



There is nothing more difficult for a truly creative painter than to paint a rose, because before he can do so he has to first forget all the roses that were ever painted.

—Henri Matisse (1869–1954)

Painting with Overglazes

Many artists come to china painting with extensive experience in other art forms, particularly oil and watercolor painting. A few come from a ceramic background, seeking a more painterly approach.

Overglazing is a special art form in several ways, and occupies a distinctive niche in the continuum from painting to glazing. Painters will enjoy the depth, luminosity, and permanence of china painting. Potters will delight in a medium that is more like painting than any other ceramic technique, and offers a full range of colors. Both groups will appreciate the fact that the raw colors are almost identical to the fired colors.

What makes china painting truly unique is its application onto a glossy surface. This creates special challenges, but also special possibilities. The material is a powder suspended in a medium, and as such, is adaptable to any of the techniques used with any form of paint or ink. It may even be used dry, like metal enamels.

As in all art forms, there is no right or wrong way to use china paint. There are only those methods that work for you.

What to Paint On

Any fired ceramic object may be decorated with china paint. Whether it's high- or low-fired, glazed or unglazed, you can china paint it somehow. Whether it's handbuilt, thrown, slip-cast, or pressed, you can china paint it. Porcelain, stoneware, earthenware, terra cotta—you can china paint them all. Pots, sculpture, tiles, sinks, toilets—you can china paint them all. If you could



Kevin Myers, "Totem," raku, thrown and altered with china paint and lusters, 38" high, 1997.

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fit a porcelain bathtub into your kiln, you could china paint it. Many artists use china paints, lusters, and other overglaze techniques to embellish their high-fired work. Refiring will not destroy body or glaze reduction effects, but it will destroy post-firing smoked effects, such as the blackened body in raku.

You may, however, need to make some adjustments in fluxes and firing temperatures to get china paint to successfully bond to your work. If you want a smooth, glossy, consistent finish, you will need to work on a glossy glaze. The higher the underlying glaze was fired, the hotter the china paint firing must be to fuse with it. Keep in mind that any flaws in the glaze, such as crazing, will show in the overglaze.



Kevin Myers, "Totem," detail. Myers resmokes his pieces after each china paint and luster firing to preserve the glaze's crackle pattern.



Gregory Aliberti, Westlake Transit Center, Cleveland, Ohio, north view. Silk-screened and relief tile, 1999.



Gregory Aliberti, Westlake Transit Center, detail.



Celina Clavijo Kashu (Japan), "Dragonfly," Kakehashi River Promenade Tiles, porcelain, 2004.



Paul Lewing, "Hummingbird Sink," china paint on porcelain sink, 16" x 12", 2004.



Paul Lewing, "Shipwreck," china paint on ceramic tile, 39' x 10', 2003. *Photo: John Gussman.*



John Baymore, "Yunomi," stoneware wood-fired to cone 11 with Shino glaze, gold chloride red and copper green lead-free overglaze enamel, electric fired to cone 017 with 4 hour soak, 3" high, 2005.

You may even fire china paint onto used ware from secondhand stores, although if it's been in heavy use, it may develop black spots under the glaze after firing, which china painters refer to as "mildew." Some or all of this problem can be eliminated by boiling the china for half an hour in water to which baking soda has been added. Used china may also break in firing, the glazes might bubble, and your results from used china may not translate well to other ware.

Traditionally, china painters have not made the objects they decorate. It began as a manufacturing medium, and the division of labor inherent in factory work persists. Ever since china painting became a popular recreation in the late 19th century, china painters have relied on their favorite china manufacturers.

Old books on the subject give advice like "the French china is always preferable to that from



Charles Krafft, "Andrea Doria," overglaze on scorched china, 1993. Photo: Dan Walter.



Garth Johnson, "Sale Ordeal (Light)," collector's plates altered and china painted, 42½" x 34," 1999.

England." Unfortunately, it is impossible to know which factories, clay bodies, glazes, or manufacturing processes they meant by statements such as that. Gladys Burbank Nelson, writing in her *Anthology of a Porcelain Artist*, ranks all the types of china familiar to her, from the hardest to the softest, as:

- Japanese and Chinese China
- German China
- French and Danish China
- English China
- Some Stoneware
- American Porcelain
- Other Stoneware
- Beleek
- Pottery
- Satsuma

This is hardly specific information, and ignores the fact that there were many manufacturers in most of those countries. Even today, there is no general agreement on what constitutes "porcelain," or even "ceramic."

Transferring Designs

Very few china painters begin a painting without some preliminary sketch on the glazed piece. Some draw directly onto the work and proceed from there, while others like to make a very detailed study on paper, and transfer the design exactly to the glazed surface.

Those who draw directly on the piece will usually make their choice of instrument based on what their painting medium will be. Your sketch should not dissolve into your painting, although

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this is usually more distracting than harmful. The sketch marks also should not resist the painting medium, and should disappear in firing.

The traditional treatment for oil-based mediums is a light sketch with a china marker, followed by a more detailed drawing done with India ink and a brush. After the ink has dried, the marker may be washed off with turpentine, leaving the ink to be covered with paint and later disappear in firing. Some wax china markers may resist both oil- and water-based mediums, and may not disappear in firing, although they will usually wipe off even after firing.

Felt-tip markers are based on a wide variety of solvents, such as alcohol, ketone, xylene, and glycol ethers. They may dissolve into a like medium, and may not always fire out, so you should test fire before using them on an important piece. Their tendency to resist a medium unlike themselves may be annoying when they're used to sketch, but can be used to advantage as a painting tool.

Ordinary graphite pencils are usually too hard to make a distinct mark on a smooth glaze, but softer varieties work well. If you wipe the surface of the glaze with a cloth dipped in turpentine and allow it to dry, a residue will be left that is hard enough to mark easily with an ordinary pencil. China paint suppliers sell a variety of pencils and markers specifically for this purpose. They are almost all designed to work best with oil-based mediums.

To transfer a design exactly to your piece, draw it on paper first. You may cut around it to help position it on the work. Sometimes just tracing around this shape is a sufficient guide. If you prefer a more detailed transfer, you may tape your drawing in place, then slip a sheet of graphite paper under it. Carbon paper or graphite paper with a waxy surface will not transfer designs as well as paper coated with pure powdered graphite. Tracing over your drawn lines with a pencil or other pointed object (a dried-out ballpoint pen



Graphite paper is taped in place between the original drawing and the tile.



The drawing transferred onto the tile.



The finished tile, a reproduction of a high school artist's work, on left.



point works very well) will reproduce them on the glaze in a light gray. You may also choose to cover the back of your drawing with graphite using a soft pencil, essentially turning your drawing paper into graphite paper. If you're using a traditional oil painting medium, washing the piece with turpentine or lavender oil prior to doing the drawing will allow you to make more distinct graphite lines. Whichever method you use to sketch your design, keep it to an absolute minimum.

Your Palette

China paint is typically mixed for use in very small quantities. Potters accustomed to decorating with glazes or underglazes will be astounded at how little material it takes to produce a strong color. The amounts are more like those used in watercolor painting. Individual colors may be mixed with an open medium and stored in small jars, but in order to blend and mix colors, you need a palette.

Special palettes are sold by china paint supply houses, and the covered ones are particularly nice for keeping your paints open between painting sessions. A flat palette is more useful than one with small depressions in it, as you can more easily blend colors. A sheet of glass or white plastic works well, as do white tiles.

Most times you will be using only a few colors for a particular subject. It is best to lay the colors out with the most similar next to each other, as in a color wheel. This will minimize muddying the colors. Do not crowd the colors, but leave plenty of room for them to spread, and for test strokes.

When you start to learn china painting, it's best to limit yourself to a small number of colors. Most colors may be mixed together, but there are exceptions, which you should keep in mind as you lay out your palette. For example, the gold-based colors sometimes will not mix with some of the iron-based colors. However, some particular combinations will mix well, and gorgeous rosy reds

may be obtained by layering gold-based pink or ruby with iron reds, firing between layers.

One of the unique characteristics of china paints is that there are three groups of colors: those which rely on gold as a colorant, those based on cadmium, and all the others. Pinks, purples, lilac, ruby, and the like come from gold. Cadmium colors include bright reds and oranges, and a few maroons and yellows.

Cadmium colors will almost never mix with non-cadmium colors. Sometimes the mixture will fire out as a bubbly mess, but more often the result will be the total disappearance of all colors. A few companies sell blues, greens, black, and whites labeled as cadmium colors, made specifically to mix with the cadmium reds and yellows.

Many china painters believe that the gold colors also will not intermix with the other groups, but this is not entirely the case. The basis for this belief is probably the fact that mixing any other color with the deep, clear rubies, pinks and purples will muddy the color.

Paints mixed originally with an open (non-drying) mixing medium may be scooped back into the jar at the end of the session, even if a painting medium has been added. Some closed (drying) painting mediums will dry hard enough that the paint cannot be reconstituted. Paint mixed with plain water is usable after it dries, but it may become grainy. When you've finished painting, clean your palette with the appropriate solvent, or at least cover it. Dust in the colors may fire out as dark or blank spots.

Brushing

China paint is almost always applied with a brush, even if the brush strokes are not apparent in the finished product. The difference between good and bad brushwork often lies as much with the brush as with the artist, so buy the best brushes you can, and take good care of them. You will need a flat or bright brush, a round, and a liner. There are



Andreas Knobl (Germany), "Rockhopper Penguins," porcelain tile, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".

many other shapes available (see the section on brushes in Chapter 3, "Tools and Equipment"), all of which are useful and sometimes indispensable, but these three are the minimum. The most common mistake in acquiring brushes is buying ones that are too small.

Traditionally, most china painters have used an oil medium, and favored one of two systems for mixing their colors. Some prefer to mix a substantial quantity with a mixing medium that stays wet, or "open." A small quantity is then dabbed on the palette in a shape like a small mountain with a reservoir at the bottom. Dip the brush into a painting medium, deep enough so the medium

fills the heel of the brush. Lay the brush on a clean tile and wiggle it back and forth to distribute the medium into the bristles, then lightly press it to a clean cloth to remove excess medium, and then load the brush from the reservoir. Others simply mix the powdered china paint directly with a painting medium, prepping and loading their brush in the same way.

Whichever system is used, the paint is ground into the medium with a palette knife until it is completely free of lumps, and about the consistency of toothpaste. Certain colors seem to need more grinding than others, particularly dark browns and the gold-based colors. Some artists



grind their paint on a grinding glass and transfer it to the palette; others mix directly on the palette. If you use an oil medium, mix the color and medium to a thick paste, and thin with turpentine. Some painters like to grind the powder with turpentine, alcohol, or lavender oil, and then let it dry before mixing with a painting medium.

You have a wide range of oil mediums from which to choose (see chapter 4), but most china painters now use some combination of balsam of copaiba and the oils of lavender, clove and anise. The decision is based mostly on how quickly they like their paint to dry and how thickly they like to apply it. Turpentine and fat oil are seldom used today except for techniques like traditional Dresden style painting. There are also water-soluble mediums. I almost always mix my colors with plain water, or one of the glycols. Regardless of the medium, you'll soon develop a feel for how thick you like it to be and how fast you want it to dry.

The proportions are critical. If there is too much oil, the paint will appear transparent and shiny before firing, and will run on a vertical surface. If it's too thick, it may chip off after firing. Intense colors are best achieved by firing multiple layers of paint.

In this operation, you may be adding minute amounts of medium and solvent. Small squeeze bottles, eyedroppers, and ear syringes are handy tools for this. If your vials have cork stoppers, insert a toothpick into the bottom of the cork to pick up just a few drops at a time.

For water-based mediums the procedure is almost the same as for oil, with the solvent being water, and the medium being one of the sticky substances such as glycerin, one of the glycols, sugar syrup, etc. You may continue adding water to these indefinitely as they dry.

When I use plain water as both medium and solvent, I lay out a small pile of dry powder, drip a little water next to it, and blend the two together with a brush to the proper consistency. It dries



San Do, "Macaw" tile, 10" x 14." Photo: William Newberry.

very quickly, but I just keep adding a few drops of water. Mixing paint with your brushes is very destructive to them, but I maintain this bad habit because it is so much faster than grinding colors with a palette knife.

Before you load your brush with paint, dip it in the appropriate solvent and dry the tip on a rag, otherwise the brush will not load completely. Rinse your brush thoroughly when changing



Paul Lewing, "Reef," china paint on ceramic tile, 6½' x 14', 1992. *Photo: James Cohn.*



A section of "Reef," first coat, unfired. The tiles at the top have been sprayed with cornstarch in preparation for a sprayed coat of blue.



The first coat, after firing. The black marker lines have burned away.



The second coat, after firing, with colors shaded and intensified.



"Reef," detail, after third firing for outlines. *Photo: James Cohn.*

colors. The chemical interactions between different mineral colors may change them more than their unfired appearance would suggest. The yellows are particularly susceptible to being muddied by a tiny amount of almost any other color.

The raw colors of unfired china paint are almost exactly the same as the fired colors, except that they appear matte and powdery. This will be the biggest treat for potters used to other forms of glazing, and it removes one of the biggest hurdles for painters wanting to fire their paintings. Usually several firings are necessary to achieve shading and intense colors.

After that, china painting is just like any other form of painting. Anything a brush will do in any other form of paint or ink, from oil and watercolor, to sumi painting, ceramic oxides and underglazes, or house paint faux finishes, it will do with china paint.

At the end of your painting session, rinse your brush out completely in clean solvent (either water or turpentine) and let it dry flat without resting it on its tip. Many china painters who use oil mediums like to give their brushes a good washing with soap and water after cleaning with turpentine, with a final rinse in alcohol.