Paper Clay Leaves

art + science

Learn leaf anatomy by recreating the original. Working with paper clay, students emboss coils of clay against an actual leaf to recreate its patterns and structure, then further enhance the leaf with watercolors. Because the clay is paper-based, it accepts watercolors, which may be reworked and blended on the surface. Watercolors enhance the veining in the leaves, pulling out their natural characteristics.

Students can punch a hole in the top of the moist paper leaf with a toothpick and attach a string to wear it as a pendant or hang it as an ornament. Leaves may be used as decoration or left alone as a replica. Paper clay becomes very durable when dry.

Unpainted Paper Clay Leaf

Grade Levels K-12

Note: instructions and materials are based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Gather natural leaves the night before or the morning of the project. Select leaves that have thick veining and are structurally more resistant to pressure, such as hydrangea, maple or magnolia leaves. Small, thin leaves with minimal veining will break apart when embossed with clay.
2. Divide Paper Clay into 1-oz pieces and store it in resealable plastic bags until ready for use. Paper Clay tends to dry quickly.

Process

1. Roll clay into a cylindrical form for leaves that have a basic oval shape. For leaves that have extensions, such as maple leaves, roll out smaller coils of clay for each extension.
2. Place the leaf face down and impress the clay on the back side of the leaf. Spread the clay to recreate the natural edges of the leaf. For leaves with extensions, impress smaller coils of clay on the extensions. Make sure to blend the clay well, so that all the pieces are well connected, otherwise the clay will separate when dry.
3. Carefully remove the moist clay from the natural leaf. Set the leaf aside as a color reference.

Materials

Natural Leaves

Creative Paperclay®, (33230-1006); share two 16-oz packages across classroom

Blick® Artists' Watercolor (01728-); distribute 2-3 assorted colors across classroom

Blick® Scholastic Pony Round Brushes, size 1 (05865-1001) and size 6 (05865-1006); one each size per student

Round 10-Well Tray (03041-1010); share one between two students

OPTIONAL:

Liquitex® Acrylic Polymer Varnish, 16-oz, (00618-); choose matte, gloss or high gloss finish

Jacquard® Pearl-Ex Pigments®, assorted colors (27103-)

4. Allow the clay to dry fully. Drying time will depend on the environment, but most pieces will dry overnight. If the piece is to be used as a pendant or ornament, punch a hole through the clay with a toothpick while it's still moist.

Process, continued

5. Using the natural leaf as a reference, select watercolors that match the colors of the leaf. Partially fill the wells of the tray with watercolors, approximately three colors per student.
6. Using the smallest round brush, select a vein color and apply watercolor to the veining. Because the watercolor can be reworked, don't worry about going outside of the lines. Watercolor can be blotted off or blended into other colors. Allow the vein color to dry for a few moments.
7. Select leaf tip color and brush-apply watercolor to the tips. Allow to dry.
8. Select a main leaf color and apply it with a larger brush to the body of the leaf. Allow to dry.
9. Revisit the dry watercolors with a water-dampened brush to blend and unify the colors. Additional colors may be added to enhance the creation.
10. Allow to fully dry.

Options

1. Apply small amounts of Pearl-Ex pigment to the leaves to add shimmer to the surface. This helps create a glistening effect like frost, or light reflecting on a dewdrop.
2. If desired, varnish the leaf to protect the paint from moisture damage. Choose a gloss varnish to add sheen to the surface or a matte varnish for a natural look. Pearl-Ex may be mixed directly into the varnish — apply a final clear coat on top.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 — Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes

K-4 Students describe how different materials, techniques and processes cause different responses

5-8 Students select media, techniques and processes; analyze what makes them effective or not effective in communicating ideas; and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices

9-12 Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques and processes they use

Content Standard #6 — Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

K-4 Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum

5-8 Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts

9-12 Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues or themes in the humanities or sciences