

Chinese Brush Painting

by Elizabeth Priddy



This piece, *Egret Moon*, is one in a series of tile paintings made using Chinese brush painting techniques.

Chinese brush painting uses specific brushes, brush strokes, and color loading methods. My painting has the character and color depth of traditional china painting but uses techniques of rice paper brush painting. I use true-color, blending underglazes on white stoneware clay and only one glaze firing is required. The painting itself is layered between a satin white base glaze and a glossy clear glaze, both of which must fit well with the clay body. After firing, the image looks as though it's trapped in glass. The painting stains the translucent glossy glaze, making an integrated surface that has more visual depth than paintings done over a matt slip.

Painting directly onto a base glaze also allows for easy erasing with a palette knife or a bamboo skewer. Since glaze particles are fine enough

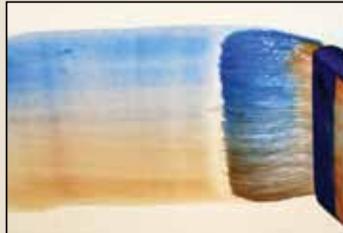
to lift away cleanly, the top layer of a tinted glaze or an individual section can be pulled away, revealing fine lines of white glaze. In contrast, engobes or slips leave ragged edges when the top painting is removed.

Commercial underglazes work like tubes of liquid watercolors. Paint with the underglazes straight from the jar. As you clean your brush between strokes, enough water remains for loading and blending the color. I use just seven colors to create the entire palette in my pieces: black, white, yellow, red, blue, dark green, and brown.

This technique can be adapted for oxidation or reduction firing and for temperature ranges from earthenware to stoneware. If you want to maintain optimal clarity of color, then choose a white clay, zinc-free glazes, and fire the pieces in an electric kiln.

Strokes and Loads

I mainly use five strokes, four loads, and dian or shaped dots made with the brush tip. The five strokes are bone, grass, vertical, side, and calligraphy. The loads are base, five-color, moon, and bamboo. Base load is one color throughout the brush, five-color is a base of water, then each color loaded in sequence and proportionally, starting with the lightest color at the base of the brush and ending with the darkest color in the tip. The brush is flattened at the tip for the moon load and after loading the brush with one color, one edge of the tip is dipped in black. Bamboo load is the same as the moon load, only the black is dipped along both edges of a flattened brush and blended to make a shaded stroke resulting in a rounded tube mark; this is the load for the bone stroke, which looks like a short bone with rounded ends.



A hake brush is used for applying fields and washes of color. Two colors are loaded onto the brush and blended by brushing back and forth on a flat surface to create a fade.



For dimensional dots, select a brush that is large enough to cover half the width of the dot. Place the brush light side to the center and swirl the brush around to meet itself.



Edges of forms, banding, or dropped shadows are made with a moon loaded, or half-bamboo stroke. It is made on a compound brush that is flattened before loading.



The bone stroke is used to show rounded or hollow forms. The load is dark on both sides of a flattened brush. Jiggle the brush to widen and finish the stroke at each end.



Grass strokes are for calligraphy and detailed line drawing. Even in simple drawing, variation in pressure of the point is used to create thick and thin lines within one stroke.



The marks across the top show how each color is added and blended into the brush for a five color load. The bottom stroke which is called a vertical stroke shows varied color and lines as the brush drags through.

Brushes

The main component of brush painting is the special technique of mixing and blending color directly in an absorbent, natural hair, compound brush. Chinese bamboo mounted brushes come to perfect points that can be reshaped to create special effects or strokes. I use a variety of sizes and hair compositions. The round bamboo handle allows the brush to twirl and dance or be gripped tightly for miniscule detail work. The hair bundle is arranged in the ferrule with the very absorbent core hair and stiff hairs for spring at the center. Softer, smoother, oilier hair surrounds the core to retain moisture and direct the paint to the point. Hair varies by quality of absorption and color from goat to weasel, deer, fox, or horse. Flat goat hair hake brushes are used for washes and applying glaze. Many brushes marketed to potters are only good for base loaded grass and calligraphy marks. They do not have the springy quality that is necessary for bone and vertical stroke. Expect to pay about \$25 for the essential Chinese painting tool, the compound brush.

Practice Makes Perfect

To begin, practice on rice paper with ink to get to know your brushes, loads, and strokes. Also, test on examples of your materials and try the stroke techniques before completing entire pieces.

When you're ready to start painting on clay, try starting with an image like the one of the egret and moon demonstrated here. Glaze a slab tile with the satin white glaze. Allow a space for the moon in the clay frame. Cover the moon area with a paper resist and wash in the sky and ground using a hake brush (figure 1).

Paint the moon in using the moon load with white, yellow, and black. The clean side of the tip is presented to the interior of the moon shape and the black side is swept in a circle around the exterior to meet itself. This is a vertical stroke using a large brush equal to the size of the radius of the circle. This creates a dimensional dot. It's used for any fleshy shapes with fullness like eyes, grapes, cherries, moons, or rounded shells (figure 2).

Create the neck of the egret using a bamboo load with gray at the center and black edges. By applying pressure down and then lifting up part way, the head is formed and extended into the neck of the bird with one fluid vertical stroke. This defines the plumbing pipe shape of the neck that distinguishes an egret from a goose or a swan (figure 3). Each bird has a distinctive quality, usually it's the shape of the beak or plumage, but for egrets, it's their neck at rest.

The body is a side stroke with a moon load. The clean side of the



1

Paint a wash with a solid loaded hake brush over rice paper masks for the moon and egret shapes.



2

The brush is swept in a circle with the light yellow side to the center of the moon, creating a fade to the outside.



3

A bamboo loaded brush with white at the center and black edges, follows the form of the egret's head and neck.



4

A load of white fading to black in the tip rounds out the form of the belly of the bird with a side stroke.



5

A round vertical stroke with a moon load makes the eye. A five color load with a vertical stroke makes the beak.



6

Grass strokes make body feathers. Spread the brush into finger shapes to make multiple marks.

tip faces the interior of the body (see figure 4).

The beak and eye are placed carefully using a three-color load of white, yellow, and black on a small brush and vertical strokes (figure 5).

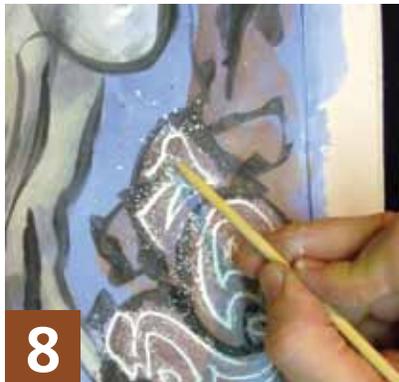
Feathers are formed with the grass stroke. Dry the clean brush hair on a cloth and twist it to a gnarled head. Drag the splayed hairs through a wet, diluted, gray for a base load of just the tips of the brush. Place, then lift the brush in

the same soft motion (figure 6). Define the legs last; scrape through the blue wash to reveal the white glaze, then use linked bone strokes and a bamboo load. They must be placed carefully to balance the weight of the completed bird (figure 7).

Lastly, use calligraphy strokes to refine the image and apply detail work in the form of dian or lively shaped dots made with the brush tip. Correct imperfect marks and add lines to the feathers, rocks, and



7 Scrape the blue back to reveal white for the legs. Use a small bone stroke and a bamboo load to position legs.



8 A combination of calligraphy strokes, dian and white scratch work refine the image.



9 Scratch in with a bamboo skewer to make white line work details for rocks, grass, and a snail.



10 Coat the painting with clear glaze. Move quickly and lightly.



11 Paint an oil spot black glaze over the black outline to create a dark frame.

the grass (figure 8). Then go back and do white scratch work to place highlights and apply white dian (figure 9).

Apply the top, sealing, clear glossy glaze with a hake brush in one clean swift stroke. Do not rub or hesitate as this will catch and lift the painting off instead of coating it (figure 10). Tip: You can also use a roller to apply the clear glaze.

Use an oil spot black glaze to create the frame around the image and

then it is ready to fire to cone 7–8 in an electric kiln (figure 11).

Raku, gas, electric, and wood all require distinct adjustments, but I have found a way with every material set that I have tried. Each surprises me with its own unique quality and beauty.

Painting Styles

There are four basic styles of Chinese brush painting. Baimiao or line work, is most similar to Japanese sumi-e painting. Gongbi, or meticu-



The finished piece, one in a series of paintings with this theme on tiles created with a moon pop-out in the frame.

lous style, is the most common and familiar and is basic flower and bird painting. Mogu, or boneless style, uses no understructure of line work to compose. All shapes and forms come from the load and tone of the brush marks. There are at least 24 shapes of leaves and rocks required for mastery of this technique. While it is evaluated by the full use of the catalog of marks, it is the most free and loose style of painting. As it relies on fades and tonal variation to create form structure, this creates a problem in clay. The color generally stays true but its final intensity can vary according to glaze application or placement in the kiln. Because of this, I paint mainly in the boneless style and then add calligraphy, or line work. These “insurance strokes” guarantee that my compositions hold their structure even if some delicate marks recede during firing. As you practice, you become accomplished at every style, load, and stroke. The ultimate goal of practice with the brush is to pick and choose among those elements freely. When you can do this, it is called Xieyi or scholar’s style.