

## Posterized Clay Portraits

“Finger Paint” with clay and create a modern selfie-style portrait with the look of ancient pottery

A very painterly approach to decorating pottery is to use a liquid clay body known as slip. Depending on its viscosity, slip can be brushed, dripped, piped, or trailed onto a leather-hard clay surface before it is fired. In most ancient cultures that created pottery, slip painting was the primary technique used for decoration and was limited to a color spectrum of red, cream, and black.

If ancient potters were working in today’s selfie culture, they might come up with a project like this one.

Students can create a tri-toned portrait with air-dry clay, using their own selfie image as reference. A digital posterization to three levels (white, black and mid-gray) is placed beneath tracing paper and clay is added to repeat the shades and shapes of the image. Clay can be easily manipulated with fingers (it’s a bit like finger-painting) or tools can be used for detailed areas. Clay colors can

be blended, and interesting textures and dimension can be built up and carved into the surface.

As clay dries, natural stress fractures occur — normally this would be viewed as a negative result. In this instance, however, cracking is embraced and enhanced with acrylic paints to look like ancient art.

**GRADES 5-12** Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

### Preparation

1. Select images and posterize them using a digital photo application. Print two copies in black and white.
2. Distribute clay colors in zip-lock plastic bags. Plan on 1 oz per color per student (golf ball size).

### Process

1. Tape one of the posterized images to a piece of cardboard and tape a sheet of tracing paper over the image. Keep the second one as a reference.
2. If desired, shapes created by the posterization can be traced with a permanent pen to make them easier to view. Think of the shapes as “paint by number” areas, using three colors.
3. Start with one of the large, white shapes on the posterized image, such as a forehead or cheek. Start with white clay to keep hands cleaner. Roll coils to outline and fill the shape, then use fingers smoothing coils together. Cut away the excess. A clay tool or shaper may be used to push the edges into the outline of the shape. If clay is starting to dry, dip fingers in water and apply just enough moisture to smooth the surface, not to wet the clay.
4. Continue to a gray shaded area and cover it with red clay. Where areas of color meet, press them together with fingers. Leave colors separate or blend them together for a softer transition.



### Materials (required)

**Activa Plus Clay**, 2.2 lb Black (33275-2051), Terra Cotta (33275-8141) and White (33275-1041); share one of each color across class

**Blick Studio Tracing Paper Pads**, 9" x 12", 50 sheets (10609-3003); need one sheet per student

**Mod Podge Matte Finish**, quart (02916-1017); share one quart across class

**Crescent Chipboard Packs**, 9" x 12", package of 40 (13152-1023); need one piece per student

**Boxwood Clay Tool Sets**, 6" long set of 38 tools (30304-1009); share one set across class

**Colour Shaper Kids Paint Set**, set of 5 (04935-0601) share four sets across class

Posterized photos printed in black and white  
Zip-lock plastic bags

### Materials (optional)

**Amaco Engobes**, 1 lb assorted colors (30459-)



## Process, continued

The first few pieces of clay may not adhere well to the tracing paper, but as more clay is added and pieces are joined, they will adhere better.

- In detail areas such as eyes and mouths, create very small coils and use the second posterized print to determine shapes as they are covered.
- Keep in mind:
  - Not every detail needs to be covered. Images can be simplified and still be effective.
  - Texture can be created by subtractive means such as creating lines with tools or pressing items into the clay — or by adding clay pieces or coils.
  - Keep clay in plastic zip-lock bags to keep it as moist as possible.
  - Edges may be trimmed straight to make a clay tile — or left irregular.
- Remove the tape from the tracing paper to allow for “give” as the clay dries and shrinks. Do not place it in front of a fan, but allow it to dry naturally. Turning the piece over frequently while drying will help prevent cracking and warping. Drying times will vary depending on the thickness of the clay. If the clay feels cool or moist, it may require more drying time.
- As the clay dries, stress fractures may occur and the piece may warp or curl. Cracking can be embraced as part of the aesthetic quality of the piece. Wait until the piece is completely dry, then gently press with hands to flatten it, even if more cracks form. If desired, press into other areas to deliberately add cracks.
- Before moving the clay portrait, coat it with matte medium. Use a soft brush and make sure the medium penetrates the cracks and covers the edges.
- Turn the piece over and coat the back side with matte medium as well. While the matte medium is wet, it will function as glue to mount the finished piece onto matboard, tile, wood, or a canvas panel, if desired.
- “Antique” and enhance the texture with brown acrylic paint. Brush the paint over the entire surface, then use a paper towel or cotton rag to wipe away the paint. It will remain in the cracks and low areas of the portrait.

## Options

- Clay colors can also be mixed to make additional color values. Start with greater levels of posterization and create more intricate detail.
- Any image, not just a portrait, can be used with this process.
- Instead of air hardening clay, use slip or engobes. Slip can be made by adding small amounts of water to air-dry or kiln fire clay. An engobe is a dry clay powder that can be mixed with water to the desired viscosity. Use a paintbrush to apply slip or engobe over tracing paper, then follow the process above.

## National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

### Creating

**Anchor Standard 1:** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

**Anchor Standard 2:** Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

### Connecting

**Anchor Standard 10:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

**Anchor Standard 11:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.



**Step 1:** Digitally posterize an image to three levels, then print it out and cover it with a sheet of tracing paper.



**Step 2:** Using the shapes formed by the posterization as guidelines, fill in with three colors of clay.



**Step 3:** Coat with matte medium and enhance with brown acrylic paint, if desired.

