

# Make a Difference

by Michael Harbridge

This month I'm taking a little different approach to my article by talking about our industry and offering ideas of ways to attract new customers. Some people want to believe the hobby ceramic market is dying. Traditional storefront studios are becoming a thing of the past, and home studios are becoming harder to find. But talking about how things used to be is not going to change the facts.

Contemporary studios dominate the market, but they're not creating the repeat business, product sales, and kiln sales of the past because most have all-inclusive pricing that covers use of colors, brushes, and tools. Traditional studios usually require customers to buy each jar of color and their own brushes. Consumers with great interest may even purchase a kiln, teach others, and possibly open a home studio or storefront. So how can that change?

First of all, it's not going to go back to what it used to be, so get that idea out of your mind! Contemporary studios are here to stay, and consumers have and will continue to support them. I hear comments all the time from traditional studio owners wondering why consumers would drive past their studio to go to a contemporary studio and pay higher prices to make nearly identical items. Think about what that statement says. *Customers are driving past your studio to pay a higher price at another studio.*

Why would they do that? I guess I would take a close look at my studio and compare it to what the other studio offers. Is the other studio cleaner, more organized, more appealing? Does the fact that the other studio offers bisque as well as greenware have something to do with it? I don't understand the thought process of forcing customers to clean their own greenware. Why not offer bisque *and* greenware and allow your patrons to decide what they want? Not everyone wants to take the time or experience the messy method of cleaning greenware. Plus, there's a higher profit margin on bisque. Most studios charge half of the greenware price to fire ware. Bisque is usually double the greenware price, giving an additional 25 percent profit.

And speaking of bisque, many comments are also made about the fact that much of the bisque in the market is made overseas. I'm saddened by that. I wish all the manufacturing was coming from the USA. Unfortunately, the market has demanded lower prices,



and imported products have made it difficult to compete. I'll admit I've resisted using imported bisque in all of my workshops and work. But as I struggled to cast consistent plates earlier this year, I finally gave in. It was costing me more in time and materials (plus frustration!) to cast, clean, and fire my own. It's so much easier to cut open a box and pull out a plate that's ready to use.

Not every shape I use is available in commercial bisque, so I'll still have to cast much of my own. Several bisque manufacturers have been successful in the states because they've focused on shapes importers can't do. I also know for a fact some of the big bisque suppliers have been working with domestic studios to make some of their bisque offerings.

We can argue all we want about job losses and studio closings in the U.S. as a result. However, much of the sculpting for new designs is being done by talented sculptors here in the states. They wouldn't have jobs any longer if they were relying on mold sales. Bisque suppliers also employ a lot of other staff here, and some purchase molds from the mold companies. So you can fight it, or you can accept that this is the way it is. So many of things we use every day are created overseas. And while imported ware has had some quality issues, so have domestic products. Manufacturers have changed with the times and done what they need to do to survive and keep their doors open. Just look at

all the mold companies that have gone out of business. It's unfortunate, because each time another one calls it quits, we lose more creative designs.

Many traditional studios have accumulated a lot of stuff over the years. That's a polite way of saying clutter, junk, and stuff all over. The coat of dust covering it all can also be a turnoff to potential customers. Please don't get me wrong and think I'm being mean. With all the dust created by the casting process, it's difficult to keep it all clean. And we all have our collections, rooms, or closets with clutter. But take the time to clean things up and get rid of the clutter. It will make a difference. Learn from the competition. The hobby ceramic market is not dying, it's just changed.

So rather than sitting back and watching the changes take place, get involved. If you don't change with the times, you may just go out of business. The good news is, things can be done to get new people interested in fired arts.

## Make money!

Traditional and contemporary studios can easily incorporate the tie-dye string method outlined at the end of this article into camps, adult workshops, and everyday business. Even if you're not a studio owner, you can get involved and make a difference. It's not uncommon for individuals to start a small home business going out to other's homes and events to sponsor a painting party. The investment is minimal, but the dividends are immense. We need to show off what we do to as many people as we can.

This is an excellent opportunity to grow the fired arts market! Show techniques to friends and family. Let them see how easy and fun it is to do. Years ago the ceramic industry grew rapidly due to all the home studios. Everyone seemed to know someone who had a kiln in their home, and it became a weekly ritual for classes and friends gathering to paint. The same thing could blossom today. Why can't you use this as an opportunity to generate some extra income while helping create awareness of fired arts?

## Where are the new people?

Whether you have a studio or not, don't wait for people to come to you. Look at different venues to show off fired arts. Think about where you can reach people — here are some options to get you started:

*Church groups:* Both adult and children-oriented church groups are always looking for activities and outings. You can go to them and host a workshop. They generally have a facility. Studio owner or not, you can do this!

*Scout troops:* Scouting programs have requirements to get badges, and ceramics is just one badge. Hook up with local troop leaders to offer your services.

*Craft shows:* People going to craft shows often do crafts themselves — or want to. Demonstrate methods at craft shows and give out literature on your services. You could even do make-and-takes.

*Fairs:* Where else can you get masses of people spending money? At least with a project like this, you get something in return. They could spend the same amount on silly games and have nothing to show for it.

*Community events:* What's going on in your community? Try to set up during various events and show off!

*Schools:* School art-program funds are getting cut. But that's not to say students can't do a special project. (See marketing details below.)

*Daycare:* Handprints, footprints, and so much more can be done with little ones.

*Farmers Market:* Again, large numbers of people spending money!

This is just a small list of potential opportunities. You can certainly come up with more.

## Marketing

If you're going to put the effort into reaching out to new groups, you want to follow it up with good marketing. Include literature about what you offer. Studio owners have a physical address customers can patronize. But those of you going out to do programs can also benefit. Talk about party programs. What parent would not want someone to come to their home to create a project with a group of kids? But don't stop there — make sure you tell all the kids that they, too, could have a painting party. Supply literature so they go home and harass their parents. But don't stop there! Make sure you include literature again in the bag with their finished item as a reminder. For every party you have, you could book several more.



# Tie Dye String Painting



Attention studio owners! Don't be so willing to deliver finished pieces to the customer after the final firing. It's better if you can get them to pick them up at your store. That gives them the chance to see all you have to offer. Give an incentive like free studio time if they pick the item(s) up. If you go out to a fair or other event, give the customer a claim ticket to pick their item up at the store a week later. Imagine the traffic it will create.

## Free workshops

Before you say, "Are you crazy?" read this through. What if you did small bisque shapes at any of the above venues for free. These could be \$1 or lower-priced pieces of bisque. If you require that they be picked up at your studio, it would bring a lot of people through your door. How much would you spend on advertising to get a new person to come see what you do? A couple bucks is pretty inexpensive advertising! And for those without a studio, going to a school and offering a small project for free is a good way to get literature in the hands of every student for potential parties. The teacher will love you. Contact your local media or send out press releases about the free event. The coverage is all free advertising. Don't look at the cost short term. Look at it as an investment in the long term!

## Calculating costs

- 1) Figure the cost of your selected shape. If starting with bisque, don't forget to add shipping costs. If you're starting with greenware, it's customary to double the greenware price to figure in cleaning and firing.
- 2) Determine the cost for color by placing a half ounce of each color in separate cups. Your customers will generally take more color than they need, so don't figure it at exactly what is used. There will be waste, and it needs to be figured in.

3) Don't forget to include the cost of small plastic cups if they're disposable. Don't give them large cups. Stick with the small cups available from restaurant suppliers for serving sauces, or you'll have more waste. What about brushes?

4) What does it cost to dip the item in clear glaze? Don't just figure the cost to glaze, but also the time it takes to have someone prepare the glaze, dip, and clean up.

5) Those items need to be fired. How long does it take to load and unload your kiln? Those things need a value associated.

6) You've made an investment in your kiln and you have to maintain it. And someday it will need to be repaired or replaced.

7) What other costs do you have? You could go as far as overhead, taxes, and all other associated costs of being in business.

For the sake of determining the actual cost to create a shape, here is an example:

Cost of bisque dinner plate	\$2.25
Cost of color	.80
Cost of dipping and labor	.50
Cost of cups, string, and brushes	.15
Cost of firing and kiln upkeep	.50

Total cost to make one plate \$4.20

So what are you waiting for? If everyone working in fired arts right now went out and showed a few friends and family members the thrill of creating something with clay, bisque, glass, metal clay, or any other form of fired art, we could increase our numbers dramatically! Traditional studio owners, please look around your studio, clean up clutter, get organized, and put a smile on your face when working with customers. They don't really want to hear about your health issues and how poor business has been. Make a new start! And contemporary studio owners, keep introducing new methods so your customers keep coming back for more.



These Mayco shapes were completed with Stroke & Coat colors and stenciled with Duncan EZ Stroke Black.

## Objectives

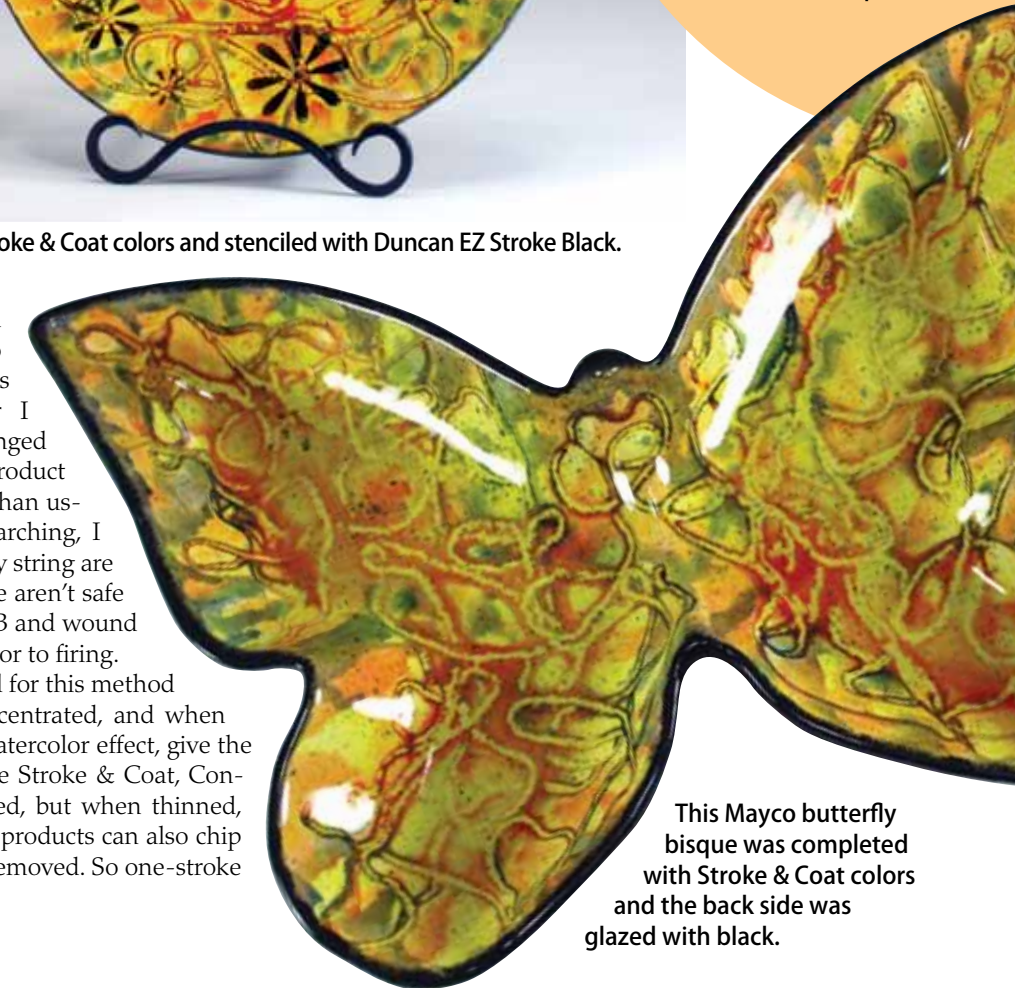
- Learn an easy technique for children and adults
- Combine string with colors to create a retro look
- Use lesson to teach others
- Create new interest in fired arts

## BONUS VIDEO!

See this technique in action! Go to [www.firedartsandcrafts.com](http://www.firedartsandcrafts.com) and click on the Videos link to see a short video on this technique.

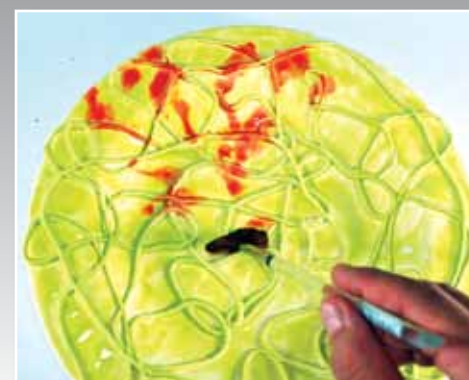
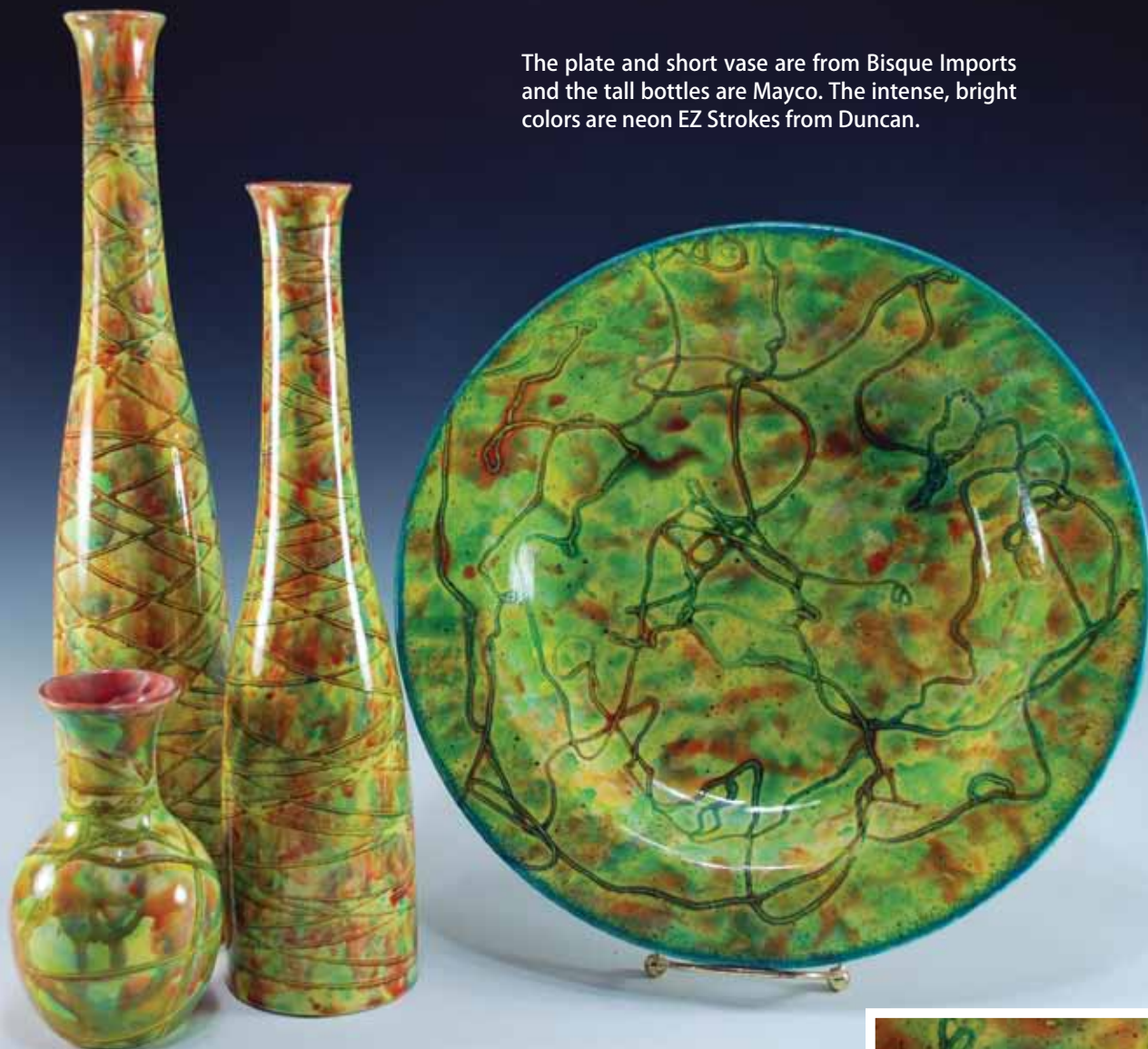
This project originally started with the use of silly string to create background textures with awesome results. However I noticed my local dollar store changed brands of string, and the new product seemed to be more plastic, rather than using a paper-pulp base. After researching, I discovered that many brands of silly string are made with a plastic base, and those aren't safe to fire away. So I switched to plan B and wound up with string we could remove prior to firing.

One-stroke underglazes are used for this method because they are much more concentrated, and when thinned with water to create the watercolor effect, give the best color and results. Products like Stroke & Coat, Concepts, and Fun Strokes can be used, but when thinned, the results are not as bright. Those products can also chip and flake away when the string is removed. So one-stroke colors will work best.



This Mayco butterfly bisque was completed with Stroke & Coat colors and the back side was glazed with black.

The plate and short vase are from Bisque Imports and the tall bottles are Mayco. The intense, bright colors are neon EZ Strokes from Duncan.



### Materials

Bisque shapes of choice  
One-stroke underglazes or bisque stroke colors  
Clear glaze of choice

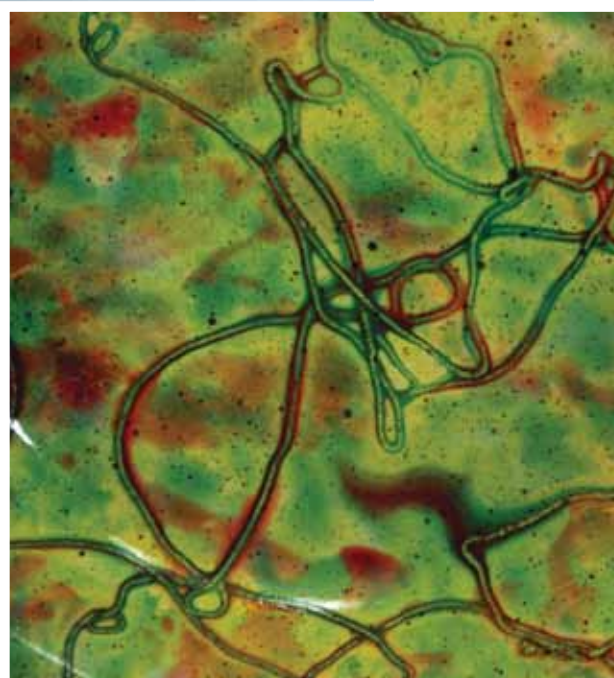
### Brushes by Royal & Langnickel

R2845-6 Aqualon natural fan  
R2855-3/4 Aqualon wisp fan  
R2005 Synthetic sponge  
RD60 Sponge stippler

### Miscellaneous:

Cotton string  
Water  
Stencils  
Small plastic cups  
Scissors

**Step 1:** Dampen the ware to remove all dust.  
**Step 2:** Cut several lengths of string, dip each length into clean water, and drape them over the plate or around the shape. Allow the string to overlap, curl up, and form unique patterns.  
**Step 3:** Thin each underglaze color in separate cups with two to three parts water to one part color.  
**Step 4:** Load the large fan glaze brush with the lightest color and dab it randomly over the string-covered plate. The goal is to have puddles of color gathering around the strings.  
**Step 5:** Wash the color from the brush, load it with the next darkest color, and randomly dab over the string-covered plate. This color will bleed into the first color. The goal is to get a tie-dyed look, so this is fine.



**Step 6:** Repeat Step 5 with any remaining colors until the entire plate is covered with color.

**Step 7:** Allow the shape to dry at least until the shiny, wet look is gone. Remove the string.

**Step 8:** For added effects and more fun, use a wisp fan loaded with a thinned color (usually darker is better) to splatter small specks of color over the surface. Also, sponge a color around the edge of the shapes. Stencils can also add another dimension. Use the sponge stippler to dab color over stencils.


**Step 9:** Clear glaze and fire to cone 06.

### Advanced methods


Use fired dimensional products to add more accents to the design. Non-fired glitters, gemstones, and other accents could also be added to items not used with food. FAC

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**Left:** Notice how the details of the string are picked up when the color puddles.



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