

# Summer Art

by Isobel Coney



**I**n summer the landscape is painted with swathes of greens and bright colours as we see the full fruition of nature, flowers and berries in the woods, fields and hedgerows.

In this article we present three art projects to celebrate the fruits and foliage of summer, learning about their shapes, smells and textures. Children work creatively in teams, solving problems and seeing a process through from start to finish. At the same time they work on their own creative tangent, learning new skills. Nature is their palette, the natural art shop where they can look, test ideas, and make choices based on what they see.

## Hand-made natural paint

Late spring and summer are the time when the abundance of flowers and vegetation really fills gardens, woodlands and landscapes with colour.



*"The urge to unite ourselves with this colourful weft is strong" (All year round)*

Go out into nature and look for suitable ingredients for natural paints: berries, flowers, leaves, soil and ash. Bring them back to the classroom and start pounding, grinding, mixing, mashing and straining: working to release the colour, the essence of nature that all this hard work releases. Children love mixing and experimenting; making potions and concoctions, and colour is one of the driving forces for this kind of developmental work.

A pestle and mortar is the best tool for grinding berries and soil, mixing substances together to make paint, and the reward comes when the beauty of colour is released.



Water and egg white or egg yolk can be added to develop the quality of the paint, and used as a binder to make it sticky. Colour and consistency are both important, and egg yolk can give the colour a shiny finish. Early renaissance painters used egg yolk so students can learn about art history while they work on their paint. Other ingredients to experiment with include acids like vinegar, and alkali such as bicarbonate of soda, which change the colour of the paint, often dramatically. Students can take notes of all their colour experiments.

Making paint brings students closer to the essence of nature, and gives children a greater understanding of how ancient civilisations used the technology they had available, crushing coloured stones to make paint for cave paintings. They can also learn about the history of colour over the last 400-500 years, when certain colours were very rare because they rarely occur in nature. It is interesting to research the names of colours still used today in paint boxes, like 'Burnt Umber', 'Sienna', and 'Prussian Blue'.

The paint can be quite thick and heavy, so a thick watercolour paper or thin card works well as a surface for painting. The children enjoyed gradually adding



bicarbonate of soda to paint made from raspberries, and painting various sample squares as the paint turned from bright pink to a deep bluish purple. "We wrote the ingredients next to each square we painted, and the colour changed a bit more as the paint dried."

Another way to make a colour wash is to set vegetables to simmer on low heat. The colour is released slowly into the water, with particular success coming from red cabbage, yellow and red onion skins.

Another useful colour wash can be made with strong tea, and washes can be used to stain the paper, and dried before the thicker paints are applied.

The beauty of hand-made paint is that the colour is not flat like commercial paint from a paint box. It's translucent, earthy, rich, and we gain more understanding of the natural sources and language of colour. Brush marks showed in the finished work, depending on the thickness of paint used, and flecks of dark and light occurred where the paint still contained texture. The children worked hard to achieve certain colours, and had a strong connection to their finished work, and a great sense of pride in the achievement.



An afternoon could be taken to make the colours labelling each pot and then the paints could be used to create a picture inspired by their natural surroundings.

Some of the colours will fade, we are borrowing their brightness for a moment in time, as art historians know even with the oil paintings of the great masters.

Vegetable dyes behave in the same way, and it fascinating to pull out work from over a year ago and see how it has changed over time.

## Hand-made paper with plants and leaves

Paper-making is a great project to carry out in the woods or fields. Children love this project because almost anything they find around them can be incorporated into the paper, like leaves, seeds, berries or even sheep's wool. It's also a great way to preserve these objects – much more interesting than pressing leaves between papers under the bedroom carpet!



While making paper with the students we can talk about the most extraordinary natural paper which is made by the oldest paper makers of all wasps! Their beautiful nests are

*"Colour is the essence of landscape, of mood, of our whole perception of the physical world"*

Robert D Kaplan from *Colour A natural history of the palette.*





made when they chew up old wood and mix it with their saliva which is then spread out with their mouth and feet in thin beautiful layers to make their nests.

Some simple tools are needed for paper-making: in particular a blender (liquidiser) – but be careful not to over-load it because they can burn out, causing unpopularity as I have found several times! Sometimes jumble sale blenders still have a few hours of life left in them.

The other required tools are “deckles” – a rectangular frame with wire mesh or gauze stretched across. They can be purchased from art shops or you can make your own – stapling gauze or mesh (from car body repair shops) across a wood frame. Old photo frames or jumble sale picture frames are ideal. They can even be made using old stockings or tights instead of wire mesh, stretched over plastic frames with a knot tied at each end. Finally you will need pieces of fabric the same size as the deckles (Fleece works well), sponges that can be cut into usable sizes for children, and tables to work on.

To start the project a few days before the main event, tear up or shred scrap paper, and leave it to soak in water for a few days. With shredded paper from businesses or the school office, this is a great way for children to learn about paper recycling. If good quality white paper is used then the colours and natural dyes stand out most strongly.

Once the paper is well soaked, it can be mixed in the blender, each load usually about  $\frac{3}{4}$  filled with water. Blend to a smooth pulp, then strain the pulp and dump it in a plastic storage box that can be carried out to the field.

For a deckle of about 20cm by 30cm, put about four cups of pulp into a mixing bowl. Add water, and use hands or a whisk to distribute the pulp into the water, getting rid of lumps. Lower the deckle into the bowl, under the surface of the pulp, and gently move it from side to side until it is



evenly coated with pulp. Lift it out and let the water drain back into the bowl. Place the frame on the table, and at this point leaves, feathers, wool or seeds can be added to the paper. Lay out the natural treasures in a thoughtful design, thinking carefully about placement, as they will become part of the paper.

Natural paints can also be added to a separate bowl of pulp, and carefully added into the design using a turkey baster.

When the design is complete, a piece of synthetic fleece fabric (very cheap) the same size as the deckle is laid on top of the design, and with a strong hand against the fleece, flip it over. Using a sponge, press strongly against the mesh with a dabbing action to absorb the water out of the paper, and with a few minutes of dabbing and squeezing out the sponge, the paper will separate and drop away from the mesh. Finally, a piece of fabric or cardboard can be used to flip the design back over to reveal the finished piece.



of the leaves, tracing and rubbing the edges to give a really good outline. Lift up a corner and peel away the fabric, enjoying the sense of expectation as the design is revealed. The artists will be excited with anticipation and surprised by the results of their prints.

The second stage in the process creates a positive image of the leaves. Lift them out of the ink using a pin, fork or knife to loosen them from the ink. Place

them carefully, inky side down, on a clean piece of paper or fabric, without smudging the ink. Think about the design you want as you place them, as they cannot be moved. Lay another clean piece of paper (not fabric) on top, and now rub each one strongly so the details of the shape and texture of the leaves are transferred to the print. The top sheet allows the rubbing to take place without the leaves moving around or disintegrating. Finally remove each leaf carefully from the print to reveal the finished design. As a final touch students could write the name of each leaf species next to the image on the print using a pencil or a pin or sharpened stick, dipped in printing ink.

## Mono-printing on fabric with leaves and printing ink

A walk on a summer evening allows us to find a great variety of different species. With direction, children are able to focus their attention just on the leaves they find, looking at plants in a new way by questioning and describing the aesthetic qualities of the leaves. There is such a variety, including large, dramatic leaves, heart-shaped ones, long thin leaves and filigree fern fronds. Ask the children to look at the surface: are they prickly, hairy, with sticking out veins, or quite flat? Do the leaves have holes where caterpillars and other bugs have been chewing? All these qualities give leaves their character and affect images we will print from the leaves.

The most straightforward way to mono-print begins with rolling out printing ink on to a waterproof surface like a plastic table cloth or place mat. Let the artists be free with the roller, driving ink in different directions, and possibly blending two or three colours. The ink does not need to end up flat; the rolling marks are transferred on to the printed fabric, showing both marks and movement.

The first part of the process creates a negative image, with the leaf outlines showing clearly against a background of colour. Place the leaves directly into the rolled ink, textured side downward, taking care to lay the leaves out in a way that reflects the desired style of composition. Take time to look at the outlines of leaves against the ink, then lay a clean sheet of printing paper or cloth on top of the leaves. Use hands to rub gently and press the fabric into the ink. Feel for the edges

## Conclusion

These projects really make full use of long summer days, and make the most of time spent outside. Children can become engrossed in these projects, following their own experiments and creativity. The work can be left open-ended, and you can encourage students to endless experimentation and combination of the three techniques. As they interact with the natural world, they see the magic and gaze in wonder at the surprises, their spirits are lifted and their imagination and creativity take off. ■



### 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. Isobel lives with her family in Dentedale in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and she is a regular contributor to the IOL training calendar. E: IJConey@Gmail.Com

**Photographs:** all from the author