



A FEW TIPS FOR ADDING PAINT TO YOUR EMBROIDERIES ON ANTIQUE LINEN

Nearly twenty years ago, I had just finished the embroidery above on a piece of pristine antique linen, when I knocked over a cup of coffee. I quickly rinsed it, but could not completely eradicate the stain.

I wondered about using a little box of watercolour paints I had been given as a present but had never used. I practised first on a scrap of the same linen, and found that if used neat, the colour was too strong, but that if I diluted it and then simply laid the loaded brush on the linen, the paint flowed into the fabric in a way I found quite pleasing. And so I started to use paint a little more in my embroideries, encouraged also by seeing some exquisite Georgian silk-on-silk embroideries featuring delicate areas of painting.



I have never had a painting lesson, nor do I consider myself out to be any sort of painter. When we have done 'paint into stitch' workshops, people are very anxious about the painting. However, painting on fabric is much easier than painting on paper. The combination of the silk paint I use and the technique of allowing the paint to travel, rather than brushing it on,

means that all you have to do is find the right colour and and apply it by allowing the paint to travel, and anyone really can achieve interesting results. Indeed, people find it relaxing, addictive and I am usually hard-pressed to persuade them to put the paintbrushes down and pick up a needle.

WHAT PAINTS TO USE?

For a long time I used Abraxas inks made from natural vegetable dyes, finding the fluidity and consistent texture of the ink easier than watercolour paints. These inks are still available (see suppliers's list), and covetable if only for the exquisite little corked and labelled bottles.

However, neither inks nor watercolour paints are intended for painting onto fabric, and there are frustrations. First, the colour tends to fade between application and drying, so what you get as you paint does not always hold. Secondly, if you are wanting to paint a swathe of grass or sky, which is mostly what I use the paint for, I find that watercolour paint does not travel in a consistent manner and so you end up with circular splodges where the liquid has travelled, but the pigment has stopped. Some watercolours have a more granular consistency and you can end up with tiny grains of pigment in the weave of your fabric. I use watercolour paints and brush pens from Japan for tiny details rather than washes of colour.



A few years ago, I attended a *Selvage* workshop given by textile designer Sarah Campbell, where I learned to use silk paints. It was an exciting moment in which I realised I could abandon appliqué, which had hitherto been my way of 'painting' on fabric, and create more painterly pieces by combining paint and stitch.

I like the watery, suggestive quality of the diluted silk paint, which I think gives a more subtle result. You simply place the brush on the linen and allow the paint to travel from your brush and through the fibres, spreading and settling in a serendipitous fashion which can often leave you with something quite unexpected to stitch. It sinks right into the fabric, leaving it still pliable and soft to handle and work on.

Nothing has been brushed on in the birds (right). Either the paint has been allowed to flow onto the fabric or I might have dabbed a bit here and there before choosing the threads to match the results. I like the play between stitched and painted areas.

If you have a heavily stitched foreground subject, paint the background very simply, it lends the piece some perspective. I like to paint over printed lines for architectural features, legs and arms which can look awkward when stitched.



The painting in the embroideries left and above, both by students at workshops who had not painted before, is in fact very simple.



FINDING COLOURS

As well as using paint to lend perspective, I like to use it to find colours for my stitching. So, for instance, if you want to stitch autumn leaves, first find a real leaf, then try to match the colours with paint on your fabric, and take this to the thread shop to find your threads.



For the garden embroidery below, I used paint to map out the different areas as I worked. Mostly it ended up being covered by stitching but I left some visible, such as that on the brick wall behind the tree.



For my *When May Follows* kit, and indeed for all my kit embroideries, I use paint on a rough sketch (right). Frixion pens are an invaluable resource, allowing us to draw and write on fabric freely, knowing the lines can be erased by the iron or a hairdryer. Yes, they can come back if placed in freezing cold temperatures, but they can be removed again by heat.

STARTING TO PAINT

First, which brushes to use. You only need a couple of brushes, but they need to be round point synthetic brushes sizes 1 and 2. Artway do a very useful pack of 5 sizes. It is worth experimenting with the effect that different brush shapes produce when simply laid on the fabric (see below).

PAINT

As I use the silk paints for workshops, I have built up a collection, but of course you can mix pretty much any colour you need if you get the primary colours red, yellow and blue. The colours I use most are by Javana: Olive, Pistachio, Black and Sky Blue (see suppliers list). The jars cost £4.90 from George Weil and depending on how prolific you are, a jar could last your stitching lifetime. I find I can make pretty much any green by mixing and/or diluting the first two, and you can mix the black with any to create myriad colours.



Once you have got used to painting on linen, you may want to experiment with making marks with different types of brushes. Even the round fine point brushes, if simply laid flat on the linen will make a petal shape, enabling you to paint-sketch some daisy heads or leaves before stitching.



When you are practising for a particular piece, then you need to test and practise on the same fabric. I try to allow a generous margin around my kit prints for you to try the paints out.





FINDING YOUR COLOURS: PAINT CHARTS

Making paint charts is enjoyable and relaxing. It is a great way to start painting on linen. You get used to the colours and the way the paint behaves on that fabric.

START by finding a palette- an old white china plate will do (or see suppliers list). A large palette with various wells and trays is best for this type of painting because you are constantly diluting and mixing. If I am painting a larger expanse of grass or sky, using a single colour, I will mix up enough for the whole area, in tiny white ceramic bowls and dolls' plates.

Starting with any colour, wet your brush and dab it on some kitchen towel before dipping it in the neat colour. Next, just rest your brush on the fabric and allow the paint to travel off the brush and onto the fabric. Note the speed with which it travels. Most paints are too strong

when neat. So put some neat paint on your palette, and experiment. One dab of paint, one of water, mix and blob. One dab of paint, two dabs of water, mix and blob. Keep diluting the original paint in a row so you can see how diluting the paint affects it. Repeat for each colour. Then try mixing colours neat, and repeat. So, if you are using watercolours, try mixing blue and yellow in different quantities and with different dilutions to find greens. Then see what happens when you add a touch of black. You could make a little paint chart album, and type fabric labels for the different colours.



KEEPING THE PAINT WITHIN THE LINE

If you want to practice preventing the paint from running over a line, then use a Frixion pen to draw a circle or leaf shape, and practise filling it with colour. The birds below were drawn so that the student could practise working within a line, at the same time as developing a colour palette. Once she was happy to start stitching (although her painting was lovely in itself), she ironed the lines away.

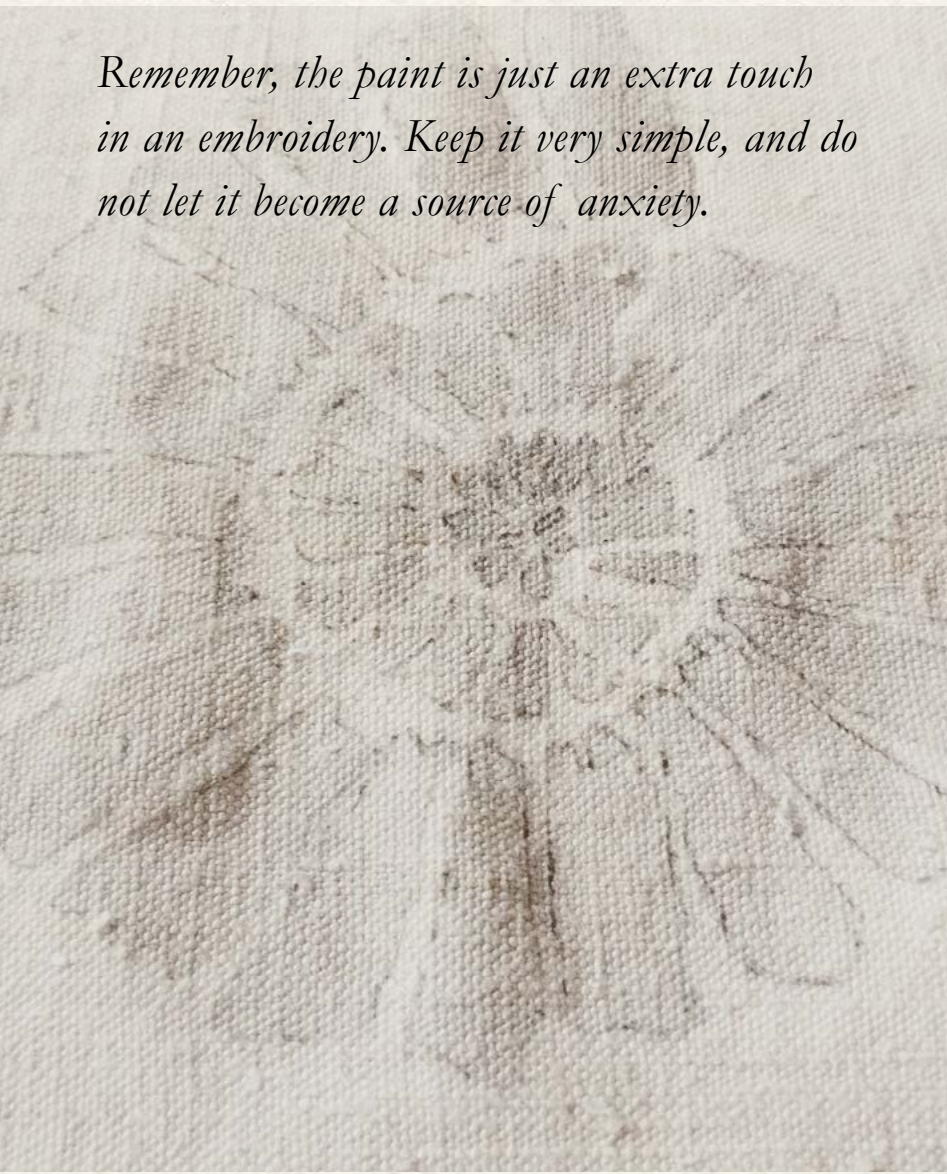
A useful tip when painting is to lay your linen on top of another piece of absorbent fabric, or a couple of layers of kitchen roll. The latter will absorb some of the paint coming through the linen and slow its outward progress.



Always start in the middle of a shape and let the paint flow out towards the edges. Once the paint stops travelling, then you can add more near to the edge, making sure your brush is never too wet, and that there are no drops of water about to dribble down the brush and splash onto your work. As a precaution, I always dab the brush on the edge of the embroidery. First, to remove excess paint and reassure myself that it is the right colour. Try to get into this habit and never take the brush from the palette straight to your embroidery. This certainly applies when you are painting smaller areas or details. The only time I am less careful is when I am painting a large expanse of grass or sky.



Remember, the paint is just an extra touch in an embroidery. Keep it very simple, and do not let it become a source of anxiety.



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STOCKISTS

artway.co.uk

BRUSHES

artway.co.uk/artway-brushes-round-synthetic-fine-point/

PAINT PALETTES

I recommend this one

artway.co.uk/artway-large-good-quality-palette-250mm-x-330mm/

SILK PAINTS

georgeweil.com

Silk paints by Javana, Pebeo Setasilk

Amazon has a vast selection of watercolour paints for paper and fabric.

If you want to use watercolour paint, this is a nice set
Kuretake Gansai Tambi Japanese Watercolour
Paints (36 Colour Set)

The Curettage watercolour brush pens are lovely
for fine detail but you cannot dilute them.

Students have used these with great success:
Memory Professional Artists Fabric Paint Set,
12 Colours in 12ml Aluminium Tubes