

By Linda Whiting

Though knitted lace can stand beautifully on its own, it becomes something even more with the addition of color. Painting your finished lace with dye can accentuate its pictorial and abstract elements, alter them, or even suggest new ones. For this introduction to lace painting, I have chosen several familiar lace patterns from Barbara Walker to illustrate the possibilities. Ready? Let's get started.

Step 1: Analyzing your lace

Some lace designs better lend themselves to enhancement this way than others. The first step is to analyze pattern elements. Pictorial or representational patterns may be more suitable for coloration.



You need to look carefully at a lace pattern to see what might create the most pleasing effect. While the entire knitted piece may not lend itself to painting, there may be elements that could be painted such as the edging or small design units. The whole piece of lace might be painted one color with certain elements highlighted by a second color. Because it takes a long time to knit a piece of lace, be very sure of what you want to do before applying any dye.

Step 2: Planning a color scheme

One way to experiment with color possibilities is to scan your knitted lace on a computer or take digital photos. Using watercolor paints or colored pencils on the paper prints, you can find the effect that is most pleasing without having to risk your actual lace. Color can be intense and dramatic or soft and subtle, so play with intensity. It is also a good idea to try the dyes first on a small swatch of your knitting.



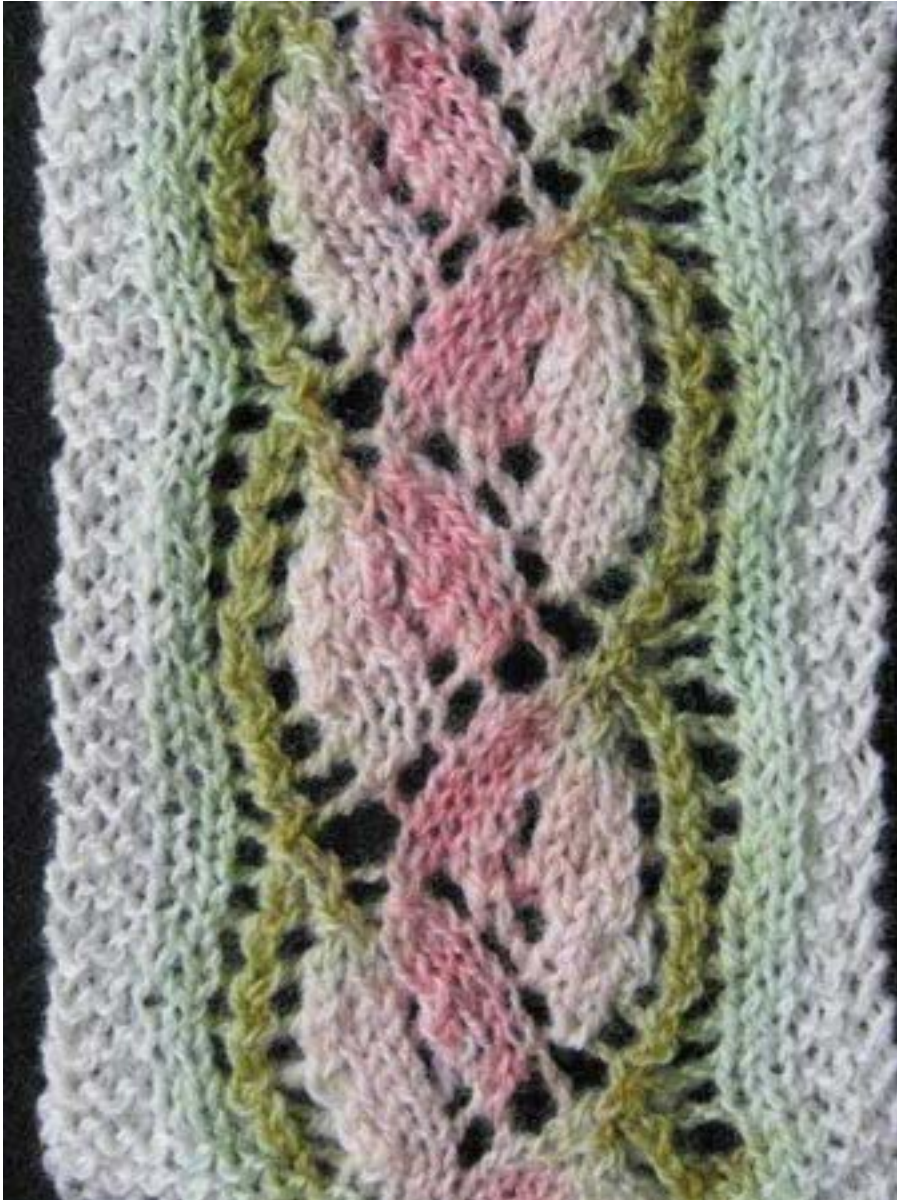
Step 3: Understanding how dyes behave

The most important thing to remember when painting with dyes is that they do not behave the same way paints do. When you touch a brush to paint you know that the color in the tube or pan is the color that will be left on your paper or canvas. Dyes, however, are often made up of different color components, not just one. These components may dissolve in water at different rates: some faster, some slower. This may affect the application. For example, when you paint an area blue and the color strikes the fiber, you may find that a pink halo will begin to spread out from the area of application. This is because the red component of the blue dye requires a longer length of time to take up in the fiber.

Some dyes are light and transparent and will not separate when applied. Others are rather opaque with sediments or heavy elements in their mix of components. By experimenting first on paper towels, you will understand what to expect from each dye. Some dyes mix well with others to create a wide range of color that is clear and beautiful. Some create muddy colors that may seem heavy or dull. Get to know each of your dyes, learn their makeup and how they behave when mixed in water and applied to fiber.

Step 4: Dye decisions and preparations

Mixing dyes the day before assures that all of their components have dissolved fully. Set up a dedicated painting area and get your brushes ready. Whether you use foam or stiff stencil brushes, you want to make sure that they are thoroughly clean. Give yourself plenty of uninterrupted time to complete your project.



While you are preparing your workspace, soak your lace. This is an important step so that the scales on the fiber will be open and receptive to the dye. Water should be warm to hot to the hand. Add a squirt of wetting agent such as Synthrapol or dish washing liquid. When you put the lace in the water, hold it down and gently squeeze to help remove the air trapped in the fibers. Soak for at least one half hour. After soaking, gently squeeze the water out or use a salad spinner.

Your painting surface should be covered with plastic. A padding of newspaper or an old blanket under this lets you pin the lace out to full size to keep the stitches open and stretched. This under-layer should be white or light colored so you can see your painting better. Obviously, finer yarn and more open patterns will be easier to paint than heavier yarn and denser patterns.

Step 5: Application

You want to be in control of the color at all times. Always have a sponge or absorbent paper towels handy. As mentioned earlier, applied dyes may generate a halo of another color; this can be minimized by blotting with the sponge or towels.

Knowing your dye's behavior ahead of time will let you know what to expect so you can control the color. Remember to rinse the sponge or towels each time after blotting so that you do not transfer unwanted color to another area. It may be handy to have a spray bottle of water nearby. For large projects it may be necessary to dampen areas that have dried out while you were painting other areas.



There are a few things to consider regarding application of the dyes. Do you want the colors to blend or do you want the individual colors to remain distinct? You may choose to paint all of the first color, let it dry, and then apply the next color. In this method the second color will be less apt to spread and blend. Applying the second color soon after the first helps precipitate blending. Overlapping colors can create pleasing third colors or lovely shading effects.

Step 6: Addition of the Acid

To set the colors, dyes for protein fibers require heat and acid in the form of household white vinegar or citric acid. When you add the acid can make a big difference. If you paint with just the pure dye, the dye will better saturate the fiber. After painting all the elements you wish to color you can also easily spray the surface of the lace with the acid solution. You will want to spray consistently to assure the most even application of the acid. On the other hand, adding acid to a dye before applying will help it strike right where painted instead of spreading and blending with surrounding colors. Carefully blot the plastic underlayment of any excess moisture, remembering to rinse the sponge between each blotting. Let the piece rest in place for a bit while you clean up your brushes and put away your dyes.

Step 7: Add heat to set the color

Prepare your lace for steaming to set the colors. If the piece is small, it can be placed in a plastic bag and set on a rack or vegetable steamer above an inch of boiling water in a covered pot. If there are several colors involved, you may want to lay plastic wrap over and under the entire piece to keep the colors from touching. Make a neat package by folding the edges of the plastic in on themselves, place the package in a plastic bag, then set it on the rack to steam for a half hour. Check periodically to make sure that you still have sufficient water. When the steaming period is over, turn off the burner and allow the piece to cool in the pot. Leaving the piece overnight will give the dyes the best chance to cure fully. If you rinse as soon as the steaming is done, you might lose some of the color that needs a longer time to set.

Step 8: Washing and blocking

After the curing period, gently remove the wrapping and wash the lace with mild soap in cool water. You don't need much soap, but sometimes there could be excess dye, especially if you used turquoise or fuchsia. It is better to wash first rather than risk color coming off on your clothes at a later time. Rinse well, squeeze out the excess water and then block your lace over a towel or safe surface to dry.



For Linda's comments on her individual swatch results, see the companion article on the next page of the magazine.

Bibliography

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