Learn the ancient Italian art of buon (true) fresco, a way of applying watercolor to wet plaster.

BY CONSTANCE MCCLURE

Buongiorno Buon Fresco!

Whether for the dining rooms of Pompeii and Herculanum or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, fresco required a time-sensitive process of first applying plaster to a surface, drawing a cartoon of the still life elements or figures on the intonaco (the actual painting surface) and then painting with wet pigment. “Buon fresco” means that the plaster was still wet; “secco” means the artist applied paint to the surface once it had dried.

The first frescoes date from 1500 B.C. in Crete and Egypt. The apotheosis of fresco occurred during the Italian Renaissance. Just a few examples are Giotto’s Saint Francis cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua; in Florence, Fra Angelico’s Annunciation and single panels for the monastery of San Marco and Masaccio’s Brancacci Chapel murals at Santa Maria Novelli, and finally Raphael’s School of Athens in Rome. Flash forward to the 20th century for the Works Progress Administration (WPA)’s public art and Diego Rivera’s Detroit Industry frescos at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

To learn the art of fresco, one can’t try things on her own or access directions from a book. Learning fresco painting demands that the novice work with an experienced fresco painter. A particular challenge is time. The artist has to start painting after an initial layer of plaster has set (thirty minutes after the plaster is applied) and finish painting a little more than three or four hours (depending on the weather) before that layer has thoroughly dried. One day’s work is called giornata.

I have long loved fresco—working with it often in my own practice. I also have taught classes in the ancient process for the Art Academy of Cincinnati. Last summer I worked with an apprentice, Katelyn Wolary, who was eager to learn this storied process, and herein lies our story.

A Step-by-Step Process

Although creating buon fresco is complicated, the process can be organized clearly into divisions: what materials you will need; what you have to do to make plaster and create the surface; how you make preliminary drawings and transfer them to the plaster; and finally, how you apply the paint. Before you embark on a large work, it’s important to work in manageable ways. I recommend preparing a test panel or sample wall first and indeed, you should paint several small frescoes before you tackle a larger work.
Grinding the Dry Pigments

1. Assembling the mortar and pestle and dry pigment
2. Wolary grinding the pigment
3. Adding water to the pigment
4. A. Using the pestle; B. Pouring the wet pigment into a baby-food jar
5. Examining the ground color that has settled in the jar; excess water will be poured off, leaving some water so that the paste remains wet

The Science

Alkaline-resistant pigments ground in water are applied to plaster, a mixture of sand and lime putty; no binder is required because the paint is absorbed by and becomes one with the plaster.

The plaster dries in reaction to air; a chemical reaction fixes the pigment particles in the plaster.
Preparation of the Cartoon to Transfer the Shapes on the Intonaco

1. We lay down a line drawing on plastic-coated paper and then prick the outline with a stylus. We could also use a needle or anything sharp to make dots.

2. Here is the reverse side of the cartoon; the shiny area shows the outline created by the dots. Pouncing, which we’ll do in the next step, is a technique to transfer a drawing to another surface. We will be placing the cartoon on the surface and then lightly pouncing the charcoal dust or pastel powder through the holes. We can apply the charcoal dust easily if it’s confined to a small cheesecloth bag.

Preparation of the Panel for Painting

1. We wet the first (browncoat) surface, then lay the intonaco plaster surface so that it is about ⅛-inch thick.

2. A trowel allows for even distribution of lime over the total surface—the lime will hold the color.

3. We let the panel dry for 15 minutes and test it by tapping a finger lightly on the surface to see if it has “set” enough.

4. Transfering the cartoon by laying the pricked-plastic paper on the plaster, we carefully pounce with the charcoal bag.

5. We lay a thin coat of a neutral, cool color—green earth—over the total surface, which helps the entire surface dry evenly.

6. Here we’re painting broad areas of local color, moving around the panel. Since the mortar is slowly drying, the setting time of all the painted colors grows shorter.

7. After about three hours, we can paint continuously.

8. Here is the finished panel a day later, thoroughly dried; at this point, we check the colors to see if they’ve set well.
After the Test Panel: Preparing for a Two-Section Panel

1. The first section, the giornata, is trowelled onto the panel past the area of today’s painting. When the day’s work is finished, the excess plaster will be cut away.

2. Using both charcoal pouncing and a dull pencil transfers the cartoon—the pencil leaves a slight indentation on the wet plaster.

3. Applying light earth green over the entire area will ensure that the surface dries evenly.

4. Wolary paints the sky area.

5 and 6. Painting the head and jacket (We only have a five hour window before the plaster gets too dry to hold the color.)

7. When the day’s work is done, with a painting knife, Wolary very carefully cuts away the excess plaster.

8. This is how the first giornata looks the next day. We check whether the color has set by touching the surface with our fingers. If any color rubs off, we know that we’ve spent too much time painting; the surface must have been too dry to hold the color. Luckily, this is not the case; no color rubs off.
Painting the Second Section of a Two-Section Panel

1. The edges of what will become the second giornata layer, troweled with a painting knife so as not to disturb the first day's giornata.
2. The second giornata layer applied with a pointed trowel.
3. Painting proceeds in the same way documented for section one: earth green underlayer before final colors.
4. After five hours, Katelyn Wolary's Portrait of Brad Davis (buon fresco, 20x14) is finished.

Meet Constance McClure

"The history of materials is fascinating," says Constance McClure. "For me, reading about pigments is recreation." McClure paints in egg tempera, oil, encaustic, watercolor and fresco, and her drawings can be in gold, silver- or copperpoint as well as in charcoal and pencil. McClure studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and the Fresco Workshop, Castle Hill, in Truro, Massachusetts. She taught at the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Fla., and teaches now at the Art Academy of Cincinnati. Her paintings are in the permanent collections of the Cincinnati Art Museum and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Behind her is Figures/Drapery, eight canvases of different shapes that fit together (oil on linen, 90x174).

Photo courtesy of Hanay Custom Framing & Gallery