

## Sumi-e Resist Painting

### Traditional Sumi-e Painting with a Modern Twist

#### (art + history)

Ink and wash brush painting have strong, traditional roots. Originating in China, the sumi-e (or suiboku-ga) painting style was brought to Japan by Zen Buddhist monks in the 14th century. Sumi-e literally means "ink pictures," and traditionally, only uses black ink in various concentrations.

Unlike Western artists, sumi-e painters work on their hands and knees with their washi (paper) or silk spread out before them, a position that gives them great freedom of their arms and wrists, which is essential, as sumi-e employs the whole arm and wrist in each brush stroke.

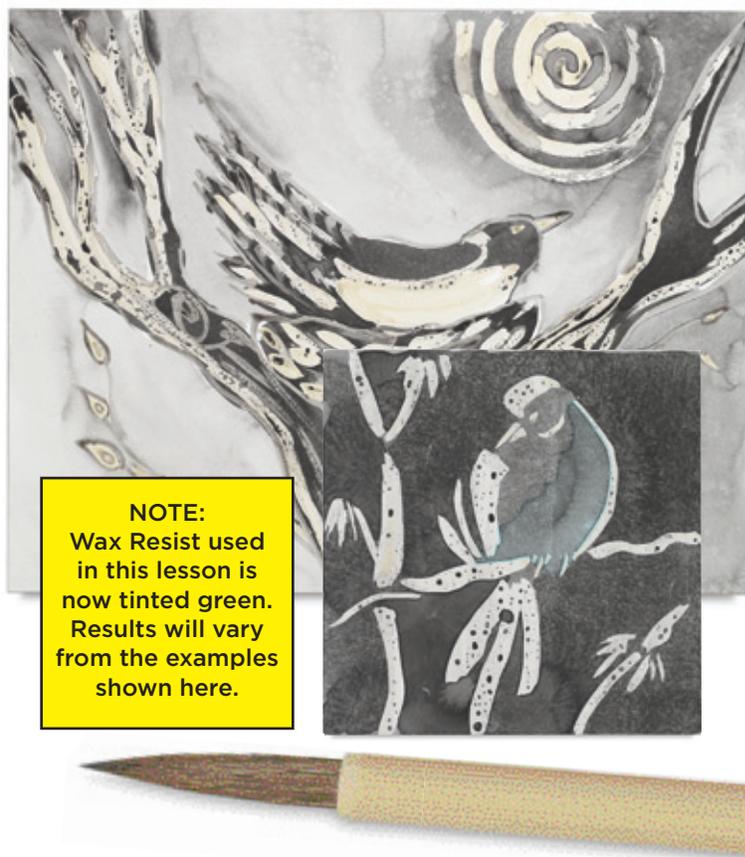
Maruyama Ōkyo (1733-1795), born Maruyama Masataka, was a Japanese artist who was active in the late 18th century. As a child, Ōkyo apprenticed for a toy shop, where he painted the faces onto dolls. When the shop began selling European stereoscopes — novelties that presented the illusion of a three-dimensional images — Ōkyo discovered Western-style perspective and became eager to study any Western paintings or prints he could find, in addition to Chinese and Japanese artwork. Eventually, Ōkyo developed his personal style combining Western naturalism and Eastern decorative design, and founded the Maruyama school of painting.

This lesson plan takes traditional sumi-e painting a step further by experimenting both with a wax resist technique and the addition of color as an option. The wax resist technique plays with the concept of figure-ground reversal. Traditional brush strokes are made in wax and in ink. Ink or watercolor washes are added last and serve to reveal the painting underneath.

**GRADES K-12** Note: instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

#### Preparation

1. Begin by soaking the brushes to remove the starch that protects the bristles. Run the brushes under warm water and gently loosen the bristles, then soak the brushes for approximately one hour.
2. Add water to the wax resist until it reaches a flowing consistency that will easily transfer brush strokes to paper. Prepare small bowls of resist.
3. Prepare the ink. Students can do their own grinding of the stick into the stone. Liquid sumi ink can also be used.



**NOTE:**  
Wax Resist used  
in this lesson is  
now tinted green.  
Results will vary  
from the examples  
shown here.

#### Materials

Blick<sup>®</sup> Brown Hair Sumi Brushes, set of 3 (05410-9003); share 8 sets among class

Amaco<sup>®</sup> Wax Resist, 16-oz (32936-0006); share one among class

Yasutomo<sup>®</sup> Sumi Ink Stick (20828-0000); share between 2-3 students

Yasutomo<sup>®</sup> Suzuri Grinding Stone (20829-0000); share between 2-3 students

Stonehenge<sup>®</sup> Paper, White, 22" x 30" (10423-1002); share one sheet between 4 students

Yasutomo<sup>®</sup> Bamboo Sumi Brushes assorted sizes (05414-); need one per student

#### Optional Materials:

Books: *The Sumi-E Book* (70116-1001) and *Japanese Ink Painting: The Art of Sumi-e* (68208-1001)

Ampersand<sup>®</sup> Aquabord™ 1/8" thick, assorted sizes (14912-)

Yasutomo<sup>®</sup> Sumi Painting Paper Rolls, Kozo, 11" x 60-ft (12952-1022)

Blick<sup>®</sup> All Purpose Newsprint, 500-sheet ream, 9" x 12" (10204-1003)

Yasutomo<sup>®</sup> Liquid Sumi-e Ink, 12-oz (20827-2006)

Blick<sup>®</sup> Liquid Watercolor, assorted colors (00369-)

## About the ink stick and stone:

The ink stone is for grinding the ink stick, and both work together to create the correct ink consistency for sumi-e. Season the new stone by putting a wet brush into the ink stone, and using either side of the ink stick, grind the stick well until the ink stone is full. Every time the stone is ground, the ink quality is improved. Never wash out the ink stone, as the dirtier the ink stone, the better it becomes. Be careful, as the ink stains.



**Step 1:** Apply diluted wax resist to watercolor paper that has been taped to a board. Allow to dry.



**Step 2:** Brush sumi ink in various concentrations from very black to pale gray over the waxed areas to reveal the painting.

## About brush strokes:

Basic calligraphy brushstrokes are used in sumi-e painting, and together they are considered the "Twin Arts." The aim of sumi-e is to use a few expressive strokes to capture the subject's spirit or essence. The most important quality is for a brush to be able to make lines of varying nuances, meaning the brush head must allow for light and heavy strokes, along with the ability to create tonal changes in one stroke. First, dip the brush in water and then into the prepared sumi-e ink. The brush must be used immediately to keep the correct balance of water and ink. Hold the brush perpendicular to the paper, at an almost right angle to the hand, using a firm grasp. In this way the unsupported arm does the work while the fingers stay almost immobile. With practice, the artist can create seamless tonal strokes, from deep ebony to the palest gray.

### Preparation, continued

4. Set out inexpensive paper for the practice of brushstrokes and possible final designs before moving to the final piece. Allow students to get a feel for the brush, wax resist, and ink.
5. Allow enough room at tables or on the floor for the free movement of wrists and arms.

### Process

1. Using thinned wax resist and brushes, practice making strokes on newsprint or other paper. Concentrate on easy, clean brushstrokes and think about the "essence" of the subject matter to be portrayed. If desired, a small

amount of ink can be added to the wax to create a gray color that can be used in addition to the clear wax.

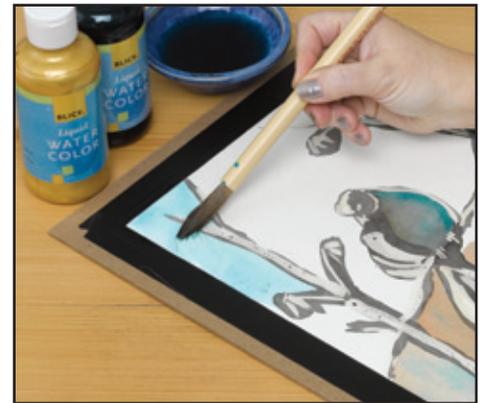
2. When confidence is gained, move on to using Stonehenge watercolor paper or Aquabond. The watercolor paper should be taped to the floor or to a board. Do a sumi-e painting with the wax resist. After painting with wax, wash brushes thoroughly in soap and warm water. The wax painting will dry almost immediately.
3. Move on to the use of sumi-e ink. Add strokes with the ink, and apply washes of color over the wax. The clear wax brushstrokes will be revealed. Use varying intensities of ink, from the darkest black to the palest gray, simply by adding more and more water.
4. If desired, add washes of watercolor to the composition.

### Process for Elementary Ages

Because Sumi ink is permanently staining in both liquid and stick form, it may be preferable to substitute black watercolor when working with younger students.

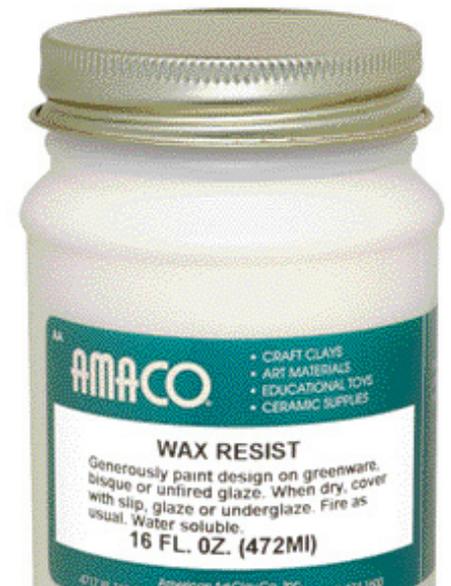
### Options

Use a small square of [Blick® WonderCut Linoleum](#) (40417-1029) and the [Blick Lino Cutter Set](#) (40216-1001) to carve a personal name seal. Used after a sumi-e painting is complete to identify the artist and give added meaning to the art through names, messages, or moods, these seals, called han or hanko, come in several sizes and shapes, which dictate the seal's placement on the painting. If the seal is large or square, it is usually placed in the lower corner, while irregular, oval,



**Step 3:** Apply washes of Blick Liquid Watercolor, if desired.

and rectangular seals are placed on the sides. Name seals are usually square, while message or mood seals come in a variety of shapes. Hanko is used with a distinctive red ink, which essentially becomes the signature on anything it stamps. Use [Blick® Water-Soluble Block Printing Ink](#), Light Red (40305-3014) to make a hanko on the completely dry Sumi-e Resist Painting. The seal must be created in reverse.



## National Standards for Visual Arts Education

**Content Standard #1** — Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes

- K-4** Students know the differences between materials, techniques, and processes.
- 5-8** Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques, and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas.
- 9-12** Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.

**Content Standard #4** Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

- K-4** Students know that the visual arts have both a history and specific relationships to various cultures.
- 5-8** Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures.
- 9-12** Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art.

