Sink your Teeth into Toothpaste Batik!


The best-known is the batik of Indonesia made on the island of Java; the derivation of the word ‘batik’ is Indonesian. Intricate patterns are painted using a tool called a tjanting, in which a copper or brass reservoir with a handle and a spout holds the hot wax, and is used as a drawing tool. Also, the hot wax can be applied with paint brushes or with copper stamps.

In Africa, a paste for the resist is made of a starch (from the cassava melon or rice) or mud rather than wax, so lines are thicker and designs are more graphic.

Batik with hot wax is fabulous and gorgeous, but not necessarily safe or easy to do with kids. There are toxic fumes, and of course the hot wax itself can be dangerous. Plus, you need to go through the time-consuming ritual of dying the fabric and ironing or boiling out the wax.

So ‘toothpaste batik’ is a fun alternative! Here’s how to do it:

- Mix together a 50/50 mix of white toothpaste and cream or lotion (choose one that is not too watery) and put them into empty glue-style bottles and shake like crazy to mix. *Make sure you label the bottles so they don’t get mixed up with glue bottles!*

- Draw desired design to size on paper, and trace lines with black Sharpie. These lines will be white in the competed artwork.

- Tape paper to cardboard, and then tape a piece of white fabric over it.

- Use the toothpaste/lotion mix to trace the lines, shaking occasionally. Leave it overnight to dry (it may feel rubbery when dry).

- Paint with tempera; do NOT use washable tempera. Use intense or dark colors for best results. You can paint over the lines. Let dry. Alternatively, you can use acrylic, but the fabric will be stiff when complete; if tempera is used it will be soft. I have also experimented successfully with fabric paints/dyes.

- Remove painting from cardboard and run under warm water until toothpaste starts to loosen. Use your hand to help loosen the paste. Rinse gently, but thoroughly.

- Dry flat, on cardboard. (If placed directly on wire drying rack, you may get “grill lines”.)

- If desired, add details with colored Sharpie markers.
**What kinds of designs work well for toothpaste batik?**

The possibilities are unlimited, but remember, you can’t always control the result 100%. Play up the element of the unexpected when introducing the medium with students. Whenever you use non-traditional materials to make art, the result can be unpredictable, so have fun with it! Some of the “themes” I’ve used for toothpaste batik projects include:

- Matisse inspiration
- The designs of Victorian architecture and gingerbread trim on homes
- Fantasy – including dragons, castles, unicorns, mermaids….
- Garden inspired
- Landscapes and seascapes

A few of other ‘themes’ that I think would lend themselves beautifully to the medium include work inspired by artists like Hundertwasser, Peter Max, Klee, Miro, or many others, or designs inspired by some of the batiks from Java or Africa or elsewhere. Or simply to explore abstraction through repetition, rhythm, movement, etc! Explore and experiment!!

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**A few additional notes about the materials:**

- You want to use a WHITE paste-type toothpaste. Colored gel toothpastes might stain your fabric. I encourage kids to be liberal with their use of the resist for interesting line design. You can use the resist to make dots as well as lines.

- It’s always a good idea to pre-wash fabric without fabric softener, and then iron it, before doing any sort of dyeing.

- You can use any light-colored fabrics, but remember, your resist lines will be the color of the fabric. White fabric is generally your best bet. We’ve used muslin or old sheets.

- I’ve experimented with various brands of tempera paint. **Blick Premium Tempera**, while not my usual ‘go-to’ tempera, has given me the most vibrant color results, but I’ve also had success with **Sax Versatemp** and **Crayola Premier Tempera**. Sometimes you will experience some color loss with the yellows, and I’ve had mixed results when mixing tints. I found some old **Concentrated Crayola Artista Tempera** (they don't make it any more) and it worked really well, since the pigment was so concentrated. Remember do NOT use any sort of WASHABLE tempera! A lot of today’s Artista tempera is washable.

- Or use any acrylics, if you don’t mind the stiffened fabric when complete.

- Remember, whatever color is painted on the fabric first is what you’ll see when you wash the resist off. So if you make a color mistake while painting, you generally cannot fix it by painting over it with another color. It will just wash off!