Making a Clay Calavera

You can create a calavera in less than an hour using oven-bake clay and acrylic paint. The key to success is in keeping your first attempt simple. As you advance in the art, you may wish to add more details to your figure.

Sculpting a Basic Skeleton Form

A skeleton figure can be complex, or fairly simplistic. You may choose to carefully form each limb, trying to replicate the major bones in, for example, the leg or rib cage. Or, you may decide to make a more free-form shape and paint on the details after baking. The choice is up to you; both approaches can provide wonderful effects. In order to access both possibilities, you need to first master the creation of a basic skeleton shape.

Supplies

- Polymer clay
- Several gauges of thin, flexible armature wire
- Wire cutters
- Clay tools for cutting, shaping and detailing
- Gesso (acrylic primer)
- Acrylic paints or acrylic paint pens
- Fine-tipped paint brushes

Try This

For sculpting tools, try bamboo skewers, a school compass, a craft knife, flatware, sewing tools and supplies such as a seam ripper and large spools, as well as nails and pins.
Step 1
Form a head for your calavera by rolling a piece of polymer clay into a ball. To form the jaw, use your thumb to pinch the back lower half of the skull. Continue until you’ve created a square jaw line with a flat chin. Manipulate the upper portion of the ball until you are satisfied with the shape of the head.

Step 2
Use a fine-tipped sculpting tool to gently press into the clay head, creating small slash shapes for the nose.

Step 3
Use a rounded sculpting tool to press eyes into your clay head. Because the size and placement of the eyes will largely determine the personality of your calavera, you may wish to sketch your concept on paper before beginning to implement your ideas on clay.

Step 4
Create the rib cage by forming a teardrop shape out of clay. Flatten the top of the teardrop (the portion upon which the skull will sit). To hollow out the rib cage, insert your thumb into the base of the shape and pinch out the center.
Step 5
For the pelvis, pinch a single flat butterfly shape out of a piece of clay.

Step 6
Connect the rib cage to the pelvis by inserting a piece of sturdy armature wire through the lower portion of the rib cage and the top portion of the pelvis. Do not press the two clay sections completely together. Instead, leave a section of exposed wire to create the spine.

Step 7
Form upper and lower sections of the arms by rolling clay into narrow tube shapes. Pinch small pieces of clay to form hands. Connect the pieces with thin pieces of armature wire. Press the upper arm section into the rib cage.

Step 8
Form the legs in the same manner as you have formed the arms. Attach all the pieces with thin pieces of armature wire. Finish your skeleton by adding the head on top of the rib cage. Place your calavera on a cookie sheet. Pose it by gently manipulating the body parts. (Note: Because of the wire “joints,” you will be able to do some manipulating after the figure has been baked, but major positioning should be done before baking.) Bake according to package directions.
Step 9
Remove your calavera from the oven and allow it to cool. Paint it with a coat of Gesso. Repeat, if desired. (Note: to make painting easier, you may disassemble the skeleton and reassemble when finished.)

Step 10
Complete your calavera by detailing the bones. Here, the negative spaces around the bones are painted with a black acrylic paint pen. Detail the face by painting in the eyes, nose and drawing on a mouth.

A Calavera of Correct Proportions
When creating the pieces of your calavera, the ratios below will help you proportion the body parts. Notice that these measurements are relative to the size of the skull of your figure, so create the skull first, before working on other body parts.

Height: The human figure is an average of 7 heads high.
Torso: The distance from the top of the chest to the bottom of the chest is 2 heads.
Buttocks: The length from top to bottom of the buttocks is 1 head.
Leg length: The distance from the hip to the toes is 4 heads.
Wingspan: The width from shoulder to shoulder is 3 heads width.
Forearm: The distance from the elbow to the end of outstretched fingers is 2 heads.
Girth of hand: The distance from the wrist to the end of the outstretched fingers of the hand is 1 head.