

Working that Old Blue Magic at a Faience-Making Workshop

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How did the ancient Egyptians produce those beautiful blue ceramic beads, animal figurines, scarabs, and shabtis? Some thirty SDSU community members were initiated into the secrets of the process on October 18, 2019, at a mid-day workshop led by Dr. Flora Brooke Anthony (Kennesaw State University). Smell of pottery in the air, participants gathered around workbenches in the Ceramics Area of the SDSU School of Art + Design, graciously hosted by ceramicist Mary Cale Wilson. Experts Wilson and Anthony had already been at work in the studio for more than an hour, preparing supplies and staging workstations.

After a short lecture during which Dr. Anthony explained the background of faience-making in antiquity and the chemical process that transforms the dingy gray mixture into beautiful blue-glazed artifacts, workshop participants fashioned their own faience objects. First, the novice faience-makers carefully measured into bowls small portions of feldspar, flint, clay, sodium bicarbonate (to simulate ancient natron), soda ash, lime, sand, and turquoise copper carbonate. Adding just enough water to form the ingredients into a ball, sticky-fingered participants used molds, carving implements, and their imaginations to fashion the clay into objects both ancient (wadjet eyes, ankhs, scarabs, and Isis amulets) and modern (Hello Kitty, Darth Vader, and even Han Solo frozen in carbonite!). The real blue magic happened after the workshop, when Mary Cale Wilson fired the nearly one-hundred small objects in a kiln. Afterwards, participants got to take home their very own pieces of Egyptian faience, SDSU-style.

This workshop, an International Archaeology Day 2019 activity, was arranged by SDSU History Professor Elizabeth Ann Pollard (also President of the San Diego Society of the AIA) and Dr. Danielle Bennett (Postdoctoral Fellow in Classics and Digital Humanities and Membership/Website coordinator of the San Diego Society of the AIA). The event was generously co-sponsored by the SDSU History Department, the Ceramics Area of the SDSU School of Art + Design, and SDSU Arts Alive.

