



## Creative drawing outside

Drawing is a fundamental part of art and can be an important part of outdoor learning.

In the spring, if we draw outside it teaches us really to look in detail at what is happening. We see the tiny buds on the trees, and the new plants shooting, not only the way it looks, but the way spring feels different outside. The air is different, and there are new smells.



Drawing can be daunting for the student and teacher if you simply go out with white paper and a sharp pencil. There are ways to make it a much more rewarding, and for it to be a whole body experience.

Before you go out, spend some time preparing the tools for drawing. Collect materials from outside: sticks, feathers, moss, and dried grass. You can experiment with making tools. Let the students try different ideas with what they have found.

Next, students can prepare their canvases. There is nothing more intimidating than a big sheet of white paper, so stain sheets of paper with tea, or put pale washes of watercolour, or squash grass and stain the paper with colour.

Get rid of the white paper. Put the paper to dry, and put it on a clip board ready for a day of drawing.



## Spring Art

by Isobel Coney

From the beginning of January we feel the need to shake off the cold dark days and feel the warmth of spring sunshine twinkling through the trees. As the days get longer snow drops push through the hard ground and what was dead and dull turns lush and green.

In spring we find there is a meeting of the very old with the very new. We use old sticks from the last fruitful year to nurture and cherish the seeds and shoots growing in the New Year. Connecting the end of one year with the beginning of the new. We have so much to learn from the renewal and creativity of spring. There is urgency, a call to life, to light, to fruitfulness. We must be alert and respond to the first signs of spring.

This is a great time to go outside and make and draw something; a creative response to what we are seeing, feeling and smelling; to celebrate these new beginnings.



*"Drawing not only develops hand-eye coordination, it teaches one to really observe to see, as nothing else ever will."*  
Nancy Marulewicz

Lastly, be really adventurous - make paint from natural ingredients like mud, clay, or charcoal crushed up and mixed with water. The students will have their own original ideas.

With all these preparations, you can make clear connections with prehistoric painters and how they developed their techniques.

So before students even start drawing, they are fully involved with the whole preparation: have made their own tools, prepared their papers and made their paint. They have ownership of the project before it even starts.

We took our children walking on Hadrian's Wall on a crisp, sunny spring day. We sat down on the wall and I brought out the materials. There was no hesitation; only excitement to try a new technique. They used sharpened sticks and branches dipped in ink. They drew something directly in front of them: a piece of the wall, a tree on the hillside, using the sticks in different ways to create different techniques: fine lines and bold lines. This first technique leads them into thinking "what else around here could I use as a tool?" Bundles of dried grass were tied up and used as a brush, once they saw what kind of effect that created when dipped in ink. It was a perfect technique for painting hair, so faces were painted with the sticks, then the grass brushes were used for painting the hair. The



grass brush was next used to paint a nest, and then to create a horse's mane. Fingers dipped in ink added different effects. It was very rewarding to see this creative flow, one idea leading to another, reacting to a discovery and flowing through to a finished idea. All of this happened outside using only natural materials they were finding directly around where they were sitting. The children found joy in creating a completely new kind of line and exciting mark-making. It was a very exhilarating experience.



On another occasion, after a long walk with a group of families, we lit a fire and gathered around it. I had collected flat stones and long sticks and laid them out on the table. The children burned and blackened the ends of their sticks in the hot coals. When the sticks were black and smouldering, they took them out and drew on the stones: beautiful black simple strong lines. Some of the children worked with small sticks doing detailed work, and some worked with long sticks using bigger arm movements. There was a lot of excitement in the air as the children worked together drawing and burnishing their sticks. They then moved on to using the sticks to draw on paper. The hot sticks slightly burnt the paper giving it an interesting yellow tinge, along with the black line.

Next time we'll try using the same technique on fabric.



## Creative Felt Making

Sheep have an important relationship with the many places in our landscape. Their grazing helps create the way it looks. They are part of the spring. They feed off the new shoots and they produce some of the first new animal life – lambs: the ultimate sign of spring.

*"Our perception of sheep is so different to the reality of the sheep. We see sheep as woolly animals. To get through that woolliness to the essence of the sheep is very hard. But it is important to remember that sheep are incredibly powerful animals in their own way"*

- Andy Goldsworthy

To celebrate this powerful "Being" we can collect the light and flimsy wool and make strong, beautiful and robust felt. Felting is an ancient craft over 5000 years old. Felt can be soft enough to make slippers or hard enough to build a house. Yurts are made from felt in Mongolia; the lanolin in the wool keeps the house waterproof and the wool keeps it warm.

In the spring you can find lots of wool in the fields and clinging to fences. It is an excellent time to go on a treasure hunt, following the trail of wool hooked on barbed wire or prickly bushes.

I laid out before the students different kinds of wool: Swaledale, Jacob, Herdwick, and some dyed colourful wool. They were excited to see the different colours and types of wool and noticed how different the colours of wool could be that was just straight from the sheep with no processing! They were also interested to see what was caught up in the wool. Soil, leaves, sticks, seeds: stories of where the sheep had been on travels.

When you look at wool under a microscope it has tiny barbs on it so when it is rubbed and rolled with soap and hot water, these barbs or scales are lifted and snagged and get knotted up together creating felt. With continued rolling with strong hand pressure the felt becomes smoother and more condensed and compacted.

To contain the wool while making felt art wall hangings, wrap the work in a piece of old sheet of suitable size to wrap round both sides of the work and fit in your sink or bowl.

Gently pull 'drafts' of wool from the fleece, the fibres are about two to three inches long. Arrange the fibres all pointing in one direction on the top layer of the folded piece of sheeting. Fill up the whole area with a thin sheet of fibres make sure there are no gaps.





*"Felt is organic and humble and primal, yet ethereal and beautiful and sensuous. It is warm and soft and yielding, yet strong and hard and dense."*

- Hand felted jewellery and beads, by Carol Huber Cypher



When the whole area is covered, lay the fibres out in the opposite direction to the first layer. Continue like this for three to four layers changing the direction of the wool fibre each time. This mesh of wool fibres will make a strong fabric when felted and forms the under layer of the hanging.

roll it up tightly. Now roll it backwards and forwards applying pressure. Then unroll the mat and turn the felt around so a different edge is against the edge of the mat and roll it up again then roll it backwards and forwards applying pressure. Repeat this, changing the position of the felt each time, so you are felting by rolling it from all directions.

The final layer of the wool fibres will be the background colour of your design, with areas of coloured wool fibres creating the pattern or picture. To help the design stay in place during felting, sew it loosely with big stitches into the mesh of wool fibres.

There is something very magical about laying out wool fibres and creating a piece of cloth, then laying out colours to create a work of art.

When you have finished your design fold the under-layer of the cloth wrapper over your design and loosely stitch the sides together with long stitches. It will look like a small pillow. Put it in a sink or bowl; swirl over some washing-up liquid and cover with boiling hot water. Wear rubber gloves, and start squashing the fabric in the hot water. Work on both sides of the fabric in the pillow, making sure all the hot soapy water has really penetrated the wool. After working for ten minutes, gently squeeze the water out. Do not screw it into a ball as this would damage your design.

Lay the work in a mat for rolling. Something with texture like a rush beach mat or bubble wrap works best. Place the felt, still in its cotton wrap, on the edge of the mat and

When your felt is finished put it somewhere warm to dry.

Students are filled with a sense of wonder and excitement as they create and shape a piece of art work from wool. The piece of art changes and evolves through the different stages of felt making, going from layers of loose fibres to strong decorative fabric.

Spring is offering us a chance for positive creations and new beginnings. Lets us seize it and continue to learn more from the wild world outside! ■



#### 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