

Feature



Painting Your Shoes *Margot Silk Forrest*

The co-author of Sassy Feet! offers some inside tips and techniques on selecting and applying paints on shoes made of man-made and natural materials.

When I was a teenager, one of the shoe polish companies marketed a new product you could use to change the color of your shoes. What it did was cover the leather with a thick ugly layer of paint-like shoe polish. The result looked terrible! Thankfully, times have changed. There are new paints made for leather that go on smoothly, cover beautifully, and come in wonderful colors.

Editor's Note

This article is an excerpt from the first edition of *Sassy Feet!* from the chapter of the same name, covering techniques and technical aspects of selecting and applying paints on shoes made of man-made and natural materials. For the latest on painting and embellishing shoes and bags, along with many projects and examples, see the second edition of *Sassy Feet!* by Margot Silk Forrest and Destiny Carter.

Before we go any further, I want to say that you don't have to know how to paint in order to paint great shoes. For one thing, you could simply paint solid colors. Or, you could paint different sections of the shoe in different colors—sort of like paint-by-number. This is called color blocking and I do this a lot. Take a look at “Crocodile Mosaic” and “Old-Fashioned Girl.”



Crocodile Mosaic, inspired by French master Roger Vivier's crocodile shoes painted in mosaic pattern.



Old-Fashioned Girl uses a color-blocking technique: painting different clearly marked-off sections of this bootee in different colors.

You could also paint simple patterns like dots (use a pencil eraser instead of a brush), stripes (lay down masking tape on either side of the stripe you want to paint), or geometric forms: “Glitter Takes a Walk.”

You can also use the shape of your brush to create designs you think you can't paint freehand: “Cherry Blossom.”



Glitter Takes a Walk echoes the lines in the shoe itself.



Cherry Blossom pattern painted with a specially shaped brush: a half-inch oval wash (right).

Or you could drag a comb across the surface of the paint while it's still wet. If you want to get a little bolder, you could stamp or stencil with leather paint. I'll talk about that toward the end of this article.

Start with Great Paint

You can use any old kind of acrylic paint to paint your shoes—and you'll get any old kind of results. To get really beautiful results, use paint that's formulated to work on leather, fabric, and so-called manmade leather. The two brands I recommend are Lumiere, made by Jacquard, and Angelus Leather Paint. Lumiere paints are available from the [Sassy Feet website](#). Many online (and some brick-and-mortar) art stores also have it. As far as I know, the Angelus paints can only be found online.

Both these brands of paint are easy to work with, clean up with water, and won't crack or peel if applied properly (See "The Basics of Painting Shoes," later on.) I've also developed my own line of glitter glaze that won't shed microscopic flecks of glitter all over your clothes, your carpet, your car, or your cat. Sassy Feet "Glitter It!" Glaze comes in 20 delicious colors. You can see it in action on "Diva Couture" (right) and "Glitter Takes a Walk." For a color chart and ordering information, see the Sassy Feet website.



Above Lumiere acrylic paints. Below: Angelus leather paints.



Choose Great Colors

What's the point of painting your shoes if you're just going to paint them black or brown or gray or beige? You may choose to do that to "renew" a pair of old favorites that are already in one of those practical colors. But when you want to reinvent some shoes, go for it! Try metallic olive, or pearlescent turquoise. Experiment with colors you never thought you'd wear. After all, it's not like you're buying new shoes in those colors. You're simply experimenting on worn-out or cheap shoes.

One approach to picking great colors for your shoes is to juxtapose colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel, such as blue and orange; purple and yellow; and red and green. Get a color wheel for yourself (you can print a free one from the web) and take a

look at the intermediate steps of these colors. You'll learn, for example, that blue-green is opposite red-orange.

One of the best ways to decide which colors to use on your shoes is to make yourself a set of paint chips, or samples of each color of paint you have. My own paint chips are done on water-color paper and measure 1 1/4" by 4". I punch a hole in one corner and put them on a key ring (the kind that unscrews) to keep them together. Then when I need to choose colors, I can open the key ring, take off the colors I'm considering, and hold them against the shoe.

I also recommend experimenting with mixing paints to get entirely new, custom colors. You can mix any of the Lumiere colors together; ditto any of the Angelus colors. Here's a tip: If you want a light color, like light green, start with a lot of white and add just a little green to it. If you do it the other way around, you'll end up with way more paint than you need as you keep adding white to your mixing cup of green paint, trying to get a light enough color. Lumiere makes a pearlescent white that is a wonderful base for lighter colors.

Be sure to save a tiny, airtight bottle or jar (preferably labeled) of any colors you mix so you can do touchups if you ever need to. Leather paint, unlike dye, is not absorbed in the fibers of the leather (or fabric or manmade materials). Instead, it sticks—like glue—to the surface. That means that under severe duress, even the most durable paint can scuff off.



Gypsy Summer. Suede footbed of stenciled and painted sandal was painted since it is also visible.



Anastasia. Faux uede boots in halo pink gold is at once royal and feminine.

The Basics of Painting Shoes

You can paint shoes made of fabric, leather, or manmade leather. Results on patent leather can be dicey, though some people have had luck with it. Paint will also adhere to suede, fake suede, and fur, but it can create a thick-looking coating. If you want to change the color of suede, use Angelus suede dye. It doesn't come in many colors, but it works really well. Having said that, I'll confess that I have painted shoes of brushed pigskin (thicker than suede) and faux suede, but I've had enough bad experiences doing so that I've sworn off. A few successful examples include "Gypsy Summer," and "Anastasia." (left)

As to fur, if you want to color it, use Jacquard's Pinata inks (as I did on "Green With Envy," right). Lastly, you can't paint shoes made of soft plastic, like Crocs, because the paint will peel right off, even if you prep and prime it. (Believe me, I've tried!) You can paint hard plastic (the kind used to make some high heels and wedges), if you prep it with paint thinner and give it a coat of spray-on plastic primer first.

Prep the surface of your shoes so they are clean enough for the paint to adhere to. Then you paint, using a soft brush. One coat may do it, or you may need two, depending on the color of your shoe and the color you've chosen to paint it. If you make a mistake, wipe it off right away with a wet cotton ball or cotton swab. If your mistake dries, sand it down and paint again. When you're done, seal the paint. That's it.



Green with Envy. Wedge colored with Lumier metallic olive green paint. Fur tinted with lime green Pinata ink.

Prepping Your Shoes

Don't skip this step! It doesn't take long to prep shoes for painting and it will make all the difference in how long your paint job lasts. Even if your shoes are brand new, prep them!

You start by stuffing your shoes with newspaper so the surface is smooth and free of wrinkles. Next, you apply one of the following, depending on the type of shoe you're working with:

- **Leather shoes:** Wipe the surface with a cotton ball or rag that you've dampened with rubbing alcohol (available at drug stores).
- **Fabric shoes:** Whether they are made of canvas, satin, or polyester, brush them well to remove loose dirt. If they have oil stains, use a stain remover like Kiss-Off (my choice) to get the stains

off. Any other type of stains, the paint will simply cover.

- **Shoes of manmade leather:** Wipe the surface with a cotton ball or rag that you've dampened with 100% acetone (available at hardware stores; inexpensive). Do this outside as acetone is stinky and not good to inhale. While nail polish remover is acetone, too, don't use it to prep your shoes. It could have additives (scent, nail conditioner) that will interfere with the paint's ability to adhere to the shoe.

Three Ways to Tell Leather from So-Called Manmade Leather

First, leather smells like leather. Second, the materials used to make new shoes must be stamped on them, so look for a sticker on the bottom of the sole or printed information inside the shoe somewhere. Unfortunately, this info has often worn away on older shoes. Third, if you press your fingernail into the surface of the shoe (somewhere that won't be noticed), manmade leather will spring right back, while genuine leather will hold the impression much longer.

A Primer on Using Acrylic Paint

All paint for leather and fabric is acrylic paint, and here's the minimum you need to know about using it.

First, always apply your last coat of paint in broad daylight so you can see what places you missed. No matter how good

your shoe looks by indoor light, I guarantee you that you'll find places you need to touch up once you look at it outdoors.

Second, brush lines usually disappear when the paint dries. If they don't, dab a little paint over them using a cosmetic sponge.

Third, acrylic paint dries really, really quickly. That's great if you want to get those shoes finished in time to go out tonight. It's not so great if you have to stop painting to answer the phone or a lengthy call of nature: you'll come back to find your brushes are as hard as rocks. So, always keep two containers of water at your side when you paint shoes. A largish one (say, a pint) to put your brush in when you take a break, and a small one (a half cup size will do) that you never put your brush in. The second is for dipping cotton balls or swabs in to wipe up mistakes the instant you notice them.

Because of this rapid-drying action, don't pour a lot of paint on your palette at one time. If you need to pause while paint-



Cover areas you don't want to paint, like the heel and sole of this cowboy boot, with drafting tape. This can save you a time, but check carefully when you pull off the tape. Sometimes paint sneaks under the edge.

ing (for one coat to dry, or to walk the dog, or even to get a good night's sleep), cover your paint container with plastic wrap. This will keep the paint liquid at least overnight. If the paint gets too gummy, you can dilute it with a little water (don't add more than 25% water).

If your paint dries and you don't like it, you have a three choices:

1. Paint over it.
2. Gently sand it off and repaint.
3. Paint over a very small part of your mistake at a time, give the paint a moment to penetrate the dried paint beneath it, then gently scrape it away with a hobby knife. This usually works, but I don't like to do it as it risks marring the surface of the shoe. You could try scraping it away with your fingernail, but it's way safer and easier to wipe off mistakes before they dry!

Brushes and Other Tools for Applying Paint

When you're painting shoes, you want to use a soft brush and lay the paint on the surface of the shoe, not brush it on. You don't want any Van Gogh-like swirls or dabs. You want nice smooth strokes. I like to use a fan brush for most of the shoe, a small square-ended brush for painting up to the edges of things, and a small round-pointed brush for painting in tiny places. You don't need expensive brushes, but get decent ones.

I also use sponges to apply paint. Inexpensive cosmetic sponges are a godsend when you have a large surface to cover, like a boot. Sea sponges are fun when you want to create a dappled look onto the surface, as on “Toga Party.” (right) You get the best results if you don’t saturate the sponge; you want the sponge’s little pointy parts (I’m sure there’s some scientific word for them) to stay...well, pointy.



I usually dab the sponge in just a little paint, then blot it on a piece of paper before sponging the shoe. Also, you’ll get the best effect if you sponge on a minimum of two colors, better yet three. This adds to the layered effect that makes sponge painting so cool looking. Test out this technique (and other painting techniques) on a scrap of leather first.

A Technical Tip on Working with Lumiere Paints

Shake your bottle of Lumiere really well, and only pour a small amount onto your palette at a time. Shake the bottle again each time you pour out more paint. This is especially important if you are using Lumiere’s luscious metallic or halo colors, since there are metallic bits in the paint that like to sink to the bottom of the bottle, given half a chance.

Sealing Your Shoes

When you’re done painting, you’ll need to seal your shoes. This isn’t necessary for most uses of acrylic paint, but shoes live down on the ground where life is rough. They’re apt to get scuffed, knocked around, even kicked. So you need a tough, clear, flexible (shoes bend, after all) sealer to protect your paint job.

I use an excellent acrylic sealer that disguises itself as a floor wax. Its formal name is “Pledge with FUTURE Shine Premium Floor Finish,” though it’s often referred to and sometimes sold as simply “Future Premium Floor Finish.” You can buy it in big (27 oz.) bottles at most hardware stores, or in smaller (2 oz.) bottles at the Sassy Feet website. Apply a light coat with a cotton ball. It will dry quickly and give your shoes extra shine and protection.

Create a Painting Kit for Yourself

In addition to alcohol and/or acetone for prepping your surface, paint, two water containers, brushes, and sealer, here’s what you’ll need to have in your painting kit.

- Something to use as a palette. This could be an actual plastic palette with little wells, a sheet of waxed palette paper, or a Styrofoam plate.
- Newspaper for stuffing your shoes
- Cotton balls
- Cotton swabs
- Paint rags (several!)

- Popsicle sticks or chopsticks for stirring paints
- Toothpicks (because they’re always useful)
- Small hobby knife (e.g. X-ACTO knife)
- A fine or extra-fine sanding sponge or sandpaper (I use 220 weight)
- Drafting tape from the paint section of the hardware store for masking off areas you don’t want to paint.

Stenciling

You can use plastic or heavyweight paper stencils (as opposed to brass ones) to paint images on your shoes. I did this on the straps of “Gypsy Summer,” which has vines running along them. The challenge to stenciling shoes is that they aren’t flat, which makes holding the stencil perfectly still and flush against the surface a little tricky. If you’re patient, it can work.

Dab on the paint with a the broad end of a wedge-shaped cosmetic sponge. Don’t



Stenciling on straps of Gypsy Summer.

load up the sponge with paint, though. Just use a little. I even like to dab the sponge once or twice on paper before dabbing over the stencil. This controls the wet-paint factor, which is responsible for paint seeping under the edge of the stencil.

Reverse Stenciling

Because I don't draw well, I've gotten very good at coming up with alternate ways to paint images on my shoes. I used one of these workarounds on the ballet flat "Good Morning, Paris" (below, seen from the back). Instead of trying to paint all those little white fleurs-de-lis by hand, I did what I call "reverse stenciling."

First I painted the entire shoe pearlescent white (the color that I wanted the fleurs-de-lis to be). After it had dried completely (in other words, for at least two hours longer than one thinks necessary), I



Good Morning Paris. Fleur-de-lis shaped stickers were used as reverse stencils.

pressed little fleur-de-lis shaped stickers onto the white paint. Then I painted the whole thing with one coat of pearlescent magenta.

Caution: Using multiple coats of paint, makes it very hard to pull up the stickers.

Finally, I pulled off the stickers to reveal the little white fleur-de-lis shapes beneath. I needed to do a little touch-up here and there, but for the most part this method works well. Just be sure that you choose stickers with strong, simple silhouettes—like stars, martini glasses, cats, butterflies, sharks, and geckos.

Stamping

So, what about stamping on shoes, all you rubber-stamp mavens are wondering. Well, you can do it, if you use deeply etched stamps without a lot of detail and don't mind a less-than-crisp look. I have used commercial rubber stamps, and cut my own stamp using a hobby knife and an eraser. In both of these cases, I had to hold something inside the shoe, just opposite where I was stamping, to create a flat, hard surface for the stamp to press against. I used a small square of tile; use your imagination and you'll find something that will work.

When you're stamping, you can use Lumiere or the other leather paints, but you'll have to use a lightly coated brush to apply the paint to the stamp (and wash off

your stamp before the paint dries on it). Otherwise, you can use stamp pads whose ink will adhere to leather, such as StazOn by Tsukineko.

Final Touches: Painting Other Parts of Your Shoe

Once you really get into painting shoes, you'll probably want to start painting the insoles of your shoes as well. Sponging works great for this purpose, as does painting polka dots and other geometric shapes. Even a simple solid color will look just great. You might also want to take a tip from renowned shoe designer Christian Louboutin, who paints the breast of every heel he creates a bright, sexy red ("Diamonds and Lust" at left).



Margot Silk Forrest is an artisan, craft teacher, and co-author of "Sassy Feet: Paint, Embellish and LOVE Your Shoes (and Bags)!" More photos of her work, along with free how-to information, are on the SassyFeet.com website. For leather paints (Lumiere and its sister line of products, not Neopaque), books, tools, embellishments, and other supplies, explore the online store, and check out the Sassy Feet [blog](#) about DIY shoe design.