



Winter Art

by Isobel Coney



In the winter it may be bleak, dark and cold, but magic lurks beneath the soil. The potential for new life bearing fruit will come in the spring and summer. It is a mysterious kind of magic which will kindle and burn with a new light when it is ready.

This is a great time of year to take students out to be creative. We are forced to work with what we have so we scabble on the wet cold earth, fight through prickly bushes, looking for treasure in the cold stark winter lands. We piece together dead branches, dry leaves, berries and mud to make beautiful creations. We use the cold temperatures as a new tool making us work fast and furious because our hands are so numb. We notice details we may never see: the beauty of rose hips against rock, the contrasting colours of dead stalks against a white frosted ground. I think it is reassuring to know that even though all around is dead and decaying, it will come back to life after harsh winter. There is beauty even at the end of the cycle of life, the end of the growing season.

The days are short, bleak, misty and dark with the occasional treat of a crisp sunny day and we suddenly see the landscape more clearly without

the clutter and busyness of foliage: The silhouette of a tree with no leaves against a barren hill side, the tall stalks sharp and empty. It is time to celebrate this new purity, and work through the short days into the night with challenging and inspiring art projects.

Students may complain about having to go out on a cold winter's day and once outside the cold air hits them but with some encouragement, everything becomes clear. With a new creative bravery they tackle the art project ahead. Their decision making will be more focused and they will be more organised if they are working in a group.

I introduce here three projects which capture the beauty of winter in all its harshness. There is so much inspiration to be found searching in the landscape for the last souvenirs of the outgoing year, using light to bring out the beauty and hope of the coming year.



"For me, looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins."

Andy Goldsworthy





Winter tree decorations

Each Christmas is filled with excitement and anticipation, but it always makes me feel quite sad cutting down a tree to bring inside to decorate. There are so many stark leafless trees outside, why not create decorations for an empty tree to celebrate the season?

Willow is an excellent material for making decorations. It is bendy and can be manipulated into shapes, without snapping to form the basic shapes for the decorations. Other kinds of branches can also be experimented with for quirky, knotty shapes. Hazel works well.

Circles can be formed by gently bending the willow into a circle twisting the extra willow around the circle to make a wreath like shape. Berries, leaves and seeds can then be threaded and hung inside the circle or twisted around the outside.



A star can be formed by bending the willow in four places to create five equal lengths of willow. Then fold the willow at each bend to make a five pointed star. Weave the sticks under and over as you form the star to make a much stronger structure. For a more intricate star lay one five pointed willow star on top of another and lash them together with some of the thread to create a ten pointed star.

It is more adventurous to let the willow dictate the shape and as you bend and weave it ovals and organic shapes appear. Try different combinations of circles and stars within circles. If the branches have extra little branches leave them on for interesting details on your decorations.



A little green thread or florists wire can be used to thread berries on. I really enjoyed piercing the berries with my needle and seeing the rows of jewel like berries on the thread their rich, shrilling

colour. Weave the strings of berries around the willow shapes to create festive organic wreaths.

Sheep's Wool found in the fields can also be wrapped and teased out around the star to make a white, wispy wintery star. The colour from the farmers' identification mark can also add interesting details. The wool I found in the field had green dye, which gave an interesting green tinge to my star.

Look for contrasting colours in nature to make vibrant tree decoration: the deep red holly and rose hip berries next to acorns and dried seed heads.

"Natural spaces and materials stimulate children's limitless imagination and serve as the medium of inventiveness and creativity observable in almost any group of children playing in a natural setting"

Robin C Moore "Last child in the woods"

A winter spiral of light

The inspiration for the spiral of light comes from St. Martin and the celebration of Michaelmas. St. Martin recognised the divine spark in the poor man of Amiens, and gave him the protection of his own cloak. In this project students are creating protection from the earth for their light.



Students create individual lanterns and then arrange them in a spiral, a beautiful pathway through the lights. This would be an excellent afternoon project culminating in the lighting of the lanterns in the evening: a time for students to have quiet and stillness, as they focus on the lovely lights at the end of a busy day.





I set myself the challenge of creating lanterns without glue or paper. My family and I went out on a crisp cold winter's day to play in the woods by the river. While my three children made a den from the materials they could find, I looked around to see what I could find. I loved the colours of the dead fern, bracken and nettle stalks, and felt sure there must be a way I could use these in my constructions.

After digging around on the banks of the river, I found really good sticky clay, which I thought would be really good to hold the stalks upright.



I then found some nice flat rocks, and some old rotten short planks of wood. I slapped a big clump of clay on the wood, making it thick enough for a good lantern foundation. I then enjoyed collecting stalks of different colours, golden yellows, burnt reds and oranges and dusky purples. I made layers of stalks in the clay imagining the candle light flickering through the colours. Fallen leaves with holes in were threaded onto the stalks. Fern leaves and dried grass stems were also pricked into the clay.

It was rewarding to bring together contrasting materials; the hard rock, the wet sludgy clay and the fragile and brittle stalks and grasses.



Lantern making works effectively as a group project, each person is responsible for one element of a whole. To make the impact of the spiral work each student must complete their lantern.

The lanterns are then laid out in a spiral at dusk, positioning them in a beautiful spiral. At night-fall, the lanterns are lit and the magic begins. Each lantern becomes part of a delightful whole. An ethereal kind of light flickers through the stalks, leaves, branches and leaves glowing stripes of oranges, reds and yellows: a stunning spiral of light in the cold dark, wintery night.

Each student's unique lantern protects their own little flame, shining to celebrate Michaelmas. Every light brings relief in the darkness, and together the lights become lyrical, and dancing, a spiral of hope for the coming year after the darkness.



"Nature - the sublime, the harsh, and the beautiful-offers something that the street, or gated community or computer game cannot. Nature presents the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity."

Richard Louv 'Last child in the woods'



Ice Lanterns and Mobiles

Ice lanterns are made in countries with very cold climates where there is plenty of ice on hand, places like Finland, Norway and Russia.

For the people who live in these cold climates the winter solstice is a moment of joy when they can celebrate and bring light into the middle of their cold winter.

"Great happiness is brought to all by the simplest thing—a dark winter's night illuminated by a flame as it plays within a shell of ice."

"The history and chemistry of ice lanterns."

Within these ice lanterns we can preserve treasures collected from a winter landscape, fiery red and orange leaves, rosehip berries ferns and pinecones. The candlelight will flicker through the layers of colour and detail. We are suddenly able to see through a thin leaf, the magic of candlelight flickering through the veins of a dead leaf, like unearthing magical gold.

To make the lanterns find two short squat containers (i.e. Tubs not bottles), one that fits inside the other, with a gap between where the water will be poured. Put some stones in the central container to stop it floating up when the water is poured in. Pour the water in, then position your berries



and leaves. Carefully place your container outside if it is cold enough to freeze or place it in the freezer. When you are ready to remove your ice, warm the outside of the container a little and your ice lantern should slip out. Put a candle inside the lantern and place it outside. The lantern will last longer outside and look beautiful against the cold black night sky.

Students enjoy the element of surprise when they shake the ice free from the mould. They see the frozen treasures in a whole new way: icy to the touch, yet containing the warm, soothing glow of the light within.



To make ice mobiles, find small plastic pots or bowls (from the recycling?), lay them out in the order you want them to hang, on a tray, and then lay string between them. Pour 1-2 cm of water into each container then arrange leaves, berries and seed-heads to be encased in the ice mobile. Place the tray in the freezer and leave overnight. To release the ice, gently warm each container, and the ice should easily come out. Hang the mobiles on a tree outside so the crisp winter morning light sparkles in the twinkly, dripping ice stained-glass windows.

In conclusion, we are manipulating the elements, creating art from wood, ice, leaves and sticks. These sculptures are briefly beautiful. The special memory of what we have made with our own hands will last forever. ■



Author's Notes

Isobel Coney is a qualified Secondary School art and textiles teacher, with commercial textile experience and three years teaching GCSE, GNVQ and A-level at St. Marylebone School in London.

She has worked very successfully in the UK and US with all ages of students on projects combining cultural, environmental and historical studies with art, with techniques spanning painting, quilting, felting, batik, print-making, hand-made paper and woodland crafts.

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Photographs all from the author