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Modern artistic materials in «Moscow letter» decorative painting: opportunities and prospects

Abstract. This article analyzes the artistic materials used to decorate items with the “Moscow letter” decorative painting.

The analysis of contemporary artistic materials expands the creative toolkit available to students working on objects decorated in the “Moscow letter” decorative painting and stimulates their interest in producing original artworks using modern decorative materials. This research contributes to establishing a theoretical framework for further studies in the material science of “Moscow letter” decorative painting.

Keywords: “Moscow letter” decorative painting, traditional applied art, material science, technique, higher education, graduation qualifying work.

Decorative painting in the “Moscow letter” style represents a dynamically evolving form of traditional applied art. The genesis of this technique has been thoroughly examined in the works of O.V. Fedotova [10], G.V. Tsvetkov [13] and A.A. Solopova [8, pp. 77-78]. This specific decorative style is characterized by “the application of a wide spectrum of various artistic materials employed in the execution of artistic-decorative techniques” [9, pp. 46-55]. An artistic-decorative technique is defined as a set of established artistic means aimed at expressing the conceptual intent of a work and enhancing its expressiveness [9, p. 43].

The development of traditional art crafts is inextricably linked to the integration of contemporary artistic materials into the creative process. Currently, the market offers a vast array of such media, including diverse metallic powders, specialized pigments, textured effect pastes, liquid multi-colored imitation gold leaf (potal), as well as colored enamels and acrylic contour paints. These products are widely available for purchase. Despite their diversity, there remains a notable absence of a clear classification system for the artistic materials currently utilized in the decorative painting tradition of “Moscow letter”.

Consequently, the following objectives arise:

- to classify the artistic materials currently in use;
- to analyze the efficacy of applying modern artistic materials;
- to assess the feasibility and pedagogical expediency of employing these materials in student instruction.

The integration of traditional decorative painting techniques specific to the “Moscow letter” style of decorative painting with contemporary artistic media will

not only diversify the spectrum of artistic-decorative methods within this form of traditional applied art but also stimulate students toward creative experimentation.

The process of creating a work of decorative painting in the “Moscow letter” style consists of several distinct stages:

- preparatory operations: sizing (application of glue/adhesive layer), priming and application of a metallic powder undercoat/substrate;
- execution of the background for subsequent painting;
- execution of the painting itself, employing various systems: alla prima, multi-layered painting, opaque/dense painting, transparent painting and mixed-media approaches;
- application of modern decorative art materials;
- varnishing / lacquering;
- finishing operations: sanding and polishing/buffing [13, p. 6].

The distinctive artistic and technological features (including techniques, technologies and decorative methods) of various types of decorative painting on metal (Moscow, Zhostovo and Nizhny Tagil schools) are described in the research of A.A. Solopova [7, pp. 77-78]. The author has also analyzed the artistic materials used in other forms of decorative metal painting [3]. The artistic and technological specifics of finishing items in the “Moscow letter” style are detailed in the works of O.V. Fedotova [10; 11] and A.S. Subachev [9], as well as in the educational manuals by G.V. Tsvetkov [12].

Within the framework of the academic discipline “Materials science in ‘Moscow letter’ decorative painting”, students master the handling of various traditional art media and the specifics of their application. At the same time, it is considered feasible to incorporate modern materials, a description of which is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

The application of modern artistic materials in decorative painting:
“Moscow letter” style

Material type	Material	Description and characteristics	Application in “Moscow letter” decorative painting	Note / Remarks
Metallic coatings	Gold leaf	Ultra-thin sheets of metal creating a natural luster	Used for creating bright decorative elements and backgrounds	An expressive but labor-intensive material; requires protection with varnish and application using the transparent technique
	Liquid imitation gold leaf (Gold gilding paste)	Solutions or dispersions based on fine metallic particles	Used for creating smooth tonal transitions, color gradient and rendering fine detail	A costly and hard-to-source

				material. High hiding power ¹⁴⁰
Contour media	Acrylic contours	Thick-bodied acrylic compounds designed for creating crisp, well-defined lines	Used for rendering fine details, ornamental patterns and creating raised relief elements	Fast-drying; allows for the creation of precise lines with variable thickness
Base coats	Alkyd enamel	Durable, oil-based coating systems with high solids content	Serves as a foundation for subsequent decorative finishing; creates a robust substrate for paint application	Characterized by enhanced wear resistance, excellent hiding power and the ability to form a durable protective barrier against moisture and mechanical impact
Decorative metallic pigments	Metallic powder	Finely dispersed, lamellar metal particles	Used to create a metallic luster effect on the background layer. Requires sealing with varnish and application of transparent paint layers using the transparent glazing technique	Limited color palette; requires strict adherence to safety protocols due to the risk of dust inhalation and spontaneous combustion
	Decorative powders [1 p. 27] and fine pigments	Ultrafine particles of various hues	Used to create shimmering, iridescent, or pearlescent effects. Requires sealing with varnish and application of transparent layers using the transparent glazing technique	Wide range of colors and optical effects; high market availability; generally safe for use
Special effects media	Decorative filler	Acrylic modeling paste, texture paste	Used to create an “antique” or aged effect (antic finish) for ornamental relief decoration	Unique texture

¹⁴⁰ Hiding power – the ability of a coating material to obscure or conceal the color of the underlying substrate.

The following research methods were employed in the course of this study:

- analysis of scientific literature pertaining to the problem under investigation;
- description and analysis of students' practical application of contemporary artistic materials in their Graduation Qualifying Works (Final projects) – specifically, decorative paintings in the “Moscow letter” style. These works were produced at the Institute of traditional applied arts (the Moscow branch of the Russian university of traditional art crafts) during the 2024–2025 academic years;
- comparative analysis of traditional versus modern artistic materials utilized in the creation of “Moscow letter” decorative painting.

The objects of analysis included the students' Graduation Qualifying Works and their accompanying explanatory notes.

In the process of creating works of decorative painting in the “Moscow letter” style, students actively employ contemporary artistic materials. In the 2024 Graduation qualifying work “My golden Moscow” by student I.M. Voevodkina (Fig. 1¹⁴¹), a decorative gold enamel with a pearlescent effect was used for the background for the first time. As noted in scholarly literature, “the high artistic quality of an item and the resulting aesthetic impression largely depend on the qualitative execution of the background layer in decorative or miniature painting” [13, p. 54]. However, alongside aesthetics, the labor intensity and time required for background preparation are critical factors.



Fig. 1. I.M. Voevodkina. “My golden Moscow” panel. Graduation qualifying work, 2024.
Academic supervisor: A.A. Solopova

¹⁴¹ Figs. 1-10. Photo by the author of the article.

The use of this material offers a viable alternative to the traditional transparent glazing technique for creating decorative backgrounds. Under the “classic” approach – which involves applying metallic powder to semi-dry varnish – the formation of the background requires three to four sequential operations, including sanding and varnishing cycles. In contrast, the application of the examined material reduces the number of stages to two ones. This significantly optimizes production time, while the final result in terms of quality and visual impact is comparable to backgrounds executed using classical materials.

Particular attention should be paid to the analysis of how a background executed with decorative gold enamel with a pearlescent effect influences the overall composition of the artwork.

This background is noteworthy for ensuring the harmonious integrity of the composition. It accentuates the primary motifs of the painting through its metallic luster, which highlights the elements rendered in dense, opaque paints.

In the course of the master’s thesis research “Artistic and technological features of decorating items in ‘Moscow letter’ painting” by A.S. Subachev, two serving trays were produced. In their decoration, modern artistic materials were actively employed alongside new methods of ornament application: using an acrylic contour/painter's liner (Fig. 2) and utilizing a linographic cliché (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Fabric contour.
Color: Gold



Fig. 3. Linographic cliché for repeated ornament application

Artists working in the “Moscow letter” style have begun to incorporate acrylics into their practice. As noted in scholarly literature, “acrylic paints possess such characteristic properties as resistance to water and light exposure, ease of use, a rich assortment of shades, and fast drying times; these features provide greater opportunities for realizing creative concepts” [4, p. 216].

One of the primary advantages of acrylics is their rapid drying time. Furthermore, compared to bronze paste – which is traditionally used in decorative metal painting – an acrylic contour/painter’s liner is more cost-effective and accessible, as it is sold in widespread art supply chains. The tube of an acrylic contour features a convenient dispenser nozzle that allows for the application of fine lines less than 1 mm wide, making it suitable for rendering intricate ornamentation.

Alkyd enamel is utilized in artistic practice either as a base for creating decorative effects or as a background color for the item itself. Students master the process of handling this material during the preparatory stage of the work. Since this is a foundational layer that influences all subsequent stages of execution, its practical application requires careful conceptual consideration. According to data from 2014, PF-115 enamel was the predominant type used in both “Moscow letter” and Nizhny Tagil painting techniques – primarily for coating backgrounds and creating intermediate layers; this trend persists as of 2025 [2].

In the process of completing her Graduation qualifying work, student N.V. Mainstruk employed decorative filler for the first time (Fig. 4). She undertook an experimental approach to create a textured, technologically complex decorated background. This background imitates the texture of an old seaside house wall and, according to the artistic concept, resembles Venetian plaster.



Fig. 4. N.V. Mainstruk. “Melody of the waves by ancient shores” panel. Graduation qualifying work, 2025. Academic supervisor: A.A. Solopova

Decorative filler is a specialized material intended for forming a relief or textured ground on various surfaces to create a decorative-artistic background. Decorative fillers are categorized into several types: smooth (thin-layered), textured and embossed/relief. Regardless of the specific type, “any decorative filler represents a pliable mass that is applied to the surface using a spatula or a specialized tool (such as a float or trowel)” [6, pp. 68-76].

The technological process of creating a textured background involves several sequential stages [5, pp. 223-234]. At the initial stage, a base coat of tinted paint is applied using a specialized roller and a tray, which ensures an even distribution of the primary color across the surface.

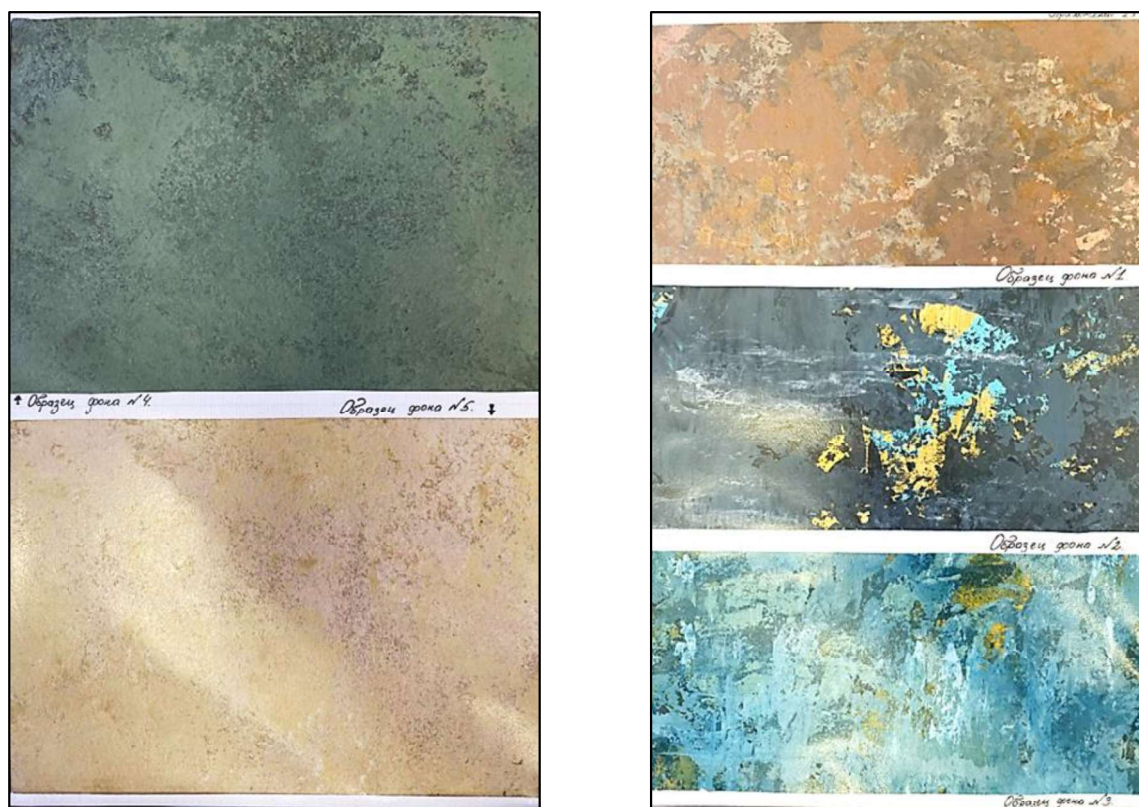
The subsequent stage involves texture formation. Particular attention at this point is paid to working with sponges of various textures, which allow for the creation of soft transitions and natural irregularities characteristic of decorative filler. A painting knife is used to work on large textural elements and create raised relief areas (Fig. 5–9).

The creation of a wall texture “scoured by sea breeze” enhanced the visual perception of the artistic image. In doing so, the authenticity of the “Moscow letter” decorative style was preserved, successfully integrating modern decorative art materials with traditional painting techniques.

Decorative powders and metallic pigment powder consist of finely dispersed materials intended for creating special artistic effects on the surface of an item.

The process of students working with metallic powder and other finely dispersed materials involves several distinct stages:

- a specialized varnish/adhesive is applied over the design;
- the varnish must dry to a “tacky” state – this is the degree of drying at which the coating is no longer wet to the touch but retains sufficient adhesion for powder application;
- powder or pigment dust is applied to the surface using the “powdering” technique.



Figs. 5-9. Material collection for the Graduation qualifying work
“Melody of the waves by ancient shores”

Students practice controlling the uniformity and thickness of the varnish layer, while also learning to select pigments and powders for application based on the desired artistic effect (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Student execution of the “powdering” technique using decorative powders

Another group of materials comprises metallic decorative coatings. These include:

- imitation metal leaf (potal') – a specialized artistic material designed to imitate precious metals, produced in the form of ultra-thin metallic sheets. In the process of mastering the “Materials science in Moscow letter” course, students acquire the technique of applying sheet gold leaf;

- liquid metal leaf (liquid potal') – a modern alternative to traditional sheet

gold leaf, consisting of a suspension of metallic particles in a liquid medium. Unlike conventional leaf, it is characterized by a rapid drying time, which significantly simplifies the application process.

The analysis of Graduation qualifying works – specifically, decorative paintings in the “Moscow letter” style produced during the 2024–2025 academic years – has confirmed the effectiveness of integrating contemporary artistic materials into the process of teaching this form of traditional art crafts to students. The following positive effects have been identified:

- technological changes: reduction of the technological cycle duration; simplification of individual operations; increased durability/reliability of the coating;

- artistic changes: new options for background texturing; novel approaches to ornament execution; application of modern liquid and powdered metallic compounds.

The use of contemporary artistic materials in creating items decorated with “Moscow letter” stimulates students’ creative activity and contributes to the formation of professional skills demanded in the industry. Specifically, future artists learn to navigate current art supplies available on the market. Furthermore, these materials significantly expand the range of decorative techniques applicable in final projects. It is important to note that all results were achieved while preserving traditional painting techniques. This confirms the feasibility of incorporating such innovations into the educational process within the disciplines “Materials science in ‘Moscow letter’ decorative painting” and “Advanced craftsmanship”.

The study has revealed that modern materials in “Moscow letter” decorative painting open new avenues for the development of this type of traditional art crafts.

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