

Painting on Silk

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The Serti-Technique

“*Serti*” is a French word meaning to encircle or surround. In the serti painting technique, a resist is used to contain flowable dye within a design shape on fabric such as silk or cotton.

I learned this technique initially painting on cotton in Steve Brockett’s class at Fort Worden. I later worked with the same technique for painting on silk.

The serti painting technique, using a clear water-soluble resist, silk dyes, and 8 mm Habutai silk, is what we will be working with in my Fort Worden class.

Selecting your silk

Silk fabric is available in many types, such as China silk (Habutai), Twill, and Crepe de Chine. These fabrics range from fine to heavy, smooth to textured, and bright to matte.

Silk weight is measured in “momme” (mm), a Japanese unit of weight used in silk production. The heavier the silk, the higher the mm number:

- 5 mm Habutai: light weight silk, good for kites.
- 8 mm Habutai: slightly heavier than 5 mm, good for scarves, ties, pillow covers (used in class).
- Heavier silks have more body, and are good for wall hangings and framed art. Heavier silk is also stiffer and colors flow more slowly.

Preparing the silk for painting

Materials you will need

Silk	Fabric yardage or hemmed scarves
Mild soap	For washing
White Vinegar	For rinsing
Towel	For drying the silk
Iron	For pressing the silk

Washing and pressing the silk

1. The experts say to hand wash silk in cool or lukewarm water.
2. Use a small amount of very mild soap, such as baby shampoo, castile soap, or Synthrapol®.
3. In hand washing, rinse well, adding white vinegar to the final rinse.
4. Roll the wet silk in a towel and squeeze gently, but don't wring.
5. Press the silk while it is still damp using the Delicate or Low setting on your dry iron.

Hints & Tips

- I'm lazy, so I machine wash my silk scarves in cold water on the delicate cycle.
- I use a few drops of Synthrapol for a small machine load.
- I skip the vinegar rinsing step with the machine washing and haven't seen any adverse affects.

Developing your design

Materials you will need

Paper, white drawing paper, tracing paper	For patterns
Pencils, soft lead, & erasers	For tracing design onto silk
Felt pens, crayons	For deciding on color scheme
Tape, masking tape	For taping pattern and silk onto table before tracing design

Trace design from pattern onto silk:

1. Work out your design on paper.
2. Work out the color scheme, making adjustments to the design as necessary.
3. Tape the paper pattern onto the table.
4. Tape the silk in place over the pattern. Since the silk is a flowing fabric, it will not lay flat like the paper!
5. Trace the design lightly onto the silk with a pencil, being careful not to snag the silk with a sharp point.

Hints & Tips

- If you don't want to paint large areas, think about ways to break large areas down into smaller design areas. For example, you can draw design elements off the edge of the paper to break up the size of the background space.
- If you are creating one large design element, use paper that is 2-inches shorter on each side than the silk you will be painting on. For example, to make sure a large butterfly fills a 30 x 30 inch scarf without cutting off any of the butterfly, use paper that is 28 x 28 inches for your pattern. I follow this guideline because scarf sizes can vary by as much as 1 1/2 inches per side.
- Straight lines are almost impossible to work with because lines are easily distorted when the silk is stretched for painting.

Selecting Colors

Using a color wheel is an easy way to help you develop a harmonious color scheme for your silk designs.

Complementary Color Schemes

Complementary colors lie opposite each other on the color wheel. These color schemes tend to be lively and vibrant.

- yellow and purple
- blue and orange
- red and green

Primary and secondary colors

Pairs of primary colors can be mixed to create secondary colors.

- red + blue = purple
- blue + yellow = green
- red + yellow = orange

Split-Complementary Color Schemes

Split-Complementary Colors use one color and the two colors that lie next to its complement on the color wheel.

- blue with red and yellow
- purple with orange and green
- red with yellow and blue

Warm Colors

Warm colors are reds, oranges, and yellows.

Warm colors tend to advance, and are bright and stimulating.

Analogous Color Schemes

Analogous colors lie next to each other on the color wheel:

- green, yellow-green, and yellow
- orange, red-orange, and red
- blue, blue-green, green

Cool Colors

Cool colors are greens, blues, and purples.

Cool colors tend to recede or draw away, and are considered to be more calming than warm colors.

Stretching the silk

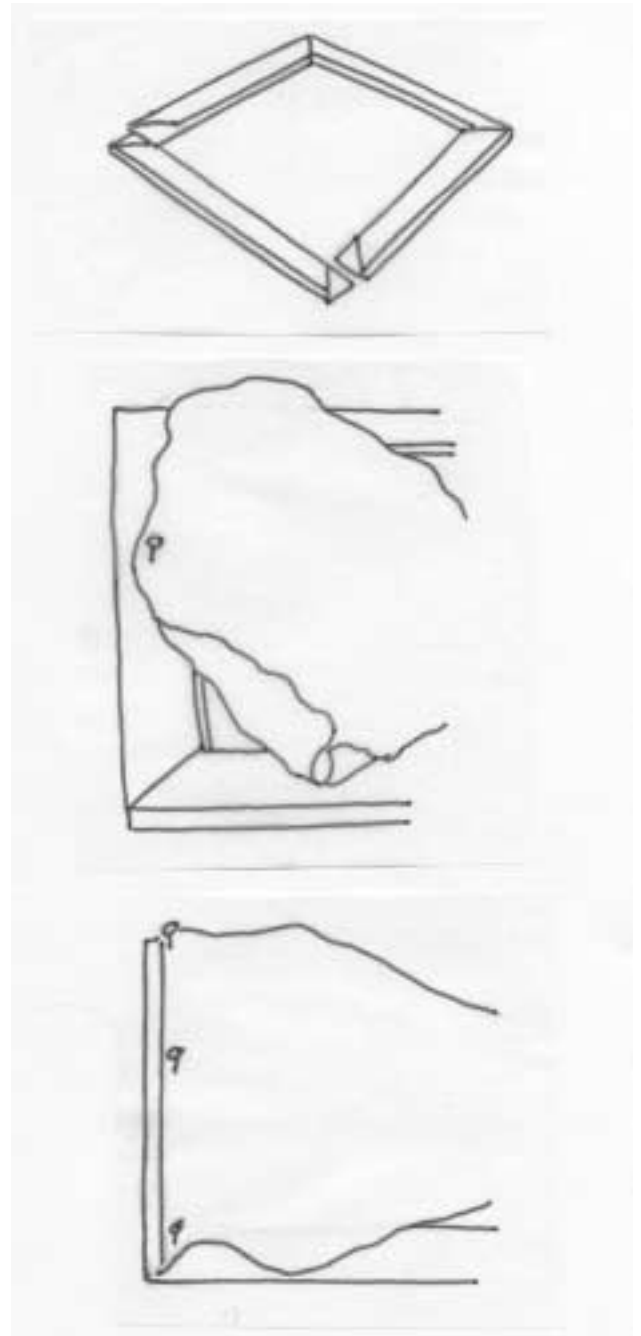
Materials you will need

Frames, wood stretcher bars	For holding stretched silk
Push pins or thumb tacks (stainless steel)	For attaching silk to frames
Packing tape	To protect the wood from dye stains

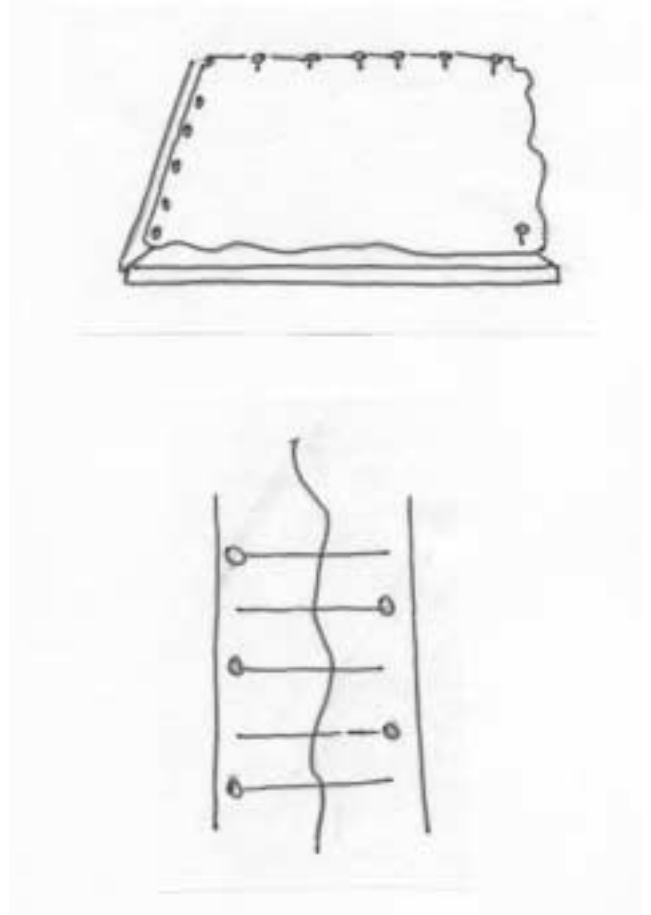
Stretch the silk onto a frame:

I prefer the wood stretcher bars typically used for stretching canvas for oil painting. These bars are available in a variety of sizes at larger art supply stores. Buy a set of bars slightly larger than the silk you are using. The silk should be stretched tightly within the inside of the stretcher bars.

1. To protect the frame, cover the wood bars with clear packing tape. The tape keeps dye from becoming trapped in the wood and later staining the silk. The tape can be wiped clean after each use.
2. Insert pins into the **hem** of silk scarves, or into the edge of silk fabric.
3. Center the silk over the frame.
4. Secure the silk by pressing the first pin firmly into the center of one side of the frame.
5. Pull the silk tight and secure with pins at each corner along the same side of the frame.



6. Continue placing pins, about one inch apart, across the first side of the frame.
7. Pull the corner of the silk toward the next corner of the frame and secure with a pin. Continue placing pins along the second side of the frame.
8. Pull the silk to the remaining corner of the frame and secure with a pin.
9. Continue placing pins along the third and fourth sides.
10. To prevent ridges from forming in the stretched silk, place the pins in an off-set pattern from each other on opposite sides of the frame.



Hints & Tips

- For other stretching methods, refer to silk painting books and catalogs.
- Keep the scarf from touching the frame by sliding the silk toward the head of the pin. There should be space between the silk and the frame (to keep dye from pooling onto the frame) and space between the silk and the head of the pin (to keep from having white unpainted spots on your silk).

Applying the Resist

Materials you will need

Plastic applicator bottles	For holding resist
Metal tips	For controlling flow of resist
Resist	For outlining design before painting
Paper towels	To wipe off the tip as needed

Apply resist to the design:

1. Fill an applicator bottle with resist and replace the plastic insert.
2. Press the metal tip onto the plastic insert.
3. Invert the bottle over a paper towel.
4. Gently squeeze the bottle and draw a few lines of resist onto the paper towel. Draw a few lines to get a feel for how the resist flows.
5. Place the tip onto a line on the silk.
6. Gently squeeze the bottle and trace over the pencil lines with the resist. The tip should touch the silk to make sure enough resist penetrates the silk.
7. To avoid smearing resist, work from one side of the design to the other, or start from the center of the design and work outwards. Try to keep your hand from resting on the silk.



Hints & Tips

- I use *SilkPaint!* brand clear resist because it is non-toxic and you can paint while the resist is still wet.
- True "gutta" is a rubber- and solvent-based, flammable product. I don't like messing with it.
- Everything you put on the silk is permanent (resist & dye). So if you make a mistake, incorporate it into the design!
- Start applying resist to the center of the design and working outwards to avoid laying your hand in wet resist.
- Drawing smooth lines takes practice; give yourself time to learn a new technique.

Painting the silk

Materials you will need

Containers or jars	For holding water
Ice cube trays, white plastic, or plastic containers such as 6-oz. or 8-oz. yogurt cups	For mixing dyes
Dyes	For painting
Diluting solution	For thinning concentrated dyes
Eye droppers, glass or plastic	For measuring dye
Brushes, watercolor type, all sizes	For applying dye to silk
Paper towels, cut into squares	For spills and cleaning brushes
Scrap silk	For testing colors
Alcohol	For sponging up unwanted dye
Q tips	For testing and mixing colors
Salt	For special effects
Color Wheel	For selecting colors

Paint the design:

1. Choose your colors.
2. Using an eye dropper, place a small amount of dye in a container. *A little bit of dye goes a long way!*
3. Add a few drops of the thinner. I use 2-parts dye to 1-part thinner.
4. Test colors on scrap silk.
5. With a small amount of dye on the brush, gently place the brush on the silk.
6. Gently glide the brush within the lines of resist, moving the dye toward the lines for complete coverage.



Hints & Tips

Technique:

- Painting on fabric is very organic, very fluid. Don't be afraid of it; enjoy it.
- Everything you put on the silk is permanent (resist & dye). So if you make a mistake, incorporate it into the design.
- To avoid laying your hand in wet dye, start adding dye to areas in the center of the design and working outwards.
- Silk will hold only a certain amount of dye. You are using too much dye if it drips through the silk onto the table! If too much dye is applied it will rinse out after steaming and make a mess. Allow the dye to spread evenly over the surface area of the design, so dye doesn't pool in small areas.
- Don't place the brush too close to the edge of a resist line. Let the dye flow up to the line.
- If you find a break in the resist line, add more resist right away. It is difficult to remove unwanted dye. You can scrub some off with an alcohol-soaked Q-tip, but the results won't be pretty.
- Dyes may stain clothing, so wear old clothes.
- Try *ReDuRan* to remove dye from hands.

Materials:

- I like round, natural hair, water color brushes.
- Dupont dyes are the best I've tried. They have a true black for better color mixing. They are concentrated and last a long time. A little goes a long way, and they should always be diluted with thinner. These dyes do contain alcohol.
- Painting large design sections: The dyes dry quickly and you will get dry edges of dye in large design sections such as backgrounds. To avoid these dry edges, try the following:
 - Break up the large design sections into smaller areas.
 - Keep the brush moving between each area of wet dye, over lapping the areas of wet dye.
 - Incorporate the dry edges into the design.

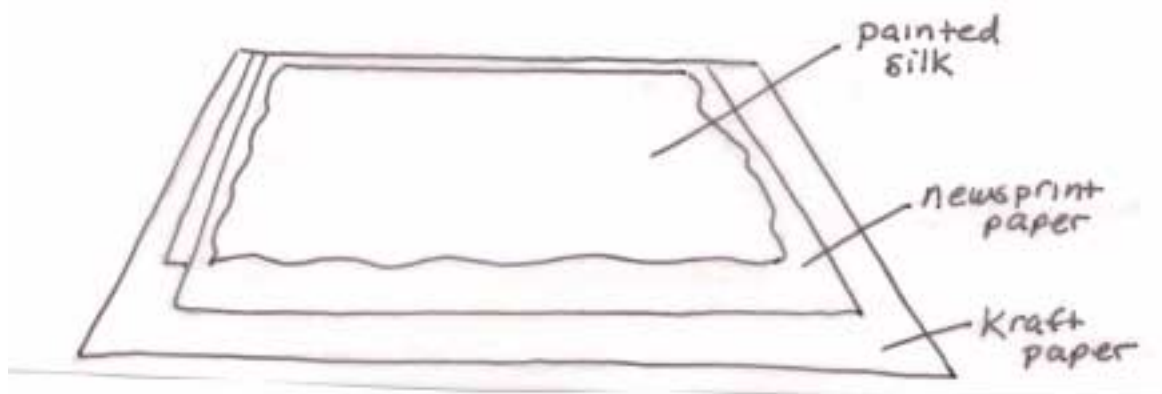
Steaming the painted silk

Materials you will need

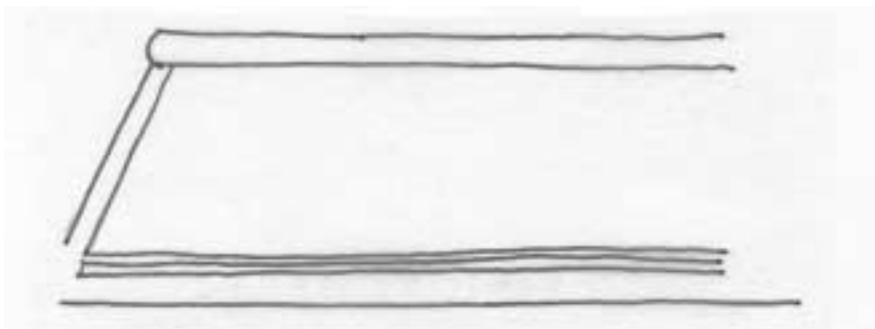
Kraft (brown) paper	For wrapping the silk
Newsprint (clean, blank) paper	For wrapping the silk
String, white shoe laces	For tying the wrapped silk
Masking tape	For taping the wrapped silk

Roll silk in paper:

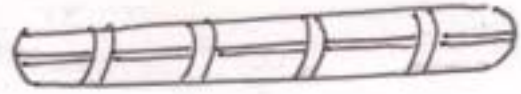
1. Cut a large sheet of kraft paper about 4 inches larger on each side than your silk.
2. Place two layers of newsprint paper on top of the kraft paper. The Kraft paper should extend beyond the edges of the newsprint paper about 2 to 3 inches.
3. Place the painted silk on top of the papers, leaving a 2-inch border of newsprint around all sides of the silk.



4. Cover the silk with two more layers of newsprint paper.
5. Smooth the silk so wrinkles do not occur during steaming.
6. Loosely roll the layers together, smoothing out any creases in the fabric. Keep the ends of the roll as even as possible.



7. Tape the roll securely.



8. Fold the rolled layers into a round package.
9. Tape the package securely and tie with string.



Materials you will need

Steamer with rack	For steaming the silk
Newspapers	To catch condensation
Aluminum foil	To tent the wrapped silk
Towel	To catch condensation

Prepare steamer:

1. Cut a 1/2-inch stack of newspapers into rounds slightly smaller than the size of the pot.
2. Place 1-inch of water in the pot.
3. Insert the rack into the pot.
4. Place the stack of newspapers on top of the rack.
5. Loosely tent the piece of foil over the top of the rolled silk package. Do not press the foil tightly around the package.



6. Place the rolled silk package with the foil onto the newspaper-covered rack.



7. Place the folded towel on top of the foil-covered silk package to catch condensation from the lid.



8. Place the lid on the pot.
9. Bring the water to a boil, then lower the heat to keep the water simmering.
10. Steam for 1 and 1/2 hours.



Remove silk package from steamer:

1. Unroll the silk package.
2. Test for colorfastness by rinsing one corner of the silk and drying it by squeezing gently with a paper towel.
 - If dye appears on the paper towel, rewrap the silk and steam for another hour.
 - If no color appears on the paper towel, continue with step 3 below.
3. Let the silk sit at least 24 hours before rinsing.

Rinsing and pressing the painted silk

Materials you will need

White Vinegar	For the final rinse
Towel	For drying the silk
Iron	For pressing the silk
Ironing board	For pressing the silk

Rinse silk:

1. Rinse the silk in cool water.
2. Gently rub the design to remove the clear resist.
3. Add a tablespoon of white vinegar to the final rinse.
4. Roll the wet silk in a towel and squeeze gently, but don't wring.

Press silk:

1. Press the damp silk with a warm dry iron.

Hints & Tips

- The resist will come off in sticky clumps.
- It may take awhile (1/2 hour) to completely rinse out the resist.
- Any remaining resist will look like a grease spot when ironed.

Complete Materials List

	Material	Purpose
Silk	Types of silk	Select the size and type of silk for your project
Developing your design	Paper, white drawing paper, tracing paper	For patterns
	Pencils, soft lead, thick soft point, & erasers	For tracing design onto silk
	Felt pens, crayons	For deciding on color scheme
	Tape, masking tape	For taping pattern and silk onto table before tracing design
Stretching the silk	Frames, wood stretcher bars	For holding stretched silk
	Thumb tacks or push pins	For attaching silk to frames
Applying the resist	Plastic applicator bottles	For holding resist
	Metal tips	For controlling flow of resist
	Resist	For outlining design before painting
Painting	Containers or glass jars	For holding water
	Ice cube trays, white plastic, or plastic containers such as 6-oz. or 8-oz. yogurt cups	For mixing dyes
	Dyes	For painting
	Diluting solution	For thinning concentrated dyes
	Eye droppers, glass	For measuring dye
	Brushes, watercolor type, all sizes	For applying dye to silk
	Paper towels, cut into squares	For spills
	Scrap silk	For testing colors
	Alcohol	For sponging up unwanted dye
	Q tips	For testing and mixing colors
	Salt	For special effects
Steaming	Color wheel	For selecting colors
	Steamer with rack	For steaming the painted silk
	Newspapers	For collecting condensation in the steamer
	Kraft (brown) paper	For wrapping the silk
	Newsprint (clean, blank) paper	For wrapping the silk
	String	For tying the wrapped silk
	Aluminum foil	For tenting the wrapped silk
Rinsing & Pressing	Towel	For catching condensation
	White vinegar	For the final rinse
	Iron	For pressing the silk
	Ironing board	For pressing the silk

A Short Bibliography

The Complete Book of Silk Painting, Diane Tuckman and Jan Janas. North Light Books. Cincinnati, Ohio. 1992.

Silk Painting: New Ideas and Textures, Jill Kennedy and Jane Varrall. Dover Publications, Inc. New York. 1993.

Silk Painting: The Artist's Guide to Gutta and Wax Resist Techniques, Susan Louise Moyer. Watson-Guptill Publications. New York. 1991.

Silk Painting for Fashion and Fine Art, Susan Louise Moyer. Watson-Guptill Publications. New York. 1995.

Where to buy supplies

Portland, Oregon: Art Media

- Papers
- Stretchers

Mail order: Dharma Trading Co. 1-800-542-5227

- Silk
- Dyes
- Resists
- Eye droppers
- Soaps/cleansers