

## TESTIMONY

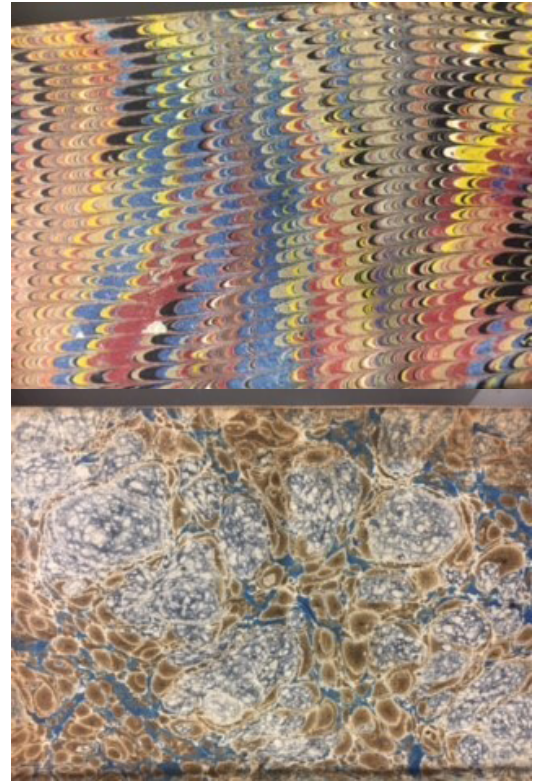
### MY JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: FROM ENDPAPERS TO EBRU, THE TURKISH ART OF PAPER MARBLING

#### Introduction

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by the decorative endpapers in old books. As I lazed away my summer days in my grandparents' library, exploring the books' physicality as well as their content, I marveled at the colorful endpaper patterns: some were graceful swirls, some like bunches of feathers or rows of seashells, others like the stony creek bed I waded through in the woods.

Not until a few years ago, when I attended an exhibit of marbled paper at the Newberry Library, did I realize that the creation of these endpapers was a complex craft, requiring an array of special equipment and materials.

An astonishing revelation came when I attended an open house at the American Islamic College, near my Chicago neighborhood. At one station a Turkish artist was demonstrating *ebru* (pronounced EH-*broo*), the traditional Turkish art of paper marbling. She explained that European paper marbling had originated in Turkey, and she showed us how it was done. What I observed was enchanting — such a beautiful use of materials. I had to do it myself. Two long years later, when the college offered an ebru course, I and an artist friend signed up at once. Then began my immersion into the secrets of this amazing art.



Endpapers from books in Catholic Theological Union's Special Collections

#### How Is Ebru Done?

I was delighted that our instructor was Sevim Surucu, the same lady whose demonstration had captivated me two years earlier. In the first class we learned that ebru is indeed a type of painting, but the “canvas” we would work upon was not the paper. Instead, we did all our work in a shallow rectangular tray of water to which carrageenan, a seaweed extract, was added for thickening. This would enable the paints to float. We donned our aprons and, using a horsehair brush, we sprinkled drops of mineral-based pigments onto the water's surface.

A crucial element is that a few drops of ox gall (bile) are added to each jar of paint. This makes the circles of paint spread out when they are sprinkled onto the water. The ox gall also keeps the colors separate, not blending with each other. No matter how many colors you drop, no matter how close to one another they are — even if they are dropped right on top of each other — they will not mix. Red plus yellow will never become orange; blue plus red will never become purple. This separation between the paints is what creates the marble effect, with veins meandering through the image as they do in marble stone.

Once we deposited colors onto the water, we manipulated the paints with combs or rakes, or we pushed and pulled and swirled the paints around with long pins, which come in a variety of thicknesses. In one class, after depositing the paints, we blew on them to move the colors around. Learning how the substances behave is the hardest part of learning ebru. A good-faith attempt at creating something beautiful can bring a person to tears (believe me!). After the colorful, floating picture was finished, we carefully laid a sheet of paper on the tray, patting it here and there to prevent bubbles, then slid it off along the edge of the tray. *Voilà!* The entire image is perfectly transferred to the paper. ([Here is a video](#) of one of Sevim's demonstration in class.)

#### Making Brushes and Paints

Our teacher put us through the paces of ebru apprenticeship — well, a watered-down version — so we might better understand what we were working with. In one class we learned to make the horsehair paintbrushes used in ebru. Sevim provided us with lengths of horse's tail, which we sliced into 1.5-inch segments. These we attached to a stick, winding nylon thread round and round and tying it with mind-bogglingly tricky knots that held the horsehair securely. We fumbled mightily; it was a humbling affair.

In another class we made paints. We began with a mineral oxide mud, slung it onto a marble slab, and ground it with a marble pestle. Up and down, back and forth we ground until the paste was perfectly smooth, with no apparent grains. Into a jar it went; water along with a few drops of ox gall was added.

About that ox gall — feeling a bit uncomfortable about the wholesale use of this animal product, and picturing the ghastly removal of rhino horns and elephant tusks — I asked Sevim how her suppliers obtained it. “Slaughterhouses,” she replied. They strike up a relationship with a slaughterhouse worker and arrange to have the gallbladders set aside — parts that were normally discarded. This came as a bit of a relief.

## The Ottoman Empire: Ebru's Heyday

Ebru began its life in the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. Some form of paper marbling was practiced in China and Japan before that, but the art reached its height in Ottoman Turkey. At first, Ottoman officials wrote administrative documents on marbled paper to prevent forgeries. Eventually ebru became a decorative art, pursued as an end in itself. Ottoman ebru artists developed several formal styles, some abstract and some representational.

To admirers of marbled endpapers, the abstract styles are the most familiar. Each style has a descriptive name; for example, *tarakli* (combed) style produces rows and rows of tiny scallops, *gelgit* (come and go) looks like colors dragged back and forth, *bülbül yuvası* (nightingale's nest) features successive pockets of swirls, and so on. *Hatip* ebru, named for a Muslim cleric, looks like a scattering of different-sized pebbles. We learned to produce a different one of these styles in each ebru class.

Traditionally, representational ebru subjects are flowers. Turkish ebru master Necmeddin Okyay (1883-1976) perfected *çiçekli* ebru, the floral marbling style, which came to be called Necmeddin marbling. The tulip is a holy symbol in Islam, and it became one of Necmeddin's best-loved specialties. He developed other flowers designs such as carnations, violets, daisies, poppies, hyacinths, and roses. Sevim explained that ebru flowers are stylized, rather than realistic, to differentiate them from perfectly realistic-looking flowers — flowers that only Allah can create. Again, in each ebru class we labored over the design of that week's flower.

## The Battle of the Guilds

In the 1600s, Turkey's marbled papers caught the eye of European merchants, and they began importing the papers for sale to printing houses and bookbinders. With the explosion of book publishing after the invention of the printing press, these decorative papers were in high demand. They became popular as both endpapers and outer book covers. Europeans hoped to make their own marbled papers, as that would be much cheaper than buying them. But how was marbling done?

Apparently, some enterprising craftspeople teased the technique away from Ottoman ebru artists and brought it home, carefully keeping the details under wraps. In the 1700s the British marblers' guild was a clandestine society, lurking in secret in the night so as not to reveal its mysteries. As Mark Kuransky describes in *Paper: A World History*:

Rooms were even examined for peepholes. It was nearly impossible to learn marbling at that time unless you were born into a marbling family. Even apprentices, who were always relatives, were not entrusted with complete formulas until they were older and deemed trustworthy. Marblers . . . kept themselves absolutely separate from the bookbinders' guild. Meanwhile the bookbinders' guild frequently sent spies into the marblers' guild, attempting to discover their secrets.

Inevitably, though, the secrets were outed, and marblers began publishing books describing the technique. Today commercial marblers flourish throughout Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, ebru remains a thriving national art form in Turkey, and Turkish artists such as Garip Ay are international celebrities among ebru connoisseurs. In 2014 UNESCO added Turkey's ebru art to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

YouTube abounds with video demonstrations by ebru artists, some venturing as far afield as painting landscapes and human portraits. Few commercial bookbinders use marbled paper today, although marbling thrives in the book arts arena. Now marbled paper has such diverse uses as drawer liners, gift wrappings, placemats, and note cards. I have even seen the peacock's-tail ebru pattern on Kleenex boxes!

### Cross-cultural Camaraderie

Back to my own ebru experience, my friend and I were the only non-Muslims in our class. It was a pleasure to spend those three hours a week working among people of another culture, all united by our common love of the art. We were a great group — helping one another, sharing tips, making suggestions, admiring one another's work. The sound track during a typical class session went something like this:

"Where's the ox gall?"

"Who's got the purple?"

"Anybody got a #3 pin?"

"I'd like to try that Lahore blue."

"The water in this tray is worn out."

"Why does my hyacinth look like cotton candy?"

"My flowers look like jellyfish, so let's just say I'm painting jellyfish."

"That black is no good; here, use this one."

"Abstracts are OK, but I want to work on orthodox tulips."

"Why are my colors running?"

"Use the skinny brush first, then the fat one."

"Your rose is perfect now; don't mess with it anymore."

"Whose poppy is that? Wow!"

Our idle chatter was open, collegial, friendly, and often educational. Our classmates shared their beliefs, taught us Arabic phrases, explained common expressions such as *Inshallah* (God willing), and talked about what they were studying in philosophy or ethics class. My friend shared tips about biking paraphernalia, and I told about visiting Morocco and Ethiopia. A flavor of good-natured camaraderie prevailed.

I came away from my class having learned how to produce ebru myself and how those long-mysterious marbled endpapers came to be. But beyond that, I gained a deeper appreciation for the common bonds that unite us all.

Submitted by  
Ann Heinrichs, Metadata/Cataloging Librarian  
The Paul Bechtold Library, Catholic Theological Union



One of my ebru roses. The Illinois Board of Higher Education chose four of my paintings to hang in their offices throughout 2017.