

Botanical Illustration

Plaster Gauze Impressions make it so easy!

(art + history, art + science)

Drawing and painting detailed illustrations of plants have been necessary since early times to provide identification and reference, usually for medicinal purposes. In the age of exploration, a naturalist would be included on ocean voyages to record new species of plants that were discovered in new lands.

When printing processes began to advance, the profession of Botanical Illustrator emerged and highly skilled artists were needed to create accurate renderings for field guides, catalogues, and magazines.

Although photography and modern printing processes have replaced the need for cataloguing plant life by hand, botanical illustration is still a beloved art form and organizations around the world have been formed to preserve it.

To make an accurate rendering of a plant, students can create an impression in plaster, then trace the shape and details with colored pencil, ink, or watercolor. Mixing and shading for color accuracy and identifying the plant are some of the skills that will be learned in this exercise.

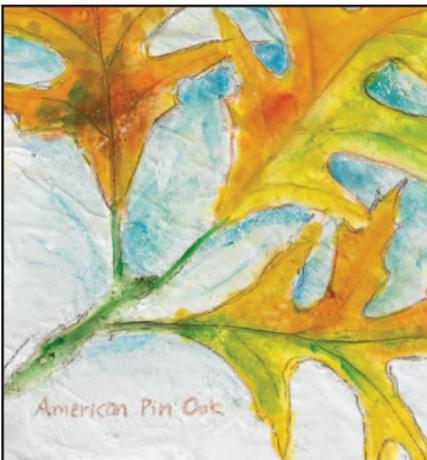
GRADES K-12 Note: instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Cut plaster cloth into smaller increments for easier distribution. Plan on using at least one yard per student. More or less will be needed, depending on the size of the botanical selection.
2. Provide wax paper pieces about 12" square, one per student. If the project needs to be moved before it has dried, have scrap cardboard on hand to place beneath the wax paper.
3. Gather leaves, twigs, flowers, ferns, and other natural items. Dimensional items should be pressed flat, but not allowed to dry out. Very thick items, such as pine cones or seed pods, should be cut in half so they can be placed flat against a surface.

Process

1. Place the botanical selection on the wax paper. Cut the plaster cloth into 2" wide pieces and dip them into a cup of warm water to activate the plaster. Over the cup, run fingers along the plaster piece to work away excess water. Position the first pieces of plaster at different points on the botanical sample, in order to hold it in place.



Materials

Activa® Rigid-Wrap Plaster Cloth, 12" x 16-yd bulk package (33507-1005); share one among class

Wax Paper

Natural items for impressions

Media for illustration; recommend one or more of the following:

Blick® Studio Artist's Colored Pencils, Landscape Set of 24 (22063-2249)

Derwent® Academy Watercolor 12-Pan Set (01749-0129)

Staedtler® Triplus® Fineliner Pens, set of 6 Nature Colors (21817-1069)

Crayola® Scissors, blunt (57039-0002); one per student

Optional Materials

Crescent® Matboard, assorted colors (13007-)

Pop Up Adhesive Glue Dots® (23841-1030)





Process, continued

2. Continue adding wet plaster cloth pieces, pressing firmly around the botanical selection. Smooth the plaster to cover the weave of the cloth. Allow the edges to form a natural deckle.
3. Apply a second layer of plaster cloth and press it firmly against the botanical selection. As an option, a third layer can be applied for greater strength.
4. Set aside for about an hour until the plaster feels dry and cool to the touch. Turn it over, remove the botanical selection and let it dry overnight. Keep the botanical selection on hand for color reference.
5. To add color to the plaster impression and turn it into an illustration, begin by tracing the shape and details with a neutral gray or brown pencil. Keep it light — creating a guide to follow is the first step.

Matching the color of the botanical selection as closely as possible, continue the illustration using

colored pencils, watercolor pencils, watercolor paint, fine line markers, or a combination of these mediums. Use light applications in layers for best results.

Note: brush clear water over the plaster before applying watercolors for the softest, most natural look.

6. With a pencil or fine line marker, identify the botanical sample somewhere in the negative space surrounding it. Use the common name and the scientific name, if available.

Options

1. To provide support for the fragile plaster cloth, adhere the finished illustration to a rigid surface such as matboard.

Dimensional pieces may require extra support. Recommend using Pop Up Adhesive Glue Dots.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

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

- K-4** Students use art materials and tools in a safe and responsible manner.
- 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 apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.

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

- K-4** Students describe how people's experiences influence the development of specific artworks.
- 5-8** Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry.
- 9-12** Students describe meanings of artworks by analyzing how specific works are created and how they relate to historical and cultural contexts.

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.



Step 1: Place the botanical selection on wax paper and firmly press pieces of plaster cloth around it.



Step 2: Allow the plaster cloth to dry partially, remove the botanicals, and allow the plaster to dry overnight.



Step 3: Trace the shape and details of the botanical impression with colored pencils or other mediums, then fill with soft watercolor washes. Try to match the colors of the sample.