



CULTURE MASHUP

CONTEMPORARY CHINA PAINTING

by Melanie Sherman

China painting allows Melanie Sherman to combine multiple images and detailed patterning from various cultures on her work.

China painting is an ancient technique for the ornamentation of ceramics. The Chinese started decorating their porcelain wares as early as the Han Dynasty (200BCE–220CE) and mastered the skill of applying overglazes long before this method became popular in Europe in the 18th century and in the US in the 19th century. This traditional approach to surface decoration is still being used by porcelain manufacturers today, such as Villeroy & Boch and Meissen in Germany; Herend Porcelain Manufactory in Hungary; and Sèvres in France; as well as various companies and studios producing porcelain in Jingdezhen, China; and companies and studios in the town of Arita, Japan, which are known for their Imari ware. The processes, materials, application techniques, and imagery used vary from country to country, but the results today are similar to those produced thousands of years ago.

I was introduced to china painting during my residency at the International Ceramics School in Kecskemét, Hungary, in 2013, where I studied with the renowned Latvian artist Ilona Romule and trained to use a metal nib to create detailed line work (see figure 3). **Tip:** A metal nib is the part of a fountain pen that holds the ink when dipped in an inkwell. You can add a handle to a nib by mounting it on a skewer or a chopstick. I subsequently learned the traditional Chinese method of china painting last year, during my residency at The Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, China. I was

also able to watch the skilled painters at the Herend Porcelain Manufactory and Meissen decorate their traditional porcelain wares. I use a combination of all of these techniques in my own work.

My current body of work references 18th-century European porcelain wares and is produced and finished with the cultural exchange between East and West in mind.

Imagery

I study Japanese full-body tattoos for inspiration and am interested in their symbolic use of imagery. Irezumi, like china painting, is a traditional art form of body art that relies on a process of decorating the body by hand. These tattoos have a spiritual and creative purpose. The animals that I draw in my work have all been derived from such tattoos and indicate a symbolic meaning in Eastern and Western cultures, such as loyalty, wealth, and strength.

My corset platter was inspired by a 19th-century French department-store catalog of corsets. Historically, the corset was worn to change the appearance of women's bodies, enhancing their breasts while decreasing the size of their waists. The line drawings I make using a metal nib provide me the opportunity to insinuate certain movement in the imagery. I feel that the combination of the Asian patterns and the European imagery creates an interesting cultural interchange. Especially, with the corset series and thoughts about the restrictions placed on women's bodies.



1 Rub turpentine over the glaze-fired surface of a ceramic form and let it dry. Cover the back of a paper image with a layer of graphite.



2 Place the image on your platter and trace an image onto the surface. The pencil lines will be visible once you remove your image.



3 Use a metal nib filled with pigment to trace the pencil lines. Use a brush to fill in spaces or a cross-hatch pattern to shade.



4 I use a sable hair brush to do any shading. Thin the pigment paste to a watery consistency using turpentine for lighter shades.

Patterns

In Japan and China, I collected patterns incorporating geometric lines, squares, and triangles, which I found on kimonos, pencils, napkins, pottery, paper, wood, and lacquer wares. I use them to frame my subject matter. These patterns are usually a grid made up of squares, diamonds, and triangles. Some patterns are easy to master, while others take longer to learn.

To better understand historic patterns, I often look at books about Imari ware, which is covered in simple patterns combined with more organic imagery and shows an abundance of basic design configurations, all based on the square, diamond, or triangle.

Transferring a Design

To transfer a design from paper to your fired ceramic form, first rub turpentine (I use odorless Humco's Rectified Turpentine Oil) over the glazed and fired surface and let it dry. Once it dries, the turpentine becomes a ground that a graphite transfer will stick to. Make sure the entire platter is covered to avoid any discrepancies in tracing your image onto the surface.

You can use standard photocopies, but any image on paper is fine. Cover the back of your paper image with graphite (1).

Place an image where you want it to appear on the platter and start tracing the lines of the image onto the surface (2). The lines you trace will be visible once you remove your image, but check to be sure they're transferring by lifting a corner of the image. If it doesn't trace completely, you probably didn't apply turpentine to a particular area or it hasn't dried fully.

Mixing Pigment

Many mixing mediums can be used to make a workable paste for china painting. I personally like to use turpentine oils with my china painting pigments, because it dries hard and I'm able to apply multiple layers, thereby avoiding repeated firings. Any china paint will do, I use pigments from Germany, China, and the US. Rynne China at www.rynnechina.com is a good source for china paints here in the US. I boil down a gallon or so of regular turpentine until it becomes a thick, brown, molasses consistency. When I mix the pigment with the thicker oil, I can then



5

Use a toothpick to scratch a cross-hatch pattern and add more depth to the overall imagery. Make sure the china paint has had some time to dry, but it shouldn't be too dry.



6

To add your own details, use a thin-tipped Sharpie® to outline your pattern before you fill it in. Let the china paint dry overnight before adding more layers.



7

Use a flexible ruler to draw the grid. If you prefer a more precise design, use a ruler that doesn't bend to the shape of the object.



8

Fill in the designs in the grit pattern. Many designs usually evolve from the original one, so be as creative as you want.



9

Soak a piece of clean cloth in acetone and clean the edge around the platter using your fabric-covered thumbnail. Any wet china paint will create a dark circle, which can be a nice touch.

thin out the paste with a rectified odorless turpentine oil. The final consistency should be somewhat thicker than whole milk. If it's too thick, it won't flow well from the metal nib. To thin the mixture, add few drops of rectified turpentine. To thicken it, leave it uncovered so the turpentine can evaporate.

China Painting an Image

Dip the tip of your metal nib into the mixed pigment and start tracing the transferred pencil lines (3). Make sure you don't inadvertently rub off any pencil marks. **Tip:** You can span a wide piece of wood across the plate to hold your arms and hands away from the surface allowing you to each reach down.

Use a fine-tipped brush to fill in spaces or to create a cross-hatch pattern for shading (4). If you make a mistake, use acetone to clean it off. Sometimes it's best to wait until the china paint has dried in certain areas to avoid smudging. I prefer to use a sable-hair brush to do the shading—use a brush that you feel comfortable with.

Thin the pigment paste to a watery consistency using turpentine to create a lighter shade of color.



Top: Plate, porcelain, glaze, china paint, luster deer, with flowers, egg shells, and clouds, 2015. Above: Plate with cups, porcelain, glaze, china paint, luster, with steak, blueberries, mahjong pieces, morel mushroom, and fork, 2015. Photos: EG Schempf.

I use a toothpick to scratch a cross-hatch pattern to add more depth to the overall imagery. (5) Make sure the china paint has had some time to dry, but it shouldn't be too dry. If it's still too wet, the toothpick marks will fill in with china paint. If it's too dry, you will not be able to scratch the surface.

To add your own finishing details to the dried china-painted image, use a thin-tipped Sharpie® marker to design a surrounding pattern. Use a different colored marker than the china paint you intend to draw with to make the markings easier to distinguish (6). **Note:** The marker should burn out in the firing, but be sure to do a test beforehand. Use the filled metal nib to copy over the marker lines. Let the china paint dry overnight before adding any more layers.

Adding Fill Pattern

To add a pattern to surround your imagery, use a ruler and a thin-tipped Sharpie® to draw your design. I use a flexible ruler that hugs the form (7)—this distorts the pattern, giving it a more flowing design. If you prefer a more precise design, use a ruler that doesn't bend to the shape of the object. Next fill in the designs. You can be as creative as you want. I find many designs evolve into more intricate patterns as I'm filling them in (8). The possibilities here are endless.

To finish, soak a piece of clean cloth in acetone and, using your thumbnail, create a clean edge around the platter (9). If the china paint is still wet, it will create a dark circle, which can be a nice touch. Firing temperatures range from cone 019 to cone 015. I use a higher temperature for black pigment and gold luster, but fire lower when I use reds, since they tend to burn out. Test your china paints beforehand and/or check with the manufacturer.

Note: Be sure to check with the manufacturer of your china paints and lusters to know if they're food, microwave, and dishwasher safe. **Caution:** When using turpentine, acetone, or resin lusters, work in a well-ventilated area and wear gloves and a NIOSH-approved respirator with the appropriate vapor filters.

Melanie Sherman was born in Germany and lives and works in Kansas City, Missouri. To see more, check out www.melaniesherman.com, Facebook: [melaniesherman](https://www.facebook.com/melaniesherman), and Instagram: [@melanieshermanceramics](https://www.instagram.com/melanieshermanceramics).