

# PATTERN and Meaning

by Shana Salaff

Patterns have embellished ceramic objects since our Neolithic past. Early clay vessels often imitated woven baskets. Our fascination with pattern and decoration dates back even further. We take pleasure from our environment when it's enhanced with decoration.

Theorist Ellen Dissanayake states that the evolutionary origin of art making is connected to our early development as a species. Then, as now, the intimate connection a baby has with its parents is crucial to language and behavior development. Sustaining this depth of feeling later in life is at the root of our drive to elaborate upon our material world. Dissanayake coined the phrase “making special” to describe the human impulse to change one’s natural surroundings or built environment through any form of artmaking. When present-day potters decorate their work, they are joyful participants in this making special. Pattern is a great way to achieve this.

## The What and Why of Pattern

Pattern divides a visual surface into regular intervals with the repetition of individual elements. While these elements can be anything, the organizing principle of repetition brings unity to the design. What do we see when we look at pattern? In an abstract pattern, we see a rhythmic arrangement of lines, shapes, and movements. When patterns contain representational elements, this adds another layer of meaning. For example, a floral pattern evokes natural beauty, while other imagery causes us to call up associations with things we have seen before. When beautiful line quality, surface variation, and color are brought into the mix, a pattern becomes much more than just a way to organize space.

Patterns also have historical resonances (derived from our own culture or that of others), which many ceramic artists use to their advantage. Using a pattern inspired by historical ceramics on the surface of a contemporary piece adds a layer to the visual experience. In the finished piece, this layer can then be compared with the form it sits upon, made either within the same historical refer-

ence or in contrast to it. Using patterns from another culture or time period is acceptable, as long as you treat both the culture and the pattern with respect in an attempt to find your authentic voice. Using patterns with no copyright is the safest way to do this.

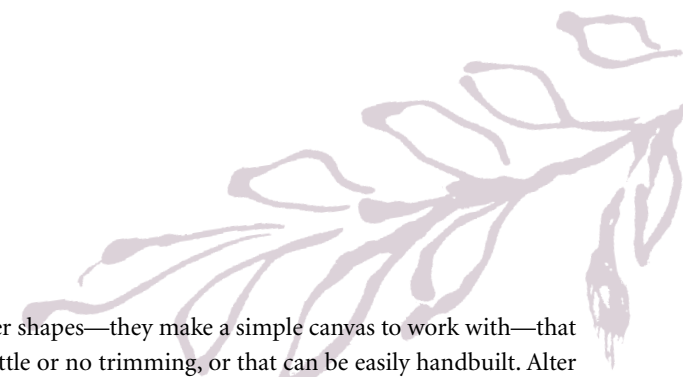
## Pattern Sources

I often decorate my work with components of patterns pulled from various historical sources. Most of the patterns I use on a regular basis come from the library’s visual art section. I choose a specific pattern for the aesthetic pleasure I find in it, as well as how easily I can transform it into a fresh decorative surface. I also look for flowing lines, a pattern that moves well across the surface, and lovely, small floral or leafy elements. I find Victorian wallpaper patterns easy to use because of the plant and flower designs (*figure 1*). I have adapted Chinese patterns derived from rugs with the same quality (*figure 2*). For line work, I prefer patterns that have a movement across space like a swooping line or draped arrangements of leaves on a stalk. I will shuffle through my extensive collection of patterns when considering a new form or new material. However, I am usually drawn to the same two or three.

I’m working with pattern as a tool, using it as a framework for beautiful line quality and color variation, and applying a painterly filter. There is a difference between a pattern created to fit a specific form (such as around the rim of a plate) and pattern used as a surface decoration on a form more like paint on canvas. I am not imitating the pattern but using it as a framework and vehicle for self-expression. The historical reference hovers in the background waiting to be recognized. This is my own way of using pattern to make special.

## Transferring a Pattern

I copy patterns onto acetate and project them onto my work with an old overhead projector. I first started using one because I mistrusted my ability to draw freehand. Now, using a projector allows



me to concentrate on line quality and spacing because I don't have to worry about getting it right. For a pattern from a book, this involves scanning the page onto my computer, sizing it, tiling it (creating a repeating pattern), then printing it onto transparency film (use the kind appropriate for your printer or have it done for you at an office supply store). Another option is to trace onto acetate directly from a visual source such as a printed textile. You might have to scan this in order to shrink the image for projection. You can find old overhead projectors in thrift shops or online: look for ones that contain working bulbs, as these are the most expensive items to replace. Projectors that connect directly to a computer also work but are more expensive. If you prefer not to use a projector, take time to practice drawing your pattern with pen and paper so you can have the same fluency with your hand as you would tracing a projection. There are also many ways to transfer a paper pattern onto clay. Search for "image transfer techniques" on [ceramicartsdaily.org](http://ceramicartsdaily.org) for more information.

### Developing a Personal Vocabulary

Give yourself the following assignment for developing a personal vocabulary with pattern: Experiment with a few patterns and a large number of materials. Create a large number of simple

tumbler shapes—they make a simple canvas to work with—that need little or no trimming, or that can be easily handbuilt. Alter into thirds or square off the form if you like (*figure 3*). Choose or create two or three patterns to play with. Assemble all your decorating equipment and materials and get ready to play with variations. Commit to making each surface different.

Use an X-Acto knife to carve patterns onto about one-third to one-half of your cups (*figure 4*). Experiment with different portions of the pattern, proportions of the surface, and any other variable that you can think of. Use the uncarved cups for underglaze application before or after bisque, as well as glaze application (*figure 5*). Try every combination of materials you have access to, as well as every decorating technique you can think of: sgraffito, underglaze- or glaze-trailing, brushing, waxing and wiping away, inlaying slip or underglaze into carved surface when leather hard or over bisque, adding layers of glaze, glaze pencil, or overglaze. Invent your own techniques, and play with color, texture, value, type of line, etc. Layer techniques and, whenever possible, contrast one pattern with another (*figure 6*). Experiment with ways to work with the negative space around the pattern as much as the pattern itself (*figures 7 and 8*).



**Wheel-thrown and altered cup with incised elements of a William Morris wallpaper pattern layered with a diamond pattern.**



**Wheel-thrown and altered cup with a carved and glazed lotus pattern over a glazed diamond pattern.**



**3**  
Alter a cylinder to create different planes or sections (either vertical or horizontal) to start to organize your design.



**4**  
Project a pattern onto the cup, arrange the composition, and carve or trace around the edges of the projected shapes.



**5**  
Apply underglaze or glaze with a slip trailer or a brush using the projected image as a guide.



**6**  
Brush on glaze to create a second pattern. Use a resist on the first pattern if you wish to keep the glazes separate.



**7**  
A Chinese cloud pattern created using glaze. The negative space becomes an active part of this composition.



**8**  
The same cloud pattern, carved into the surface, glazed, then overlaid onto a diamond pattern for a different visual effect.

## Investigating Further

Other ideas for making your own pattern are to go out and draw some trees or flowers, walk around your neighborhood, find decoration you love, look in your closet for patterned fabric, photograph it, tile it on your computer, etc. If you are like me, obsessed with historical patterns and wallpaper, find copyright-free examples. Ask yourself: how do you want to use pattern? Where do you find, or how do you create, your pattern? How do you want to make your work special? Playing with the answers to these questions will help you create your own voice when using pattern in your work.

Great resources for pattern ideas include Owen Jones' texts *The Grammar of Ornament*, and *The Complete "Chinese Ornament."* In these, Jones illustrates precise and beautifully rendered examples of ornament and pattern from around the world and across centuries. Jones was one of the mid-19th Century thinkers who participated in the intense cataloguing of both the natural and human world in the search for underlying theories and rules. I prefer to ignore strict pronouncements about what is "correct"

or even "best" and proceed on the basis of intuition. Use your intuition to guide you toward your own self-expression. Ultimately, this will grow out of your continued exploration into what moves you as a person as well as an artist.

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### Suggested Reading:

Dissanayake, Ellen. 2000. *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Dissanayake, Ellen. 2002. *What is Art For?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Owen Jones; foreword by Jean-Paul Midant, L'Aventurine. ca. 2006. *The Grammar of Ornament: Illustrated by Examples from Various Styles of Ornament*.

Owen Jones (1809-1874). 1990. *The Complete "Chinese Ornament": All 100 Color Plates*. New York: Dover.