

## Creating Your Own Pastepaper

First used roughly 450 years ago, the technique of using pigmented starch paste to create designs on paper remains one of the simplest and most versatile decorative methods. Developed by bookbinders as an easy and inexpensive way to create covers and endsheets, pastepapers are each unique, but simple to produce in volume. Pastepapers are great for use in bookbinding, and they can also be used for greeting cards, wrapping paper, decorative boxes, collages, kites . . . anywhere you want bright, vibrant designs!

### Things You'll Need

*Paper:* The best papers to work with are those that retain their strength when wet, and that do not curl or cockle excessively. Some papers that work well include heavier text-weight papers from Rives, Arches, or Mohawk, as well as colored papers such as Canson Mi-Teintes. The color of the paper you use may or may not show through, depending on the tint of your paste and the design that you make.

*Brushes:* The most important thing about your brush is that it should be big enough to spread the paste over a large area of paper quickly, so that the paste is still workable once it's all down. Two- or three-inch house painting brushes work well. Different bristle types and brush shapes will make slightly different patterns.

*Paste:* On the back of this sheet are instructions for making paste at home; wallpaper paste also works well. A batch of starch paste can be covered tightly and kept in a refrigerator for up to a week, or covered with a layer of water and kept without refrigeration for several days. Methyl cellulose paste will last several months if tightly covered and refrigerated.

*Pigments:* The most common method of coloring paste is to use acrylic paints, which can be easily mixed to create any color. Inexpensive acrylics can be purchased from suppliers such as Dick Blick or Pearl Paint. Other possibilities include gouache or watercolor paints - or almost any other source of color.

*Mixing Containers:* Since you'll want to experiment with different colors, it's good to have plenty of containers on hand. Yogurt containers, TV dinner plates, and plastic cups all work well. If you want to clean and reuse them, water will help dissolve any dried paste, and rubbing alcohol will loosen old acrylics.

*Design Tools:* One of the most enjoyable aspects of making pastepaper is finding ways to create designs in the paste. Anything that can move paste can be used (including just the brush you used to spread the paste). Some good starting points include:

- Notch-edge adhesive spreaders, available at most hardware stores
- Plastic combs or plastic utensils
- Coins, washers, or other flat objects
- Rubber erasers, into which stampable designs can be carved
- Crumpled-up plastic wrap
- Sponges

*Work Area:* You'll need a smooth, flat, easy to clean surface to work on. A Plexiglas sheet, available at most hardware stores, is an inexpensive way to protect your table.

*Drying Area:* The easiest thing to forget about pastepapers is that they need time and space to dry. Wet pastepapers can be laid flat to dry, or hung over a clothesline or other cord strung indoors. Acrylic paints will stain, so protect your furniture and floors with newspaper.

# Making Your Pastepaper

Once you've gathered your supplies and made your paste, you're ready to go. First, you'll want to get your colored paste ready. If you're using a yogurt cup, fill it a little more than half full with paste. (You can use one type of paste, mix multiple types, or add water or acrylic medium to change the paste's texture.) Add your pigment; a good ratio to start with is about two teaspoons of acrylic for each half cup of paste. Less paint gives the color a transparent effect, while more paint gives deeper, richer tones. Mix the pigment and paste well, and adjust the thickness of the paste if needed - after you've made a few sheets, you'll have a sense for the pigmentation and thickness that work best for you.

Next, run a damp sponge over the paper, working from the center outward. The paper will initially curl, but as you continue to wet it, it will "relax" and flatten. The paper should be wet, but not soaking. Smooth out any stray bubbles (gently lift and re-lay the paper if needed).

Now . . . paste away! The paste should be applied quickly, and the layer of paste should be thick enough to stay workable, but not so thick that it becomes brittle as it dries. Unless you're stippling, apply the paste in long, continuous strokes, always working in the same direction. Experiment with some of the techniques listed to the right, try using multiple colors, and if you're feeling adventurous, remember that you can make a sheet of pastepaper and then paste *again* over the first design after it dries - the first design will show through the gaps in the second. There are no mistakes when you make pastepaper, so be bold!

Lay your completed papers out over newspaper, or hang them over a line, and let them dry overnight. If they curl excessively, iron them with low heat on the unpasted side. Rubbing a crumpled sheet of waxed paper over your pastepaper will give it a light protective coating.

## Two Paste Recipes to Get You Started

### *Super-Simple Starch Paste*

Use 1 part starch to about 5 parts water. Wheat flour or cornstarch work well. Thoroughly mix 1 part starch with 1 part water; bring the remaining water to a boil. Once it boils, remove it from the heat and add the starch slurry while stirring. Keep stirring vigorously for at least 60 seconds. Cover and let cool. If you store the paste overnight, strain it through cheesecloth before using it again. A dash of glycerine can be added during cooking to help the paste stay flexible as it dries.

### *Methyl Cellulose*

Methyl cellulose makes a thinner paste that usually dries slightly shinier than starch pastes. Methyl cellulose is sometimes sold at art supply stores; some brands of wallpaper paste are also made from methyl cellulose. Follow the directions on the package, or mix 1 part methyl cellulose powder into 16 parts room temperature water (e.g. 1/4 cup mc in 1 quart water). Mix with a whisk until it thickens; let it stand for 30 minutes and then mix it again gently. If possible, let sit overnight.

## Try These Pastepaper Techniques!

**Stippling:** When applying the paste, touch the paper with the bottom of the brush's bristles, holding the brush perpendicular to the paper and gently pushing. Lift the brush almost immediately and repeat. A sponge also works well. Stippling creates a random, spotted pattern.

**Pulling:** Apply paste to two different sheets. The paste can be the same color, or different colors can be used for a more complex design. Place the sheets together, making a paste "sandwich"; gently rub the top sheet, and then slowly pull the sheets apart. The result is a veiny, fractal pattern. *Variation:* Place string, coins, or any other flat object between the sheets; these will leave lighter impressions once they're removed.

**Combing:** After pasting out the paper, drag a wide comb, plastic fork, adhesive spreader, or similar tool across the sheet, revealing the color of the paper. Combing in different directions gives a three-dimensional effect.

**Printing:** A design cut into a material in relief (so that it sticks out) or intaglio (so that it's indented) can be pressed against the paste like a stamp. Experiment with sponges, rubber erasers, potatoes - some materials make sharper impressions than others, but all are unique. A brayer with felt or rubber shapes glued to it can be rolled across the paper for an elegant repeating pattern.

**Finger Painting:** That kindergarten skill finally comes in handy! One traditional technique is to use one of the methods above, and then rotate a thumb or finger into the paste ("squashing a bug") to make a whorl.