



PAINT A MEDIEVAL-STYLE PICTURE



ACTIVITY

The famous painted column from 1306 in St Mary of Charity church in Faversham is an example of the kind of painting that was once found in most churches. In the middle ages, paintings like these were an important way of telling stories to ordinary people. Find out more about medieval paintings and have a go at creating your own!



PAINTING ON CHURCH WALLS

Painting on church walls goes back hundreds of years, and probably began when the walls were covered in smooth plaster which made a good surface for painting.

Many paintings were created in the centuries after the Norman Conquest in 1066, though a large number of them were destroyed during the English Reformation in the mid-1500s (see *information sheet*). Some, like the column in St Mary of Charity church in Faversham, have survived.

The artists who painted these pictures were anonymous - the important thing was the subject, not the artist's name. They painted straight on to the plaster, drawing some outlines first to help.

Most of the pictures showed scenes from the Bible and Christian history, including stories from the life of Jesus and morality tales about good and bad.

Most people who came to church could not read, so these paintings were ways of telling them the important events from the Bible and showing them the right Christian beliefs and behaviour.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

A medieval artist would have been trying to show his subject clearly and get a message across, rather than trying to make the picture look realistic. To us, the paintings may look flat or unreal, because they do not show distance or depth (perspective). Trying to create a sense of perspective was a method that artists developed in the 15th and 16th centuries. The style of painting in English churches is sometimes called gothic.

Artists used simple materials to make paints. The reason why there is a lot of red and yellow in their paintings is because they could make paints in those colours, from earth. They mostly used these with black and white. Blue was rare because it was usually made from lapis lazuli (a semi-precious stone) and very expensive. Green was sometimes made from a copper salt and red from vermilion (a mineral), although this was unstable which meant that it did not last very well.



Figure of a pilgrim, part of a scheme of wall paintings in St Mary of Charity from around 1340. The paintings are hidden by the organ so cannot be seen.

CREATE YOUR OWN MEDIEVAL-STYLE PAINTING

Make a plaster base using the instructions below, then choose one of the subjects to paint - or invent one of your own, if you prefer.

Try to paint it using the colours and style of a medieval artist.

When you have finished, use a clear varnish to protect your painting - perhaps it will last hundreds of years, like the paintings in the churches!

YOU WILL NEED:

Plaster of Paris
A paper plate
A plastic container for mixing
A piece of wire 8-10 cm long
Poster paints in red, yellow, black, white, green and blue
Paintbrushes of different thicknesses
Water
Clear varnish for paintings



PREPARING THE PLASTER OF PARIS

Put the plaster of Paris into your mixing container and add water until it has a smooth texture, not too stiff and not too runny. You should need about one cup of water for every two cups of powder, but add the second one a little at a time and stop when it is ready. It should be a bit like cold custard!

Now add to the mix a very small drop of paint to make your surface look older. You can use brown, yellow, orange or red - but make sure you only use a tiny bit. The mix should have a pale colour to it, not too dark, or you won't be able to see your painting. Give it a good stir to get rid of any air bubbles.

Now make sure your paper plate is on a firm, flat surface, then carefully pour the plaster of Paris on to the plate. Twist the piece of wire into a loop, leaving 2 cm at the end, then push it into the plaster at the edge, so you will be able to hang it up.

Allow 15-20 minutes for the plaster of Paris to dry completely. Then place your hand over the surface and turn the plate over slowly to remove it. You can turn it back over and press down the edges of the plate if it does not come out easily. Place it gently on a flat surface.

Now your plaster is ready to paint.