

Japanese Sumi Ink Marbling

Create gorgeous monochrome-marbled paper in seconds. BY MARCIA FRIEDMAN

Some years ago, on a visit to Istanbul, I wandered into a little guesthouse tucked into a street just down the hill from Topkapi Palace. The owner, Hikmet, was a master marbling artist, and the place reflected his passion for the art form. Everything in sight was marbled in bright colors and myriad patterns: lampshades, draperies, picture frames, bedsteads, plus a stunning array of wearables. I've been in love with marbling ever since.

Shortly after my trip I had the opportunity to try my hand at oil marbling. I had great results, but the process required lots of materials, some of which I'm sure are toxic. And I knew it would take a lot of time to master control over the swirling pigments to achieve the beautiful patterns I saw in books.

+ INK IT: SUMI INK MARBLING



A



B



C



D

Fig. A: Materials you need to get started. Fig. B: This white dishpan, made by Rubbermaid, is easily cleaned without leaving stains.

Fig. C: When first poured, the ink looks solid and heavy, but because it's water-based, most of it stays on the surface. Fig. D: Comb the ink for beautiful patterns.

Materials

- » **Bottle of Japanese sumi ink** This can be found in most art stores. Made from vegetable oil soot, this nontoxic ink produces the “five colors,” or shades of black, used in traditional sumi painting.
- » **Shallow plastic tray** larger than your paper
- » **Sheets of white or light-colored paper** medium to heavy weight, such as card stock
- » **Old comb or hair pick**
- » **Medium to large brush**
- » **Water**

Marbling has been around for centuries (especially in Asian countries), and there are a variety of techniques, both historical and contemporary, that you can try. But one of the easiest is using Japanese sumi ink and plain water to create beautiful black, gray, and white designs on a variety of papers. These can be used for card-making, bookbinding, scrapbooking, and other craft projects.

1. Set up your marbling tray.

Fill the plastic tray with 3–5 inches of water. Pour a small amount of the sumi ink on the surface of the water (some of it will sink to the bottom; that's why you only need a small amount) and swirl it around with the comb or hair pick. Try to cover the surface of the water with ink. The more you move the comb through the water, the more detailed the pattern will be.

2. Create your marbled paper.

Hold the paper by the edges, and starting at one edge, roll a sheet of paper slowly along the surface of the water in the plastic tray. Carefully turn it right side up and set aside to dry.

Photography by Marcia Friedman

**E****F****G****H**

Fig. E: Slowly roll the paper onto the surface of the ink and water mixture. **Fig. F:** Carefully move the wet marbled paper to a flat surface to dry. **Fig. G:** Painting clean water on a piece of paper before marbling will give

you alternative results. **Fig. H:** Once “painted” with the clean water, roll the paper onto the inked water; white areas will be left where you painted. *Voilà!*

You can do the same with a second piece of paper, which will have a lighter gray design. After marbling 1 or 2 pages, add a little more ink to the water tray and repeat the process. If your designs become less marbled and more overall gray, dump the water and start again.

NOTE: Use a paper size slightly larger than you would like your finished piece to be. This way you can trim the edges you hold, as they might not touch the surface of the water.

3. Press the paper flat.

After the paper is slightly dry, you might want to press it under some weights to keep it flat. If it still buckles, use a slightly warm iron when the paper is completely dry. The plastic tray and comb can be cleaned easily with soap and water.

Try Variations

a. This first variation will allow you an interesting white or light gray space, in which to put some writing or other design. After you've poured some ink onto the water, dip the large brush in a cup of plain water and make some random marks on the paper. Turn the paper upside down (water brush marks on

the bottom), and roll it carefully along the surface of the water in the plastic tray. The sumi ink should not stick to the brush marks, leaving white spaces you can write in or embellish in some other way.

b. This second variation will produce a brighter, more solid color(s). Rather than pouring the ink into the water (Step 1), dip a fine-tipped paintbrush into the ink, then lightly poke the tip of the paintbrush onto the water's surface. Repeat this as many times, and with as many colors, as you wish. You may touch the water's surface in the same spot over and over again, creating a bullseye effect, or in different spots, depending on the look you want.

c. There are also variations with the actual marbling process. Although combing works fine, you can also try dragging a (plucked) strand of your hair across the water's surface. Or simply blow across the water's surface.

Marcia Friedman loves letters, inks, and papers. As a professional graphic designer and calligrapher, she gets to indulge these passions fulltime. She is also an avid scrapbooker and photographer.