

# The Integration of Chinese Ink Painting Aesthetics Into Ceramic Underglaze Decoration: A Cross-Medium Study

SHANG Yu

He Jiang Hua Yi Ceramic Products Co., Ltd., Luzhou, China

The fusion of Chinese ink painting aesthetics with ceramic underglaze decoration represents a significant cross-medium exploration in contemporary ceramic art. Ink painting emphasizes brushwork, rhythmic void, and the spiritual resonance of “writing the idea”, while underglaze decoration (such as blue-and-white and underglaze five-color) offers stable firing properties, subtle color transitions, and a jade-like surface. By analyzing the core aesthetic principles of ink painting—brush-and-ink expressiveness, compositional emptiness, and poetic integration—this paper examines how these principles can be translated into underglaze techniques through layered washes, controlled diffusion of cobalt or iron pigments, and the use of reserved white space (milky white glaze). The study shows that the integration not only revitalizes traditional underglaze decoration with the spontaneity of literati painting but also expands the expressive boundaries of ceramic art, generating a contemporary visual language that harmonizes East Asian philosophical depth with material craftsmanship.

*Keywords:* Chinese ink painting, underglaze decoration, brush-and-ink spirit, cross-medium integration, ceramic painting

## Introduction

Chinese ink painting, known as shui-mo hua, has for centuries been regarded as the highest form of pictorial art in East Asia, valuing expressive brushwork (bi), ink gradations (mo), and the conveyance of the artist’s inner state over mere resemblance. Simultaneously, ceramic underglaze decoration—especially Jingdezhen blue-and-white and Hunan underglaze five-color—has developed a sophisticated repertoire of line drawing and color application. However, for much of their history, these two art forms evolved along separate tracks: ink painting on paper or silk, and decorative painting on fired clay. The contemporary era, marked by cross-disciplinary experimentation, offers an opportunity to integrate ink painting’s aesthetic soul into the durable, lustrous medium of underglaze ceramics. This integration is not a superficial imitation of ink effects on porcelain, but a deep translation of brush-and-ink principles into the material logic of underglaze pigments, water-based application, and high-temperature firing. This paper will first outline the key aesthetic features of ink painting, then analyze the material characteristics of underglaze decoration, and finally propose concrete pathways—technical, compositional, and philosophical—for their meaningful integration.

## Core Aesthetic Features of Chinese Ink Painting

### Brush-and-Ink Expressiveness (Bimo Yiqu)

In ink painting, the brushstroke is never merely a contour. It carries the force, speed, and emotional charge of the artist's hand. A single stroke can render a bamboo leaf, a mountain ridge, or a robe fold while simultaneously revealing the calligraphic rhythm of the brush. The concepts of feibai (flying white—a dry, textured stroke) and cunfa (texture strokes for mountains) are central. Ink washes—from dense black to light gray—produce atmospheric depth. This emphasis on the trace of the moving hand offers a radical departure from the smooth, filled-in outlines typical of much traditional ceramic decoration.

### Compositional Emptiness (Liubai)

Ink painting makes conscious use of blank, unpainted areas to suggest water, mist, sky, or simply to allow the viewer's mind to wander. These voids are not negative; they are active, breathing spaces that complement the painted forms. In ceramic decoration, the glaze surface itself can function as a luminous emptiness, but traditional patterns often fill the entire vessel. Learning from ink painting means respecting the white glaze as a positive element, akin to the unpainted rice paper.

### Poetic Integration and Literati Spirit

A literati painting typically combines poetry, calligraphy, and seal impressions with the image. The poem enriches the visual meaning, the calligraphy demonstrates the artist's facility with the brush, and the red seals provide color accents. This multidisciplinary holistic approach can be adapted to underglaze ceramics, where poetic inscriptions can be written in cobalt blue or iron brown directly on the body before glazing.

## Characteristics of Ceramic Underglaze Decoration

### Stability and Brilliance of Color

Underglaze pigments—such as cobalt oxide for blue, copper for red, and iron for brown—are applied onto raw or bisque-fired clay, then covered with a transparent glaze and fired at high temperatures (1,200-1,350 °C). The resulting colors are fused beneath a glassy layer, making them extremely durable, scratch-resistant, and chemically stable. The colors appear softer and more diffused than overglaze enamels, giving a gentle, jade-like quality.

### Line Control and Wash Techniques

Unlike ink on paper, underglaze pigments do not spread instantly due to the low absorbency of the leather-hard clay body. However, they can be diluted with water and applied in graduated washes. Fine lines can be drawn with a sharp brush, and broader tonal areas can be created by “filling” or “washing” within reserved linework (e.g., the fenshui technique in blue-and-white). This technical repertoire—line drawing plus wash—closely parallels the basic grammar of ink painting.

### Firing Risks and Serendipity

One must consider that underglaze colors undergo chemical changes in the kiln. Cobalt blue may deepen, copper red may turn greenish if the atmosphere is not properly reduced, and the glaze's flow may slightly blur sharp edges. This unpredictability is both a risk and an opportunity, reminiscent of the accidental ink bleeding sometimes cherished in literati aesthetics.

## **Pathways for Integration: From Ink Spirit to Glazed Surface**

### **Brushwork Translation: Controlled Strokes and Feibai Effects**

To achieve an authentic ink-painting brush feel, the ceramic artist must manipulate the viscosity of the underglaze medium and the moisture of the clay. A drier brush, loaded with concentrated pigment and dragged across the slightly roughened surface, can produce a feibai effect—streaky white lines within a dark stroke. Using a flexible long-haired brush and practicing calligraphic wrist movements, the artist can replicate the pressing, lifting, and turning gestures of ink painting. For example, to paint an orchid leaf, one stroke should start heavy, lift to a sharp point, and then turn back. Such brushwork in cobalt blue on a white porcelain vase creates a vivid “ink” quality despite the different material.

### **The Aesthetics of Reserved White (Liubai)**

Instead of filling every space, the contemporary ceramic artist inspired by ink painting will leave strategic areas of the bare white clay (covered only by transparent glaze) to represent mist, water, or light. On a cylindrical vase, a mountain landscape might occupy only the lower half, with the upper half completely blank except for a small flying bird or a poetic line. This negative space invites the viewer to breathe and imagine, and the glossy glaze reflects light, making the emptiness luminous.

### **Poetic Inscriptions and Seals in Cobalt**

A poem written in elegant running script on the side of a jar or on a ceramic plaque directly echoes the literati tradition. Using a fine brush and cobalt blue (which fires to a deep black-blue), the artist can inscribe classical or original verses. A hand-painted red seal can be simulated with iron-red underglaze or a special pigment stamped before glazing. This synthesis of image, text, and calligraphy transforms a decorative object into a narrative, scholarly work. Moreover, the permanence of underglaze ensures that the poem will last for centuries, unlike ink on paper which may fade.

### **Experimental Washes and Monochrome Atmospheres**

In ink painting, po mo (splashed ink) creates bold washes. Underglaze techniques can mimic this: by wetting a large area of the clay body with a brush loaded with water, then dropping concentrated cobalt or iron pigment into the wet area, the pigment spreads organically, forming soft, cloud-like shapes. When covered with glaze and fired, these washes produce a dreamy, abstract atmosphere reminiscent of misty mountains or rain-swept rivers. Such monochrome or two-tone compositions have a modern, minimalist appeal while remaining rooted in classical ink sensibility.

## **Significance of the Integration**

### **Revitalizing Traditional Underglaze Decoration**

By incorporating ink painting’s spontaneity and emotional directness, underglaze decoration moves away from repetitive, rigid patterns (e.g., uniformly drawn lotus scrolls) toward more expressive, varied compositions. Each work becomes less of a craft product and more of a unique artistic statement, appealing to contemporary collectors who value individuality.

### **Broadening the Expressive Range of Ceramic Art**

This integration adds a new register to the ceramic vocabulary: the register of calligraphic time, of gesture, of poetic narrative. It also bridges two great Chinese art traditions—ink painting and porcelain—creating works that can be appreciated both as fine art and as functional or decorative objects.

### **Strengthening Cultural Identity in Global Context**

In an era of globalization, artists who synthesize indigenous ink aesthetics with the globally admired medium of Chinese porcelain assert a distinctive cultural voice. The result is not a hybrid without roots, but a modern continuation of literati ideals on a durable, fire-tested surface.

### **Conclusion**

The fusion of Chinese ink painting aesthetics with ceramic underglaze decoration is a meaningful cross-medium venture. By translating brush-and-ink expressiveness, compositional emptiness, and poetic integration into the material language of underglaze pigments and high-temperature firing, contemporary ceramic artists can create works that carry the spiritual depth of literati art while embracing the durability and luminosity of porcelain. This integration revitalizes traditional decoration techniques, expands the expressive possibilities of ceramic painting, and offers a culturally authentic yet globally accessible aesthetic. Future research should explore more experimental applications, such as combining underglaze ink styles with multiple firings or introducing non-conventional tools to further enrich the calligraphic effect.

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*Figure 1.* Shang Yu's Work: Porcelain Vase I.



*Figure 2. Shang Yu's Work: Porcelain Vase II.*