

Ceramic Arts Daily Lesson Plan

Using Stencils

by Hanna Lore Hombordy

Stencils, in combination with airbrushing, spraying, sponging, painting and stippling underglaze or other colorants on clay, provide enormous potential for artistic expression. Though they're merely cut out silhouettes, a series of strategically placed stencils combined with shading can add interest, introduce motion, and enhance the illusion of depth.

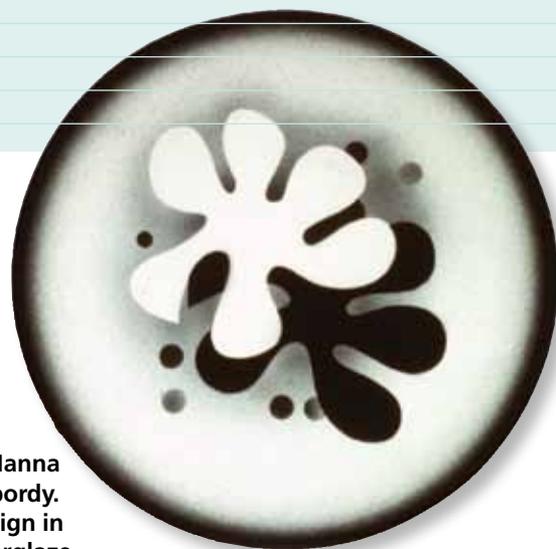
Stencil Materials

The ceramist must select the material that most satisfies each project. Stencils should be strong, flexible, transparent, non-porous and washable. The many options available for stencils include:

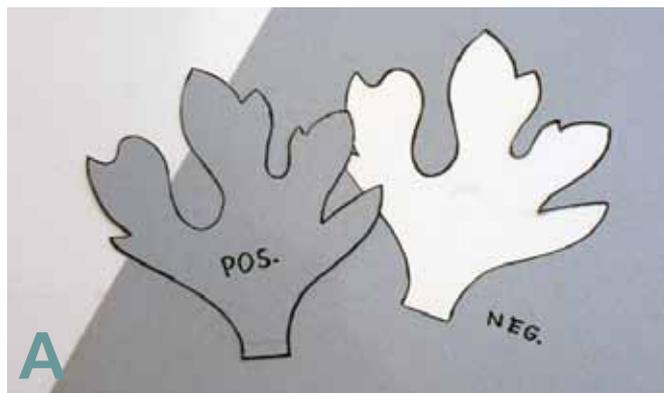
- Clear or tinted acetate sheets
- Clear vinyl or flannel backed vinyl fabric
- Commercial frisket paper made for airbrushing
- Commercial stencils from craft stores
- Contact paper or reinforced contact paper
- Leaves, or cutouts of leaves
- Naugahyde type remnants
- Paper—anything from newsprint to card stock
- Stencils sold for cake decorating
- Found items, including coins or bottle caps of various sizes, gummed labels or tapes, pebbles and metal parts—washers, gears, sinkers, etc.
- Semi-porous materials to add visual texture or pattern, like cheesecloth, netting or lace screening, hardware cloth and even furnace filters

Negative and Positive Stencils

Stencils have both negative and positive components. You can use either the solid shape cut out from the center section of a stencil or the remaining background section of a stencil to create an image. We'll think of the cut out section as the positive stencil, the background as the negative stencil (figure A). More complex projects can combine all negative or all positive stencils (figure B) or both (figure C). The positive stencil masks out the color of the original piece, so if your clay is white and you want a dark image on a white background you must use the background section, or negative part, of the stencil to achieve this result. You use the negative stencil to produce the positive image, and vice versa.



Seeds by Hanna Lore Hombordy. Stencil design in black underglaze, fired to cone 5.



Stencils can be positive or negative shapes.



Left: Image created with positive stencil. Right: Image created using a negative stencil.



Image created using positive and negative stencils.

Making Stencils

You can create a hand-cut stencil using your own original drawing. Sketch out the design first, keeping the shape simple; delicate details will cause trouble later. Save a copy in case you want to repeat or adjust the design later. To preserve both the negative and positive part of the design, carefully cut along the center of your drawn line.

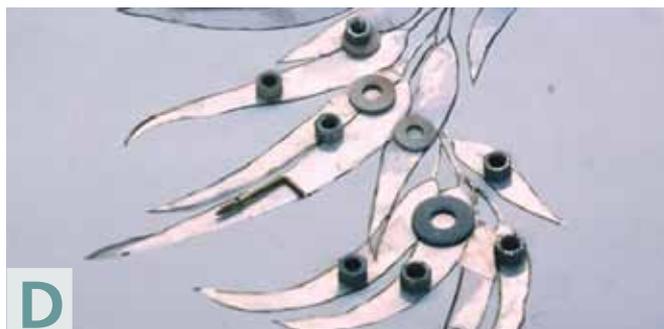
Don't overlook the help you might get from a copy machine. Place your objects directly on the glass to get a quick reproduction. This is especially useful if your subject is perishable or delicate. In addition, the copier can enlarge or reduce the size of your image.

Applying Your Design

An airbrush is better for smaller, detailed projects. Larger sprayers are great for bigger and less detailed work. Hold the sprayer about 8 to 14 inches from your ceramic piece. Results depend on the size of your piece, the air pressure in your sprayer and the consistency of your glaze or underglaze. Remember to wear a mask.

You'll need to put some sort of weight on the stencil to keep it from blowing away while you spray. Use nuts, washers, or anything that's small and heavy (figure D). A carefully placed rubber band or string helps on round shapes (figure E). Small pieces of double-stick tape may also work. It's possible to use glue or rubber cement to temporarily position stencils. Their residue can sometimes cause stains, so do a test first.

Color can be applied evenly to produce a flat, solid area. Color can also be shaded with variations from dark to light. Making more passes of color near the edges of the stencil and gradually applying less color away from the edges creates a shaded effect (figure F). It takes a bit of practice to make a smooth transition from dark to light (figure G). If you're familiar with drawing, you might try creating some shading on your image that creates the illusion of a three-dimensional form (figure H).



D Weights keep the stencil stationary as you spray.



E Use a rubber band to hold stencil in place on round forms.



F Create a shaded effect by varying the density of color.



G Vary number of passes with airbrush to create smooth transition from dark to light.



H Three-dimensional effect created using selective shading.

Creating Depth

A major advantage of using stencils is their ability to achieve the illusion of depth. The key to achieving depth is to overlap and apply shading to the stencils in a specific sequence. The interplay between the placement and systematic removal of the stencils, and the way you use the sprayer, creates the illusion of dimensional space. As shown, the stencils you use can be negative or positive shapes, or a combination of both.

The most perplexing thing for many ceramists is that what you place down onto the surface first will be the object that ends up appearing to be in front, or closest to the viewer in the finished image. This is because the stencil you lay down first will be preventing the clay underneath it from being touched by any spray, or color, from the airbrush or whatever tool you're using. The area underneath this stencil will stay blank, all other areas will have shading on them and will therefore appear to be underneath. You won't be able to see the result until you carefully lift off all stencils after airbrushing is complete.

Acetate Stencils

Using clear or translucent acetate enables you to see through the stencils and avoids awkward positioning of elements. You'll find acetate to be a durable material that can be rinsed off and reused. To make a stencil, place your selected image under a sheet of glass. Select acetate sheets that are stiff but still flexible. Avoid thin flimsy sheets. Colored sheets help you to sort out the elements in your design and do not get lost as easily as clear sheets. Place your acetate on top of the glass and cut out the pattern following the image underneath. You can cut with a sharp utility knife, or a stencil burner in a well-ventilated space (figure 1).

Tip: You can also place the acetate directly over the images, trace the design with a fine black marker and then cut out the design with scissors.

Creating Your Image

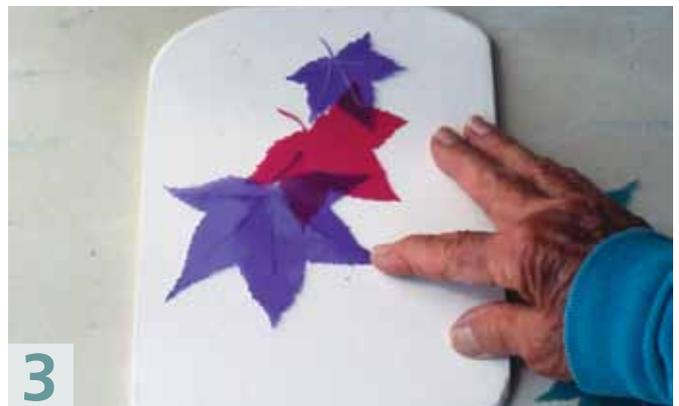
To make things less confusing, I've separated the stencils used to create the clustered image by color-coding them. One object, the red stencil, is in the most prominent position (figure 2). The two stencils used to create the shapes in the middle distance will overlap the first stencil and are purple (figure 3). Place the last two green stencils so they are overlapping previous stencils. They will end up looking like they're farthest back in the final image (fig. 4).



1 Place objects under a sheet of glass. Lay a sheet of acetate on top. Using a stencil burner or knife, cut out the shapes.



2 The red stencil is first to be placed on the clay. This shape will appear closest to the viewer in the finished image.



3 Two purple stencils become the middle ground, and are placed so that sections overlap the red stencil.



4 The green stencils are placed so they overlap the others. These will appear to be in the background.

Prepare your stencils, create your arrangement, secure or weight down the stencils and you're ready to make your practice cluster. Plan to use just one color of underglaze. Test your underglaze on a piece of scrap paper to be sure the airbrush is spraying properly.

Spray whatever underglaze you've selected around the edges of all the stencils and in any blank spots in between (figure 5). For light shading, take only one pass over the area. If you want a really dark shadow, pass over the area with the airbrush two or three times. The image area will look pretty dark and muddled now, but the individual shapes will emerge as the stencils are lifted off.

If the weather is damp and if you've applied a lot of underglaze, take a short break before lifting off the first two stencils, in this case, the green ones. When the underglaze has lost its sheen, carefully lift off the two green stencils and set them aside.

Spray color around the newly exposed edges of the purple stencils, creating a shadow along the edge (figure 6). Here again, be careful in lifting off the purple stencils when you're done.

Spray color along the newly uncovered edges of the red stencil (figure 7), wait a few minutes, then lift it off of the clay. When you lift the red stencil, you'll be able to view your completed design.

Cleanup: inspect your piece for flaws and touch up what you can (figure 8). Rinse off your stencils and save them for later use.

You may feel discouraged that your preliminary preparation required a lot of time and effort. However, it pays to double check your placement of stencils, ensure that the weights don't extend over the edge of a stencil, and so on. Once airbrushing begins, things happen very quickly.

If you find that you've forgotten something or made an area too light, you can still make adjustments in your spraying. Proceed with caution, replacing all stencils in their exact original location, then filling in the oversight very carefully. As with most things, it's better to get it right the first time.

This lesson plan is based on an article that first appeared in the September/October 2008 issue of Pottery Making Illustrated. Visit www.potterymaking.org for more details. Hanna Lore Hombordy lives in Ventura, CA, where she continues to explore the relationship between stencils and spraying techniques in her own work.



5 Using an airbrush or glaze sprayer, spray underglaze on exposed areas around the edges of the stencils.



6 After removing the green stencils, spray color around the edges of the purple stencils to create a shadow.



7 After removing the purple stencils, spray along the uncovered edges of the red stencil.



8 After removing the red stencil, touch up any flaws using an X-Acto knife or other tools to remove excess underglaze.