

Seal Painting



VIRGINIA
AQUARIUM
& MARINE SCIENCE CENTER

Explore harbor seal movement and ways to enrich their lives in human care.

Duration

Preparation: 15 minutes

Activity: 15 minutes

Supplies

- Cardstock or canvas
- Washable non-toxic paint in various colors
- Paint trays, pallets, or paper plates
- Paint brushes
- Tablecloth or drop cloth

Background

Harbor seals receive daily training sessions with our animal care experts at the Virginia Aquarium to keep them healthy. During a session, trainers may ask for behaviors such as following a target to a new location, opening their mouths, and allowing trainers to touch their flippers. All these behaviors are important for the seals to get proper care. Enrichment is another way we can keep harbor seals healthy which might include a new item for their exhibit to investigate, different food options, and even painting a picture. Trainers work with our seals to learn how to hold a paint brush in their mouth and create their own unique artwork. Painting with a brush gives them an opportunity to learn new behaviors which keeps their mind and body active. Let your students have the chance to paint like a seal and see if they can make their own unique artwork.

Pre-activity: View a [Facebook Live Video](#) recorded at the Virginia Aquarium that gives an excellent lesson on harbor seals during a training session.

Instructions

1. Prep your painting area. Lay down of tablecloth or drop cloth to help keep paint off other surfaces with your paper or canvas. This will be easiest to complete on the floor but can be done standing over a table. Select your desired paint colors and prepare them on your paint trays. It is best to limit to 2 or 3 colors that go well together, but the choice is yours!
2. Instruct students to put the end of the paintbrush in their mouth, select their paint, and begin painting on the paper. Ask the students to only use their specific brush and not to share brushes with others. Recommended to have students practice without paint first to understand how to move their heads to create a brush stroke.
3. Encourage the students to hold their hand behind their backs while painting and try to paint a specific animal or shape.
4. Allow students to change to using their hands and discuss the differences.

5. Ask follow-up questions like: “Why is this a good activity (enrichment) for harbor seals?”
“Is it fun to try to complete a task using a different part of your body?”
“What other tasks or activities could you try to do differently?”
6. Help students write their names on their pieces and then set them aside to dry.

Vocabulary

Enrichment: allows animals to demonstrate their species-typical behavior, gives them opportunity to exercise control or choice over their environment, and enhances their well-being.

Extension

Here is a [video](#) of a seal feeding time at the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center that was recorded live on Facebook. You can watch our keepers working with the seals on target training too.