

Using Majolica Glazes

by David L. Gamble

The recent surge of interest in majolica decorating by contemporary clay artists has prompted the development of specialized commercial glazes for schools and artists. In the traditional majolica technique, coloring oxides are brushed over an opaque unfired white tin glaze and fired so that the colors fuse into the opaque glaze without distorting the decoration. Today, glaze manufacturers achieve the same effect of this colorful technique with their own versions of products, many of which are marketed under different names.

When faced with hundreds of glazing choices in catalogs, it can be very confusing to decide which products will be suitable to the task at hand. The distinguishing features of these products are that they will not move and they create a colorful surface ideal for detail work.

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Commercial majolica products are formulated to be painted onto an opaque base glaze, and typically meant to be fired in the cone 04–06 low-fire range, although many products will also work on top of a cone

Manufacturer's Chart

This chart, though not comprehensive, provides you with an idea of the wide variety of majolica glazes that are available. Studio suppliers often carry several brands, so they are a good source of information about not only the brands listed below but also similar products from other manufacturers. Sample kits comprised of 2 oz. bottles are usually available—a great way to test glazes without a major investment.

Manufacturer	Brand	Colors	Cone	Size
AMACO	GDC's	36 colors	Cone 05–5	2 oz and pints
A.R.T.	Glazewerks Majolica	35 colors	Cone 05–04	4 oz and pints
Duncan	Concepts	162 colors	Cone 06–5	2 oz, 8 oz
Laguna	Creatable Colors	19 colors	Cone 06	pints
	Versa 5	21 colors	Cone 05	pints
Mayco	Stroke and Coats	64 colors	Cone 06–5	2 oz, 8 oz, pints
Spectrum	Majolica/Ultraglazes	66 colors	Cone 06–6	2 oz, 4 oz, 2 oz Super Writers

5 base glaze on a cone 5 clay body. Even though a white base glaze seems to be fine at higher temperatures, problems can arise with black and other colored base glazes because they can cause an the decoration to bubble up.

While the commercial products work best on an unfired base glaze, some also work fine when applied directly on bisqueware, although they may be slightly less glossy without the base glaze underneath.

Majolica glazes can be treated like paints, but there are some differences. Like paint, you can lighten any of them with white, and colors that are close to one another on the color wheel (blue and green, yellow and red) will mix. You can also darken colors. Glazes, however, do not mix like paint in that yellow and blue will not make a nice green. Only through testing will you be able to discover which colors mix and what the results will be. Also most majolica glazes are opaque and are made to stay put—so they do not blend well when layered. If you mix any glazes, do it while the glaze is liquid instead of trying to blend them on the surface of your work.

Testing is important before applying any glazes, Experiment with different base glazes, mixtures of glazes, and different thicknesses as well as thin coats over and under other colors and glazes to help you understand the possibilities and limitations. I've tried using black, blue, red and other colors as the base, glaze including both gloss and



matt, with great results. One series or manufacturer is not necessarily better than another, and your tastes will differ from other potters. Consider also convenience and what's available nearby. I've been able to use all the glazes I've tested on my pieces successfully.

Each manufacturer provides instructions on the container and on their websites for proper use of their products. Some may have restrictions on food safety, but generally most should be dinnerware safe when applied and fired according to the instructions.

The key to successful majolica glazing is to test what you're doing before working on a piece. Remember that a glaze on a white clay body may look quite different on a red clay body or a dark slip.

Paper color charts are not that accurate, though they will give you an idea. Actual ceramic chip charts are better but they are usually not on your clay body. These decorated sushi plate tests are two coats of majolica glaze from the each of the manufacturers in the chart. They all become opaque with three coats, so I tried two coats to see how strong the colors were.