin to blend in the small lumps of clay by pushing them together. Remember that you are only doing a rough, most people get too excited about a detail and over-work it, only to discover that everything else was wrong. The secret is to work the entire project at once. Step back to take a fresh look of your sculpt from time to time. Reference materials essential, use photos, anatomy charts, books or a live model. I like to set the project aside for the night and take a fresh look at it the next morning.

As you sculpt remember that you will have to remove the clay from the mold after the mold plaster has set. Don't make anything too long or too thin, especially things like the ears, nose or hair detail. Make the neck large enough so that you can dig the clay out later.

THE MOLD:

Once you have completed the sculpt of your mask and perfected it, it's now time to prepare the mold.

Probably the most important thing you must know about making molds for masks is to use the correct material -- #1 Pottery Plaster. Unlike Casting, Patching, or Plaster of Paris, #1 Pottery Plaster doesn't form a skin when it sets. This enables it to absorb water from the latex when the latex is poured into the mold. Other plasters won't do this. #1 Pottery Plaster is very water absorbent.

Prep the Sculpt by painting it with mold release if you wish. I usually spray it with silicone mold release which is available at a good paint store or craft shop.

Mixing Plaster is an art unto itself:

You can use the manufactures recommendations and mix it 70 parts water to 100 parts of Plaster measured by weight.

You can do what I do and mix it by hand (and experience) until it is as thick as mud. Or. . .

Use the "Island Method" and sift plaster into a standing bucket of water until the water absorbs all the plaster it can take. Eventually as you sift, the plaster will form a little island above the water line. Legends of Plaster Mixing will let this sit still for about 20 minutes until they are ready for application. Moments before the plaster is applied they will take a Jiffy Mixer and stir the plaster.

Try all three and see what works for you. I'm sure that special effects artists would be shocked to know that there is a manufacturer's recommendation on water to plaster ratio, and they would be even more shocked to see how watery it is.

Hopefully by now you have a good batch of plaster to work onto your sculpt. Start at the bottom and carefully work the plaster onto your sculpt. US Gypsum says to have 27 to 37 minutes before the plaster begins to set. I'd recommend you use a cheap bristle brush and a bit of extra wet plaster as a top coat to work out air bubbles and insure detail. The problem, however, with wet plaster is that it is weak and loses details fast. Dry plaster on the other hand will capture air and seams will be visible. Like I said -- experience!

Now, after having said all this, make sure you cover the sculpt with a plaster shell at least 1" thick. You can reinforce this shell with the use of hemp fiber.

Wait for the plaster to harden. Plaster doesn't "Dry". Plaster "Sets" and it gets warm or hot during this process. This heat can be an advantage to sculpture removal if you are using oil base clay. Because the heat will soften the clay it becomes easier to remove. And yes, most of the time your wonderful sculpt will be destroyed as you try to remove it.

Remove all the clay from your mold. Stubborn clay deposits can be removed with alcohol or mineral spirits. Mineral spirits can be removed with acetone. Acetone can be removed with evaporation. Use all this stuff in a well ventilated area or you will be removed.

DRY THE MOLD

This is an important step. Remember that the mold needs to be able to absorb moisture from the slip rubber in order to form a skin. The best way to dry the mold is to put it in a dry area and go on vacation for two weeks. The second best way to dry a mold is to place it in front of a fan. The third best way to dry a mold is to put it in front of a heater

with a blower. You can force dry the mold in an oven, but be sure you don't let the temperature get above 125 degrees or the cured plaster will break down.

CASTING:

Stir the liquid latex before pouring it into the mold. Fill it all the way to the top if you have enough material, or slush it around if you don't. You can also brush it in by hand. Pour from the bottom up. This allows all the crevices to be completely filled. Rock and roll the mold so air bubbles have a chance to escape. Let the latex sit in the mold until the skin is about 1/16" thick.

Pour excess latex back into the container. Allow the mold to drip for about 15 minutes back into the container. Let it dry overnight.

REMOVING THE MASK:

Before pulling the part out of the mold brush some talcum powder or baby powder on the inside of the shrunken head. Powder will prevent the mask from sticking to itself.

FINISHING:

The best way to paint the mask is with airbrush dyes, either painted or airbrushed.

If you're lazy and cheap like me you can use any brand of acrylic or latex-rubber based paint. Most colors of acrylic paints will flake off the mask if handled too much. Special paints designed for latex masks are available. You can also paint it with RMG, Rubber Mask Greasepaint.

To make hair, use a wig (which is usually too small), glue on crepe wool, or punch in animal hair. I like horse hair for scary masks because it is thick, easy to work with, is inexpensive and is very dense. The crepe wool and horse hair are available from Special Effect Supply.

Separate the crepe wool into strands for the hair line. Attach the wool to the head with super glue. Use a steam iron to straighten out the wool if you want.

Good Luck

Steve

Supplies Needed:

Oil base sculpting clay
Wood dowel or pipe
Wood block as a base
Mask latex, you can use cosmetic grade latex but it costs more
Molders' plaster (#1 Pottery Plaster)
Sculpting tools
Bristle brush
Stirring sticks
Hair
Paints or makeup
Vaseline
Paint thinner (mineral spirits)
Patience

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