

Luminous “Fossil” Prints

Make a clay impression, then make it impressive with a shimmer of color

A compression fossil is formed when plants or animals are placed under physical pressure by layer upon layer of sediment that eventually hardens into rock. It's very common to find fossils formed this way along rivers and lakes where fine sediment quickly encases an object before it has time to decompose. In a process known as carbonization or distillation, a plant can be reduced to a carbon film that displays the exquisite details of the fossil.

To illustrate how these fossils are formed, leaves and other natural materials can be pressed into soft clay. While the clay is moist and the leaf is held in place, a layer of “sediment” in the form of lustrous powdered pigment can be finger-applied to create a detailed outline. When dry, these shimmering, colorful “fossils” can be made into pendants, ornaments, charms, and more.

GRADES preK-8 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Select leaves, seeds, shells, and other natural materials for making imprints. Delicate flower petals will probably not withstand the pressure needed for making an imprint.
2. Air-dry clay may be divided ahead of time, rolled into 1" diameter balls and placed in resealable bags to keep fresh.

Process

1. Start with a clean, dry surface. Protect your table with a cloth or plastic cover that will not move when rolling — or cover it with full-size pieces of posterboard. If the fossil needs to be moved for drying, give each student a pre-cut piece of 5-1/4" x 7" posterboard.
2. Roll clay into a 1" diameter ball, then flatten it with a rolling pin.
3. Place the leaf on the clay, then roll over it a few times until it is pressed into the clay just enough to secure it.
4. Dip the tip of one finger into a jar of powdered pigment. Use small amounts to avoid waste and mess — a little bit goes a long way! Smooth the pigment over the clay and back of the leaf, gently rubbing the pigment into the clay. If the clay begins to dry, dip a finger in water to spread the pigment. Do not dip wet fingers into the jar.
5. Turn the clay over and apply pigment to the back side. Create a hanging hole before the clay dries.
6. Remove the leaf. The “fossil” imprint will be the original color of the clay, but may be tinted with a contrasting color if desired. Trim the edges of the clay with a knife — or leave as is for a natural look.
7. Allow to dry for approximately 24 hours, then seal with a matte or gloss varnish



Materials (required)

Das Modeling Clay, 5.3 oz, assorted colors (30538-); share one package among six students

Jacquard Pearl Ex Pigments, assorted colors, 0.10 oz to 0.75 oz jars (27103-); share one jar across class, or more for additional color choices

Kemper Clay Roller, 3-1/2" wide (30315-0000); share one between two students

Blick Deluxe White Posterboard, white one side, 14-ply, 22" x 28" (13104-1102); share one piece among 16 students

Leaves and other natural materials

Optional Materials

Kemper Hole Cutter, 3/16" Dia (30369-4316)

Blick Matte or Gloss Acrylic Varnish (00727-)

Beadalon Leather Cord, assorted colors and diameters (61517-)

Kemper Fettling Knife, soft (30349-1010)

