“Stencil Filling” Technique for Ceramics and the Use of Raking Light During the Filling Process

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“STENCIL FILLING” TECHNIQUE FOR CERAMICS AND THE USE OF RAKING LIGHT DURING THE FILLING PROCESS

PAULA ARTAL-ISBRAND

The filling of losses is one of the typical steps of a conservation treatment involving a broken ceramic (fig. 1). Each conservator has one’s favorite materials, tools, and techniques to do this. I use a dental-grade plaster for larger losses and Flügger Acrylic Filler (fig. 2) for smaller losses. Rather than tinting my fill materials—both of which are white—I prefer to complete the filling work and integrate the fills through retouching in a separate step.

Filling the narrow margins along the adhesive joins without getting excess spackling compound onto the clean adjoining edges is practically impossible (fig. 3). Instead, the conservator has to go back and remove the excess once the fill has dried. This step is not only time-consuming but it can sometimes be difficult to remove the excess fully. This is especially challenging when the ceramic object is an unglazed or slip-finished earthenware, because the surface is rough and porous and traps the fine fill material, resulting in a whitish veil—or “ghosting”—that takes additional time to remove.

Fig. 1. Achilles Painter, Athens (Greece), *White-ground lekythos* (oil flask), 450–445 BC, terracotta with slip and added colors, 33.4 × 11.6 cm. Worcester Art Museum, 1900.65, before filling joins between sherds.
To protect the edges adjoining a join from getting any or only minimal fill material onto them, I fabricate my own stencils from thick acetate film by cutting slits into them through which I apply the fill material (figs. 4 and 5). I typically fabricate several stencils with different-sized slits to fit different-shaped joins.

Fig. 2. Flügger Acrylic Filler
Fig. 3. White-ground lekythos, detail, filling of sherd join margins with spackling compound deposits on unprotected sherd edges

Fig. 4. Acetate film stencils
Fig. 5. *White-ground lekythos* (oil flask), Achilles Painter, detail, sequence of the stencil filling process using a microspatula, followed by shaping the fills with a scalpel.

Fig. 6. Raking light setup for shaping fills on *White-ground lekythos*.
Sometimes two applications are needed because the fill material shrinks as it dries. The subsequent shaping of the fills is done using scalpels (see fig. 5) and glass paper under magnification. I do not use sandpaper because it is too abrasive for ceramics. Glass paper is softer.

I do fill-shaping work under raking light (figs. 6 and 7) only because under normal light it is difficult to discern the topography of the bright white fill. The raking effect, on the other hand, clearly shows the topography. I recommend using raking light conditions whenever using a white filling compound—this can apply not only to objects conservation but paintings conservation as well. One word of caution: make sure to use a cool light to avoid heating the surface of the artwork.

**SOURCES OF MATERIALS**

**High-Quality Dental Plaster**
Philadelphia Dental Plaster & Stone (formerly Samuel H. French & Company)
3195 Tucker Rd., Building A
Bensalem, PA 19020
215-245-0130
Tom Longstreth, Mfg. Director: 215-913-6349

**Flügger Acrylic Filler**
TALAS
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Brooklyn, NY 11211
212-219-0770
http://www.talasonline.com/
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