

# POLYMER CLAY: ALIVE AND WELL IN SAN DIEGO

By Carol Blackburn



Jami and Carol (bottom right), and the San Diego Polymer Clay Guild

When the US National Polymer Clay Guild cancelled their Evolution of Polymer Clay (EoPC) conference planned for August in California I had a minor panic. Months before I had booked flights and hotel and was **so** looking forward to attending their classes. I e-mailed Jami Miller in San Diego – we had met in March when she taught a class on pen making organized by Alison Gallant in Gloucestershire. Was there any chance of meeting up with other polyclay people if I still came? She e-mailed right back “Yes! The San Diego Polymer Clay Guild (SDPCG) would help me make the most of a short visit. Jami advised me to bring ‘trade goods’. It seems Lush brand soaps and Cadburys chocolates are highly prized in southern California.

The cultural heart of San Diego is Balboa Park. It is a beautifully landscaped area that had been the California-Pacific International Exposition venue in 1935-36. The pavilions had been threatened with demolition some years ago but were saved and now they house several excellent museums. Nearby is the famous San Diego Zoo. One pavilion is the Spanish Village, now an arts centre of 35 artists’ studio shops arranged around a pretty courtyard with brightly painted paving stones where a variety of crafts are made and sold. There was wood carving, stained glass, glass blowing, jewellery, photography, silk painting, pottery and much more. All the work is vetted by an elected jury to maintain a very high standard. Ellie

Hitchcock of the SDPCG has a studio there which she shares with 3 others, each doing a different craft and taking turns to mind the shop and talk to visitors. Ellie makes polymer clay jewellery and gives classes for children and adults. There were other polymer clay artists sharing studios in the Spanish Village and no shortage of customers. It was very popular with both locals and tourists. Several national craft guilds make use of the studios for exhibitions and while there I saw quality shows of enamel, glasswork and photography.



Ellie's studio

Another day I toured the stamping and bead shops in Old Town – a group of nineteenth century buildings, restaurants & shops selling crafts and craft materials. I spent a lot of time there and a lot of money. I was almost overwhelmed by the choice in one bead shop called 'Lost Cities'. Apparently there are even larger bead shops in town. But how many beads does a girl need? Once I had selected the first string of beads I was fine and then there was no stopping. They had great chunks of turquoise, which I drooled over. The staff were friendly and handed out delicious cookies to encourage the shoppers. I've never been offered anything like that in the London bead shops - hint!

On my last day Jami picked me up from the hotel and we drove out to a church hall where the SDPCG hold their meetings and where they had arranged a special clay day and potluck lunch. People had brought various delicious eats to share and polymer clay things they were working on, as well as finished pieces to show-and-tell. They set up work tables with pasta machines and started showing each other their latest discoveries and technical tips. I had brought a few of my tassels,

buttons and brooches to trade and swap, which was fun. Ellie gave me one of her brooches and secretly made a name tag in clay for me. One of the girls demonstrated her bead rollers which I swapped for one of my own polyclay pieces. I traded Lush bath soaps for pen parts and atomizers, and swapped a set of buttons in return for a bracelet from Dotty McMillan –author of ‘Creative Ways with Polymer Clay’ – a great ideas book.

The San Diego Guild is thriving with over 80 members; about 17 of them came to the clay day. Throughout the day other guild members called by the hall to say “hello” and chat about polymer clay. Ellie said “any excuse for a clay day”, but I was amazed at the distances the guild members are prepared to travel - some had a 2 ½ hour ride each way! They keep a library of craft books and videos that is being added to all the time. Meetings are held one evening a month and they also have monthly clay days, more for demos and projects. The guild has various themed challenges and distributes ‘Bottles of Hope’. These are small stoppered glass bottles decorated with polyclay and given to people who are seriously ill to know that others are thinking of them as they go for treatment. Each bottle is made with a certain person in mind and often has a personal message inside. The recipients of these little ‘Bottles of Hope’ really appreciate them and the thought that goes with them urging them on to recovery.

Since the EoPC conference has been cancelled this has freed up the SDPCG to organize their 6<sup>th</sup> annual Sandy Camp retreat. This year it runs from 10<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> November. There are no formal classes, only numerous demonstrations and workrooms where you can practice what you have seen. The venue is 80 miles north of San Diego and it is called Sandy Camp because where the first retreat was held it was, well, sandy and sand got into everything! A lot of the tutors who were due to teach at the EoPC conference will now be teaching at Sandy Camp instead.

San Diego is very clean, the people friendly, and the climate of coastal southern California is just about perfect. I can’t wait to go back!

My thanks to the San Diego Polymer Clay Guild people, especially Ellie Hitchcock and Jami Miller for their amazing enthusiasm, energy and hospitality.

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**Websites:**

San Diego Polymer Clay Guild - <http://www.sdpcg.org/>

Balboa park – Spanish Village - <http://www.spanishvillageart.com/>

US National Polymer Clay Guild - <http://www.npcg.org/>