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Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting: compositional and technological interpretations

Abstract. The article discusses the pedagogical experience of first-year students (Field of study: 54.03.05 Traditional applied arts) creating training panels inspired by the subject matter of ancient Mesoamerica. The aim of the study is to identify the specific features of using materials and techniques of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting in the creation of training panels based on images of works of ancient Mesoamerica. The study employed pedagogical observation and comparative analysis of the training panels. It was shown that the compositional basis of the subjects was preserved, while the main features of interpretation were manifested in their material and painterly execution. In the process of creating the panels, the students used materials and techniques traditional for Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting: white and aluminium grounds, gold leaf, mother-of-pearl, opaque and transparent painting techniques, multilayer oil painting.

Keywords: Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, craftsmanship, professional training of an artist, ancient Mesoamerica, compositional and technological interpretation, through-painting, solid painting, gold leaf, mother-of-pearl.

Introduction

Professional training for Fedoskino lacquer miniature painters involves the sequential study of decorative materials, painting techniques and artistic methods while adhering to the technology of work execution. In the multi-layered oil painting of Fedoskino miniatures, traditional techniques are employed: opaque and transparent. The opaque technique is executed predominantly using body colors; however, in certain areas, particularly in the shadows, glazing may be used. The transparent technique is executed using glazing paints over a metallic ground and decorative backings, which allows for revealing their optical properties [2, pp. 8; 4].

In the 2025–2026 academic year, first-year students studying the discipline “Mastery of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting” were assigned a series of educational panels based on images of ancient Mesoamerican artworks. Students generally preserved the composition of the chosen images, reducing them to the panel format and transferring them onto papier-mâché plates.

The academic assignment “Interpretation of Ancient Mesoamerican artworks in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting” was aimed at mastering methods of creating planar compositions using decorative materials and painting techniques. Particular attention was paid to the precision of the drawing, the expressiveness of the silhouette and local color relationships. In the process, chalk and metallic grounds were used, along with decorative materials such as gold leaf and mother-of-pearl. During the painting stage, both opaque and transparent techniques were applied.

The completed panels were exhibited from March 23–28, 2026, at the exhibition dedicated to the art of the Maya civilization, held at the Russian house of science and culture in Paris [1].

Issues regarding the professional training of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painters are addressed in the works of faculty members from the Fedoskino Institute of lacquer miniature painting. N.N. Mikhailova and M.N. Mochalova investigate the selection and modeling of curriculum content for performing skills [5]. M.N. Mochalova substantiates the sequence of mastering performing skills, taking into account the artistic and technological characteristics of this art form [6]. M.A. Saltanov reveals the role of copying in the process of training students – future Fedoskino lacquer miniature painters – and the possibilities for interpreting the source image [7]. Methodology for academic copying and methods for applying gold leaf, metallic grounds and mother-of-pearl are discussed in the study guide “Performing skills. Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting” [2], as well as in the study guide “Technology of lacquer miniature painting. Section 1. Decorative techniques for finishing Fedoskino lacquer miniature items” [3]. At the same time, the specific features of creating educational panels based on images from another artistic culture, using traditional grounds, decorative materials and painting techniques of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, have not been specifically addressed in the existing literature.

In this study, the specific features of interpreting ancient Mesoamerican subjects are examined from two interrelated aspects: the preservation of the compositional basis of the source image, and the specifics of its execution using grounds, decorative materials and painting techniques characteristic of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, while adhering to the traditional technological sequence.

The aim of the research is to identify the specific features of applying grounds, decorative materials and painting techniques of Fedoskino lacquer miniature art when creating educational panels based on images of ancient Mesoamerican artworks.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

- to examine the sequence of artistic and technological work on the educational wall panels;
- to analyze the application of grounds, decorative materials, the opaque and transparent techniques in the execution of eight educational panels;
- to determine the interrelationship between the choice of grounds and the subsequent painting technique and artistic solution of the panel.

Materials and methodology

The study employed pedagogical observation and a comparative analysis of eight educational panels. During the observation, the following were taken into account: the sequence of task execution, the choice of grounds and decorative materials, as well as the painting techniques employed.

The comparative analysis examined the differences in the use of chalk and aluminum grounds, gold leaf, mother-of-pearl and the opaque and transparent techniques, as well as their role in the artistic solution of the artworks.

Results

Within the framework of the academic assignment “Interpretation of Ancient Mesoamerican works in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting”, students were tasked with preserving the composition of the chosen image and executing it on a papier-mâché plate. Fragments of monumental frescoes from Calakmul and Bonampak, executed on lime plaster [9, 11], served as the source images for five of the educational panels. Three panels were created based on images from the Codex Vaticanus B – a pictographic manuscript on animal skin with a white calcium ground [8; 10, p. 24, 25, 75].

In all eight works, the main compositional scheme of the chosen image was preserved. Students transferred the relative positioning of figures and individual elements, the nature of the silhouettes, the main local color relationships and the contour. A substantial reworking of the original composition was not part of the assignment's objectives.

The main features of the interpretation manifested in the choice of ground and decorative materials, the approach to solving the background, the application of opaque and transparent techniques, and the sequence of technological operations. The choice of ground determined the nature of the background and the subsequent painting technique. In Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, a metallic ground is used predominantly with the transparent technique, while a chalk ground is used with the opaque technique [2, p. 8].

In the panels by A.D. Galaeva “Preparation and consumption of atole” (Fig. 1⁵⁹) and M.K. Avdeeva “Women with a vessel” (Fig. 2) the compositional basis consists of large figures of characters united by a domestic action. The planar treatment of the figures, the sharp contour and the local color spots allowed for the introduction of decorative materials directly into individual elements of the image without compromising the clarity of the composition. Mother-of-pearl inserts were used when painting clothing and objects: shining through the transparent layers of paint, they imparted a soft glow to these areas. Gold leaf was applied when painting jewelry, inscriptions and costume details, creating small shiny accents against the background of color planes that were calmer in texture. Such a distribution of decorative backings allowed for the preservation of the graphic clarity of the source image while simultaneously incorporating decorative effects characteristic of Fedoskino painting.

⁵⁹ Figs. 1-8. Photo from the methodological fund of the Fedoskino institute of lacquer miniature painting.

In Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, mother-of-pearl is used as a decorative backing under the painted layer. When executing the transparent technique, transparent and semi-transparent paints allow for the preservation of its iridescence and the inclusion of the material's natural shimmer in the color solution of the work. Therefore, when painting on mother-of-pearl inserts, it was crucial not to cover them with an opaque layer of paint.

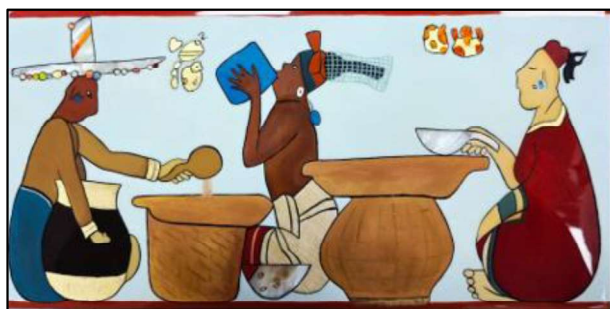


Fig. 1. A.D. Galaeva. Panel
“Preparation and consumption of atole”. 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting, decorative
backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland



Fig. 2. M.K. Avdeeva.
Panel “Women with a vessel”. 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting, decorative
backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland

The multi-figure composition in D.A. Astakhova's panel “Ceremonial scene” (Fig. 3) is built on the rhythmic alternation of vertical character silhouettes and large local color spots. The background, executed using bronze powder, unified the composition with a warm ochre tone and created a soft metallic sheen. Against this foundation, the blue, green, white and black areas of the clothing appeared more contrasting. Mother-of-pearl and gold leaf were applied locally – primarily in clothing details, jewelry and decorative costume elements. Thanks to this approach, the shine and shimmer of the materials did not spread uniformly across the entire surface but became individual light accents within the multi-figure composition.

In the panel by A.Yu. Vyguzova “Captives before the victors” (Fig. 4), the decorative materials are concentrated in specific compositionally significant details. Gold leaf was used for the execution of the jaguar skin and character jewelry, allowing these elements to stand out among the local color spots of the figures. Mother-of-pearl inserts were introduced more restrainedly, in isolated areas of the composition. Such a distribution of materials creates a contrast between matte, shiny and shimmering surfaces and allows for placing light accents without compromising the planar nature of the image.

The composition of V.N. Androsova's work “Nobility attire” (Fig. 5) is characterized by the richness of the characters' costumes in terms of colored and decorative details. The warm ochre background, executed using bronze powder, creates a unified color field on which the silhouettes of the figures are more clearly defined. Gold leaf was introduced into the clothing details, while mother-of-pearl was applied to individual light areas. As a result, the decorative richness of the

costumes was conveyed not only by color and drawing but also by the variety of textures: matte paint layers, metallic sheen and the iridescent surface of the mother-of-pearl.



Fig. 3. D.A. Astakhova.
Panel "Ceremonial scene". 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting, decorative backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland



Fig. 4. A.Yu. Vyguzova.
Panel "Captives before the victors". 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting,
decorative backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland



Fig. 5. V.N. Androsova. Panel
"Nobility attire". 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting,
decorative backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland

A different principle for solving the background is presented in the works of Ya.N. Sviridova "Deity and calendar signs" (Fig. 6) and M.S. Chistyakova "Calendar-Ritual composition" (Fig. 7). Of great importance was the preserved graphic clarity of the central figures, their contours and the surrounding signs. Therefore, the background was not meant to enter into active color competition with them. The monotype⁶⁰, executed on a lead white (chalk) ground, created a non-uniform but sufficiently calm textured surface reminiscent of stone or plaster. Against this background, the contours

of the figures and small signs were clearly legible, while the local inclusions of gold leaf and mother-of-pearl formed separate light accents. Thus, the texture of the monotype and the sheen of the decorative backings performed different functions:

⁶⁰ Monotype is a traditional decorative technique used in the finishing of papier-mâché items in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting. It is based on obtaining a unique imprint of oil paint on the surface of the item [4, p. 24].

the former unified the background, while the latter highlighted individual elements of the image.



Fig. 6. Ya.N. Sviridova. Panel
“Deity and calendar signs”.
2026 г. Papier-mâché, oil painting,
decorative backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland



Fig. 7. M.S. Chistyakova. Panel
“Calendar-Ritual composition”. 2026 г.
Papier-mâché, oil painting, decorative
backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland



Fig. 8. D.A. Astakhova.
Panel “The Archer and the Jaguar”. 2026.
Papier-mâché, oil painting, decorative backings.
Supervisor: I.V. Leitland

In D.A. Astakhova’s panel “The Archer and the Jaguar” (Fig. 8), the figure of the jaguar becomes the compositional and focal (light) accent. Painting over gold leaf imparts a pronounced inner glow to it, visually setting it apart against the background of the other elements. The gold backing is repeated in the medallions on the background, minor compositional elements and details of the headdress, thereby interconnecting the separate shiny areas. In some sections, painting on mother-of-pearl is used, which produces a softer and more variable shimmer. The monotype

of the background, by contrast, creates a restrained textured foundation. The juxtaposition of the background’s calm surface with the gold and mother-of-pearl areas allows for the construction of a system of light accents of varying intensity within the composition.

Transparent and semi-transparent paint layers allow for the preservation of the glow and shimmer of the artistic materials traditional to Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting, thanks to which the painting acquires a more decorative quality [2, p. 10].

The combination of the opaque and transparent techniques was determined by the nature of a specific image area and the backing used. Opaque paint layers formed local color spots and preserved the clarity of the silhouettes, whereas transparent and

semi-transparent layers allowed for the preservation of the metallic ground, gold leaf and mother-of-pearl's inherent glow.

The contour maintained the clarity of the planar image, separated the local color spots and delineated the boundaries of areas executed on various decorative backings. This was particularly important when combining opaque painting with metallic and mother-of-pearl surfaces, which differ in their light reflection characteristics. In panels based on the Codex Vaticanus B, contour precision was also necessary to preserve the legibility of small signs and individual elements of the image. In multi-figure compositions based on monumental frescoes, special attention was paid to preserving the silhouettes and the relative positioning of the characters.

Pedagogical observation showed that working with decorative materials required preliminary planning of the sequence of operations. The inlaying of mother-of-pearl plates, their securing and drying required significant time and precision. It was necessary to predetermine the areas for applying mother-of-pearl and gold leaf, choose the type of ground and select the corresponding subsequent painting technique. When combining several decorative materials, the sequence of work was preliminarily discussed by the instructor and the student, which allowed it to be executed without disturbing the already prepared sections.

An additional feature of the assignment was the relatively large format of the panels. The technological sequence of work on the panel did not change, but the volume of work increased at each stage: during the execution of multi-layer painting, intermediate varnishing and surface polishing. When working with large plates, particular attention was required for the uniformity of the paint and varnish layers and the quality of the entire surface treatment.

The final varnishing, sanding and polishing unified the painted layer and the decorative backings. The varnish coating enhanced the color depth, the sheen of the metallic grounds and the shimmer of the mother-of-pearl. After polishing, a smooth glossy surface characteristic of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting was formed.

Thus, while preserving the main composition of the chosen images, the specifics of executing the educational panels were determined by the choice of ground and background type, the placement of decorative backings, the combination of opaque and transparent painting and the sequence of technological operations.

Discussion

From a pedagogical standpoint, it was significant that the choice of artistic and technological solution required the student to pre-plan the work involving the ground, decorative backings and painted layer.

The obtained results are consistent with the findings of N.N. Mikhailova and M.N. Mochalova regarding the sequential mastery of performing skills and technological techniques in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting [5; 6]. In the assignment under consideration, the mastery of decorative materials and painting techniques did not occur in isolation, but rather in the process of solving a specific artistic task. This approach allowed for linking the technological sequence with the artistic solution of the work.

The experience under consideration also correlates with the research of M.A. Saltanov, dedicated to academic copying and the possibilities for interpreting the source image in the professional training of artists [7]. At the same time, the execution of the educational panels did not amount to the exact reproduction of the source images.

In the two groups of source images, certain features significant for their accurate reproduction in the educational panels differed. In multi-figure compositions based on monumental frescoes, special attention was required for the preservation of silhouettes and the relative positioning of the characters. In the works based on the pages of the Codex Vaticanus B, contour precision and the preservation of small signs and individual elements of the image were of substantial importance.

In this case, the use of works from another artistic tradition created conditions for mastering the possibilities of traditional Fedoskino technology on unfamiliar pictorial material. Students needed to correlate the characteristics of the chosen image with the capabilities of the grounds, decorative backings and various painting techniques, while simultaneously preserving the recognizability of the original composition. Therefore, the academic assignment “Interpretation of Ancient Mesoamerican artworks in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting” can be considered as one of the variants of mastering performing skills, in which the study of decorative materials, painting techniques and technological sequence is connected with their conscious application in solving a specific artistic task.

Conclusions

The nature of the initial compositional material differed between the two groups of educational panels. In the works based on monumental frescoes, individual fragments of larger compositions were used, which acquired the character of an independent image in the panel format; in the works based on the Codex Vaticanus B, the compositional structure of the selected manuscript pages was predominantly preserved. At the same time, in both groups, the main compositional scheme of the source images was maintained. The main features of the interpretation manifested themselves in the choice of grounds and decorative materials, the application of the opaque) and transparent techniques, and adherence to the technological sequence of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting.

During the execution of the panels, the compositional basis of the chosen images was generally preserved: the precision of the silhouette, the relative positioning of the characters, local color relationships and the expressiveness of the contour were of great importance. At the same time, the nature of certain performing differed. In multi-figure compositions based on monumental frescoes, special attention was required for the preservation of silhouettes and the relative positioning of the characters; in the works based on the pages of the Codex Vaticanus B, precision in small signs, contours and individual elements of the image was paramount.

Pedagogical observation showed that the execution of the assignment required preliminary planning. Together with the instructor, the students determined the type of ground, the placement of decorative backings, the sequence of work with mother-of-pearl and gold leaf, and the subsequent painting technique. Such a structuring of

the assignment allowed for linking the mastery of traditional materials and techniques of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting with the solution of a specific artistic task.

Thus, the academic assignment “Interpretation of Ancient Mesoamerican artworks in Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting” demonstrated the possibility of working with images from a different artistic culture using traditional grounds, decorative materials and painting techniques, while adhering to the technological sequence of Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting.

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