

Tips and Tricks

by Val Naber

Ceramic vs Porcelain

To tell if a ceramic piece is porcelain or some other kind of stoneware, just wet a small spot on an unglazed part of the piece, like on the back. If it turns considerably darker it is not porcelain. Why? Because porcelain is a much denser clay body than stoneware, for example.

Porcelain

Your porcelain should be clean before you begin painting. There are several methods for this but washing it with Dawn dish soap, then rubbing it with denatured alcohol works very well.

Painting Area

This is true of your painting area as well; it should be clean and organized before you begin. If things are always in the same place you will find life as a porcelain painter easier.

Clean Turp

If using Turpenoid to clean your brushes during painting, make sure you start with clean turp each painting session. The grime will settle to the bottom of your turp container, so pour off the clear turp into a clean jar and you're ready to go. Clean the dirty jar by wiping it out with paper towel and you're ready for the next session.

Blotting Cloth

If you have trouble with your work being too oily it could be your blotting cloth. If the cloth becomes saturated, it won't take oil so the oil ends up on your work. Use an absorbent towel, like Bounty. Fold one sheet in 4ths, when one side gets dirty turn it over, when that side gets dirty throw it out and get a new towel. You may use several towels in the course of a day.

Medium Recipes

There are as many recipes for China painting mediums as there are China painting teachers. I will share what I use which is similar to lots of the teachers I have taken from. I start with a clean brush, then condition it with Mineral oil (heavy). This should be fresh mineral oil, the older an oil gets the stickier it seems to get. A good medium is the one Paula Collins uses: 2 cups Copaiba, 1 cup mineral oil (heavy), ½ ounce clove oil.

Mixing Paint

If you pour your powdered paint on your mixing glass and it's lumpy, add a couple drops of denatured alcohol and grind it. Let it dry and then mix with your oil. This works particularly well with gold-based colors.

Matt Paint

You can make any china paint matt by adding Zinc oxide: 1/3 Zinc Oxide to 2/3 china paint powder. With gold based paints use ½ and ½.

Your Palette

There are many different ways to set up your palette based on your personal preference. But if you set up your palette the same way all the time you will find your hand eye coordination becomes automatic. Setting your palette up like a color wheel will help your leave color, who compliments who. Another tip for your palette is to have two glass inserts for it, with your paint color/divisions written on a white paper that goes between the two pieces of glass. If you do this, when you want to clean your palette just take out the top glass, put the lower clean glass over our white paper and transfer your paint. Clean the dirty glass and place it on the bottom so it's ready for the next cleaning.

Your Brushes

When you're are finished with each painting session, always clean your brushes in turpentine (or your cleaner), flatten the brush, dip into mineral oil, press out most of the oil then flatten between your fingers so that the brush is razor sharp edged. Store the brush handle-down in a covered container. This will keep oil in the feral and the brushes dust free.

Always use the biggest size brush you can for the area you are painting. This will give smoother strokes.

Sharpen the ends of some of your brush handles. These are great for scratching in stems, grasses, eyes etc. Toothpicks and kabob skewers work too!

The further back you hold your brush on the handle the lighter your stroke will be.

Use a kneaded eraser to remove lint and brush hairs from your work.

Don't throw away old brushes, save them for painting on bisque.

Base for Gold

Mix powder with Balsam of Copaiba thinned with Turpentine to get it to string nicely. It can be applied with a stylus or brush, or piped. Liquid Bright Gold (LGB), Roman and burnished gold can be used over Base for Gold (white powder). If mixing color into the base for gold, it will fire darker than it looks. You can add silica sand to Base for Gold if you want texture.

Raised Paste

Raised paste (yellow powder) should be completely dry and dull before firing. Never use LGB over raised paste; it is for Roman Gold. Raised paste is fired at 017 and can be fired several times (unlike enamel that should only be fired once, so applied for the last fire).

Remember that when mixing a colored raised paste, it will fire considerably darker than it looks.

Pouncing

When possible use a large brush to smooth out your backgrounds. Pouncing will dull your painting because it removes flux from your paint.

Creating Texture

Creating texture in your china paint can be fun and very interesting. Just about anything can be used for texturing. How about bubble wrap, wadded up plastic wrap, stippling brushes, ear plugs, gauze, any loosely woven fabric, hair, string, embroidery floss, leaves, sticks... Look around, give something a try.

Elmer's glue or E6000, it will burn off in the firing.

Fat Oil

Fat oil works nicely for wet grounding, Dresden-type painting, and many other uses. You can make your own fat oil by putting turpentine in a small jar, cover it with cheesecloth or a couple layers of nylon hosiery and let it sit. It will evaporate, leaving fat oil in the jar. About 75 % of the turpentine will evaporate leaving 25% fat oil.

Lusters

Do not use your regular painting turpentine when you are working with luster. Keep separate turpentine just for luster.

Before you FIRE!

Wipe the edge of your plate with a paper towel.

Check for fingerprints on the back of your plate/tiles and on the inside of your vases. Make sure the labels are removed from the backs -- Metallic labels leave a mark when fired.

Sign your piece, date your piece.

If you are doing 3, 4, or more fires on a piece, your first firing will be your hottest. The fires after that can be at 018 because of the flux still remaining in your paint on the previous fires.

If you fired your painted piece and it is dull, it is underfired. Paint again and fire again to at least 017.

Before you fire, make sure you have three values and that the lightest light is by the darkest dark, by the center of interest.

Kiln

Keep the lid of your kiln closed when not firing. Clean your Kiln by vacuuming it once in a while.

Use a pyrometer to check if your kiln is firing to the correct temperatures.

Refresh kiln wash on shelves and cone supports.

Don't place china in front of peep hole -- it's more likely to break.

To hold reds and keep them from turning brown, try firing the kiln with the lid vented a small bit.

When firing bone china make sure that no part of the glaze is touching anything, including the sides of the kiln.