

Painting & Printing - Brush-dyed Paper

After folding rice paper into pie-shaped wedges, the children paint designs on one side, then turn the wedges over and paint the mirror image. When the paper is unfolded, intricate patterns are revealed. For ages 9 to 13. Plan 1 session.

KEY IDEAS

- Using simple designs to create intricate patterns
- Learning the power of repetition in design
- Working with mirror images

LANGUAGE

brush dyeing, mirror image, repetition

YOU WILL NEED

- Paper cut into 10- to 11-inch circles (See note below)
- Food coloring
- Dishes for holding the food coloring
- Round watercolor brushes—#1 or #2
- Pencils
- Lots of paper towels
- Newspaper
- Water supply
- Containers of water for rinsing brushes

Note: The paper needs to be unsized, porous, light-weight, and strong enough to withstand being wet. A number of papers will work, but it is important to experiment ahead of time. In this lesson, Japanese kozo paper (Shuji Gami) was used. Since the food coloring will bleed on wet paper, it is easier for the children to control their designs by working on large circles (10 to 11 inches).

THE PROJECT

Preparation

- Cut the paper into 10- to 12-inch circles.
- Cover the work area with newspaper.
- Set out the circles, dishes of food coloring, pencils, brushes, containers of water, and lots of paper towels.
- Have available a sink or supply of water.

How to Begin

- In this lesson, the children will be *brush dyeing* papers by painting designs on folded paper. When the papers are opened, the *repetition*, or repeats, of the designs will form intricate patterns.
- Demonstrate the process of brush dyeing by carefully lining up the edges of a paper circle while folding and creasing it three times, creating a pie-shaped wedge.

- With a pencil, lightly draw a design on one side of the wedge. (Due to the inevitable bleeding of the food color, the designs should be kept simple.)
- Moisten the wedge until all layers have been penetrated. Gently squeeze out as much water as possible between paper towels, leaving the wedge just damp.
- Lay the wedge on a dry paper towel. Dip the tip of a brush into the food coloring and tap against the edge of the dish to wipe off any drips. With a very light touch, apply the first color to the top of the dampened wedge. Go over each line two times to be sure the color has penetrated through the layers of the folded paper. (Some bleeding of the colors will occur, but too much food coloring in the brush or pressing too hard with the brush will cause the colors to spread uncontrollably.) Turn the wedge over. You should be able to see the lines penetrating through to the other side. Apply the color two more times to the corresponding *mirror image*, or reversed design, on the back. Repeat this process for the desired number of colors, making sure to rinse and dry the brush carefully between colors and to find a clean area on the paper towel each time you flip the wedge over.
- When the painting is completed, press the wedge between clean paper towels and then carefully unfold it to reveal the pattern.
- Have the children fold the circles, paint the designs, and unfold the paper to see the newly created patterns.

Note: After the papers have dried, they can be flattened with an iron on a cool setting.

NOTES

- When demonstrating, only paint a few lines on each side of the wedge and then open the folded paper for the children to get the idea. Doing an entire design would take too much time.
- For the final pattern to be effective, it is important to carefully line up the edges of the circles when folding and creasing them.
- Press out as much excess water as possible. If too much is left in the wedge, the color will continue to bleed while unfolding the paper.
- The food colors can be mixed to create new colors.
- To avoid splotches in the designs, emphasize that only the tip of the brush should be dipped into the food coloring and then tapped against the edge of the dish before painting on the paper.
- Absorbent papers will pick up any colors that touch it, so be especially careful that fingers and the work surface are kept clean.

LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR WORK

- Discuss the effect of repetition on the designs.
- Ask the children to look for lines that form surprising patterns when repeated.
- Discuss some uses for brush-dyed paper.

What the children might say...

- *The color is spreading much more than I want it to.*
- *I dropped a big blob of red on my paper.*

- *In one area of my paper, the color didn't go through.*
- *These are beautiful. I'm going to make one at home.*

What you might say...

- *If your colors seem to be spreading too much, try drying your wedge again. Be sure to dip only the tip of your brush into the food coloring and tap off any drips against the dish.*
- *The blob of red cannot be erased, but you could work it into your design or even add a pattern on top of the red.*
- *Remember that you need to go over all the lines two times on both sides of the wedge. When you unfold the paper, part of the design will probably be lighter than the rest. If necessary, small repairs can be made with watercolor markers after the paper dries.*
- *If you make brush-dyed paper at home, be sure that the paper you use is absorbent and won't fall apart when it is wet.*