

Majolica

What is Majolica?

Majolica, in the historic sense, is earthenware with a white, tin-opacified, viscous glaze, decorated by applying colorants (often with a calligraphic brush) on the raw, unfired glaze surface. The viscosity of the glaze restricts the flow as the glaze melts, giving a glossy surface that maintains the line quality of the surface decoration. Traditionally, the glaze was lead-fluxed. The beautiful ambers and greens seen in historic decoration result from iron and copper, respectively, in combination with lead.

Tin-glazed earthenware began in the Middle East. When people from the Middle East became a political force, conquering northern Africa and crossing the Strait of Gibraltar into Spain, they brought their knowledge of ceramics with them. Spanish potters with their Moorish influence made Muslim inspired works. Italians imported this ware from the Spanish port of Majorca, calling it majolica ware. When the French imported it from Faenza, they called it faience. When the Dutch became proficient at this technique they exported quantities from Delft and it became Delftware. In England, during the 19th century, companies such as Minton produced a brightly colored ware using transparent lead based glazes over relief ware which has often been confused with the traditional and historical method of producing Majolica ware.

Glaze Application

Glaze application is important because the glaze does not move in firing. Glaze may be dipped (the preferred method), as a smooth even coat is desired. Brushing and spraying are also acceptable methods of application. Any uneven surface, drips, runs, or glaze lumps need to be attended to prior to applying any decorative design. These small imperfections can be addressed by "finger" sanding or using fine 400 grit sandpaper. Be sure to remove resultant dust from the surface with a soft brush or a barely damp sponge.

Troubleshooting

Pin-holing issues -- Check wheelthrown work for trimmed areas that are smooth. Dampen bisque before dipping in glaze to reduce air pinholes from the raw glaze, and deter too thick of a glaze application. Rub any pinholes with your finger to fill pinholes in the raw glaze.

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Design Colorants

Traditional design colorants were limited to raw metal oxides: cobalt for blue, copper for green, and iron for yellows and amber. These oxides were augmented occasionally by manganese, cadmium, and selenium, a bit rarer, but still offering a rich warm color palette.

Today the majolica artist has a choice of metal oxides; either raw stains derived from the oxides in a calcined and stable form, or commercial products that use these very same ingredients in a pre-blended friendly form that includes color, flux, and a binder that aids in flow and brushability.

The choice becomes one of style, to produce the desired effect ... and ... your lifestyle. Do you want to mix pigment or paint designs?

Choosing Your Color Palette

Strong blue, warm red, yellow and turquoise serve as your primaries. You can augment them with cool pink, orange and lime green.

Mixing Your Own Colors

OXIDES: Mix by volume - one part color (oxide or stain) to one part flux. Your flux can be GERSLEY BORATE, the preferred and easiest to use, as it will naturally suspend your pigments. Frit, such as Ferro 3134, or one of the new Gerstley Borate substitutes may be used. If your choice is frit or one of the substitutes, you will also want to add CMC gum to aid with both suspension and adhesion.

OTHER COLORANTS: Mason Stains - mix one part colorant to ¾ part flux. Again, if you choose frit, you will want to add CMC gum. Gum is mixed with water, approximately 1 Tablespoon to 1 Cup warm water. Allow to dissolve and sit overnight. Add to your colorant mixture until desired brushing consistency.

Please NOTE: all of this information is a basic guideline! You may want your color more or less intense. Just adjust your proportions. Have fun creating your very own designs and effects.

Black - MA6600 or MA6650
Bright Red/Orange - Degussa Inclusion Pigments
Purple - MA6385
Crimson - MA6003 or MA6006
Turquoise - MA6288

Commercial Colors

Duncan EZ Strokes are a great choice, one of my personal favorites. They have a high concentration of pigment and go a long way making it very economical. Duncan Concepts are hybrids of EZ Strokes and glaze, created to aid an amateur "brush-worker" with a stroke that fills in.

Amaco Majolica colors, similar to Duncan Concepts with a high degree of flux which aides in stoke melting.

Firing

Bisque firing is done at ^04, The clay used for Majolica is traditionally a red, iron-bearing earthenware. The organics of the clay require a slow firing to prevent the body from gassing during the glaze fire. Earthenware also requires a hotter bisque than the glaze for proper glaze fit.

Glaze firing is done at ^05 for Mayco's UG51 China White. For ^5-6 use Georgies PG601 Perfect White.

The glaze fire should be done at a medium to slow rate. A fast fire will cause the glaze to crawl, but too slow a fire may fade color or even allow some movement of design.

HAVE FUN!!!!

CELEBRATE THE COLOR AND DESIGN OF THIS ANCIENT CERAMIC ART!