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Fabric Painting & Dyeing

This technique of the month project sheet is all about fabric dyeing and painting. First I'm going to show you some of my favorite ways to paint fabric and then I'll walk you through my easy, no fuss way to dye fabric using procion dyes.

First let's start with fabric painting. This is one of the easiest ways I know to color cloth quickly and it's my favorite way to paint canvas. There are a lot of fabric paints on the market and you'll need to experiment to find the ones that you like working with. You can even use an acrylic or non-textile paint on fabric, but remember that if you do that you may not be able to wash the item you painted.



Canvas (or duck cloth) and denim both make a nice surface for painting. Because they're a bit stiffer than a standard cotton the paintbrush doesn't get caught on the surface so you can get some nice brush strokes onto the fabric. If you wanted to paint a piece of lighter weight fabric using this technique, then you could stabilize it by taping it to the surface, stretching it on some stretcher bars or you could stabilize it with a fusible interfacing.

Before you begin painting, cover your work area with a drop cloth. For this first painting example I'm working with a piece of canvas. Wet the canvas under running water and then wring out the extra water and smooth it flat on your work surface. I just spray mine with a water bottle sprayer. It doesn't need to be soaking wet but it should be damp.

I use foam brushes for this technique and since they are larger than the width of the paint jars I set myself up with a little palette of paint on a piece of parchment paper. Working with a wet foam brush pick up some paint from your palette and start brushing on color. I paint in two or three blocks of color to start.



Notice that I'm not concerned with completely covering the fabric. Some variation in the amount of paint on the surface will create an interesting piece of cloth.

I use wide strokes and vary the amount of pressure on the brush so that I get some variation in color on the canvas. For this first piece I'm using Jacquard Neopaque paints. I like these paints, they are not too thick but they give great coverage.

Once the first color is on then I pick another color and add some blocks of that.

I vary my brush strokes when I paint the blocks of color—painting some horizontal strokes and some vertical. I think this makes for a more interesting piece of cloth when it's finished. Finally, I'll go back and add some touches of an accent color.

Once all the canvas is painted I use a clean, wet foam brush to blend the edges of the blocks of color a bit. Then the entire piece is left to dry thoroughly which can take anywhere from 12 to 24 hours depending on the climate. Once it's dry you can go back and add some additional color if you like.



Here's another way to get interesting effects painting on cloth. This works with a thicker paint like Lumiere or Stewart Gill Metamica. I'm using a combination of the two here. Just drizzle some of the paint on the surface of the wet cloth.

Then using a wet foam brush, brush across the surface lightly.



Brush just enough to move the paint around but not so hard that you completely combine the two colors.

This next technique is one of my favorites. This creates a very complex looking piece of cloth. Wet your cloth and then paint it.

Give it a fairly generous spray of water and then crumple it up and leave to dry completely.



This could take 12 to 24 hours depending on the climate you're in. When it's completely dry, unfold it and iron it flat.

You won't believe the difference!



You'll get some wonderful shade variations and lines of color where the fabric was resting against itself. I use this technique a lot because it creates such a interesting piece of fabric with virtually no effort at all.

Some other fun ways to get the paint on the cloth:

Use a wadded up piece of plastic wrap and dab the paint onto the cloth. Dip the plastic wrap in several different colors for a mottled effect.

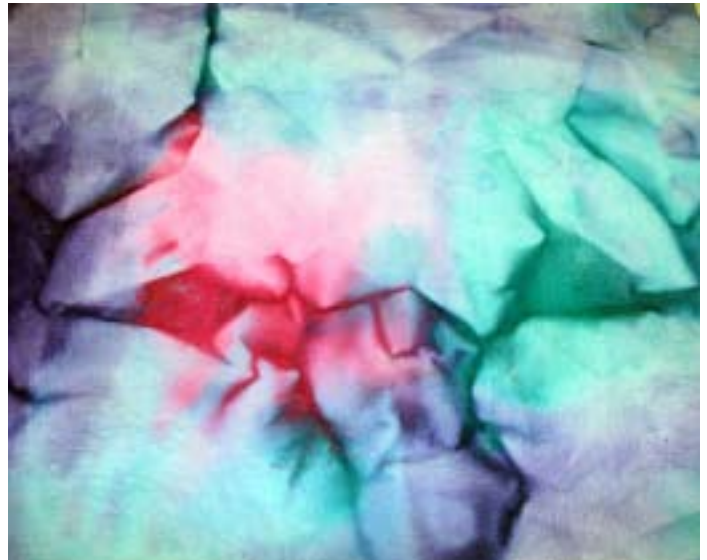
Pour the paint onto an area covered with plastic and spread it around a bit. Then lay your cloth over the top of the paint, rub it with a brayer and then lift off the cloth.

Paint some bubble wrap with paint and then press it against the cloth for an interesting effect.

After your painted cloth is dry, add some additional color and surface interest with Shiva Artist's Paintstiks or scribble on your cloth with a permanent marker.

Walnut ink crystals are also an interesting way to get color onto cloth or lace.

To use these you just dilute the crystals in water and then paint or spray it on. How much you dilute it will determine how dark the color is so you'll need to experiment a bit.



Here I sprayed it onto the lace. It's hard to see the color variation in this photo but the color is fairly light and has a nice vintage look.



If you want a darker result, then soak the lace in the mixture. I put some of the crystals and water into a zipper bag, added the laced and then squeezed to make sure the lace was fully saturated with color. You may need to add a little more water.

Then I left it soaking in the ink overnight. I took it out of the bag, wrung out the excess ink and let it dry.



Any of the techniques we've just looked at will also work for cotton and silk fabric as well.

The cotton fabric in the photo at right was sprayed with water and then painted with Jacquard Dye-Na-Flow paint and then left to dry in a crumpled heap.

I used the same technique for the silk chiffon in the next photo.



The only difference is that I did not paint the Dye-Na-Flow onto the chiffon. I wet the silk and then dipped it into the jar a bit. Next I kneaded it in my hands to distribute the color. Then I left it to dry. You can see in the photo that this created some fabulous color variations in the cloth.

Another easy way to get color onto cloth is by dyeing your own. Now I know a lot of you probably shudder at the thought of trying to dye your own fabric, but trust me on this, it's so easy you won't believe it. I resisted dyeing my own fabric for years and then decided to give it a try and wouldn't you know I love doing it. There is something really special about working with a piece of fabric that you've dyed yourself. It adds a personal touch to whatever it is that you're creating with it.

I'll be honest with you, I'm not into all that color theory and mixing colors and all of that stuff that can make the whole dyeing process complex and overwhelming. And I'm not looking to dye a perfectly evenly colored piece of cloth. I can go buy that in the fabric store. This method that I'm going to show you creates a more mottled piece of fabric with some nice surface variation.

I use the fiber reactive procion dyes that you can use with cold water so there's no stove top mixing and all that business. The dyes come in an incredible array of colors so I can buy what I need without having to mix colors.

All you need for dyeing my way is dyes, water, soda ash, squeeze bottles and some zip close bags. You'll also want a measuring cup or plastic cups and spoons for mixing the dyes up before you transfer them to the squeeze bottles. Don't ever use any of the measuring or mixing utensils that you use for measuring dyes for food preparation. Once you use them to mix dyes you must never use them with food again.

I recommend that you work with PFD fabric, but if you don't have that then make sure your fabric is well washed with no fabric softeners added to it. I pre-cut my fabric into fat-quarter size since I rarely work with a piece of fabric larger than that.

You will need to soak your fabric in soda ash and water before dyeing it. I fill a five gallon bucket with warm water and add ¼ cup of soda ash and stir with an old spoon to combine.

Please wear a mask or a respirator when working with the soda ash. You don't want to breathe any of it in. Then I just stuff my fabric in the bucket while I prepare my dyes. I usually soak the fabric for at least 15 minutes.



Make sure the fabric is well submerged. While the fabric is soaking you can prepare the dyes.

Once procion dyes are mixed with water, they pose no health hazard; however, when they are in powdered form it's imperative not to breathe them in. You must wear a mask or preferably a respirator before you open the containers. DO NOT do this in front of a fan or an open window when the wind is blowing. Close the containers

as soon as you finish taking the dye out of them and do this away from other people and pets.

Okay now that the warning message is out of the way it's time to mix the dyes. I use a ratio of 1 tablespoon of dye to 2 cups of water. More or less dye will produce stronger or lighter colors so you'll need to experiment to find what formula of water and dye works best for you. Start by putting a tablespoon of dye into a container and adding a few tablespoons of warm water. Warm water will help the dye dissolve quicker and easier.

Mix it to start dissolving the dye and then add the rest of the water to make 2 cups. Then just pour it into your squeeze bottle or other container.



This is now your "base" dye. You can use this dye straight out of the bottle full strength or you can dilute it further with more water.



I like to mix up all the colors that I'm going to use before I start doing any dyeing. I label the squeeze bottles so that I know what color is in each and I store any left-over, prepared dye when I'm done in a cool dark place. I actually just put it in the spare refrigerator that I have. I've stored them for several months that way and they've worked just fine. That's it! It's as easy as that to mix up your dyes.

Once all your dyes are mixed and the fabric has been soaking for 15 minutes take the fabric out of the soda ash/water and squeeze out some of the excess water. You don't have to completely wring out all the water. Place each piece in a plastic zip close bag.

Now squirt some dye into the bag.



There are a few things to keep in mind that affect how dark the fabric will dye.

*How much fabric you have put in the bag and how much of the base dye you have added:

For example, let's say I have a fat-quarter sized piece of fabric in the bag and I pour in 3 tablespoons of dye. That 3 tablespoons of dye has to disperse and divide itself among all that fabric. If I pour 1/2 cup of dye into the bag there is more dye to go around so I will get a darker result.

*How much extra water you add to the bag:

If you pour in 1/2 cup of dye and then a 1/2 cup of water, you'll dilute the color and get a lighter result. Less water means less dilution and more color.

*How long you let the fabric sit in the dye:

If you pull it out too soon then the dye doesn't have enough time to bond with the fabric and you won't get much color. The longer you leave it in the more color transfer you will get.

Once you've added some dye (and water if you want), squeeze the extra air out of the bag and zip it shut.

Now knead the bag to distribute the color throughout the fabric. You may need to add either more water or more dye when you see how the color is distributing throughout the bag.

Once the fabric is completely colored set the bag aside and let it sit for at least a few hours to overnight. The longer it sits the more the color will transfer to the fabric.

You can see in this following photo an example of how I've used additional water added to the bag to affect the color.



The bag on the left has the dye added straight from the bottle and the one on the right has just a little of the dye and some added water.

If you want you can throw a couple pieces of lace right into the bags along with the fabric and dye two things at once. The Venice lace dyes up nicely with the procion dyes. Make sure you've soaked it in the soda ash first though.

I let my fabric sit in the plastic bags with the dye overnight. I leave the bags piled up in a heap and then when I'm ready I just dump the fabrics out into the sink and rinse them in cool water until the water runs fairly clear. Then I toss the fabric, similar colors together (meaning: don't put the blues and greens in with the pinks and yellows), into the washer and wash it on warm with regular detergent and then I toss them in the dryer to dry them. Once they're out of the dryer I give them a nice press with a hot iron.

That's it! It's that easy to dye your own fabric. You'll notice in the fabrics in the photo that they are dyed unevenly with some subtle color variations on the surface. I like this result. If you want to get a more evenly dyed surface then you'll need to knead the fabric in the bags every so often to help distribute the dye more evenly.

