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Tranquil china artists are happy to tell their secrets

The art of brushing delicate, curving lines in deep translucent colors on plain porcelain plates is no longer a murky secret.

Unlike previous generations of china painters who jealously guarded their personal innovations, Farmington's Dolores Petachenko and Lucinda Betty Runyon are willing to share their knowledge.

They are members of the Birmingham Chapter of the Michigan Federation of China Painters.

The group will demonstrate its painting techniques and display the results at a hand-painted china show and sale Nov. 12-14 at the First United Methodist Church, 1012 Grand River, Farmington.

Both women came across the art in the days when hand painting was a still-exercised craft. In the 1930s, master painters were loath to part with anything but the basics of the craft.

Mrs. Runyon, president of the Birmingham Chapter, found the craft almost by accident when she asked if it might be an excuse for an exercise class.

"SHE SAID SHE couldn't go because she was painting a cake plate to give as a gift. Then I said out loud that her sister gave her one."

Mrs. Runyon's grandfather and sister are artists, so she brought some tradition of background to her plate painting.

But Mrs. Petachenko lacked formal arts training. She brought with her a fascination for the china cups, jugs, saucers and plates that she had collected since childhood.

She turned to the craft at a china shop.

"I just knew that I had to learn to do that," she remembers. "It was hard for me. I had never painted before. It's been a real tough struggle for me."

Although china painting didn't come easily, she believes that talent isn't a prerequisite for the craft.

"It's really about 90 per cent desire and five per cent talent," she explains. "You have to follow the instructions given by the teacher."

Anyone can paint. But you have to paint between classes too," she says.

Now that they have gained experience in the craft, both women are willing to stir up others in the parlor.

"We're happy to tell anyone our secrets," Mrs. Petachenko says.

They are eager to help anyone learn the methods. It's not a competitive art. We learn from each other. We haven't any secrets in china painting," she says.

A good brush stroke and a mastery of handling light are necessary.

The brush stroke is important because most of the painting is done free-hand.

Mrs. Petachenko says:

"I will sketch in the design, but I paint a portrait," she explains. "But the flowers are done free-hand."

Students start flowers such as a 12 roses by painting in the centers and drawing in the center lines of each of five petals. Finally, the design should be completed by shaping the surface of the cup, saucer or platter.

You're always learning," Mrs. Petachenko says.

If you see something you did earlier, you say to yourself, 'I could have done it better now,' chimed in Mrs. Runyon. Through experimentation, Mrs. Petachenko has found a way to soften the glare of the white china.

Use light pink or green as a base to soften the shade of the white, so it doesn't glare," she said.

She contrasts her first plate to one of her latest, a portrait of a maple which

won the best of show at last year's Michigan State Fair.

"LOOK AT THE first plate. I didn't find it before I started painting. The white glare on the bird's feathers. I found the plate and painted the white color on over it."

It's a maple after white," she says.

Mrs. Petachenko does her china painting on saucers, adding more details and greater depth of color after each firing.

By firing three or four times, she gives a softness to the colors and deepens them.

For a flower arrangement, she will draw the leaves on after the first firing.

For her portrait of an Indian girl, she paints in the hair colors for the first time.

During the next stage, details such as the iris of the eye and additional colors are added.

Portraits warrant a slightly different technique than flowers and birds.

You don't add texture in the portrait, as with a flower or bird picture," Mrs. Petachenko pointed out.

But you do want to have contour and highlights in the portrait," she added. The attention to details and the timing of firing of the plates make the art time-consuming.

I spent about six hours a day when I was painting the maple," Mrs. Petachenko estimated.

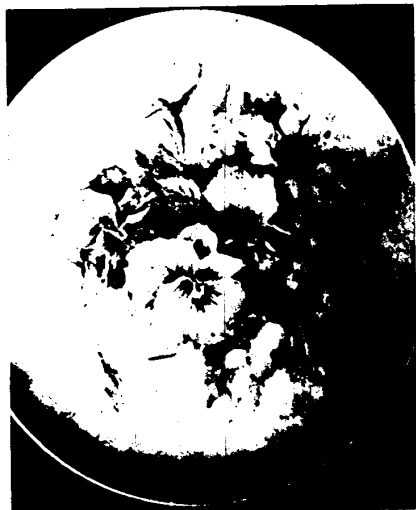
But most plate painters don't seem to mind the time, the women noticed.

It's good therapy," said Mrs. Runyon. You've experienced in a project, so it's good that you forget your problems."

You think positive thoughts when you paint," agreed Mrs. Petachenko. No one crosses negative thoughts. It surprised me at first when I started to teach. I was going to put up a sign saying no negative thoughts, but I never had to do that."



The shaggy dog (above), which resembles Mrs. Petachenko's poodles, was etched onto the china plate by removing the red background paint. Flowers, another popular subject among china painters, (below) are given depth by the artist by the addition of color and detail to the work after each firing. Subjects such as these are brushed onto the plate, free-hand. (Staff photos by Harry Mauthe)



Although Mrs. Petachenko didn't find it easy to learn how to paint china, she believes that 95 per cent of her ability stems from determination, not talent. The magpie plate (left) was

awarded the best of show at last year's Michigan State Fair. Mrs. Petachenko tried the plate to soften the glare of the bird's white plumage.