



Portable Frescos

Family Art
Day Project



Fresco

What is it?

Fresco (meaning “fresh”) is painting done on lime plaster, traditionally on walls. Buon fresco (meaning “true” fresco) is most common, and involves painting directly onto freshly laid plaster using chemically stable earth pigments mixed with water. The pigments are absorbed by the plaster and become part of the wall when it sets.

Secco fresco (meaning “dry” fresco) is done on top of dry plaster. For this, the pigments need to be mixed with limewater or a binder like egg, glue, or oil. Because the pigments sit on the surface rather than inside it, secco fresco is much less durable than buon fresco. However, the two are often used in combination—to fix mistakes, cover seams, add detail, or add colors that used to be incompatible with the fresh lime plaster, such as blue.

Mezzo fresco (meaning “half” or “middle” fresco) involves painting on almost but not quite dry plaster, which has set up enough to no longer hold a thumbprint. The pigments in water penetrate into the surface, but only slightly.

Today's project is based on buon fresco, with watercolors and plaster for patching walls instead of earth pigments and lime putty.



People still make traditional frescos on walls. This picture is from a fresco company in Italy called Mariani Affreschi. italian-frescos.com/oversized-frescoes-paintings-and-pictures/



Bull-leaping Fresco, ca. 1600–1450 BCE. This Minoan fresco was created for a wall in the Palace of Knossos in Crete. Photo: Ministry of Culture and Sports via Wikimedia Commons

A brief history

Frescos were most prevalent in dry climates, as excess moisture damages them. Most were found in lands around the Aegean Sea, North Africa, and South Asia. The origins are unknown, but the earliest known secco fresco was found in Egypt in Hierakonpolis Tomb 100, ca. 3500–3200 BCE. The earliest buon frescos were made by the Minoan civilization ca. 1640–1600 BCE. Buon fresco reached its peak during the late Medieval period and Italian Renaissance. By the mid-16th century oil painting had largely taken its place.

Fresco experienced a revival during the Mexican Mural Movement of the 1920s and '30s, led by artists such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. Today's artists are innovating fresco.



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–1512. Part of a complex fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. Photo: Jörg Bittner Una via Wikimedia Commons



Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Murals*, 1933. Part of a 27-piece series inspired by the Ford Motor Company. Photo: ashleystreet via Wikimedia Commons

Artist Spotlight

N. Sean Glover

[Sean Glover](#) makes frescos that are off the wall, and has experimented with different surfaces on which to make them. In his leftovers series, one of which is shown here, he scrapes away parts of the fresco to expose the burlap and leave geometric shapes. Traditionally, when artists made



mistakes in fresco, they had to either work with the mistake or scrape it away. Sean uses this method of correcting mistakes to make his shapes.

Sean also adds fresco to sculptures. In the work shown below, he has glued together layers of rigid foam insulation and then shaped them. He painted bright pink fresco in the hollows inside.



Left: N. Sean Glover, *Disembodies #1*, 2011. Fresco on styrofoam, 6 x 13 x 5 inches. Above: N. Sean Glover, *Leftovers #1*, 2016. Fresco on burlap, 7 x 5 inches.

Artist Spotlight

Christopher Carroll

[Christopher Carroll](#) has developed a way to combine buon fresco and screenprinting.

In screenprinting, a fine fabric like silk is stretched across a frame. The artist covers the fabric with a thin layer of emulsion, blocking all the little holes in the weave. He then places a transparency with a black and clear

image on top and exposes the screen to light. The emulsion that gets the light

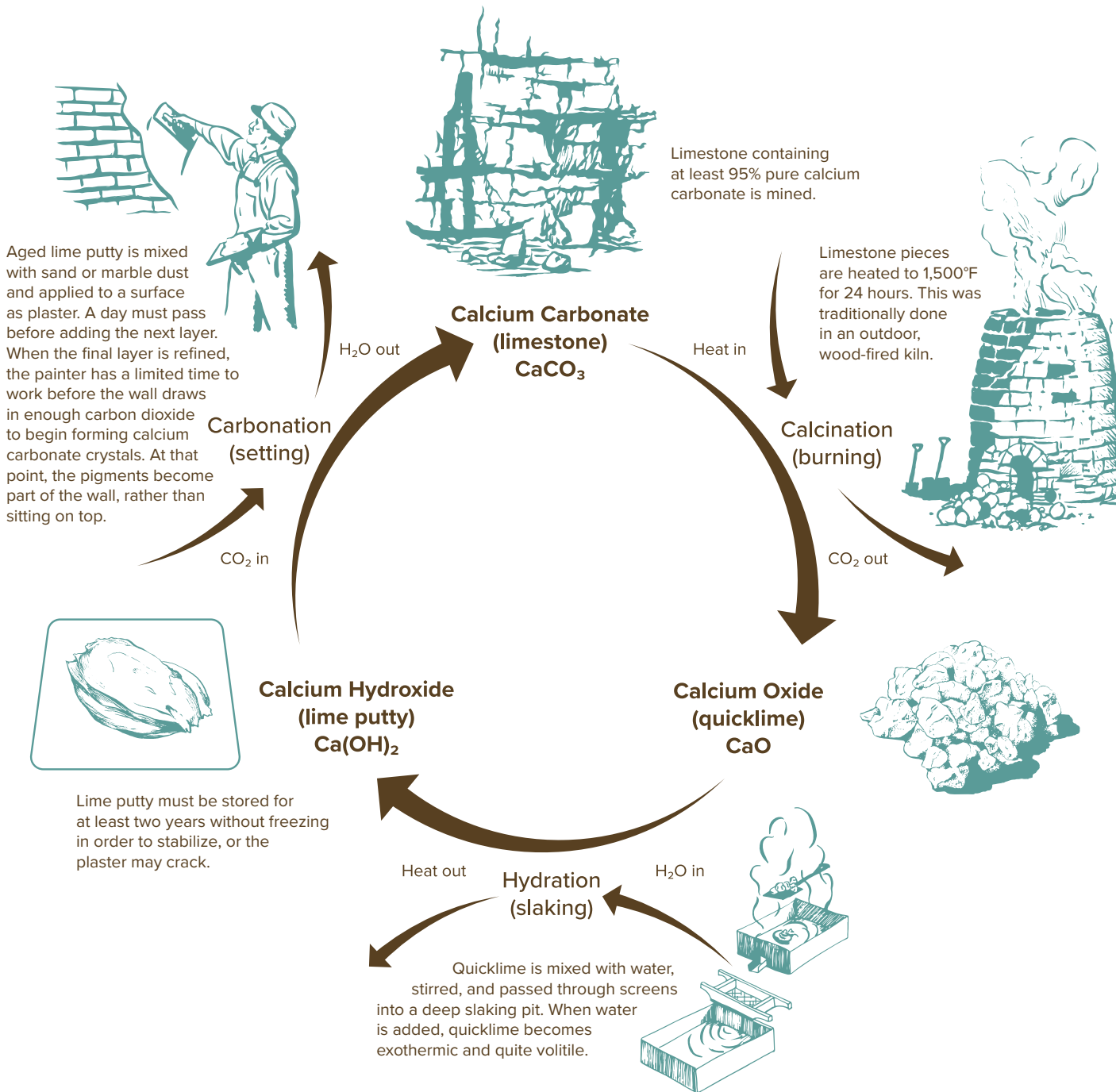
hardens, but the areas that are covered by the black can be washed away, opening up the little holes again. Finally, the artist scrapes ink over the screen, forcing it through the holes onto a surface like paper, a t-shirt, or, in this case, plaster.



Christopher makes his own ink by mixing the powdered pigments with water then grinding them smooth against a frosted glass surface. You can see his pigments, the ink, and prepared screens to the right. *Forest Door 1 (magenta anomaly)*, shown above, was made using four layers of color—yellow, magenta, cyan, and black.



The Fresco Cycle

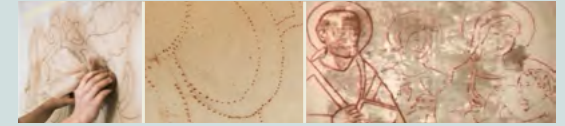


Process

Scratch coat A base layer of lime putty mixed with coarse river sand and occasionally other additives is troweled directly on a rough wall or over wood lathe or wire mesh. This coat is floated flat but rough and later scratched to give it more tooth.

Rough coat A layer of one part lime putty mixed with two parts medium-grained sand is added and leveled up flat but left rough.

Additional layers, each with progressively finer grains of sand and higher portions of lime putty, may be added before the brown coat. Each coat needs to set for at least 24 hours before applying the next. More layers yield a longer painting time and stronger calcification.



Float or Brown coat (Arriccio) The second-to-last layer is a mix of 5 parts lime putty to 8 parts fine sand. It is floated absolutely flat but not troweled smooth. In the 14th century, artists would sketch the major outlines of the image directly onto arriccio with a reddish-brown paint. The painting is called the sinopia. By the late 15th century, many artists instead used a full-size drawing on paper called a cartoon. The cartoon was pricked with a needle, held up against the arriccio, and "pounced" with a sack of carbon to transfer the drawing.

Skin coat (Intonaco) This final coat consists of two steps—base and skim. The base of 5 parts lime putty to 8 parts extra fine sand is laid, floated flat, and allowed to sit for about 20–30 minutes before adding a final, 1/8-inch thick skin of lime putty mixed with marble dust. It should be troweled to a very smooth surface, then pressed about 5–10 minutes later. 15–30 minutes after that, the wall is ready to paint.



The intonaco is not done all at once. Only as much area as can be painted in a day is plastered. The artist adds paint in thin layers, starting with a faint layer of shading that the wet plaster will pull in deep and advancing to more vibrant layers that will remain nearer the surface as the plaster dries. At a certain point, the artist must stop painting or risk damaging the plaster. Each day's work is called a giornata. The edges of the giornata are scraped at an angle with a putty knife so a smooth seam can be made with the next day's work. These seams are usually planned ahead and run along natural outlines in the image.

Let's get started . . .

Supplies

Inside the kit you'll find

- bag of plaster
- bamboo plate
- burlap and paper
- watercolors
- round & flat brushes
- plastic knife

You'll also need

- measuring cup
- cup of water
- scissors
- pencil



Beware

- Try not to breathe in the plaster dust. It's not good for your lungs.
- Do not surround your skin with wet plaster—it gets hot as it cures.
- Plaster residue will clog your drains. Wash hands and tools in a bucket, then drain the bucket outside.

Steps

First, decide whether you want to make a fresco that is full of color, like Christopher Carroll's, or partially scraped away, like Sean Glover's.



Without opening the bag, shake the plaster into a bottom corner.



Pour 3/4 cup of cold water into the other corner. Seal the bag with some air in it.



Normally, you slowly sift plaster into water so it absorbs the water evenly without clumping. However, we want to keep the plaster in the bag, not in the air.

Slowly tip and shake the plaster from one corner into the water in the other. Wait until each bit of dry plaster absorbs or sinks into the water before shaking in another bit.



Let the moistened plaster rest a few minutes as you trim the burlap so it fits nicely in the bottom of your plate.



Let most of the air out of the bag, then seal it again.

Massage the plaster through the bag, breaking up any dry clumps. Do this until it is evenly mixed.



Collect the plaster into a bottom corner by gently squeezing and pulling, like you would with a nearly empty tube of toothpaste.



Cut the corner off your bag.



Squeeze a small amount of plaster out onto the plate.



Cut the cover off your watercolors, remove the envelope, and fold the cover in half to make a paper putty knife.



Use the folded cover to spread the plaster across the bottom of your plate in a thin layer.



Press the burlap into the plaster until the plaster fills the holes in the fabric.



If you plan to scrape part of your fresco away like Sean, squeeze out enough plaster to make a layer just thick enough to completely cover the burlap. If you plan to fill the frame with fresco like Christopher, squeeze out all of your plaster for a thicker layer.



Smooth out this top layer as much as you can with the folded cover. Then, slightly lift and tap the plate on the table several times until the surface appears smooth and shiny. You may need to pop some air bubbles that rise to the top with your pencil.



Let the plaster rest for about 20 minutes so it can set up a bit. While you are waiting, draw a simple sketch on the paper.



When the 20 minutes are up, lay your sketch over the plaster. Trace your lines with a dull pencil or the back end of a paintbrush, pressing hard enough to make a dent in the plaster but not so hard that you tear the paper. Peel back the paper to reveal your indented lines.



It's time to paint! For the brightest colors, don't use too much water. Your brush should be damp but not dripping wet. Be gentle with your brush strokes—pressing too hard will pull up the plaster.



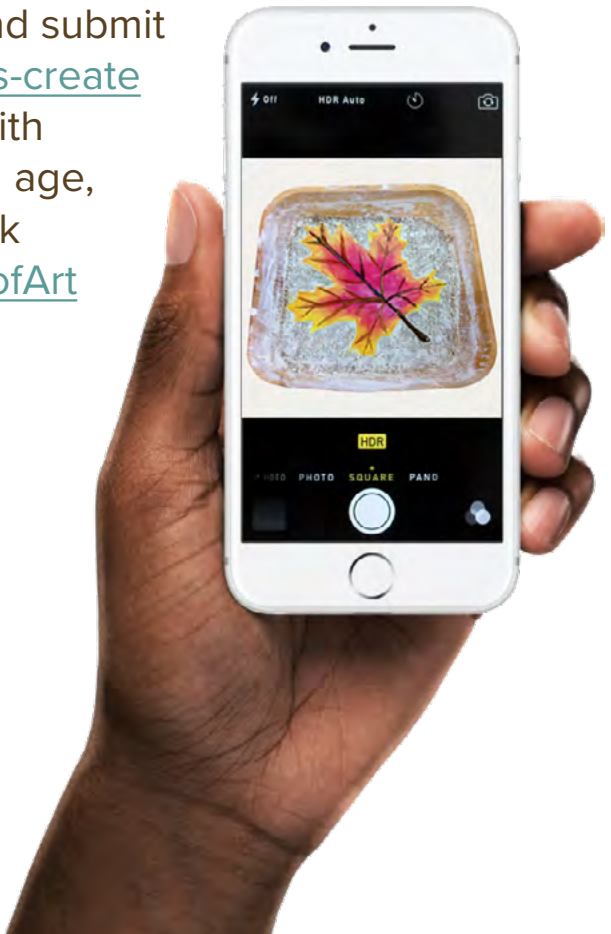
If you want to scrape away part of your fresco to reveal the burlap, use your knife to do so as soon as you finish painting.

In a couple of days when the plaster has completely cured, you can carefully remove it from the plate if you like. If you made the thin type with burlap showing, you'll want to glue it onto some cardboard that is slightly smaller than the burlap, so it doesn't show.

Share what you made!

This winter, PenArt is having an online exhibition of work inspired by Family Art Day projects! *Kids Create* will go live on PeninsulaSchoolofArt.org on March 1, 2021.

To be part of it, take a picture of your creation and submit it at bit.ly/enter-kids-create or share it, along with your first name and age, with us on facebook [@PeninsulaSchoolofArt](https://www.facebook.com/PeninsulaSchoolofArt)



www.PeninsulaSchoolofArt.org

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