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Peculiarities of stencilled ornaments in the painting of Nizhny Tagil trays

Abstract. The article examines the role of stencil ornament in the Nizhny Tagil decorative painting on metal. The author raises the issue of the gradual loss of the stencilling technique in this type of art. The evolution of the execution of the stencil technique is analysed, from the first samples of the 18th century to contemporary interpretations. Particular attention is paid to the types of stencil ornaments – heraldic, geometric, floral and zoomorphic – and their compositional features in tray decoration. A comparative characteristic of the materials used for creating stencils is provided, identifying their advantages and disadvantages in practical work. The technological process of creating a stencil ornament is described, including all stages from sketch development to the final process of fixing the work onto the surface of the finished product. The combination of traditional methods with innovative ones is studied, which allows for the preservation and revitalization of the Nizhny Tagil painting traditions, expands knowledge about artistic and stylistic techniques in the decoration of metal trays, as well as focuses attention on the development of educational programs for future specialists.

Keywords: tray, Nizhny Tagil decorative painting, decorative painting, stencilled ornament, experiment, stencil.

The Nizhny Tagil decorative painting on metal is one of the unique types of Russian traditional art crafts. The appearance of the first lacquer painting on metal, whose homeland is considered to be Nizhny Tagil, dates back to a conventional date – 1746 [2].

Two main painting techniques are used in the Nizhny Tagil decorative painting: the brushstroke two-color and multilayered painting. Works executed in the brushstroke two-color technique are characterized by a sectoral composition – the division of the image into sectors, which gives the product a more decorative sound [4]. Multilayered painting is characterized by its step-by-step execution on the item: underpainting, shadow tracing, light tracing, color reflections, final detailing with fluting at each stage of painting and their subsequent varnishing [7].

One of the important elements of decoration used in the design of items with Nizhny Tagil painting is ornament, which is divided into hand-drawn and stencil. Ornament applied to the surface of a painted item allows giving it completeness, revealing and accentuating the architectonics of the form of each element [3].

A characteristic feature of hand-drawn ornament is geometric elements: a point, an arc, rocaille scrolls, united into a single single-tiered or multi-tiered

ornamental band (Fig. 1⁵⁷). The hand-drawn ornament is executed with a thin round squirrel-hair brush and gold paste. Much less often, silver and bronze powders are used for execution. To fix the ornament on the surface of the item, a “dvoinik” is used – a special solution obtained by mixing white spirit and varnish.

One of the types of ornamental decoration in the Nizhny Tagil painting is stencil ornament. The initial application of this type of ornament in the works of Nizhny Tagil masters dates back to the first half of the 19th century. A stencil is intended for repeated manual application of a painted ornament, letters, numbers, images or other graphic elements onto any surface [5; 6].

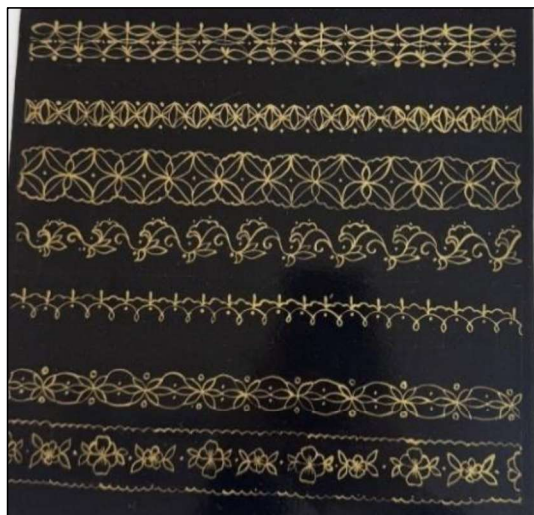


Fig. 1. Yu.M. Mitryukova.
Ornaments. 2020



Fig. 2. Ya.A. Filatova. A fragment of the tray's
ornament from an art and design project. 2025

It is characteristic that on trays from the beginning of the 19th century, a stencil was considered an addition to the composition's framing [1], while in the middle of the 19th century, stencil ornament became an integral part of narrative compositions (Fig. 3⁵⁸).

The technological process for creating a stencil ornament is known to contemporary artists; however, it is used less frequently than hand-drawn techniques. The Museum of the History of the Tray Craft “Dom Khudoyarovykh” (House of the Khudoyarovs) features an exposition including the necessary tools, materials, samples of stencils and fragments of painting with stencil printing executed by artists at the beginning of the 20th century (Fig. 4).

⁵⁷ Figs. 1, 2, 4- 6, 11-13. Photo by the author of the article.

⁵⁸ Fig. 3. Tray ТМ-25171 // Тагильский-поднос.рф : сайт. – URL: https://тагильский-поднос.рф/catalog/2/266/?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=yandexsmartcamera (date of access: 16.11.2025).



Fig. 3. Tray. First half of the 19th century.
The State Russian Museum
(St. Petersburg)



Fig. 4. Materials used for stenciling
on trays

To create a stencil ornament, it is necessary to adhere to the following technological sequence:

- *the development of a graphic sketch (drawing) of the future stencil* is carried out on paper in accordance with the developed composition;
- *cutting out the stencil* is performed on a special plate using a scalpel-style craft knife;
- *applying the ornament with the stencil onto the surface of the item* is done with a special tool – a “kukolka”, which is a small leather pad with a wooden handle. Metal powder (red bronze) is used as a decorative material. By patting the surface of the item through the stencil, the color is hammered in, which helps to evenly and densely distribute the applied material, avoiding runs and defects.

It is known that for many decades, masters made paper stencils. However, after the design transfer process, the paper would lose its strength, darken, and tear. The material used for making stencils changed in the 21st century: paper was replaced by a thin transparent plastic plate (Figs. 5, 6).



Fig. 5. Stencil ornament
(material: paper). 20th century
The Museum of the history of the tray craft “Dom Khudoyarovykh” (Nizhny Tagil)

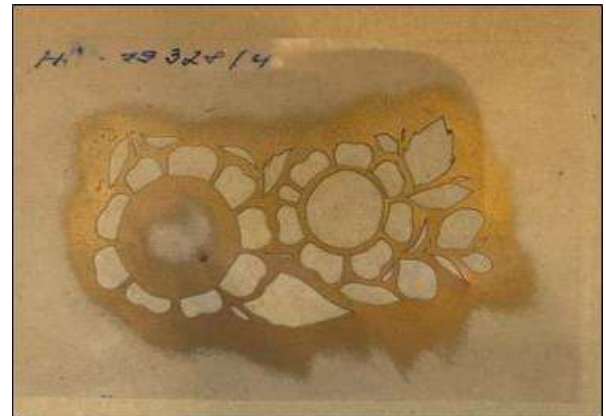


Fig. 6. Stencil ornament
(material: plastic). 21st century

Advantages of transparent plastic:

- *Durability*. Paint and decorative materials do not deform the edges of the stencil elements. The plastic is resistant to various materials and tools;
- *Reusability*. After performing the decorative work on an item, the stencil is cleaned of paint for further use;
- *Transparency* simplifies the process of applying the stencil to the desired area; it fits tightly to the surface of the item, which reduces the likelihood of smudges (runs).

The stencil ornament used in Nizhny Tagil painting is classified by type: heraldic, geometric, floral and zoomorphic. At the same time, it can be presented in the form of modular compositional elements.

Heraldic stencil ornament is characterized by the use of symbolism from cities, states, enterprises, etc. Such trays include S.V. Veselkov's series "Demidov heraldic" (2003), Yu.V. Platonov's tray (1996) and series of trays from the folk crafts enterprise "Smena". In the 1993 work by N.Z. Tul'kuyeva, a theme of heraldry was embodied using the technology of stencil painting (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. N.Z. Tul'kuyeva. Tray "Yellow flowers". 1993

The central part of the item's composition is decorated with a large coat of arms of the Demidovs family. At the same time, on the rim of the rectangular tray, stencil inserts of the main historical symbols of Nizhny Tagil are placed in the corners: a steam locomotive, a bicycle, a tower and a monument.

Zoomorphic stencil ornament involves the use of animal images, which are stylized during the stencil design. An example of the use of zoomorphic stencil ornament is one of the trays from the late 19th century, made in the workshop of I.V. Obukhov. The composition includes images of birds and horses, whose figures are

arranged in a circle around the mirror (central field)⁵⁹ of the tray (Fig. 8⁶⁰). Geometric stencil ornament is characterized by the use of elements such as lines, dots and geometric shapes (Fig. 9⁶¹).



Fig. 8. Tray. The hallmark "I.V. Obukhov in Nizhny Tagil". 1890



Fig. 9. M.V. Palceva. Tray "Listoboinyi tsekh". 2013



Fig. 10. T.V. Yudina. Tray "Solemnity". 1993

Floral stencil ornament is the most widespread. It is characterized by stylized and meticulously detailed depictions of flowers and leaves.

Floral stencil ornament is used both in the design of centric compositions and as decorative embellishment for the borders of trays. Some Nizhny Tagil artists employ new artistic and stylistic techniques. For example, in the work of T.V. Yudina, floral motifs are embodied using a variety of decorative techniques to

create a complex composite stencil ornament (Fig. 10).

S.V. Veselkov, who works in the stencil painting technique, employs traditional technological methods combined with decorative potale (metal leaf) in his works (Figs. 11, 12).

In order to conduct an in-depth study of the artistic-stylistic and technological techniques that enhance the expressiveness of the artistic language of Nizhny Tagil

⁵⁹ The mirror of a tray is the flat base (bottom) of the tray, framed by a rim (of a certain height), and having a glossy surface.

⁶⁰ Fig. 8. Tagil tray. Tray TM-605 M-2025 : site. – URL: <https://тагильский-поднос.рф/catalog/3/243/> (date of access: 16.11.2025).

⁶¹ Fig. 9. Tagil tray. Tray "Listoboinyi tsekh" : site. – URL: <https://тагильский-поднос.рф/catalog/6/450/> (date of access: 16.11.2025).

painting, as well as to research the features of stencil ornament, a copy of S.V. Veselkov's tray "Ryabinovy" (Rowan) from 2003 was made.

The goal of the practical work is to execute a Nizhny Tagil painting on a shaped tray with an oval mirror measuring 38x31 cm, whose compositional solution is based on the application of hand-drawn and stencil ornament executed with the decorative art material – potale.



Fig.11. S.V. Veselkov. Tray
"Grapevine". 1993



Fig.12. S.V. Veselkov. Tray
"Demidov". 2006

In the process of creating the item, preliminary experimental work was carried out on the use of decorative potale (metal leaf) in the stencil ornament.

On the prepared surface of the tray, a background is applied using the "rastampovka" method (applying paint to a surface with a sponge or tampon) to achieve a smooth gradient transition from green to black. After the background has completely dried, a layer of varnish is applied to the surface for the decorative technique known as "kaptyozhka pod cherepakhu" (applying chaotic smoke spots from a candle flame). After this, the surface of the item is secured with another layer of varnish.

At the next stage, the stencil is prepared: compositional elements with a rowan motif are reproduced on dense paper with a simple pencil using graphic construction. Then, the necessary sections of the stencil intended for applying gold paste are cut out with a scalpel knife on a special mat, and areas on the tray for working with potale are also prepared (Fig. 13).

The finished stencil is tightly secured to the dried surface of the tray. Then, a layer of gold paste is applied to the prepared fragments of the stencil using patting movements. Varnish for potale and sheet potale in gold and silver shades are applied to separate areas of the surface. The work begins with the central part of the composition. Decorating the tray ends with a stencil ornament framing the central rowan motif. Elements not covered with gold paste are coated with one layer of varnish using a thin brush, after which decorative potale is applied. Excess potale is removed with a fan-shaped brush. The composition is finalized with hand-written elements: "privyazkami" (connecting thin scrolls) and dot-like linear-graphic

elements – “tychinkami” (dots). Next, an outline is drawn around each stencil motif, and the painting of the item is completed with hand-written ornament and a gold border around the edge of the tray (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13. Fragment of a stencil ornament



Fig. 14. Fragment of a stencil ornament using potale

The finished item is coated with several layers of varnish to fix the decorative materials and give the surface a glossy shine, which simultaneously ensures both the aesthetic completeness of the item and its durability (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Yu.M. Mitryukova. Copy of the tray “Ryabinovy” (Rowan), author S.V. Veselkov. 2025

In the course of the practical work on copying the painting of a Nizhny Tagil tray with a composition executed using a stencil, the author managed not only to investigate its features but also to master the execution technology using traditional materials, such as decorative potale.

This experience is valuable for the process of training future artists in the Nizhny Tagil decorative painting, contributing to the development of professional skills and expanding the range of technical and technological methods used to create unique, highly artistic works in the field of Russian lacquer art.

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