

Paper Marbling with Diane Maurer
A Workshop Review by Meg Kennedy

During the weekend of March 7 & 8, Room 238 of the Fine Arts Building at Rutgers University, Camden was awash with bright colors, gorgeous patterns, squeals of delight, oohs & ahhs. Paper Marbling with Diane Maurer: what a treat!

One of America's leading experts in marbling and other paper surfacing techniques and the author of multiple books on these subjects, Diane Maurer is also an extraordinary teacher whose vast knowledge and well-organized presentation makes a complicated and somewhat mysterious process accessible for the beginner.

The first morning was devoted to learning the history, tools and materials, and the procedures of basic marbling. Diane described the ideal conditions—high humidity, cool, dustless (none of which, by the way, we had that day!)—and the fluids necessary for marbling: spring water vs. distilled water vs. tap water, carageenan, alum, and ox gall. The special pigments used (Colophon brand) provided jewel-like colors, as compared to the more antique-looking shades favored by Iris Nevins. Diane described many of the pitfalls that occur, even to experts, and reminded us that “it’s the process, not the product.” (“Baloney,” we muttered, “let me at that tray!”).

And then we experienced just how wrong things could go—marbling the wrong side of the paper, dropping in too much pigment, capturing large air bubbles, etc.—while getting the first thrill of the occasional sheet that came out just right. Marbling paper was not only exciting but absolutely addictive. We had to force ourselves to take a lunch break!

In addition to providing recipes for mixing the size and the mordant, Diane taught us the procedures for creating nearly 20 different marbling patterns, as well as a variety of Persian fantasy designs. Here’s the list I noted as she demonstrated:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Stone & pebble | 10. American |
| 2. Gel get | 11. Dutch |
| 3. Nonpareil | 12. Chevron |
| 4. Wave nonpareil | 13. Flame |
| 5. Bouquet & reverse bouquet | 14. Feathered chevron |
| 6. Gothic | 15. Fleur de Lis |
| 7. Icarus or Feather | 16. Octopus |
| 8. Zebra | 17. Palm |
| 9. Cascade | 18. Feather palm |

The Persian fantasy designs included leaves, hearts, flowers, birds, and butterflies.

We learned how much prep is involved in marbling paper (LOTS!) and all gained respect for this ancient art. The procedures for creating a sheet were not necessarily difficult, but systematic and essential; thus there was a lot of talking to oneself going on throughout the room. Here are the steps we followed:

1. Break the surface tension of the water by skimming the surface with a strip of newspaper.
2. Sprinkle colors over the entire surface with a brush. Finish with a sprinkle of gall water to compress some of the rounds of color.
3. Using the large rake, make a gel get pattern. Follow with additional movements of various tools to make the other patterns.
4. Hold your paper by two opposite corners, alum side down, and roll it down onto the water smoothly.
5. Pick up the paper and placing it on the draining board.
6. Rinse it off with plain water to remove the alum.
7. Hang the paper to dry.
8. Skim off the remaining color from the surface of the water in the try before starting again.

The rest of the weekend was spent marbling paper, learning the patterns, and experimenting with color combinations. As if this were not enough to keep us busy, Diane also brought the materials for suminagashi marbling (the earliest type of marbling, dating back to 10th century Japan), using Boku Undo colors and Photo Flo on Lowe-Cornell rice paper. This was one of the best workshops I've ever taken! Diane's excellence and generosity were appreciated by all who attended.

Reprinted from SCRIPTA, the newsletter of The Philadelphia Calligraphers' Society with permission of the editor and the author. Volume 33 #2, Spring 2009