

Vince Pitelka, 2015

Slip-Decorating Techniques

Polychrome Slip Painting

Opacified colored slips may be painted onto leather-hard clay just as one would use any other paints. Different effects can be attained with different consistencies of slip as discussed above, or with textural materials added to the slip. For very liquid slips use soft water-color brushes, but for thick paste-consistency slips a stiffer brush is appropriate, as is used for oils and acrylics. Thick slips may even be applied with a palette knife, especially when raised textural effects are desired. Slips for brush painting are often colored and opacified much more strongly than slips for other applications. In painting with oils or acrylics, what you see is what you get. That is not the case in painting with slips, because the glaze has a solvent effect upon the surface of the slip, depending on firing temperature and the particular glaze. In order to get dense, saturated colors, you generally need to apply two or three layers. If you do thin, translucent effects as with watercolors, they will likely disappear into the glaze.

Mishima (Slip Inlaying)

In this traditional East-Asian technique, shallow incised or impressed lines and patterns are filled with slip. Don't worry about being neat when applying the slip, because the excess is scraped off with a flexible metal rib at the leather-hard stage to leave a flush inlaid effect. For the cleanest, sharpest effect, use a gritless base claybody and slip. Do not attempt to get a flush inlaid effect with deeper impressed or carved effects, because the slip will almost certainly crack in drying or firing. Even with shallow incised or impressed design work, several applications of slip may be needed to fill recesses flush with the surface.

Wax Mishima

This is an alternate way of achieving inlaid lines or areas of slip that does not involve scraping, and thus it works well on all claybodies. The trade-off is that it does not produce the flush inlaid effect of classical mishima. Apply a ground of slip to a medium-hard-leather-hard piece if you want the background to be something other than the base clay. When the slip is leather-hard (if any slip coating) apply wax resist over the surface, and once the wax is dry carve or incise a design through the wax. Normally this is done with a very small band-loop or wire-loop trimming tool, but fine-point tools like the tip of a razor knife or needle tool can be used to incise extremely thin lines rarely seen in classic mishima. Apply the desired slip or underglaze to the incised areas and wipe away the excess. Those areas may be waxed and more design work carved to receive additional colors of slip or underglaze, and this may be repeated as many times as desired. Also, with wax mishima you are not limited to shallow carved areas. Deeper recesses with the coat of slip applied will still show relief, and will also contrast in color with surrounding areas. Again, those areas may be waxed and the process repeated with additional colors.

Sgraffito

In this technique a contrasting-color slip is brushed, poured, dipped or sprayed over the clay body. Design-work is incised or carved through the slip, exposing the clay beneath. The quality of line and

edge varies greatly depending on whether the slip surface is wet, soft-leather-hard, hard-leather-hard, or bone dry. At the medium-to-hard leather-hard stage, a small band-loop or wire-loop trimming tool works great. At the very hard-leather-hard stage, a cheap ball-point pen works well.

Slip-Trailing

Slip-trailing involves a range of design-work created by depositing or trailing lines of liquid slip onto a wet to soft-leather-hard clay surface using a rubber squeeze-bulb, plastic hair-tint bottle, or gravity-feed applicator. In some cases a ground of contrasting slip is brushed or sprayed onto the surface before trailing. Smoothest, most uniform application is achieved with thin slip applied with a gravity-feed applicator. For some effects, the tip of the squeeze-bulb or gravity-applicator may be dragged directly on the surface of the clay, while for other effects the tip is held above the surface. For best results always use a well-screened slip to avoid clogging in the tip. Effect varies greatly depending on consistency of slip and whether trailing is done on a freshly applied slip ground. With very fluid slip on a fresh ground, the trailed slip will settle level into the surface, leaving only the contrast in color. The thicker the slip, the more surface relief in the trailed lines and marks.

In approaching slip-trailing most people think in terms of the color effects and contrast, but the technique is often done with a thicker slip or slurry often made from the base claybody specifically to achieve three-dimensional relief effects. Very early examples are unglazed ancient Roman Barbotine ware, but the technique is often used to create surface relief that interacts with a clear or opaque glaze, as in the contemporary work of Kristen Kieffer.

Ceramic suppliers now sell very good slip-trailing bulbs with interchangeable tips that work well with varying consistencies of slip. Most traditional Early American and European slip trailing is done with a rigid gravity-feed dispensers and very liquid slip. The dispenser has a small filler hole that can be covered with the thumb to regulate the flow of slip while decorating.

Feather-Combing

In this traditional Eastern European and Early American techniques, parallel bands of very liquid contrasting-colored slips are trailed onto a fresh clay surface or a freshly-applied slip ground, and a fine-point flexible-tip tool (50-lb. monofilament fishing line protruding several inches from a wood dowel handle) is dragged through the bands, pulling the colors along to create the classic "combed" effect. For the cleanest feather combing, a small groove can be incised in the clay before applying the slips in order to define the total width of the area to be decorated. The slip may trailed in alternating parallel bands, or may be laid down in a wide band, with contrasting lines or bands trailed over it. On slab-built plates and trays, or on flat slabs to be used for making such forms, trailing is usually done in straight lines, with the combing done at 90 degrees or some other angle. On thrown forms the trailing is generally done in concentric circles and then combed on the radius or at an angle. There are no hard, fast rules, and some of the most interesting and inventive feather combing on thrown or handbuilt forms involves grids, dots, starbursts, and other variations. Have fun being inventive.

Keep in mind that even a freshly-thrown plate or a freshly-rolled slab is already much stiffer than the slip, and will begin absorbing water from the slip immediately. The best feather-combed effects depend on having everything completely ready and then laying down the slip and executing the

design as quickly as you can on freshly thrown or rolled clay. One exception is in executing a feather-combed design on the flange rim of a wheel-thrown platter or bowl, when you must allow the rim to stiffen up a bit first to keep it from collapsing due to the introduced moisture of the slip.

Slip-Marbling

This process is slightly similar to feather combing, but the colors are generally trailed onto a very fresh brushed or trailed slip ground in random lines, drips, or pools. The colors may then be manipulated several different ways. One approach is to simply lift the bat and vessel and shake it or whack the edge of the bat with your hand, causing the colors to intermingle. Another approach is to manually mingle the colors with a combing tool or low-pressure jet of air from a squeeze bulb or compressed air nozzle, or even to use all of these methods. Because of the thick layer of slip added to the surface in this technique, the piece should be dried very slowly, and a cutoff wire pulled under the piece as the slip stiffens to ensure that it does not re-adhere to the bat.

Slip-Layering

In this rarely-seen technique, a number of contrasting layers of slip are applied to a leather-hard form, each layer of color built up with at least three or four coats and allowed to dry to leather hard before adding the next color. Variable sanding, scraping, or shallow carving will expose concentric bands or patches of the different colored layers. Some people prefer to accomplish this by sanding, sand-blasting, or grinding the surface after the bisque firing.

Slip-Resist Techniques

Using conventional wax resist, hot wax, liquid latex, masking tape, adhesive stickers, or moistened paper, particular areas of the surface are protected when slip is painted, dipped, or sprayed onto a form. An especially popular method is paper resist, where moistened paper shapes are smoothed onto the surface and an opacified slip is painted onto the exposed clay. As soon as the slip has just begun to stiffen, the paper pieces should be lifted with a knife or needle point and peeled from the surface. When done carefully this can produce bold, hard-edged design-work.

Slip-Texturing

A variety of interesting textural effects may be created with slips. Just as the interior walls of your house may be textured with drywall joint compound, the surface of any leather-hard ceramic form may be textured by sponging, brushing, rolling, or stippling the surface of a slip. For the most textural effects the slip must be thickened to the consistency of a thick slurry or even a stiff paste.

Grainy or fibrous materials may be added to a slip to achieve textural effects. Appropriate additives include sand, grog, crushed bisqueware grog, sawdust, chopped fibers, coffee grounds, etc. Non-ceramic materials will burn out, leaving craters or voids in the surface.

Slip-Stamping

Slip patterns may be applied using pattern stamps cut or torn from soft foam or sponges. This is also an excellent way of applying textured slips.

Pate-Sur-Pate (Paste-on-Paste)

The Pate-Sur-Pate technique is a variation on slip-trailing. First seen in Roman Barbotine wares, a simple pictorial image was built up in sculptural relief with slips on the surface of a pot. The method appears in its most accomplished form on eighteenth century Wedgwood Jasperware. White slip is applied to a contrasting colored claybody, and when leather hard the slip is carefully carved to create shallow-relief imagery. The effect is similar to that found in “cameo” jewelry items, which are executed in shell or stone, carving through one colored layer to expose a background in a contrasting-colored layer.