

Van Aken Oven-Hardening Polymer Clay – Firm a review by Cara Jane Hayman January 2025

The polymer clay I normally use is Kato Polyclay, which is manufactured by Van Aken, and I have used it for 95% of my polymer clay projects for the last 15 years. I love its firmness and the way it handles. I mainly make canes and I get a clean crisp result with much less distortion than I would with softer clays. I also like its strength and rigidity. I can make very thin but durable pendants and earrings that aren't too flexible and keep their shape.

The new Van Aken Oven-Hardening Polymer Clay Firm feels firm in the packet. Opening the packet it doesn't have a strong smell, unlike Kato which has a distinctive smell. Whilst I don't especially like the smell of Kato it does help me identify it if ever I am uncertain which type of clay I have – I found this useful whilst testing these clays as they were all white!

The Van Aken clay doesn't feel the same as Kato clay, it feels more like Cernit or Pardo in the hand to me. I can't really find the words to describe how it's different but it does feel different beyond the smell. It is firm though; I took a small equally sized ball of each clay and squished them. It's close but I think the Van Aken clay might have been slightly firmer.

It definitely needs to be conditioned before use even whilst it is fresh from the factory. Straight from the packet and rolled through the pasta machine it will crack when folded. It didn't take long to condition and become a workable clay.

I only had what I assumed is white Van Aken clay (although there is no colour indicated on the packet) so I added some purple pan pastels to a piece to give me a purple.



I took two small blobs of the Van Aken clay and pushed them together. I let them sit for 10 or so minutes and was able to separate them easily. This is one of the things I like about Kato so I am glad the Van Aken clay is the same. Some other brands are more sticky and you wouldn't be able to separate parts like.

I then made a simple kaleidoscope cane and took some slices. It squashed a bit immediately after reducing but after a rest in the fridge it didn't squash much as it was cut. I normally leave a cane to rest for longer before slicing but was short on time so used the fridge. From left to right - the cane, a slice after resting (about 3 hours in the fridge) and a slice cut immediately after the cane was reduced.



I also tested the Van Aken Make and Bake oven-hardening polymer clay (Super Soft)- it is super soft! Too soft for me when I normally work with very firm clay. It didn't need any conditioning as it was very malleable, it didn't hold its shape and easily distorted.

I cured a thick and thin strip of Van Aken Clay, Kato Polyclay and Make and Bake at 150°C for 45 mins tented with a sheet of foil. Here are my samples and what the colour was like after curing.

From left to right – Van Aken Clay, Kato and Make and Bake



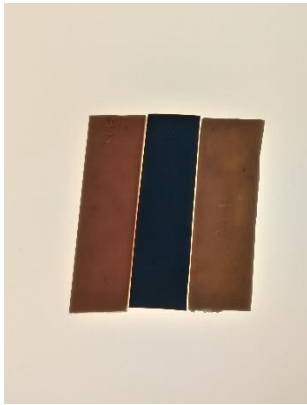
- Top row is uncured clay (you can see the make and bake distorted when moving the uncured sample onto the tile to bake but the other clays didn't distort)
- Second row is the thick sample (#1 on the pasta machine)
- Bottom row is the thin sample (#6 on the pasta machine)

They have all changed colour a little with the least discolouration on the Kato and the most on the Make and Bake. 150°C is at the top end of the recommended temperature for the new Make and Bake and Van Aken clay so it is not really a surprise that they have discoloured more than the Kato clay as 150°C is at the bottom of the range I normally cure Kato Polyclay.

I bent all the samples repeatedly. They all seemed flexible and durable – none broke. The Make and Bake samples were a little bit more flexible than the other two and the thin Make and Bake sample was noticeably more flexible than the other two thin samples. The Kato and Van Aken clay seem to be much the same when cured in terms of their flexibility and strength.

I noticed that the Van Aken Clay seemed a little translucent so put the samples on my light to check – both the new clays have some translucence but the Kato is opaque. I had assumed the clays were white but they may well be translucent or uncoloured clay as there is nothing on the label to indicate its colour.

From left to right – Van Aken Clay, Kato and Make and Bake on the surface of a light box.



I made a simple oval pendant from the Van Aken clay cane (using the purple cane from above) and a Kato clay cane (black and white). I cut the slices the same thickness (thanks to my Lucy Tools slicer) and used the same tools and template and cured them at the same time at 150°C for 45 minutes on the same curved glass. They are thin (setting #5 on the pasta machine) and will be backed but I wanted to see how strong they felt. They both feel strong and have some flexibility. I gave them a light sand pressing down on the surface, the Van Aken clay flattened a little more than the Kato pendant but they both retained a curve. Of course, I have added the pan pastel to the Van Aken clay so that may affect how it responds.



Holding them up to the light the 'white' areas of the Van Aken clay pendant are translucent. The Kato pendant is opaque.

I would like to do some more testing and to have a couple of colours to experiment with to see how the Van Aken clay performs for making more complex canes. From my brief testing I still prefer the way Kato feels and handles but I can see that if you like a firm clay the Van Aken firm clay may be worth trying yourself to see how you find it.