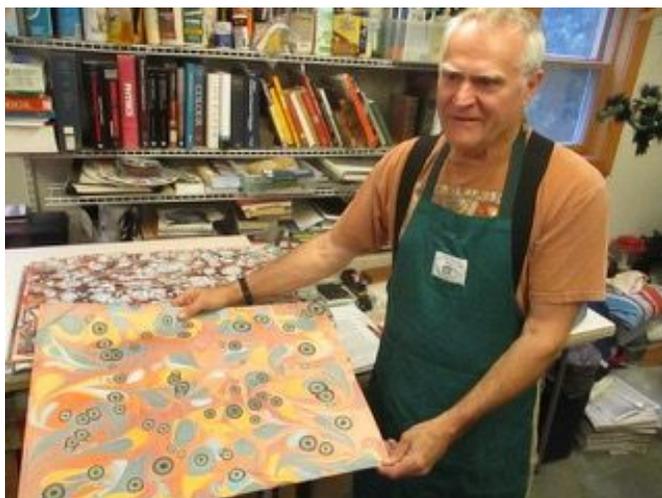


## Chena River Marblers



The centuries old technique of marbling is enjoying a second “golden age” at Regina and Dan St John’s Amherst homestead. Their business, Chena River Marblers, thrives in a large addition to their house, where thirty-four years of research by the couple have led to the reformulation of paints and pigments and lost techniques. When I visited the couple, we started off from scratch in a room where Dan creates the paints used on the very fine book papers the couple makes for customers all over the world. His studio was filled with jars and bottles, books and beautiful papers, and his worktable held a very large, thick sheet of glass with a large glass muller sitting on top of it. This is where he works to grind pigment into the right consistency before mixing it with other ingredients. A wizard with wild orange eyes overlooked the operation from one corner: this is definitely an alchemical process going on here!



Expert at techniques and materials for the craft, Dan was once a chemistry and physics teacher. His encyclopedic knowledge of materials was gleaned from old European texts printed before the 1850s. He took a book off the shelf that was recently reprinted. It was published in France in 1852 and contained trade secrets for making many kinds of “fancy papers,” including marbled papers. “What I like to call the “golden age” of marbling started in the beginning of the 1800s when they started getting long rolls of paper made on the Fourdrinier machine. Instead of using combs on single sheets, they were making tons of papers using substances to get effects,” explained Dan.

“There were whole towns making papers. You could order a thousand sheets from a catalog by the 1840s.” These papers went to decorate volumes of books produced by the burgeoning book trade. Originally, marbling was introduced to Europe over the silk road from the Middle East. The general idea is to float paints on the surface of a viscous water bath and then pick up this film onto the surface of paper or fabric. In Turkey, where many pigments and tools of the trade still come from, they specialize in creating images in the film of paint.

Thanks to his research and networking Dan learned how to add beeswax to the paint in order to be able to polish the paper after it was painted, thus making it stronger by calendaring the surface, and giving it a lustrous sheen. This finish particularly highlights metallic paints that “can look like a sheet of metal.”



He demonstrated this method of polishing using an agate burnishing tool on a sheet of marbled paper. He leaned over the paper, using his weight to press the stone firmly and evenly across the surface several times. The paper became smoother and took on a luster which added greatly to the sheen of the copper veins running through the design.

Dan displayed a jar of bleached beeswax that he boils with potash to make a soapy paste. This is mixed with finely ground pigments and a rabbit skin glue binder to make the paints.

These pigments are made from the same natural substances as early marblers would have used, including indigo from the woad plant used to make brilliant blue, and cochineal insects which yield a deep red. (He let me sniff a jar of indigo blue, which smelled strongly due to the animal urine used in the compound.)

Another effect that was “lost” to the modern age and now resurrected by Dan is the Tiger Eye effect. Dan was taught an interpretation of this technique, described in the 1852 fancy papers book, by Garret Dixon of Franklin, PA. The pattern does indeed look like many eyeballs complete with iris and pupil within a clear circle, and it involves the use of potassium hydroxide, a caustic substance that needs to be carefully handled.

I could have stayed in his studio for quite a while leafing through sheet after sheet of marbled papers, examples of various stunning techniques that managed to look antique and psychedelic at

the same time, but Regina was ready to do a demonstration in the large marbling workshop at the



rear of the addition, so I moved on.

We passed through a hallway lined with yards of marbled silk, and marbled hats, shirts, ties and scarves that provided even more “eye candy.” Regina showed how the marbling stayed only on the surface of the cloth by turning over pieces to show the reverse side which was indeed different.

Sometimes she will marble both sides of the fabric.

Other times she uses a patterned silk to make the other side more interesting, or a painted silk, and sometimes she uses snow dying to make a mottled effect on top of a printed pattern. To do this, dye-activated silk is scrunched and bunched into a basin and packed with snow topped by sprinkles of dye. The basin is wrapped in plastic and left to melt for a day, so that the dyes dribble and blend into the fabric in a pleasing way.

A display of decorated journals, pads, barrettes, and books beckoned as well. I couldn't wait to see how this was actually done!

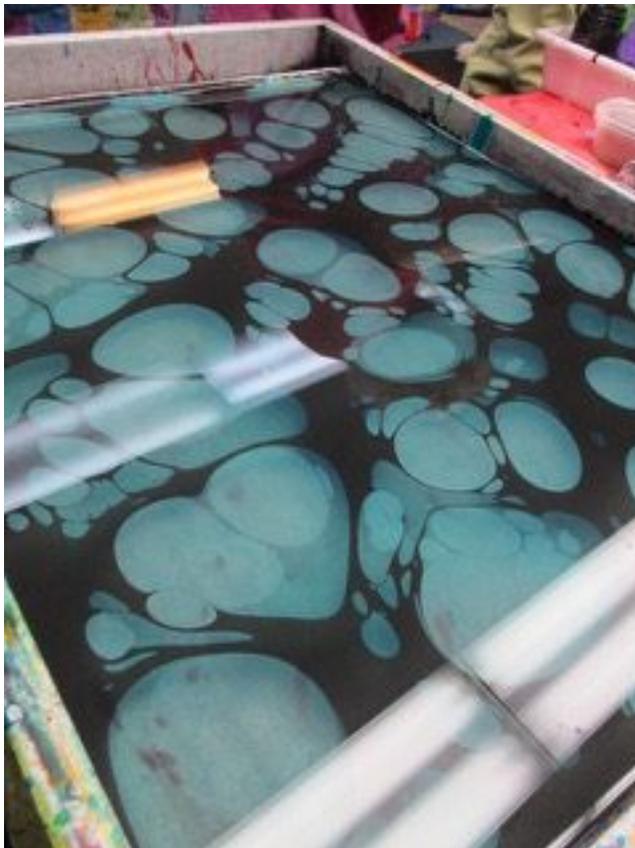
Regina has been marbling for 34 years. She saw a scrap of marbled paper while up in Alaska where she and Dan were village teachers for 16 years and vowed to find out how to do this craft. (Chena River is a river in Alaska). Once back in the Valley, which she says is “a hotbed of bookmakers, writers, and printers” she took a marbling workshop, and has not stopped her exploration of this craft since, gradually drawing Dan into it as she went.



Nowadays, the couple dedicate themselves to passing down their knowledge of this lost art by giving classes and workshops to people, both at their studio and at museums and schools in other parts of the country.

Regina showed me a thick water bath filling a deep tray. The substance used to thicken the water, carrageenan, is widely used in the food industry to thicken, strengthen and stabilize liquids. It is made from seaweed. Next, she cleaned the surface by drawing strips of paper across it which soaked up old paint remnants from a previous batch and broke up the surface tension of the liquid. The paints she uses are mostly heavy body acrylics made by Utrecht. Anything she can't find, her husband Dan will make for her but in the interest of efficiency, she finds that these particular ready-made acrylics are perfect for the job.

Next, she made three rows of drops from a paint bottle, which gradually spread out to a very thin film. At the very edges of the basin, she swiped with strips of paper to remove the surface tension of the uncovered liquid and get the paint film to spread completely across. She used black in this case, but it could be any color. If the surface tension is not removed, there will be veins running through the pattern where the paint cannot cover the water entirely. (She calls these "worms." When she makes her signature "party papers" which are marbled twice, she will leave the worms, since they get painted over, and generally any other time she wants that effect of the unpainted paper showing through.)



Then, Regina went at it with various dots of purples, blues, and white. Drops spread and grew, magically, on the carrageenan's surface. She took a long wooden board with wires sticking out of it and "wove" the drops into lines that zigzagged over the surface. Another board with fewer, staggered pins in it was drawn across and moved side to

side at the same time, creating what is called a “bouquet” pattern, one of the more traditional and well known marbled effects.

Paper, like fabric, needs to be specially prepared for taking up this film of paint. Alum is used to prep the paper, otherwise the paint will rinse off. She took a sheet of this prepared paper and laid it on the surface briefly, then peeled it away and rinsed it in the sink. It was incredible to see all the paint lift off onto the surface perfectly, without dripping or shifting, and then remain intact under a stream of flowing water!

Chena River Marblers teach at Snow Farm locally, and at their home studios in Amherst. Contact Regina and Dan St John at 413-253-2835 or visit their website, [chenarivermarblers.com](http://chenarivermarblers.com) to learn more about their classes. Their products have been at the Shelburne Arts Co-op for many many years!

Nina Rossi

[nalerossi@gmail.com](mailto:nalerossi@gmail.com)

[ninasnook.com](http://ninasnook.com)