Pottery Stencil Ideas to Share

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I have a friend with artistic talents that fill me with envy. With a few deft strokes of a brush, she can cover a blank empty platter with birds and mermaids, or penguins or owls, or a possum in a tree. She brings her wonderful stuff to me, to be fired along with my less inspiring pots. If you have the same magic talent, perhaps this article is not for you. But if (like me) you have to think long and hard before every move, read on. Let me share with you some ideas about **stencils**.

The broad idea, of course, is to make use of two glazes, and apply one over the other. A stencil, lying snugly over the first coat of glaze, leaves an outline as the second coat is applied. For this to work well, the two glazes need to be of contrasting colour. Also they need to be stiff and not too fluid when melted, if you want the stencil outline to remain crisp and sharp. This process can be quite disappointing if either glaze is free-flowing and runny when hot.

Here's an example, done with two glazes which we call "Dark Chocolate" and "Cream Tin". The platter in the picture was first given an all-over coat of the chocolate glaze, then the stencil was laid carefully in place and a coat of contrasting creamy-white glaze was sprayed over it.

Both of these glazes were chosen because they remain obediently in place when melted, so even the fine line details of leaf stalks don't become blurred.

Notice that for this to work, you really need to be able to **spray** the second glaze over the stencil. The first coat of glaze may be applied by dipping or spraying or even brushing, whatever suits you, but this is not an option for the second one.

Where to Begin?

When you set out to create a stencil, your first task of course is to decide on the shape and the size. Just one piece? Several pieces joined in some way, like the stencil in the picture above? Or a loose group of completely separate pieces? It may be that these decisions involve Art (with a capital A) rather than craft (with a small c).

Now, what material to use? The stencil needs to be heavy enough to stay in place while you spray over it. Thin foil or sheet plastic just won't do. You may try weighing the edges of the stencil down with small coins or fishing sinkers (been there, done that), but it's not easy with small detailed pieces. Sheet metal (copper or tinplate) isn't really a good choice either, too hard to cut, and not flexible enough to be pressed snugly against the pot when necessary. For me, there's only one sensible choice, sheet lead.

Why lead? Well, it's soft enough to be cut with simple tools like scissors and sharp blades. And of course, it's heavy enough to lie obediently in place while the second coat of glaze is sprayed over it. If the surface of the pot requires it, the soft malleable lead can be pressed down to make a snug fit against the job. And finally, if you choose to assemble a number of small pieces it is easy to do this using copper wire and solder.

Yes I know, it's no longer politically correct to do anything with lead. Lead is a four-letter word. If working with lead makes you uncomfortable, you might choose to wear gloves (like you do when you smoke a cigarette?) My own feeling is that there are enough real hazards in a pottery workshop, without making them up. But wash your hands, of course.

Stencil Examples: One piece, or several pieces?

Here is an example of a one-piece stencil, a stylized Japanese bird, about 200 mm wide

The bird motif adds some interest to an otherwise plain and ordinary plate.

More than one piece? This dragon is a loose assembly of **three** pieces. You can move or re-position them one by one to get the effect you want.

The copper red glaze used for this 5-year-old dragon plate is cheerful and bright, but maybe a bit too fluid when melted. The outline of the stencil is a bit blurred.

You aren't limited to just a few parts for your stencil. This duck-in-a-pond design has half a dozen pieces, not fixed together but placed individually on the pot to suit its shape or size.

Small fiddly bits like the little leaves in a stencil like this can be made into a sub-assembly with little bridges of wire. This photo shows the idea. Notice how the wire bridges loop up high, so they don't cast a shadow when the second coat of glaze is being sprayed on.

The ducky-dish stencil pattern was not original, but inspired by something very similar seen in a woodcraft exhibition years ago. Thank you, anonymous designer, for a happy idea.

If your stencil has lots of little fiddly pieces, sometimes it makes sense to connect them all together.

The leaves and gumnuts in this one are all joined by stiff copper wire, so the whole thing can be lifted and repositioned in one simple move. The wire of course is placed flat down next to the surface, so it leaves its own shadow to form the stems of the branch.

Now let's look at how the glazes are applied. In this picture, the underside of a platter rim has already been sprayed. The platter has been turned over, right side up, and a measured quantity of chocolate glaze is being sprayed evenly on the top.

With the first coat of glaze in place, the stencil is lowered carefully into position. We try not to drag it about, in case this leaves marks later.

The second coat of glaze is sprayed a little at a time, with the gun held not too close to the surface. The idea is to let the glaze drizzle down gently, evenly, without having it blow in under the edges of the stencil.

If a pool of wet glaze builds up on the stencil, stop spraying and blow gently with warm air until it's dry before continuing.

All done? Now try to lift off the stencil without dragging it around or leaving marks. A pair of tweezers might be a good idea here.

Look carefully at the resulting pattern. Any little blobs of unwanted top glaze may be picked away with a pointed tool. Just don't dig too deeply into the bottom layer.

Narrow tracks like leaf stalks may be improved by gently drawing something like a toothpick along the track. It's worth spending a few minutes here to get things right.

After all that trouble, the final fired plate usually makes it all worth while

The glazes used in the example above (chocolate, and cream tin) are best fired in oxidation, maturing at Cone 9 or 10. Now here is a different combination suitable for a reduction firing, using copper red and temmoku.

Way back in 2007, my wife and I travelled to Wales, to walk the ancient "Offa's Dyke" track for nearly 300 kilometres.. We found there was a Welsh dragon behind every bush, on the flag, on the coins, on letterboxes, on forestry notice boards,. This stencil is a faithful copy of that wondrous beast, and it brings back happy memories.

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Here is a platter destined to have the Welsh dragon motif. Before placing the stencil, the underside of the rim was sprayed with a measured quantity of temmoku glaze. Then the platter was turned over, and a coat of copper red glaze applied on the top. This coat is thicker in the centre, not so thick up the sides of the rim. Now the stencil lies in place over the layer of copper red.

Yes, the top coat of glaze still looks white. Copper red colour doesn't develop until late in the firing.

Now a coat of temmoku glaze is sprayed over the top.

For coating the rim, the spray gun can be held quite close to the job. But when spraying over the stencil itself, the gun is pointed down and held much further away.

As usual, it's necessary to pause from time to time to blow warm air over everything so little pools of wet glaze don't run off onto the pot.

All done!

The stencil has to be lifted off with care to avoid disturbing the dry soft glaze around it. Look carefully for little blemishes, like dribbles or beads of glaze which have sneaked in under the edges. A delicate pointed tool or a small stiff brush may be helpful here.

Here it is at last, ready for the kiln. The sloping inner sides of the rim have a thicker coat of copper red towards the bottom, while the temmoku is sprayed more thickly towards the top. The idea is to have the colour change gradually from red to brown as the rim rises.

Making the original stencil took several hours, but the results make it all worth while. And of course, with a stencil, making another plate takes much less effort.

Not for the faint-hearted, this last one. The stencil for a "Firedancers" platter has at least 25 loose pieces, and it's no small task positioning them all on the plate.

The small pieces can be lifted off with tweezers after glazing, so you don't smudge the finished job.

See here why sheet lead is the material of choice. Could you really make this work if the little flames were made of plastic?

Dancing joyfully around the fire? Of course! That's what potters do in their dreams.

Some glaze combinations to try:

Chocolate

Potash feldspar	40
Silica #200	20
Ball clay	10
Calcite	10
Red iron oxide	6

At a specific gravity of 1.35, it needs about 6 to 8 mL per 100 sq.cm

Cream Tin

Potash feldspar	49
Kaolin HR1	20
Calcite	4
Dolomite	19
Tin oxide	8
Bentonite	2

This "chocolate and cream tin" combination is not very fluid, and so keeps its place on a vertical surface at cone 9 or 10 without streaming down. Mixed to specific gravity 1.35 to be sprayed over temmoku, think in terms of about 7 or 8 mL per 100 square cm. Some trial and error is needed for the best results, as usual.

Temmoku. Cone 9 oxidation, or Cone 10 with copper red in reduction

Potash feldspar	55
Silica	23
Calcite	21
Ball clay	8
Talc	8
Red iron oxide	13

At a specific gravity of 1.4 it's OK for dipping. If sprayed, it needs about 10 mL to 100 square cm. It's a bit too fluid for use with stencils on a vertical surface, but works OK with copper red glazes on a level surface such as a platter.

Copper Red.

Potash feldspar	80
Kaolin	2.8
Silica	49
Whiting	16
Frit 4106	16.7
Dolomite	20.7
Tin oxide	5
Copper carbonate	0.9

Mixed to specific gravity 1.6, it needs about 15 mL to 100 square cm to achieve a reliable red.