

Bas Relief Plaster Tiles



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Combine clay, carving, and plaster to create a dimensional tile.

Bas relief refers to a kind of low-level relief sculpture where the objects seem to project from the background. The name comes from the French word *bas*, meaning “low,” and *relief*, meaning “raised work.” This kind of sculpture is generally created by carving out the negative space of a material such as stone or wood. No part of the modeled form is created by undercutting; it’s only by removing the negative space around the form that the form is revealed. The final visual result looks like something between a painting and sculpture, as they are often not too thick and follow the same visual and pictorial rules used in painting and drawing.

Generally, when one thinks of bas relief, ancient Greek and Roman reliefs incorporated into architecture come to mind. But this isn’t the only application of the art form! They can be featured in both modern and historical painting or full wall murals. The pieces can be painted or left unfinished to show their original material. Textured wallpaper is an excellent example of modern bas relief use in the decorative arts. Bas relief pieces can stand on their own as distinct art pieces to frame on a wall—much like a painting would be displayed. They can be descriptive of scenes from life or abstracted completely.

In this lesson, students will carve an image into Van Aken Plastilina Modeling Clay using sculpture and printmaking tools. The clay will not harden and can be used multiple times over if kept clean of dust and debris. The final clay piece is then taped around the edges to create side walls of a mold into which plaster is poured. Once the plaster is set, simply remove the tape, and pop out the plaster tile. The clay mold can then be used to create another piece. The plaster tile can be left white or painted with watercolors to really highlight the relief effect.

Note: Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.



Materials (required)

[Van Aken Plastilina Modeling Clay](#), Ivory, 4.5lb, (33268-1095); share one between four students

[Kemper Wire Clay Cutter](#), (30327-1018); share one between four students

[Fox Run Wooden Rolling Pin](#), 6", (30345-1006); share one between four students

[Kemper Fettling Knife](#), Soft, (30349-1010); share one between four students

[Masonite Craft Bases](#), 6" x 6", Pkg of 12 (61004-1009); need one base per student

[Blick Pottery Plaster No. 1](#), 8lb, (33536-1008); share one bag across class

[Creativity Street Craft Sticks](#), Natural, Pkg of 150, (60401-1500); need

one stick per student

[Blick Masking Tape](#), Natural, 2" x 60 yds, (24149-1002); share one roll between six students

[Sargent Art Supreme Series Watercolor Cakes](#), Set of 36, (01666-1369); share one set between four students

Suggested Tools for Carving:

[Kemper Wipe Out Tool](#), (30312-1062); share one between two students

[Richeson Student Clay Modeling Tools](#), Canister of 35, (30387-1035); share one canister across class

[Kemper Ribbon Tools](#), 6", Set of 5, (30372-1006); share one set between four students

[Blick Lino Cutter Set](#), (40216-1001); share one set between two students.

Ready to order materials?

Go to www.DickBlick.com/lesson-plan/bas-relief-plaster-tiles to access a product bundle for your convenience.

Preparation

1. Use the Kemper wire clay cutter to divide the Van Aken Plastilina Modeling Clay into four equal parts. Each student will need one piece of clay.

Process

1. Place the clay piece onto a 6" Masonite Craft Base.
2. Use the rolling pin to flatten the piece into a slab approximately 1" thick and 6" x 6" wide. Use a soft Fettling Knife to cut away any excess and to square off the slab.
3. Rough in the design with a stylus or pencil. Using a pencil will not leave a graphite line in the clay, but it will lightly etch it.
4. A variety of tools can be used to carve the design into clay. Ribbon tools are good for removing large amounts of material, while the Blick Lino Cutter is good for creating fine lines. The Kemper Wipe Out tool is perfect for smoothing out edges of the design. Keep in mind this is a reverse process: any mark carved into the clay will protrude out when cast in plaster. Additionally, Chavant Roma Plastilina Modeling Clay will not harden or dry, so the design can be worked over an extended period if needed.
5. When the design is finished, run a length of 2" masking tape around the perimeter of the clay tile. This will create a 1" high wall around the clay piece. Press the tape firmly into the clay, making sure there is good adhesion and no gaps. If there are gaps, the plaster could run out the side. Add another layer of tape for added strength.
6. To mix Blick Pottery Plaster #1, use a ratio of 60% plaster to 40% water. Carefully spoon the plaster into a cup, being careful not to inhale the dust. It's a good idea to wear a facemask when mixing plaster to ensure the dust isn't inhaled. Slowly pour water into the cup. Mix with a craft stick for approximately 3 to 5 minutes.
7. When the plaster mixture is free of lumps and is the consistency of heavy cream, it is ready to be poured into the mold. Pour slowly, filling the mold to just under the top of the masking tape barrier.
8. The plaster will set in approximately 15 minutes, depending on climate, but can be left in the mold for up to one week.
9. Once the plaster is set, remove the masking tape from the sides of the mold. Carefully pop the plaster tile out from the mold by gently pulling both sides until the plaster piece is free.



Step 1: Roll out clay onto the Masonite board.



Step 2: Use tools to carve design.



Step 3: Pour plaster into the mold.

10. The clay tile can be used again to cast the same design, or reworked to make new designs.
11. Finished tiles can be colored using watercolor. Colors should be mixed on a pallet, as they will not mix well on the plaster. Watercolors on plaster dry to a matte finish, much like gouache paints.

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National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Responding

Anchor Standard 8: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to make art.

