

Pastel Fresco Secco (art + history)

History is greatly indebted to Fresco painting. Much of the knowledge we have about life in ancient cultures is gathered from paintings that were permanently sealed into plaster on walls and ceilings. Fresco paintings were created by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, and extremely well-preserved examples are found in the Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The art flourished throughout the middle ages and reached its peak of excellence in the 16th century with the work of Raphael in the Vatican Palace and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos.

The technique of applying paint directly into wet, fresh, lime mortar or plaster is known as Buon Fresco. It requires the artist to work in small sections at a time and to paint quickly, before the plaster dries. Mistakes are difficult to correct. Fresco Secco, or "dry" fresco, is a technique that applies pigment to a dry plaster surface. Leonardo da Vinci

experimented with this method in his famed "The Last Supper" fresco. Although he was able to work directly, this approach proved to be much more susceptible to damage over time.

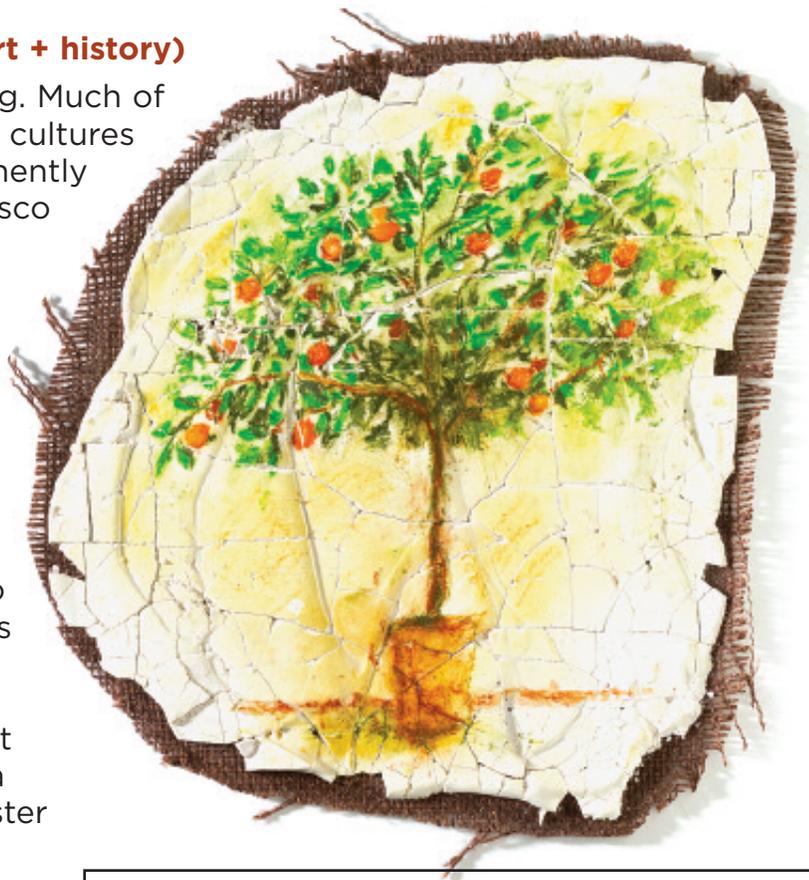
Using simple, safe Plaster of Paris, students can create a small, portable Fresco Secco of their own. Pastels, colored pencil and paint can all be applied to a dry plaster surface, and later sealed for permanency. For fun and excitement, "antique" the finished artwork by intentionally dropping it on the floor and forming stress fractures.

Grade Levels 3-12

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

Objectives

- Students will mix Plaster of Paris, observing the chemical reaction that occurs as the plaster hardens, and create a support surface for art
- Students will apply design elements and principles including line, form, and color as they create a Fresco Secco painting
- Students will learn about art preservation and understand the importance of preserving art as a description of culture for future times



Materials

[Plaster of Paris](#) (33531-1008), an 8-lb box will make about thirty 8" x 8" frescos

[Burlap](#), brown (63202-8036), 16 pieces per yard, size 8" x 8"

[Blick Pastels](#), recommend: Portrait (20016-1249) or Landscape (20016-0249) sets, share between students

[Blick Multi-Purpose Glue](#) (23872-1069), gallon, share across class

[Blick Newsprint](#) (10204-1085), one sheet per student

Mixing Bowl

Spatula

Pieces of scrap corrugated cardboard

1 cup measure

[Sponge](#) (23901-1025)

[Sandpaper](#), fine (34935-1023), optional

[Blick Economy Camel Hair Brush](#), size 10 (05153-1010), one per student

Objectives, continued

- Students will explore the purposes of fresco painting as public art and architectural enhancement, and compare why some art is created to last for centuries and other art is intended to be temporary

Historical and Cultural Relativity

- View ancient examples of frescos from Egypt, Greece, Italy and other cultures. Paintings on plaster walls have also survived centuries in China and India.
- View fresco examples from the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods. Suggested resources:
 - [Michelangelo, Taschen Art Series \(70033-1006\)](#)
 - [Leonardo da Vinci, Taschen Art Series \(70033-1020\)](#)
 - [Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, video \(72018-1003\)](#)
- View 20th century examples of frescos by painters including Thomas Hart Benton and Diego Rivera.

Preparation

1. Cut burlap into pieces approximately 8" x 8". Place on top a scrap piece of corrugated cardboard to protect tabletop from wet plaster and to have the option of moving it while wet.

Process

1. In mixing bowl, pour out 2 cups plaster and add 1 cup cold water. Blend with spatula until smooth and creamy. Scrape the sides of the bowl frequently and use the flat side of the spatula to press out any lumps. Pool the plaster in the center of the burlap and spread it out into a random or square shape, no less than 1/8" thick (burlap should not be visible underneath the plaster). Leave 1/2" burlap around the edge. Very gently agitate the corrugated cardboard to force air bubbles to rise to the top. Allow to dry for an hour or more.
2. While plaster dries, create practice sketches on newsprint. Any subject matter



Process, continued

can be used, but portraits, still lifes and traditional topics will blend especially well with this technique.

3. If desired, use sandpaper to gently smooth out ripples in the plaster surface. Dampen the surface of the plaster lightly using a sponge or spray bottle of water — this will help cut down on the pastel dust and help prevent smearing. Execute final

drawings in pastel. Avoid dragging the hand through the pastel.

The availability of pigments was limited in early fresco painting, so, for historical accuracy, use a palette consisting of earthtones and soft hues. Pastel dust will absorb into the dampened plaster, so it is less likely to smudge and won't require fixative. Errors cannot be corrected completely, but they can be diminished by dipping a cotton swab in water and dabbing the color away from the area.

4. Once the artwork is completed and the plaster is thoroughly dry, enjoy "antiquing" the fresco by dropping it onto the floor or bending it by hand to form stress fractures. The plaster permeated the holes of the burlap while wet, and adhered to it as it dried, so it won't fall off. Small particles will crumble away when broken, but the large pieces will remain on the burlap.
5. After manipulating the fresco to the desired level of "antiquing," seal it with a coat of multi-purpose glue to stop the release of plaster from the burlap. Apply with a craft stick, moving it over the pastel drawing as if applying frosting to a cake. Allow it to penetrate the cracks. Do not paint the burlap with glue. Once dry, turn the entire piece over and coat the back as well.



*Leonardo da Vinci,
detail of Phillip from
The Last Supper,
fresco secco, 1498*

Options

- For added rigidity, and to make the fresco ready to display, mount to a piece of [Crescent Matboard](#) (13007-2453)
- Other mediums will work as well as pastels on the plaster surface. Try [Blick Studio Colored Pencils](#) (22063-0249), [Blick Artists' Watercolors](#) (01728-1009), [Blick Premium Tempera](#) (00011-0069) or [Blick Artist's Acrylics](#) (00624-1029).

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National Standards

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

K-4

Students use different media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories

5-8

Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas

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 #4 — Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

K-4

Students identify specific works of art as belonging to particular cultures, times, and places

5-8

Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

9-12

Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places

Content Standard #5 — Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

K-4

Students understand there are various purposes for creating works of visual art

5-8

Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art

9-12

Students describe meanings of artworks by analyzing how specific works are created and how they relate to historical and cultural contexts