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# All About Decoupage

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## Introduction

Welcome to the world of decoupage. I found out about decoupage in 1994 and have been obsessed ever since. It is such a satisfying and interesting craft. I have read lots of books about decoupage and have had several teachers who each had their own methods. The following instructions are my method. Try different ways of doing decoupage with different products and find your own method.

Any prices quoted are Australian dollars, unless specified otherwise.

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## Preparation

### Prepare your piece

- If you are working on a **wooden** piece, lightly sand any rough spots. Fill very rough spots and holes with Liquid Nails, Timber Putty, or similar product, then sand. Wipe with damp sponge.
- If you are working with **terracotta**, lightly sand any rough spots and wipe with damp sponge.
- If you are working with **bisqueware**, lightly sand any rough seams and wipe with damp sponge.
- If you are working with **glass** plates or bowls, clean thoroughly with vinegar or methylated spirits and white tissue paper.
- If you are working with **crockerly**, clean thoroughly with vinegar or methylated spirits. If you are working with soap, carve off any rough edges with a scalpel.
- If you are working with **eggs** (from hens to ostriches), wash carefully with warm soapy water to remove any dirt.

### Applying Gesso


Gesso is a substance used to create a perfectly smooth and blemish-free surface to work on. There are several brands on the market: Jo Sonya, Liquitex, Matisse. There are also coloured gessos available from those suppliers.

You can apply gesso to wood, terracotta, bisqueware and eggs.

- To get a really smooth surface I usually apply 4-6 coats of gesso.
- Lightly dry sand each coat and wipe off the dust with a damp sponge.
- After the last coat, wet sand with 1000 sandpaper. The gesso will be goeey but when it dries the surface is smooth.
- You can mix paint with the gesso to make your own coloured gesso. I also mix Matisse paint with Matisse gesso.

Gesso can really make a difference on wooden boxes with rough routed edges. These do not sand well but with gesso and sanding they become smooth, therefore requiring fewer coats of varnish in the end.

## Seal

- If you are working on a **wooden** piece, seal with one coat of Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish.
  - If you are working with **terracotta**, seal *inside* and *out* with 2 coats of Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish.
  - If you are working with **bisqueware**, no sealing is required if the piece is glazed inside. If it is not glazed inside, seal with 2 coats of Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish *inside only*.
  - If you are working with **glass** plates no sealing is required.
  - If you are working with **crockery**, no sealing is required.
  - If you are working with **soap**, seal with a coat of undiluted PVA glue or 2 coats of oil-based varnish (try both and decide which you prefer).
  - If you are working with **eggs**, no sealing is required.
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## Preparing Second Hand Furniture

### Checklist

It is a challenge to take an old piece of furniture and turn it into something you could live with.

You can find pre-loved furniture in garage sales, op shops and sometimes markets.

You need to run through a checklist before buying the piece.

- Is the piece well-constructed?
- Are the joints firm?
- Are there any broken bits (legs, decorative parts)
- Do I like the shape?
- Will it be useful or decorative once I've fixed it up?

If you still want it after close examination, buy it.

You've bought your treasure and taken it home.

### I've bought it. What now?

- Sand well. You need to remove any old varnish and oil. Sanding will help even out any dints or gouges.
- Fill any holes or dints with gesso, or, if they're very deep use Timber Putty or Liquid Nails. You may need several applications. Lightly dry sand between applications and wet sand the final coat of gesso and dry sand the Timber Putty.
- Seal.
- Paint, unless you like the grain or colour of the wood and want it to show.

Now the piece is ready for decoupage. Proceed in the usual manner.

Below I have a \*before\* and \*after\* picture of a piece I bought at a garage sale. This little table cost \$5. I think the transformation was worth it.



### Desk Make Over

New Zealand decoupeur Leonie Norton created this wonderful child's desk from a pre-loved piece of furniture.

Leonie's work has featured in the New Zealand Womens Weekly Magazine.

Leonie describes how she did this project.

The aquarium desk was a commission that I received after the article in the New Zealand Womens Weekly.

The desk was supplied by the client. She had painted it in bright primary colours and the paint was oil based.

- I began by stripping the drawers with paint stripper and lightly sanding the top and sides.
- I then sprayed the desk with dark blue spray paint then metallic blue and green paint in wave like motions across the top.
- I then painted in seaweed and sea plants with brown, green and black oil based paints.
- The paper I used was on a roll of wrapping paper. I used only half the roll of tropical fish and another few cut outs from another sheet for the dolphins, seals etc.
- The drawers were lined in another fishy paper. Again only half a roll was used.
- I varnished with gloss polyurethane, about 5 coats, sanded in between. The desk sold for NZ\$250.



## The Design Part

### Design

No one can teach you to design well. You can learn this by imitating designs which you find pleasing. If you are using only a few images, then odd numbers are more pleasing than evens (eg 3 flowers rather than 4).

### Cut Out

If you are serious about this hobby, then you should invest in a pair of high quality curve bladed scissors.

Manicure scissors will do while you are learning, but if you intend to keep it up, you need really good sharp scissors.

- Before you cut, seal your image on the back with Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish.
- When it is dry, seal the front of the image.
- When holding the scissors, have the blades curving outward from your body. If you are right-handed, the blades will curve to the right. If you are left-handed the blades will curve to the left.
- When you are cutting out your design, move the paper and guide it into your scissors. Do not move your scissor hand (other than to open and close the blades).
- If you are cutting out something quite complex, cut out the interior spaces first by piercing the white space and inserting the scissors from below. This way you can see what you are doing.
- Another way to cut out the interior spaces is to use a scalpel and cutting board.

### Paint the Background

- Paint your piece with a sponge brush for the undercoat. Most folkart paints require two coats to cover.
- Use a natural sea sponge to apply the 2nd coat.
- You can create new colours by sponging two or more colours together while they are wet. Do not mix them too well. This is called applying paint *wet on wet*.
- If you let the first coat dry and sponge another colour over it, this is called applying paint *wet on dry*.
- If you are decouping the entire surface, paint the edges only (ie where the edge of the tablemat is or where the edges of the box meet). Alternatively you can apply Treasure Gold antiquing wax on the edges when you have finished gluing.
- If you want a painted background, you will need a minimum of 2 coats of paint. The metallics and some light colours do not cover well and will require more coats.
- When using pale gold, I do an undercoat of Turner's Yellow so less iridescent gold is needed.
- Matisse background paints cover very well and have a sealer built in, so you don't need to apply Liquitex to your piece before painting.

- Painting a solid background and then sponging the next coat with a sea sponge dipped in several colours will give a depth to the finished piece. With experience, you will be able to imagine what a piece will look like when the pictures have been added and sunk beneath varnish.

If you want a crackled background, see my separate instructions on crackling but remember these essential points:

There are two different types of crackle medium - one that is applied between coats of paint (this is what my instructions describe) and one that is applied on top of the finished work. Make sure you choose correctly.

The size and shape of your crackles depend on the sponge you use to apply both the paint and the crackle medium. The larger the holes in the sponge, the larger the crackles. When planning your crackling, decide which colour is to be the top colour and which colour is to be the crackle. Using colours that contrast well gives a more pleasing result. (For example, for a red box with white crackles, paint the white first, then crackle medium, then red paint)

### Crackling

The only type of crackling I have been successful at is where the crackling medium is sandwiched between two colours of paint. I use the Duncan brand Quick Crackle.

- Paint your base coat. This is the colour that the cracks will be. For example, black.
- Apply the crackle medium with a sea sponge. Put on a heavy coat and rotate the sponge as you go.
- Leave it for about 45 minutes. After that time, it will be slightly tacky to touch. This is the recommended time. But don't despair if you forget and go back a few hours later. I have done that without any problem to the crackling.
- Now sponge on your top coat fairly thickly and quickly, rotating the sea sponge as you go. Do not go back over areas you have covered. Crackling will begin immediately, so you can't go back without wiping out the crackles.
- Your crackles should be appearing and will continue to develop for about half an hour. This technique takes practice. I used to practice on cardboard until I felt confident to do an object.
- Practice with colour combinations. If you use black as a base and red or green as the top coat, the effect will be like leather. Another attractive combination is Iridescent Gold as the undercoat and Red (Naphthol Crimson + Cadmium Red) or Green (Hookers Green) as the topcoat.



## Advanced Techniques

Try some cloisonne or illumination

### Cloisonne

What is it?

According to Websters Dictionary cloisonne is enamel decorated with colours separated from each other by fine wire or thin metal partitions.

What is it in decoupage terms?

Cloisonne is a technique for embellishing cutouts. It involves simulating the real cloisonne by adding a thin gold, silver, copper etc edge to the cut outs before adhering them to the surface.

The photo shows gold cloisonne. To do this

- I use metallic gold wrapping paper.
- I stick the cutouts on the paper using sealer (Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish or Jo Sonya's All Purpose Sealer).
- Do not use glue. It leaves a residue which must be removed and this can damage the cut outs.
- When the sealer is dry, cut around the cut outs leaving 1mm of gold showing (see the photo)

This process takes longer to do because you are cutting twice. But the effect is worth it. You will also find that the cutout is thicker so varnishing will take longer. If you are using two-pack resin for the finish, it doesn't matter how thick the cutout is.

See Audrey Raymond's book \*Traditional Decoupage\* for another description of how to do cloisonne. This is where I first learned it.



**This is what it looks like done with gold paper.**



**This is what it looks like done with silver paper.**

## Illumination

What is it?

According to Websters Dictionary illumination (as in manuscripts) is decoration by means of coloured initials, borders, pictures etc. Another meaning is to decorate with bright lights.

What is it in decoupage terms?

Illumination is a technique for decorating your cutouts with gold, silver, copper etc highlights.

To do this

- Cut out small holes in your already cutout objects. (for example, cut out parts of the design in a figure's clothing, or windows in a building)
- Glue using sealer (Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish) a piece of metallic paper behind the cutout so that the paper shows through the hole you cut. Do not use decoupage glue. It leaves a residue which must be removed and this can damage the cut outs.
- Glue your cutouts onto the piece in the normal way.

You will find that the cutout is thicker so varnishing will take longer. If you are using two-pack resin for the finish, it doesn't matter how thick the cutout is.

See Audrey Raymond's book *\*Traditional Decoupage\** for another description of how to do illumination. This is where I first learned it.

## Combining Cloisonne and Illumination

When you are thinking about combining cloisonne and illumination remember that a little bit goes a long way and don't overdo it. This is meant to be a subtle highlight not the main feature.

- First cut the holes for illumination in your cutouts.
- Glue using sealer (Liquitex Gloss Medium & Varnish) the holey cutout onto the metallic paper.
- Now cut again leaving the 1mm cloisonne border around the cutout.

You will find that the cutout is thicker so varnishing will take longer. If you are using two-pack resin for the finish, it doesn't matter how thick the cutout is.



**You can see in this detail of my briefcase that the hair ornament is an illumination and the cloisonne effect is around the edge of the figure's head and the butterfly.**

See Audrey Raymond's book *\*Traditional Decoupage\** for another description of how to combine cloisonne and illumination. This is where I first learned it.

### Glue paper down

Use decoupage glue from the craft shop, or Liquitex Gloss Medium and Varnish to glue your bits of paper. If you are not experienced, decoupage glue is better for you because it's drying time is greater which will help you reposition something if it's not quite where you intended it to be.

Liquitex Gloss Medium and Varnish dries quite quickly and you may not be able to reposition something without ruining it and your painted surface.

### Mix your own glue

You can make your own decoupage glue from 4 parts Clag to 1 part PVA glue. Mix together and store in a small screwtop jar. This has a long drying time and you can easily reposition the bits of your design.

### Gluing Process

- Always apply the glue to the surface **not** the paper cutout.
- Put a little glue on the top of the paper cutout and move it around with your fingers to dislodge any air bubbles and smooth the paper.
- Clean excess glue off with a damp sponge.
- If you are working with a large piece of paper, use your rubber roller to gently rollout the bubbles and wrinkles. Do not press too heavily or you will squeeze out all the glue.
- If any glue dries on the top of the paper cutout or on the painted surface, you can remove this with vinegar. Most books recommend using vinegar to water 1:4, but I use it full strength without any problems. Just be gentle.

### Touch up edges

Sometimes you will see white edges on your cutouts. If you turn the piece in the light, these white edges are highlighted.

- To soften them, you can use oil-based pencils of a colour that blends with the cutout. Rub the pencil gently along the white edge. Your piece must be dry when you do this, otherwise you will tear the paper.
- Alternatively, if you are very fussy, you can paint the white edges before you glue the paper down.

### Seal

After touching up, seal the whole piece with Liquitex Gloss Medium and Varnish. Some teachers recommend 6 coats applied at right angles to each other. Now it is protected from finger marks, dust, pet hairs and other disasters.



## Finishing

### Varnish

Your choice of varnish will depend on a number of factors.

#### Water based varnish

Use water-based varnish such as Estapol Speed Clear, Cabot's Crystal Clear, etc if you want the colours in your piece to remain true. This is particularly important with cool colours and skin tones.

Use water-based varnish if you are working in a small space such as a flat (apartment).

#### Oil-based varnish

Use oil-based varnish such as Estapol, Feast Watson, etc if you want a yellowish glow over your piece. These varnishes give an older look which is important if you are creating a yesteryear theme. Warm colours will appear warmer and a little subdued. Cool colours will be warmed, for example, blue will be greenish.

### Applying varnish

Whether you are using water-based or oil-based varnish, you need a brush which is only used for that varnish. It must be kept clean and dust free.

If you are using oil-based varnish, store your brush in a baby bottle of turps. Put the brush handle up through the teat (which you've cut the top off) and suspend in turps. If you are using water-based varnish, clean your brush with a little dishwashing liquid and warm water.

- Apply varnish in thin even strokes. Watch for drips on box corners and the sides of vertical objects.
- Apply coats at 90° to each other.
- Do not attempt to varnish when it's raining. Varnish can go cloudy or develop crocodile skin.
- Do not rush. Make sure the varnish is dry to touch before applying another coat.
- Wipe your piece lightly with a tack cloth before each coat of varnish to remove dust, pet hairs and those transparent little wiggly fibres that land on everything.

### Sand

- To finish most pieces, I apply 10-15 coats of sealer. Then I wet sand with 360. The sealer goes gooey and cloudy. I used to use Mod Podge, but found that it remained spongy and the surface marked even after a long time.
- Sand until the surface feels very smooth.
- Let it dry overnight and the cloudiness will disappear.
- Check for brush marks. If there are still brush marks, sand some more.
- Apply three to five coats of your chosen varnish, then wet sand with 600.
- Apply the final coat and leave it to set for 3 weeks.

### Micromesh

You will need a micromesh kit to polish your piece finely. This kit costs about A\$40. After your piece has set for 3 weeks, it's time to micromesh. There are four grades of mesh in the kit.

- Start with 4000. Wrap the mesh around the foam block that came with the kit.
- Dampen the foam block and mesh.
- Rub in one direction for 20 strokes.
- Then move to the next section and rub in the same direction for 20 strokes.
- Continue in this manner until you have done the whole piece. Then take the 6000 and rub it in a crosswise direction to the 4000.
- Then proceed to the 8000 and the 12000.

### Polish

- After you have micromeshed, polish your piece with car wax or furniture wax. Any of the car waxes which contain carnauba wax will give a good polish. Beeswax furniture wax also gives a good polish.

## Lining a Box

### With Fabric

Lining a box finishes it beautifully, particularly a jewellery box or a trinket box.

- Cut a piece of sturdy cardboard to fit into the bottom of the box. It should fall in and out easily, without catching on the sides of the box.
- Cut a piece of wadding the same size as the cardboard.
- Cut a piece of fabric about 2cm larger on all side than the cardboard. I use satin or stretch velour.
- Put the fabric face down on the table. Put the wadding down next and put the cardboard on top. Cut the corners off diagonally so that you won't have a big bulge at the corner.
- Pull one edge of the fabric up onto the cardboard and glue it down with PVA glue. Put a weight on it. Bring each side of the fabric up onto the cardboard and glue down. Leave overnight.
- To glue this padded shape into the box, just run a line of PVA on the box bottom close to the sides. Push the padded shape down into the box and press firmly. Your lining is finished.



The black velvet lining with red ribbon accent completes the elegant style of this box.

### With Soft Flock

Soft Flock is the name of a product that can be used to give a box or container a nice soft flocked interior.

It comes in a variety of colours. I always paint the inside of the box a similar colour to the colour of the Soft Flock.

Soft Flock comes in two parts. There is a coloured *glue* type liquid in a bottle.

- Paint this onto the inside of the box.
- Sprinkle the flock pieces from the second bottle into the box. Be generous.
- Close the box.
- Shake vigorously for a few seconds.
- Pour the excess out onto a piece of clean paper.
- Use the paper as a funnel to put the excess back into the bottle.

The inside of the box should be covered by a thick even coat of flock.



**I painted the inside of this box red. Then I applied the red “glue” part of the Soft Flock.  
I poured the red flocking into the box. I closed the box and shook it like  
a cocktail shaker. Voilà – beautiful!**

My earring box which was made and flocked in 1995 still looks OK.

**TIP**

If you want to flock the inside of the box but not the lid of the box, insert a piece of paper or cardboard between the box and lid, then close the lid and shake. When you remove the paper, the lid will still be clean and the box will be flocked.

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If you have any questions/problems you can email me at

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