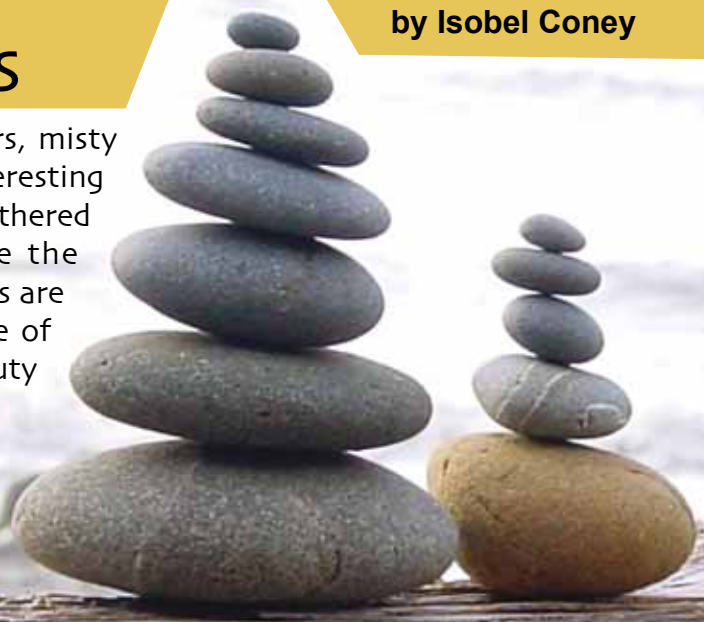


Autumn Arts

by Isobel Coney

Autumn is a time of changing colours, misty mornings, sparkling cobwebs and interesting smells. Harvest is over: fruits are gathered in, and harvest festivals complete the celebration of the growing year. Plants are dying back all around, giving a sense of sadness and departure, but there is beauty and richness of colour.



Leaf Rainbows

The first frosty night of September or October leaves a chill in the air the following morning, and we quickly see evidence as the most delicate of the leaves start to turn yellow or gold. Copper beeches shine golden red, and Japanese maples glow pink and gold.



"Winter is an etching, Spring a watercolour, Summer an oil painting and autumn a mosaic of them all"

Stanley Horowitz

An unexpected sharpness and coldness in the air wakes us up from our dream of summer and tells us to look around and take in the last moments of nature as it prepares to turn and bend under the weight of winter. As berries are collected and bushes and shrubs die back, the underlying bone structure of the landscape is revealed.

This is the time to go outside, and rejoice in the beauty of the rich autumnal colours. Run and kick through the leaves, taste, feel, and smell the presence of autumnal decay, and be creative with eagerness before it is all gone; as it changes and prepares to be reborn in the spring.

Children love to collect the coloured leaves, making collages and other designs that bring out the colours and emphasise the subtle differences in tones, shades and hues. One good challenge is to try to find enough leaves to show the colour progression from green to red, with all the shades in between.

Mixed and deciduous forests are the best places for this project, or managed woodlands that often have hazel, sweet chestnut, hawthorn and blackthorn in addition to the more common sycamore, horse chestnut and alder.

Send the children to collect leaves in empty boxes so they are not crushed, working individually or in small groups.

The leaves can be arranged on cardboard or a thin wood or bark backing that you might find in the woods. Natural glue such as thick mud can be used to hold everything together, or simply commercial glue to make things simpler.





example we give the children (and adults!) materials to make head dresses to turn themselves into forest-born warriors.

Headbands can be made from corrugated cardboard box sides. This is ideal because leaf stalks can be stuck into the corrugations. Staples are good for fixing pieces on, and string for anything they want to hang from their head dresses. The forest floor and reachable bushes provide a rich selection of materials: large sweeping ferns, clumps of berries, dry grasses, thin branches and all shapes and sizes of leaves.



Children can make the props to help them act out a story written in the classroom based on a forest theme; choreograph a forest dance, or hide in the woodland using their head dresses as camouflage. You can also make forest-dweller clothing, with leaves hung from a string necklace, ferns and sheets of bark. They can even weave grasses and sheets of bark together to make skirts or boot tops.

Native American and Canadian First Nation people used cedar bark to make all sorts of things from clothing to baskets and furniture: the bark is extremely strong and durable, yet flexible and even soft. These were some of the first people to create art from nature. They understood the complex interaction between the species living in the landscape, and knew how to respect and protect the land: to take only what you must and return to nature all that you can. They were the pioneers of environmental awareness.

Start by securing the darkest brown leaves, then working through the different shades of brown, red and gold to yellow and finally the greens. You can carry on through the range of colours from dark green to light green to yellow to orange then red and back to brown, making waves of rainbows.

You can also discuss the science of why the leaves are changing colour. As autumn comes the days are shorter and there is less light; the green light catching chlorophyll disappears from the leaves, and as it fades we see the underlying yellow and orange colours which are normally hidden by the strong green colour.

Leaf warrior *Head-dresses*

The lovely thing about the autumn is the temperature: not freezing cold but still warm enough to play and have adventures outside in the woods. A few materials can help create endless woodland entertainment, and here for





Leaf Rubbing

A leaf-rubbing or bark-rubbing project introduces a tactile element, emphasising the textures and underlying structure of the landscape that are revealed when the greenery dies back. This is a project for a little later in the autumn, when tree trunks and bark are more accessible in a forest or woodland fully in the throes of autumnal decay.



The children first go out and collect leaves, looking for many different kinds and sizes, but noting they should be relatively dry and strong, not wet and squishy. On a table, each person takes a large sheet of paper and places the first leaf under the paper. Wax crayons are used on their

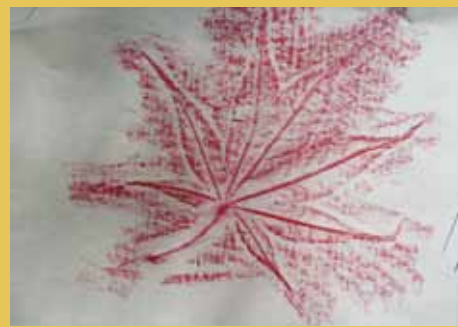
side with the paper covering removed, so that the full crayon length is used to rub over the leaf different and reveal its texture. Different colours can be used on top of one another to create interesting colour effects. A design can be built up using first one leaf then another, carefully positioned near each other so that the shapes, textures and colours interact. Children could also identify each leaf species, and write the name of the tree next to each leaf print.

Contrasting washes of colour can also be added using watercolour or inks over the wax crayon rubbings, which act as a wax resist. Yellow crayon rubbings work well with

dark washes of colour over the top, and dark crayon rubbings with pale washes of green or yellow

These designs can be turned into window hangings after they are dry.

Turn them over and brush with vegetable oil, then let them dry again. When you hang or stick them in a window the light will shine through showing the beautiful translucent colours of the leaf rubbings.



William Morris, the famous Victorian fabric designer used leaves as one of the core elements in his work. Pictures of his work are available on the internet (search for "image: william morris fabric") and are useful to show to students in this project. With this inspiration, leaf rubbings can be made directly on cloth using oil pastels, with dramatic results.

There are three further simple extensions to this project: first the natural pigments in the leaves can be extracted to make a print. Fleshy leaves are sandwiched between white card and waxed paper (baking parchment) and rubbed with a rock or piece of wood on a flat surface. The leaves are squished against the card, and colour is transferred to the card making a print.

A further extension is inspired by Max Ernst, the surrealist painter, who felt intimidated by a blank canvas so filled the canvas before painting with texture created using leaves, bark and wood. In this way he created a new kind of landscape painting, directly using resources from nature. For examples search on the internet for "image: max ernst frottage".

With paper and crayons, students can go out into the forest to collect rubbings using the forest as their



texture pallet, using leaves, different kinds of bark, or seeds. Cut pieces of wood provide opportunity for rubbings using wood grain internal to the tree. Once they have different kinds of rubbings they could be taken into a class room cut up in different ways and collaged together to create a picture washes of colour could also be added over the top. Landscapes and forests could be created strange new landscapes could be created.

Finally, there is no need to limit this project to leaves. Loose bark or pieces of wood can be used, or alternatively rubbings of live bark with rich but shallow texture can be made using thin cloth (muslin) wrapped and taped around a tree, then rubbed with crayons. Silver birch or fir are ideal.



Sculptures

A great way to start an outdoor experience is to send students off into the woods with a creative goal in mind, to start the flow of ideas and self-expression by building anything from simple sculptures to structures, using loose materials found in the woods or on the beach. This immediately shows diversity of ideas and of interpretation of instructions, draws attention to the range of materials that can be found in the forest, and encourages team work and respect for others' ideas.

The most creative ideas are often the simplest: combining ideas such as the shape of a stone, the colour of a leaf, or the shape and texture of a weathered, gnarly branch. Contrasting materials can be put together: an ivy frond wrapped around a stone: delicate and heavy in contrast with each other; order and confusion working together.

Inspiration can be given to the group if needed by introducing word ideas: arch, rock, cleft, bridge, floating, tiny, balance, wave, spirit, crescent, spiral. These can help give students a starting point: the match to light the fire, before they go off to be creative.



Conclusion

Autumn is a time to be creative. As the last rays of the sun shine on the rich changing colour, the world looks different. We capture this in a moment and it will help us get through the cold and dark winter.

Making something out of what we have found, we start to see the world in a different way and see the seasons as a natural cycle of events.

We follow the flow: the dying light of winter, the new twinkling light of spring, the long slow light of summer turning into autumn, and the fragrant changing mood and light as we dip again into winter. Our emotions are affected by the changing seasons and we can express our feelings through the projects discussed in this series of articles. Creating something beautiful from the natural world, the beauty of that moment in time is held in the art work. Some of the pieces can be taken home as a memory of that day, while others only last a day and we hold the memory in our heart. ■

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