Marbling FAQs

The art of marbling paper has been historically associated with the craft of bookbinding. The technique of marbling involves creating a multi-colored pattern of paint that floats on the surface of a gel-like medium. Paper or fabric is then laid on the surface to pick up the floating paint and transfer the design.

How much of the mordant has to be removed from the paper after marbling? It seems like the paper's a little slimy no matter how much I rinse, even if I agitate a little with my fingers...I'm afraid to ruin the design. What's the worst that will happen if a LITTLE of the gel is left on?

You want to remove as much of the mordant as possible. But if a little is left on the paper, it will dry and be a little stiff is all. If you are working on fabric, you can heat set the paints and then the mordant will wash out. But here's the key: you'll want to use a squeegee to remove the mordant from your paper—rinsing usually isn't good enough. A gentle pass with a squeegee will remove all the mordant and shouldn't harm your design. And don't be afraid to rinse thoroughly! The design will stand up to water just fine.

I hang these sheets to dry, and there's always a puddle at the bottom edge of the sheet (almost like a rim of the gel and liquid)...any way to avoid this? I'm afraid that if I dab with a paper towel I'll mess up the image.

Again, if you rinse and then squeegee, you'll remove most of the gel/water, and you shouldn't get any puddling. That said, if you want to blot your paper. Then it shouldn't be a problem. The colors are bound to the paper fibers and should stand up to water, squeegee or paper towels.

My colors don't seem to spread well at all when I use them as is, but watering them down even a little makes them too pastel for my tastes. How else can you make them spread more? (It's not the mordant...I've used other paints that spread out just fine.)

This is THE question for marbling. There are many variables that contribute to how your colors will spread on the mordant. Thinning them with water will help them disperse, but as you say, that also dilutes the color. Fortunately there are dispersing agents! Traditionally, marblers use ox-gall (which is exactly what it sounds like) as a dispersing agent. Just a drop of oxgall in your paint will help it disperse tremendously. The general rule of thumb is that each additional color you put on the mordant surface will require an additional drop of oxgall for equal spreading. (Jacquard does not sell oxgall, but it is available in art material stores or online). A cheaper (and vegetarian) alternative to oxgall is Photoflow, which is a wetting agent made by Kodak. Photoflow is available at any darkroom supply house or online.

Jacquard Products | Rupert, Gibbon & Spider, Inc.
P.O. Box 425, Healdsburg, CA 95448 | 800.442.0455 | Fax: 707.433.4906
www.jacquardproducts.com | service@jacquardproducts.com

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I've also used Jacquard's Marbling Kit by substituting other paints. Specifically, I used Jacquard's Pearl Ex powders mixed with an acrylic medium. These spread beautifully and are interesting to work with over dark papers, but don't seem to have the 'sticking' power that the watercolors with the kit have. Some of the intensity seems to rinse off in that last step. Any way to correct that?

Marbling is a transfer process. What allows for the transfer is Alum, the sizing you use to treat your paper or fabric. Alum has a chemical charge opposite to that of paints and pigments. It attracts color and transfers it from the mordant surface onto the paper via electro-chemical properties. In other words, alum turns your substrate into a pigment magnet. The Pearl Ex powdered pigments have no charge, and are thus not attracted to alum the way our paints are. This is probably why you are losing color in the rinse: the pigments are not well bound to the substrate. If you want a more reliable pearlescent color for marbling, try Jacquard's Lumiere (thinned with water with a bit of oxgall or Photoflow).

How can you tell if the mordant is getting too old? What does it do (or not do) that I can tell when it's time to make more?

The mordant should keep indefinitely. It does not go bad. Occasionally, the Methocel may precipitate and become lumpy. A little heat and stirring will bring it back into solution.

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