

Developing Paintings on Suminagashi Marbled Papers (Using Acrylic Paints)

So, you've created beautiful papers using the technique of suminagashi marbling...now what? How do you build a painting on top of that marbled pattern? Here are some tips I've discovered for turning these marbled papers into finished paintings.

Step 1:

Before you do ANYTHING, have a session where you take your stack of marbled papers and, one by one, coat the front of them evenly (leaving no dry patches!) and gently with Acrylic Matte Medium (not gel) OR gloss medium. It's useful, but not essential to have this in a squeeze bottle rather than a jar, so that you can directly squeeze it onto your paper and then use a slightly wet wide (1 ½ inch) brush to evenly coat your paper. You want this as smooth as possible, so don't use a coarsely bristled brush.

Let the papers dry completely (20 minutes or so is usually sufficient, unless you used a lot of water). Because the rice paper is absorbent and the matte medium may bleed through to the other side of the paper, you may want to lay the papers on plastic sheeting until dry. The papers should be dry to the touch on both sides when they are ready to be painted on.

Why coat the paper with matte medium? It's simple—you have marbled onto a raw, untreated cotton rice paper that behaves like a blotter. If you add a layer of paint or ink to that "blotter" surface, the pigments sink in and won't flow & mix with one another. By creating this "barrier", you now have a surface that has some "tooth" for the acrylics to dance upon! And since you're using rice paper, matte medium strengthens the paper making it less likely to tear.

Step 2:

Look at the colors and shapes of your marbled paper and see if it "suggests" any subject matter to you. Certain marbled patterns might suggest a landscape, so you might want to go in that direction. Even if your patterns DON'T suggest any particular subject matter, you can IMPOSE any subject upon the paper.

Step 3:

Cut a piece of tracing paper that is the same size (or a tiny bit larger than) your marbled paper. Lay it over the top of your marbled paper and use a #2 pencil to create a drawing of the subject matter you've chosen. Take advantage, where possible, of some of the patterns/swirls in the marbled paper.

Step 4:

Once you are satisfied with your drawing, go over the pencil lines with a black Sharpie marker. You can save this tracing paper for future paintings, by the way (create a series perhaps).

Step 5:

Transfer your drawing onto your marbled paper. Since your rice paper is light enough to see through, you can put the Sharpie marker drawing under the marbled paper and see the lines. Use a light brown Caran D'Ache crayon (avoid black) to draw the lines directly onto your marbled paper.

Step 6: Glue 12 x 18" marbled rice paper onto heavier substrate (a 15 x 22" "half sheet" of 300 lb watercolor paper works well, although you can also use 140 lb paper), using a mixture of white glue (Elmer's) and matte medium. With bare hands (or while wearing latex gloves), spread the mixture out evenly and generously onto the substrate. Then, (with dry hands), carefully place the marbled rice paper onto the substrate. Gently work your hands across the paper to smooth out any air bubbles that might form. TIP: Before you glue your dried rice paper down on the substrate, gently dampen it by spraying clean water on both sides of the rice paper so that when you apply it to the substrate, there are fewer "air bubbles".

Step 7:

Start to plan/think about the colors you want to use in this painting—and how to apply your paint. Always start with transparent colors—you can always decide later if you want to opaque out an area with white (or some other opaque pigment). When you apply transparent colors, they will “glaze” over the existing marbled colors and change them (for example, a blue glaze over a bright yellow will turn it green).

You will need to decide what you are going to paint around (negative painting) and what you are going to paint “positively”.

Remember that some pigments are transparent and some are more opaque (Golden indicates this on the front of each of their pigments). You can always add black or black gesso to a color to darken it; or white or white gesso to tint it. But there are pigments (Indian red, most cadmiums) that cover over areas with a coat or two, and you will need to get acquainted with the properties of each pigment you use.

If all you have are tubes of acrylic paint, you can use these, but you will need to add a bit of water to make them more fluid and less like toothpaste! You could also get small (2 oz) containers with tight fitting lid (Glad storage containers can be found at the grocery store) and make your own fluid acrylics by squeezing a large amount of tube paint into a container and adding a tsp or so of water and stirring well (if I had to give a ratio of paint to water I'd say 5 parts paint to 1 part water). Be sure to write the color name on the lid so you know what it is!

Important tips for applying paint:

Don't use too much (or too little) water to thin your paints. As in watercolor, if you use too much water, it will “crawl” back into your wash and create an unwanted “halo” effect.

Let your painted areas dry before adding a second coat. Again, like watercolor, if you add more paint & water to a slightly wet area, you break up the surface tension and create unwanted “holes” in the color.

Make sure you are using ENOUGH pigment and that you don't have to constantly stop and remix colors—that can slow you down and cause your paper to dry before you want it to!

Be patient—marbled patterns are very strong and can be difficult to completely opaque out, but if you apply paint and let it dry between layers, you will be able to cover over areas. The trick is using enough water but not too much to achieve those opaque passages. Practice makes perfect!!

Let your colors mix on the paper where possible (in other words, it's not necessary to take one color and coat a whole area with only THAT color). For example, if you are painting an area in the orange/red family of colors, try to get a range of colors by “changing color every inch” or so to make it more interesting—red might segue into orange, then yellow, then back to red again. It makes things much more interesting visually.

Never throw away a painting that didn't quite work. You can always use your marbled rice papers for collage.