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### **Prospects for incorporating the decorative technique “craquelure” into training programs for future artists in “Moscow letter” decorative painting**

**Abstract.** The article presents the experience of innovative application of the decorative technique of craquelure in “Moscow letter” decorative painting. It examines the history of its origin and provides examples of craquelure application in various types of applied art. The possibilities of integrating this decorating technique onto various surfaces in the compositional solution of products with “Moscow letter” decorative painting are analyzed and a hypothesis about the possibility of using craquelure as an independent decorative element is scientifically substantiated.

**Keywords:** decorative painting, Moscow letter, craquelure, composition, traditional applied art, decorative techniques, practical experiment.

“Moscow letter” decorative painting is a unique form of traditional applied art. Its distinguishing features lie in the use of bright saturated colors, elaborate floral compositions combined with landscape motifs.

Training for future artists in “Moscow letter” decorative painting is carried out at the institute of traditional applied arts – a Moscow branch of the Russian university of traditional art crafts. Students master three techniques of decorative painting: “alla prima”, “multi-layered writing” and “through painting”, as well as methods of applying various decorative techniques and materials that contribute to expressing the artistic image in artifacts. Among the decorative techniques are “fuming”, “water stains”, “imitation stone” and “wood imitation”, described in detail in textbooks by I.Yu. Arkhangelskaya [1] and G.V. Tsvetkov [10]. The dynamics of the development of “Moscow letter” decorative painting have been thoroughly examined in the works of O.V. Fedotova [8, 9], G.V. Tsvetkov [11; 12] and A.A. Solopova [6, pp. 77-78].

A characteristic feature of this type of decorative metal painting is the utilization of a broad spectrum of various artistic materials used in the execution of decorative techniques [3, p. 216; 7, pp. 46-55]. The decorative materials employed by students include metallized powders, gold leaf (potal'), pigments and others. However, the contemporary market of art supplies offers a wide array of new materials suitable for decorative techniques, which were previously unused in classroom settings during training for future artists specializing in “Moscow letter” decorative painting. Furthermore, there are few comprehensive educational publications that provide full descriptions of the technological processes involved in

applying decorative techniques and their significance in creating the artistic image of an artifact [2; 5].

The objective of the study is to analyze the possibility of incorporating a new decorative technique, craquelure, into the curriculum for students specializing in “Moscow letter” decorative painting, including the materials and methods of its execution.

Research methods – analysis of art history and pedagogical literature related to the topic; practical experiments using modern materials to execute the craquelure decorative technique.

Craquelure (from French – *craquelure*) – refers to cracks appearing in the painted layer or varnish coating of any artwork. Artist and educator D.I. Kiplik provided a definition of this phenomenon in oil painting:

“Cracks in oil paintings arise due to various reasons. Depending on these causes, their appearance and size vary significantly. Starting from finest hairline cracks, they extend to substantial fractures. Cracks can penetrate the entire thickness of the painting layers or appear only in some sections, either spreading over the whole canvas or localized in specific spots” [4, pp. 68-76].

The origins of craquelure are diverse and directly affect the nature and pattern of cracks. Primary natural causes involve violations of preparatory and painting techniques.



Fig. 1. A.P. Gogin. Fragment of tray “Dark red”, village of Zhostovo. 1949

The appearance of cracked paint layers is caused by the following factors:

- composition of paints: different components of paints react differently to changes in temperature, humidity and light, leading to varying degrees of shrinkage and crack formation;
- violation of execution technology: a thicker top coat of paint in multilayer painting can crack if underlying thinner coats of paint do not dry properly (Fig. 1<sup>43</sup>).

Cracks in paint layers emerge naturally as materials age over time. Gradually, cracks began to appear in the works of easel painters and miniaturists. Initially unintended, these cracks eventually came to be appreciated as an aesthetically pleasing element, adding uniqueness and distinctiveness to individual pieces.

Historically, the technique of craquelure has been used in various cultures. Early evidence dates back to Chinese ceramics, where cracks were deliberately incorporated as an attractive aesthetic feature, particularly during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD). This technique received its name during this era. In China, craquelure was widely applied in porcelain, where cracks on the surface of volumetric ceramic objects signified refinement and skill.

<sup>43</sup> Figs. 1, 5-10. Photo by the author of the article.

In the 18th–19th centuries, craquelure became a popular technique in Western Europe for giving vintage looks to decorative furniture and interior decorations. To obtain cracks of specific width and density, craftsmen used special mixtures and precise techniques for applying paint and varnish layers (Fig. 4<sup>44</sup>).

In the Russian Empire, during the reign of Catherine II, interest in West European art contributed to the adoption of new artistic techniques, including the decorative technique of craquelure. By the end of the 19th century, Russia produced a wide range of colored glassware using the “cracle” technique. (Fig. 2<sup>45</sup>).



Fig. 2. Cherry-colored glass decanter made in the “cracle” technique. Russia. 14th–20th centuries



Fig. 3. Porcelain vessel with craquelure. China. 18th century

In ceramics, unintentional craquelure is referred to as “tsek”. When the effect of lacquer cracking is intentionally created, it is called “cracle”. In contemporary ceramics, “cracle” is often used as a decorative element in experimental production. This decorative technique produces intriguing visual effects and gives products exceptional artistic expressiveness (Fig. 3<sup>46</sup>).

Craquelure as a decorative technique is known in fabric painting, where it is called “cracle”. This fabric treatment can be found on ancient Indonesian, African and Indian painted cloths. The “cracle” technique reached

its peak of popularity in France in the 18th–19th centuries. This effect is still used today in modern works with fabric painting (Fig. 5). Execution of this technique is one of the training assignments included in the curriculum for learning the art of fabric painting at the institute of traditional applied arts when students master the “hot batik” technique.

Despite the widespread demand for the decorative technique of craquelure in various art fields (ceramic production, glass making, fabric painting, decorative furniture finishing), this technique is primarily taught within the framework of fabric painting in educational programs. Currently, there is no information indicating that the craquelure method, created using modern artistic materials, is intentionally applied to create compositions on metal objects with decorative painting. This method is also not included in educational programs for training future artists.

<sup>44</sup>Fig. 5. French antiques “French garden house” – URL: <https://frenchgardenhouse.com/blogs/blog/secret-life-of-antiques-tole-peinte> (accessed November 20, 2025).

<sup>45</sup> Fig. 2. State catalogue of museum collections of the Russian Federation Goskatalog.ru : Website – URL: <https://goskatalog.ru/portal/#/collections?id=46005268> (accessed November 3, 2025).

<sup>46</sup> Fig. 3. State catalogue of museum collections of the Russian Federation Goskatalog.ru : Website – URL: <https://goskatalog.ru/portal/#/collections?id=20032726> (accessed November 3, 2025).

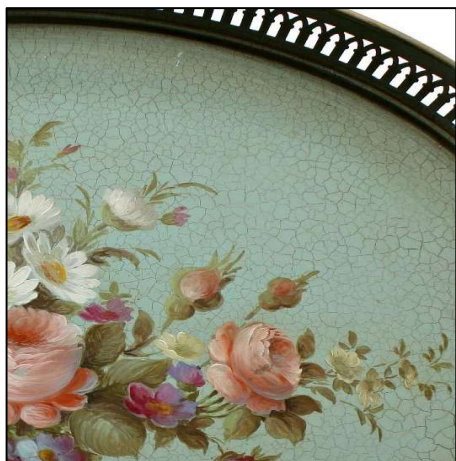


Fig. 4. Tray fragment. France.  
19th century

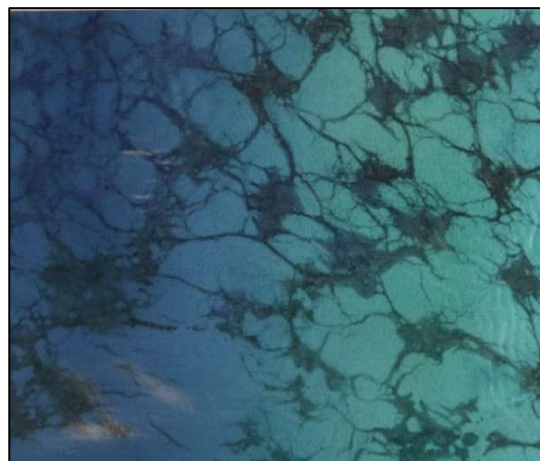


Fig. 5. S.M. Shipovskaya, example  
of performing the “craque” technique  
on chiffon. 2012. Institute  
of traditional applied arts

In the 21st century, the decorative technique of craquelure remains highly sought after among artists and designers who utilize it to create an effect of antiquity and uniqueness in their works. Modern artistic practice successfully implements this technique using specialized technologies and materials, making it a popular decorative method among contemporary artists. Over recent decades, new specialty coatings and paints have emerged that produce a craquelure effect on decorated surfaces without waiting for the natural aging of the paint layer. The selection of artistic and decorative materials for achieving the craquelure effect depends on the desired artistic image and intention behind the composition to achieve a specific outcome. When creating a decorative craquelure effect in interior décor items, materials such as lacquers, pastes, glues, acrylic and alkyd-urethane coatings are used.

Experimental data indicates that alkyd-urethane compounds are most suitable for producing articles with “Moscow letter” decorative painting.

Alkyd-urethane compositions are predominantly composed of alkyd resins, which exhibit excellent adhesion and resistance to chemical substances. These compositions are versatile and applicable for creating cracks on various surfaces, including wooden, metal, plastic and stone substrates. Their durability against ultraviolet rays makes them ideal for outdoor applications, ensuring long-lasting aesthetics. Another notable feature of alkyd-urethane compositions is the adjustable size and depth of cracks, depending on the application technique and mixture composition. Additionally, applying different shades of paint layers and specific techniques such as patination and caulking further enhance the aesthetic impact, generating unique color transformations – a crucial aspect in decorative arts.

In the decorative painting technique known as “Moscow letter”, an imitation of “craque” is achieved using crumpled gold leaf (potal') [1]. However, manually reproducing such crack-like textures is labor-intensive and challenging. Gold leaf itself is difficult to handle, demanding meticulous handling and specialized techniques.



Given these considerations, a practical experiment was conducted to create the decorative craquelure effect, selecting an appropriate paint composition and technique to convey this effect accurately.

In the step-by-step experiment, round hardboard plates measuring 6 cm in diameter were prepared, on which large and finely spaced cracks appeared during the application of paint layers (Fig. 6). In the experimental samples, manufacturing technology was strictly adhered to ensure no defects would arise during the painting process. Subsequently, fragments of floral compositions in the “Moscow letter” decorative painting style were executed on other plates sized 15 × 10 cm, featuring a background with craquelure, using techniques such as “alla-prima”, multi-layered painting and painting with “through painting” elements. (Fig.).



Fig. 6. Blanks with large and small frequent cracks applied using two-stage alkyd-urethane enamel Siana Craquelure

The composition used to create the craquelure effect in the samples shown in figures 7-9 consists of two parts: a base primer-enamel and a finishing coat. The finishing coat is applied over the primer-enamel, which serves as the foundation for the decorative craquelure effect and determines its color.

The width and density of the cracks depend on the number of primer-enamel layers applied. To achieve fine cracks, wait until the base layer reaches a tacky state and then cover it with one layer of finishing coat. To obtain larger cracks, apply a thicker layer of finishing enamel – two to three layers – without waiting for previous layers to dry. To achieve uniform-sized cracks, evenly apply all layers across the surface of the decorated item.

As a compositional filler, the craquelure decorative technique can be applied in various ways:

- the entire background of the item is covered with craquelure, with equal attention given to both the composition and the decorative effect (Fig. 10a).
- craquelure covers only the rim and lift of the tray, serving as a complementary decorative effect and enhancing the overall composition (Fig. 10b).
- the decorative technique is applied centrally on the item (Fig. 10c).

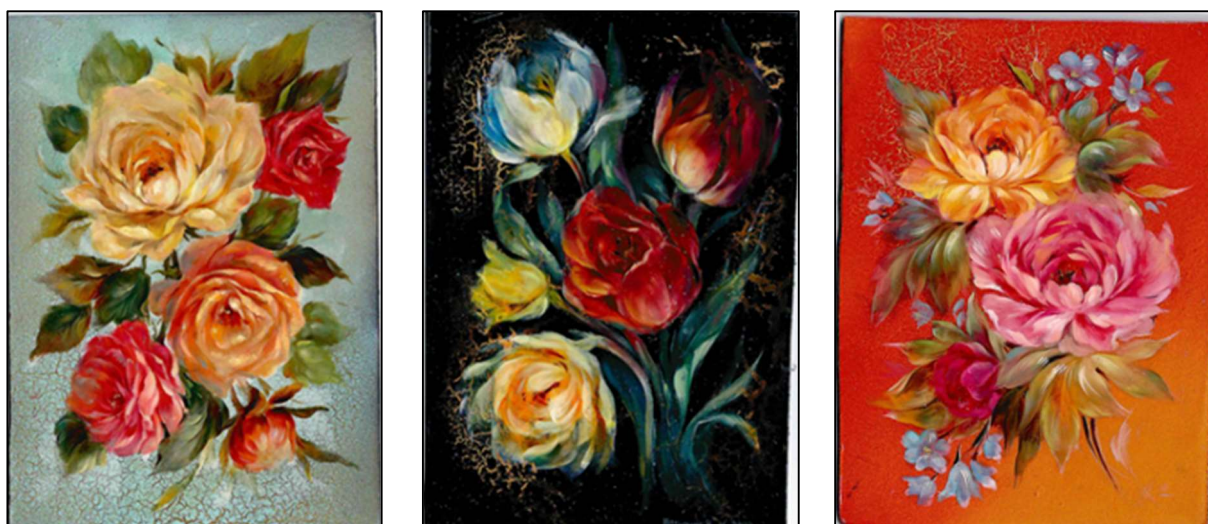


Fig. 7-9. Samples of “Moscow letter” decorative painting with craquelure as a decorative technique



Fig. 10. Arrangement options for the craquelure decorative technique on a tray combined with silhouette composition

When combined with the multi-layered painting techniques “alla-prima” and “through painting” (“poskvoz”) in the “Moscow letter” decorative painting, the craquelure technique visually enriches the artistic representation of the painted item. The only issue encountered was the relief texture of the formed cracks, but this problem can be easily resolved by applying additional layers of varnish and polishing.

The results of the conducted experiment demonstrated that modern materials make it possible to create a craquelure effect using special compositions on almost any material, ranging from paper to glass. Specialized craquelure lacquers and paints simplify the application process and allow achieving desired results quickly.

Consequently, incorporating the craquelure technique into the curriculum for studying “Moscow letter” decorative painting and encouraging its usage in the practical work of future artists can expand their creative possibilities and lend uniqueness to their artworks.

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