

Hand Painted Tile Murals: How To Do It

A Tutorial by Lisa Burt

While a small percentage of my murals are painted on ready-glazed ceramic tiles, the majority of my work is painted on commercial bisque tile using the underglaze technique.

Although there are several factories that produce and sell unglazed bisque tile, I have had the best luck with those manufactured by Dal-Tile. I prefer to work on 6"x6" tiles for a couple of reasons:

- 1) there are fewer grout joints creating grid lines across the mural artwork, and
- 2) since I do a lot of commissions for residential kitchens, 6x6" tiles work out mathematically well on a standard 18"-high backsplash.

Also, 4-1/4" tiles always *feel* like a bathroom to me.

I always do a full-scale pencil drawing of the mural, with grout lines indicated on the drawing so that important elements of the mural aren't across a grout joint. The drawing is then transferred to the bisque tile (which has been laid out and numbered on the backs with a colored ceramic pencil) with red graphite paper which is placed underneath the drawing, graphite-side down on the tile. (I prefer the red to the blue graphite paper because for some reason, the red transfers better onto tile, and it also burns away completely in the firing. I use Saral-brand graphite paper-- readily available at any good art supply store)

The majority of my murals are nature/botanical scenes, and I always begin by painting all the background first. Then I do all the greenery (there's usually more of that color than any other, and it takes the longest). The flowers and animals (main subjects) are painted next, and then the foreground.

I use a wide range of underglaze "1-stroke" brands, but always underglazes that work on bisque. It's important to avoid underglazes meant for greenware, because when applied to bisque, they tend to flake off.

The underglazes should be mixed with water, generally to a consistency similar to that of light cream, but will sometimes need to be thicker or thinner depending on the effect desired. I can't tell you exactly-this part comes from practice and experience. It's probably better to err on the side of a thinner consistency rather than thick. Too thick an application can flake off, and you can always add another layer over a too-thin application.

Keep in mind that bisqued tile will literally suck the moisture from your paintbrush into the tile very quickly. Use confident,

quick strokes, and practice, practice, practice to get your brushstrokes looking natural.

The finished tiles are placed in tile setters and fired in an electric kiln at cone 06 to "set" the underglaze. I then glaze them using a mini paint roller brush used for painting wood trim. Using a roller brush with a bit of a nap gives the glaze a slightly texturized surface. I never glaze the tiles with a brush-it's too time-consuming and drives me crazy. (If I were smart, I would probably airbrush the glaze-much faster. But I am used to my rollerbrush and it works for me.) Two good coats is usually sufficient, but you might want to do three. I then let the tiles dry overnight and fire them at cone 05. If I have used a lot of pink or red in my mural, I glaze fire at cone 06 to keep the colors from burning out too much.

Again, practice your brushstrokes-it takes time to get the feel of painting watercolor-style on bisque, but it's a very "painterly" look and well worth the time to learn. Have fun!

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