
I started to experiment with the decals on metalclay after I saw a friend use them on her ceramics. When I first tried a decal on a fine silver piece I was astonished about the result, at that time I didn't know exactly what the possibilities were. Through studying, trial and error I have found my way to work with decals and I will share my research with you by this presentation.

I hope more people will use transfers and share with me their result and show me the jewellery they made with this technique.

About Decals

As a precious-metalsmith you have several techniques of using color in your jewellery. Gemstones, the use of different metalcolors, emaille and resins offer many options.

A ceramic transfer is another way of applying color with its own specific features. This technique is borrowed from the ceramic industry.

The ceramic decals I use on fired metalclay are water-slide decals.

A water-slide decal is a type of image that must be dipped in water prior to its application. Upon contact with water, the glue is loosened and the decal can be removed or transferred from its backing. The backing or base surface is a special thicker paper. The "ink" which is used to silk-screen or print the image or pattern on the paper is made from ceramic onglazes.



7 small plate's or "showing my colors".

Onglazes are a mixture of minerals, metallic compounds and water or oil.

Enamels use the same kind of base materials as the onglazes. They both create a glasslike surface. For a water-slide transfer this mixture of chemicals is used to create an image on paper.

After the decal is applied on a fine silver piece it is baked at $\pm 750^{\circ}\text{C}$ degree, which creates a permanent bond with the fine silver. This only works with fine silver or fine gold. It can be applied to finished metal clay, being fine silver, but not to sterling silver. This due to the oxidation of the copper. (all colors in the transfer will turn black) The colors created by this technique form a very thin permanent layer.

The words Transfer and Decal refer to the same technique.

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The word decal is short for "decalomania." The word Decalomania is derived from the French word "decalquer," and was coined by Simon François Ravenet about 1750. The "mania" was added during the Decal craze of the late 1800s.

(For history, more info on www.ceramicdecals.org a very informative site about all sorts of decals.)

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Ceramic onglaze transfers are basically made by two different technics. They each have their own advantages and dis-advantages.

Silk-screened Decal

1 Silk-screened

This type of transfer yields beautiful colors which give a fine layer. Companies applying this transfer type know exactly what chemicals their onglazes contain because they mix their colors themselves.

The disadvantage is that when you want a custom design, it is very expensive. A minimum of 100 sheets is common practice. Company's who make this often have standard designs called stock designs and those you can order on sheet from. I use stock designs which I cut and punch in personalised designs.

Digital printed Decal

2 Digital printing

A second possibility is a decal produced with a special printer using patent-protected ceramic toners. The biggest advantage is that small runs are inexpensive and fast compared to old-school silk-screen technologies. It is even possible to order just one sheet with your own artwork. The disadvantage is that this layer of color is not as thick as the silk-screened transfers. Also, in my opinion the colors are less vivid. It is possible to combine the two different types of decals on your metalclay work.

Preparing the work

Preparing your work for decals.

I started with flat, smooth surfaces. Slightly curved is OK. A surface created with the tear-away technique works as well, but you have to be very careful when applying the decal, not every design is suitable for decals! The object must be totally prepared, polishing is done before. Of course you can rivet it afterwards or use other cold connections, but no more soldering can be done. When you solder, colors tend to change.



Some stock-decals and custom designed decal.

Preparing the decal

Preparing the decal

If you want to apply a custom design, cut it to the desired shape. If you use stock-decals, cut or punch it in a form you desire.

Recommended tools: Scissors, punches, craft knife (new blades), pencil and plastic templates, tweezers, etc.

You can put more layers together. If you use multi-layers of decals in the same firing the colors will diffuse a bit. Another possibility is to fire the first layer, then apply the next layer and fire again. Then you create very straight lines. I did till 3 layers, building up my image.

Left: See how the dark green diffuses a bit in the light green. All layers were fired in one kiln-session. Right: Separate firing for each layer.



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Application

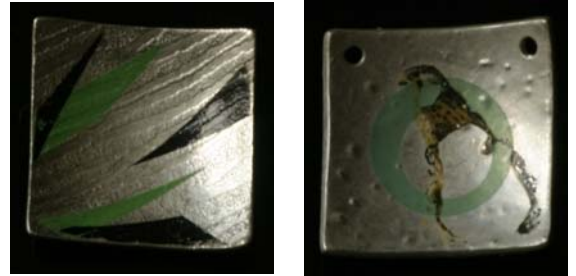
Application waterslide decals

Your work needs to be perfectly clean! Use some detergent and brush the surface so no greasy fingerprints or dust are left.

Place the decal in a shallow tray of distilled luke-warm water and soak for about 30-60 seconds, or until the color layer begins to slide from the backing paper. The decal can now be applied to the silver. Apply the decal over the silver face-up, and slip out the backing paper from underneath. I use a tweezer to avoid hand-contact with the back of the decal.

As you position the decal on your work, you only have little time to slide it exactly where you want it. Remove the water, from underneath the decal, by using a small rubber squeegee. This is accomplished by stroking from the center of the decal towards the outer edges until all excess water has been removed, and wrinkles and air bubbles have been smoothed out. If you don't get the water and bubbles out, you will get tiny explosions on the surface of the decal during the firing. They are called pinholes: Spot(s) that fire away, leaving a hole in the design. So always clean your silver thoroughly with clean water and soap before mounting, and squeegee thoroughly!

Allow to dry for at least 4 to 6 hours (preferably 24 hours) before firing.



*Left: Transfers applied on a tear-away pattern.
Right: An example of a pinhole. Cause: trapped water under the decal.*

So always clean your silver thoroughly with clean water and soap before mounting, and squeegee thoroughly!

Allow to dry for at least 4 to 6 hours (preferably 24 hours) before firing.

Firing

Firing Temperatures:

Decals are fired in a programmable kiln between 740-770°C. The temperature is dependent on the color. Green and blue can handle 770°C. With red I prefer 760°C or even 750°C. You have to try this yourself everytime you have new decals. Testing is part of the fun!

Slow fire

First I used the time schedule for ceramics. This means that you slowly heat up the kiln till 400°C (300°C in an hour) than ramp till the desired temperature 760°C, stay for 10 minutes at 760°C and then cooldown. This works fine, it takes only more time.

Fast fire

Later I adapted the enamel way of firing. I pre-heat the kiln to 760°C. Then I open the kiln and place the piece in the kiln, close the door. Wear heat resistance gloves! The temperature of the kiln must be again 760°C. From then on I fire for 10 minutes, remove the piece from the kiln and cool in air. This delivers the same results.

Choosing your heating-schedule, with the right timing and temperatures is important. If you over-heat, the colors will burn and turn to dull ocre and grey, if you under-heat the surface is not totally smooth, in this case you can repeat the firing.

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Safety reminder!!! Remember your kiln is hot!
Take all necessary precautions for working with a hot kiln.

About the Colors

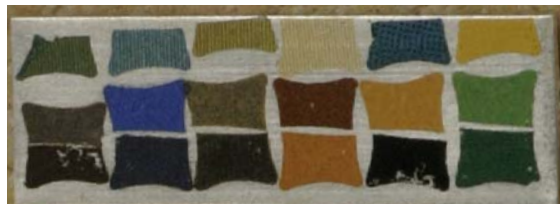
Green and blue were the first colors I succeeded to achieve. Then yellow without cadmium.

Colors which even have very little cadmium in it turn to a dull color when applied to fine silver. Reds and purple are made with cadmium.

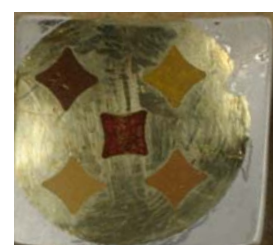
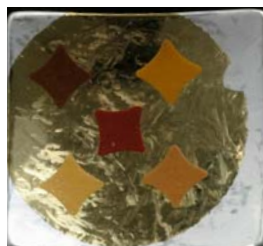
I managed to create red and purple when I first applied keumboo to the surface. Adding an extra layer(s) of gold between it delivers the right result.

With keum-boo you have to use the fast firing schedule, otherwise the gold will diffuse in the silver.

I didn't try yet aura22 but I guess it will give the same result.



Up: before firing down: after firing at 760C
Not all colors remain. Red and purple are gone.



Left: before firing right: after firing at 760C
This was a test with keumboo underneath.

Processing after the kiln

Processing after the kiln

When removed from the kiln and cooled down I polish the artpiece with a soft silvercloth.

* Using LOS is also possible afterwards as it doesn't affect the colors

* How to remove a fired decal

If you want to remove a decal which has been fired, you have to use sandingpaper. Also the habras discs are very helpful to erase the decal. Preferrable you clean the piece in a ultrasoon to remove all the dirt. When clean, you can re-apply your decal.

* 'Halo' Effect

After firing, there appears to be a slight shadow around the edge of the decal. This is caused mostly by inorganic impurities in the water. Use distilled water in the future.

A disk with Keumboo (2 layers), red decal and Liver of Sulfer



Long strips of decal are wind around these earrings to create this pattern. Fired on mica.



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Some computer skills for digital printing

The company's who do digital printing will give you the exact specs needed for their printers. But I show you what I do.

Use Adobe Photoshop/Illustrator or comparable software to create a canvas:
Canvas size = 11" x 15.5" (this is normally the printable area, ask the company!)
Background = transparent
Resolution = 300dpi
Mode = RGB (let them convert your file to their special ceramic CMYK profile)
File format = TIFF or PSD (do not compress your file -- no JPEG)

Create or import your images (photos, drawings, text, etc.) into this canvas. Lay out your decal sheet -- fill it to the edges if you want. Full color or duotone, it doesn't matter. Put it all in there.

A necklace and matching earrings in yellow.



Final

A final note

I hope this hand-out from my presentation on the PMC-conference 2008 will motivate you to start experimenting with the exciting possibilities the transfer-technique offers, good luck with it and please share your experience with me.

If you want more info, feel free to contact me on the conference or afterwards.

Helga van Leipsig
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Helga lives and works in The Netherlands.

Her jewellery education started at the Academy of Arts in Maastricht, The Netherlands. So before she came across Precious Metal Clay in 2005 she was already a traditional silversmith. Captivated by PMC because of its incredible moldable quality she immediately started to work and experiment with it on her own. She gained the PMC Diploma at the MCSJ, Cornwall, UK in 2007.

She is still astonished by this fascinating material and keeps on exploring it, creating jewellery which is sold via her website and a few galleries. She also shares her knowledge by teaching PMC workshops in the south of Holland.

Visit Helga's website - www.zilveren-akelei.nl

Right: In 2007 she wins the 2nd place of the Small Treasures competition in Europe with this necklace using the decal technique.



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