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Floral painting on Semikarakorsk ceramics: classification of types and their artistic originality

Abstract. The article conducts a retrospective analysis of the identified stylistic features of floral painting on Semikarakorsk ceramics, based on which a classification of its varieties was created. Two key stages in the development of the painting are highlighted: 1970s–1990s (style formation) and 2000s–2020s (development of the formed style). The characteristic features of the painting at each stage are described: from the abundance of decor and prevalence of grid in early works to more restrained brushwork and compact composition in modern products. The types of floral painting are considered depending on the materials used (salt and non-salt) and composition options (central, ribbon, gradient). The influence of external factors (competition, expansion of the color palette) on the evolution of floral painting is analyzed.

Keywords: flower painting, Semikarakorsk ceramics, underglaze painting, composition, traditional art crafts.

Semikarakorsk ceramics is a unique artistic craft of the Rostov region. At the enterprise JSC "Semikarakorsk ceramics", traditional technologies and artistic techniques for the production of faience products are preserved, the main method of decoration being hand-painted underglaze, while floral motifs reflect the nature of the Don region.

Over the past decades, the painting of Semikarakorsk ceramics has undergone significant changes: floral compositions have become more diverse, which testifies to the unique style of each artist at the enterprise, combining technical complexity and individual artistic vision.

At present, the floral painting of Semikarakorsk ceramics remains insufficiently studied: there is no classification of types and the evolution of stylistic features has not been explored. These factors hinder the continuity in mastering professional skills required for creating Semikarakorsk ceramics with floral decoration.

Since the establishment of the art faience workshop and until the formation of a unified style in the choice of décor for tableware, extensive work has been carried out. Floral motifs, varied in different ways by the artists, have come to dominate Semikarakorsk ceramic products. The basis is a floral ornament, which includes a central, fantastical large flower surrounded by smaller inflorescences, leaves, tendrils and a net-like pattern. The color palette is diverse in shades.

The development of Semikarakorsk floral painting can be divided into two stages. The first stage (1970s–1990s) marks the formation of Semikarakorsk

painting as an independent artistic craft and the search for a recognizable style. The second stage (2000s–2020s) is characterized by the development of the established style and further artistic exploration.

Let us reveal the distinctiveness of floral painting in each period.

Ceramics produced in the 1970s–1990s are characterized by an abundance of decoration, a significant predominance of net-like patterns and «motley» effects – the painting covered the main surface of the ceramic item. Although the flowers were decorative and fantastical, some, by their outlines, resembled real plant species. The central flower is based on a composite image, combining features of bellflower, tulip, iris, Siberian squill and goose's onion. Decorative depictions of plants native to the Don region are also sometimes present in the painting of smaller inflorescences.

In the center of the composition of the “Natasha” tableware set (1982) is a large flower of pinkish-ochre hue with a sunny center, from which smaller flowers with leaves extend (Fig. 1⁶³). All elements gradually decrease in size towards the opposite edges. The large floral ornament is complemented by a great number of ears of grain throughout the composition. Light gaps are filled with drops of turquoise, symbolizing the Don sky. A large brown net pattern is introduced along the upper perimeter of the item and a painted arabesque runs along the bottom. The surface of the tableware is almost entirely covered with ornamentation.



Fig. 1. L.V. Aldoshina. Tableware set “Natasha”. 1982.
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The complex form of the “August” jug (1989), with relief decoration on the lower and upper parts, is emphasized by large-scale painting (Fig. 2). On the body of the jug, a large flower is centrally placed within a circular composition, surrounded by bouquets radiating in different directions. The

painting consists of two types of leaves, small inflorescences, ears of grain, arabesques and is complemented by turquoise splashes. Both the lid and the curved handle of the piece are also decorated with painting.

The prominent relief on the body, handle and lid of the “Christmas Mug” (1999) is accentuated by painting (Fig. 3). The painting composition, inscribed within a circle, consists of a large central flower surrounded by leaves in green-brown tones, framed by small inflorescences and net-like triangular elements, decorated with spots of blue glaze. The lid and handle of the mug also feature painted elements. During this period, a vast number of works were created, with each artist striving to express their individual vision within the general stylistic trends.

⁶³ Figs. 1–13. Photo by the author of the article.



Fig. 2. O.P. Kunakhovets.
Jug “August”. 1989.
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Fig. 3. L.V. Aldoshina.
“Christmas Mug”. 1999.
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Floral painting of the 2000s–2020s is characterized by a more restrained brushstroke. The composition becomes more compact and harmonious. Artists strive to emphasize the uniqueness and aesthetic appeal of the form, in addition to the use of painting. The tableware remains festive and bright: the whiteness of the ceramic body itself serves as an independent decorative means of artistic expression.

On the items, the flower takes on a more graceful form and the palette becomes brighter. The construction of the decorative composition has changed, becoming more complex. Additional elements – leaves and twigs – complement the composition and accentuate the roundness and whiteness of the ceramic body. The elegance and absence of overloading in the painting are distinctive features of the modern period.

Examples of the new floral painting can be seen on ceramic items such as the tableware set “Don region (Flowers)” (2023) and the teapot “White dance” (2022) (Figs. 4, 5). On the one hand, the floral painting is vibrant and rich; on the other, it is delicate and graceful. The decoration is inextricably linked to the form and serves a framing function.



Fig. 4. L.V. Aldoshina. Tableware set
“Don region (Flowers)”. 2023.
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Fig. 5. L.V. Aldoshina.
Teapot “White dance”. 2022.
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The evolution and great variability of the floral painting were also influenced by external factors. Since the 1990s, the enterprise JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics” has experienced a period of high competition due to the abundance of imported tableware (predominantly from China). In this situation, the artists' task was not only to preserve the established artistic language of painting but also to find new solutions that would meet the tastes of modern buyers while remaining within the framework of tradition. Thus, a tandem between the artist and the customer was formed, which allowed for a diverse assortment, constant renewal and gave the production a chance to survive during a difficult period. Semikarakorsk ceramics has established itself not only as a traditional art craft of the Rostov region but has also gained recognition among viewers and customers in other regions of the country.

The artists needed to find a balance between tradition and new trends, the complexity and labor-intensiveness of painting execution, the “filledness” of the form, and, ultimately, the cost of the item.

As a result, the volume of painting decreased, although it did not become simpler and more free space appeared on the white faience body. The artists took into account the nuances of painting execution that could cause difficulties during glazing and firing of the items.



Fig. 6. N.V. Rogochaya. Salad bowl
“Flower of love”. 2000.

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As production developed, contacts with various countries expanded, which significantly enriched the palette available to the painters. The quality of pink tones improved considerably, allowing for the use of color in larger elements of the painting. Defects encountered in the initial stages of using paints were completely eliminated. Since 2005, the application of a red pigment, which had not been used previously, has been introduced, adding brightness and festivity to the painting.

As a comparison, it is possible to analyze several items from different time periods: in early works, the pink pigment is almost absent, whereas in later pieces, it predominates in the floral painting. In the early period item – the salad bowl “Flower of love” – minimal use of pink-toned painting elements can be observed (Fig. 6). The elements themselves are quite small, which reduces the risk of glaze accumulation during firing, as the use of large elements of this color increased the likelihood of tonal unevenness and the appearance of bald spots. Such elements were used only for accent purposes.

The production of modern-period items, utilizing a higher-quality pink pigment, enabled the application of this shade on a larger scale. The “Nina” set by chief artist D.E. Goncharova demonstrates the artistic possibilities of using this dye (Fig. 7). Pink tones prevail throughout the floral painting and play a leading role in the overall color scheme.

The priority of floral painting in the décor of Semikarakorsk ceramics, along with the variety of technical methods used, allows this type of decoration to be classified, depending on the materials used, into salt and non-salt techniques.

Fig. 7. D.E. Goncharova.
Tableware set “Nina”.
2023. Museum of JSC
“Semikarakorsk ceramics”



Salt painting is a decorative technique where water-soluble metal salts are applied, which, after firing, form an even colored layer [1, p. 48]. At the initial stage, the enterprise did not work with metal oxides due to the complexity of their application, but some artists occasionally experimented with this type of decoration. For the production of salt-painted items, pure salts without additives or compositions were used.

The founder and researcher of the possibilities of salt painting at the production was V.V. Tkach. Subsequently, many artists at the enterprise also began to use this decorating method.

For painting, V.V. Tkach used pure metal salts containing coloring oxides (chromium, nickel, manganese, cobalt). He decorated the items in his characteristic style of cold tones.

A characteristic example of V.V. Tkach’s work is the jug “Blueness”, created in 1982 (Fig. 8). The entire surface of the piece is covered with a floral ornament in cobalt blue shades. At the center of the composition, two large flowers with leaves are depicted. The bouquet is framed by a net pattern that smoothly transitions onto the neck of the jug. The lid, spout and handle of the jug are also decorated with painting. The cold color palette and dense coverage are the main features of the artist’s works.



Fig. 8. V.V. Tkach.
Jug “Blueness”. 1982.
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A huge contribution to the development of Semikarakorsk ceramic painting was made by the chief technologist of the enterprise since 1983, S.F. Tokarenko [4, p. 98], who actively developed the color palette of underglaze paints and glazes that became the technological basis for Semikarakorsk ceramics. He also made a significant contribution to the development of the palette for salt painting, the use of which lends softness and imagery to the motifs, increasing the number of colors

and shades from 6 to 36. These achievements became one of the fundamental factors in the development of production, opening up new artistic possibilities for decoration and allowing for an expanded assortment.

The techniques of salt painting are used by artists and craftsmen as a base layer for underglaze painting. Executed on the raw clay body and further refined with the application of underglaze paint after firing, salt painting provides that very gradient (smooth transition), which imparts airiness and elegance. However, salt painting in mass production had a significant drawback: after firing, some items became defective due to the formation of cracks.

An artist who frequently uses the salt painting technique is V.P. Gurova. Among her works, the “Flowery” tea set stands out (Fig. 9). Here, salt is used as a base and as an outlining element, giving the piece a delicate feel and an illusion of three-dimensionality. The base under the floral bouquet adds a watercolor-like softness and airiness to the image, while the outlining complements the composition. Thus, the use of salt expands the possibilities for artists and enriches the coloristic range of the painting, endowing the items with a wealth of expressive solutions. Also, in the “New garden” tea set, created by V.P. Gurova, salt painting serves as a base, giving the painting a soft contour and realism (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. V.P. Gurova. “Flowery” tea set. 2002



Fig. 10. V.P. Gurova.
Tea set “New garden”. 2019

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The variety of artistic solutions with floral painting is also achieved through different compositional options: central, ribbon and gradient (increasing/decreasing towards the edges).

The focal point of the composition in Semikarakorsk floral painting is most often a bouquet, consisting of a large central flower and smaller, evenly spaced surrounding inflorescences, leaves, speckles and tendrils. The teapot “Wild rose” by V.P. Gurova is a vivid example of a central composition, whose richly shaded painting complements the rounded shape of the piece (Fig. 11).

There are many examples of central composition in Semikarakorsk faience items. The main floral motif is usually placed in the center of the item’s surface, dominating the other elements both in color and mass, and is complemented by auxiliary elements.

In the ribbon arrangement of the ornament, the painting elements are elongated in a certain direction dictated by the shape of the item. An imaginary axial line is constructed, relative to which the painting is positioned. An example of such a composition is the “Thyme” cake stand (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. V.P. Gurova.
Teapot “Wild rose”. 2002



Fig. 12. T.Yu. Tokarenko.
Cake stand “Thyme”. 2022

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A distinctive feature of the ribbon composition is the rhythmic repetition of elements, creating an illusion of measured movement. In this type of composition, the repeating elements may be either uniform in size (which produces a monotonous effect) or alternating (making the composition more lively and rhythmic).

A gradient arrangement represents a uniformly decreasing or increasing image that conforms to the shape of the item, as can be seen in the painting of the “Irises” jug (Fig. 13). This technique creates the illusion of a gradual reduction of the decoration. Generally, in items with this arrangement, a large central floral motif is located in one part of the faience, from which leaves, small flowers and twigs radiate in one or several directions.



Fig. 13. L.V. Aldoshina.
Jug “Irises”. 2023.

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Most often, Semikarakorsk ceramics items feature a central composition, which emphasizes the whiteness of the material and complements the rounded forms. Balance is also of considerable importance, ensuring harmony among the decorative elements.

Despite the abundance of decorative solutions in Semikarakorsk ceramics, floral painting has taken a leading position and become the main type of décor for items produced at the enterprise JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics”.

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