

# The Painted Cake

— *Natasha Collins* —

*Transform cakes, cookies  
and cupcakes into  
edible works of art*

*'Natasha makes  
the most beautiful  
hand-painted cakes  
and biscuits.'*

*Edd Kimber, winner of  
BBC TV's Great British  
Bake Off, 2011*





The  
Painted  
Cake







The  
*Painted  
Cake*

Natasha Collins



MURDOCH BOOKS



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# Welcome to

## The Painted Cake

I think it was inevitable that I would end up painting on cakes for a living: I hail from a long line of both artists and bakers, and so perhaps it was only a matter of time before someone in my family had the flash of inspiration to combine the two. Both of my parents are working artists, and they always encouraged me to take up my own brush. I admit, I did flirt briefly with the idea of becoming a dentist, but by the time I was 15 I realised it wasn't for me, and my mother's sigh of relief was poorly hidden. (I should add that she has nothing against dentists, but even back then she could see I was more suited to artistic pursuits.) Instead, I trained as an illustrator and then somehow fell into textile design, where I stayed for nearly 10 years.

But baking remained in my blood. My paternal grandmother was a great Lancashire baker (I still remember the taste of her fabulous meat and potato pies) and my father inherited those genes – he can whip up a mean chocolate cake at the drop of a hat.

My mother's side of the family is Scottish and Irish, and they have an unwritten rule that nobody should ever be allowed a cup of tea without also having a slice of cake (normally fruit or Madeira). When I was a child, my mother made sure the biscuit tin was always full of homemade goodies.

When I became a full-time mum and gave up my job as a textile designer, I found that I really missed having a creative outlet. I tried various crafty enterprises, but nothing fulfilled me. So I threw all my energy into my children's birthday parties, taking on board Julia Child's saying: 'A party without cake is just a meeting.' I channelled my creativity into making bigger and better birthday and celebration cakes, until I eventually reached the point when I began to think that my efforts might be good enough to sell commercially.



My first commercial cakes were mostly decorated with fondant models and cut-out flowers. I had no training in sugarcraft and knew that I couldn't (and therefore didn't want to) use piped decorations, as I was terrified the results would be bad, bordering on hideous. However, one of the very first cake commissions I received was for a 70th birthday cake, and the client wanted a 'Happy Birthday

Granddad' banner to go on the side. I was horrified, as I couldn't bear the thought of breaking out my piping bag. But working artists rarely have the chance to turn down a job from a client, particularly when their business is just starting out. So, I smiled and said, 'Sure, no problem!'

It turned out that it was a problem. A massive problem. I can't remember actually crying, but after an hour spent piping, scraping off the results and then piping again, I'm sure the air turned a vivid shade of blue. I needed a different approach. I thought back to all the research I had done for my new career, and the many hours I had spent online looking at gorgeous cakes, and I recalled some cake decorators painting on fondant, adding features to sugar models. So I decided to do what the fifteen-year-old would-be dentist did: pick up a brush.

My mother knew it all along: I am happiest when I paint. As soon as I put the paintbrush, full of gloopy food colour, onto the fondant it was as if a cartoon lightbulb turned on above my head – it felt so much more natural than piping, and the text I had to paint flowed easily. If it felt this easy to write a message, I wondered what else I could paint. The next day I baked a batch of butterfly-shaped cookies, covered them with fondant and started painting flowers on them. And I've never looked back. There is now a permanent collection of jam jars lined up on my kitchen windowsill stuffed with paintbrushes, pots of food colour litter my work surfaces, we have cake coming out of our ears and, to this day, I'm still a terrible piper.

What started out as an escape from the housework, and a way to make a little extra money before eventually returning to textile design, has now become a career, and I couldn't be happier. I've been lucky enough to work for some amazing clients, on very exciting projects, and I get to travel the world teaching wonderfully enthusiastic sugarcraft students. Most of all, I love helping make people's special days even more special, and personal, for them.

With my training as an illustrator, I've always harboured ambitions to write and illustrate my own book. So you can imagine how thrilled I am to be able to write *The Painted Cake* for you. I hope that while reading this book you will be inspired to take up your own brush and paint, and that you will discover a totally new way of cake decorating. Remember, painting makes you happy!

## FINDING YOUR PAINTING STYLE

Don't worry if you have no previous painting experience, either with fondant or in a more traditional medium – most of my students are absolute beginners, and they are all amazed at what can be achieved with a little direction and some practice. But it is important to be aware that when you paint on cake, the process is not like other cake-decorating practices where you learn the skills that enable you to create a carbon copy of a cake, every time. Painting is never like that, in any medium, and the results you get will vary slightly each time. As you work through each of the projects in this book, even though you will be decorating cakes (and the instructions, hints and tips in this book are specifically about working on fondant), what you are really learning is how to paint. So, as well as being a cake decorator, you will also become an artist. I'm sure that you will find painting on fondant to be an incredible personal, creative endeavour, and one that is extremely rewarding.

You may think that learning the technical skills to enable you to paint will be the hardest part of the process, but actually you will find that the projects provided will help you to demonstrate these skills relatively easily. No, the hardest lesson to learn when starting out as a painter is to love your own 'hand' – this is an artist's term for the natural style that an individual paints in, and yours will always be unique. The term is very literal: it is your hand that works the paintbrush in a unique way, which leads to the creation of an individual style – and from that, unique works of art.





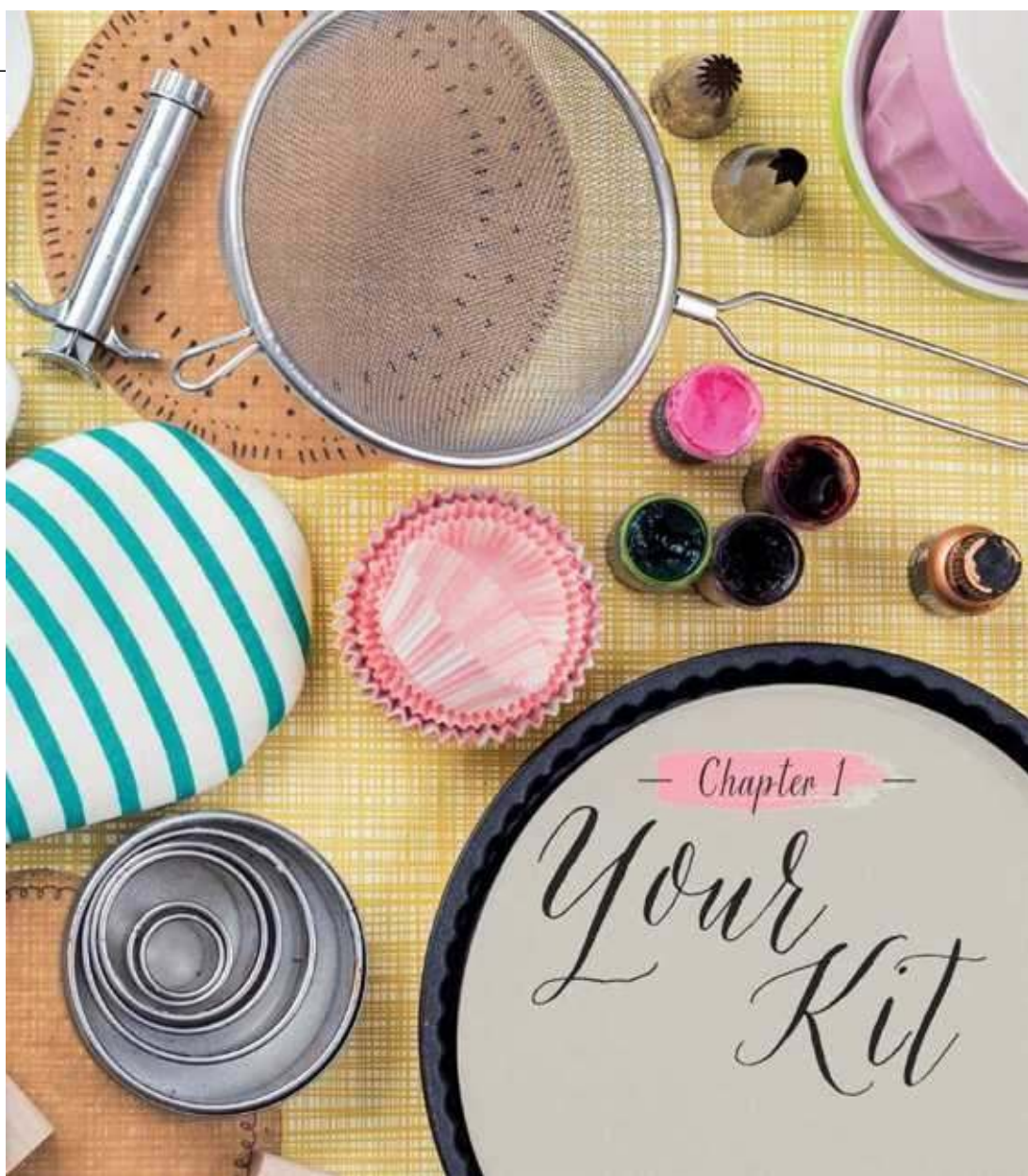
Learning to appreciate how your own 'hand' looks is always difficult. In all my life as a designer, from art college onward, I have found there was always at least one fellow designer whose work I very much admired, but also felt a tinge of envy at their style. I often felt that my own work didn't come up to scratch. Now, when I teach a class, I find that most students have the same experience. They will be in awe of a fellow student's work and feel that their own work is inadequate. That little doubting voice should be ignored. It's important to always strive to get better but if, as you work through the projects in this book, you find that you are always comparing your painting to others, then your confidence will ebb away. Please, don't let that happen! Don't waste any time worrying that your work isn't good enough, because it is – it really is – you just need to learn to appreciate it. Accept that even though it is different from anybody else's, your own 'hand', your own style of painting, is as good as anyone else's.

I tell you this because it's important to understand that painting is a personal pursuit. You will not be creating carbon copies of my work in the projects on these pages (unless you're a master forger, in which case I think you can probably make better money outside of the cake-decorating business). Some of you will discover that you have a much more delicate touch with a paintbrush, which will result in softer looking work. Some of you will have a more graphic style, or you may create a design that looks much more like a watercolour. Embrace your differences! At the end of teaching a class, I find it so exciting to see the variation in my students' work, even though they were all given the same design to work from. This is why I love painting so much – everyone's hand produces something a little different, something unique.

As you see your own style emerge while working through the projects in this book, please don't, on any account, try to fight it – or you will find your painting loses its integrity and you will feel dissatisfied with what you have created. Take plenty of time to practise, enjoy yourself, and above all else, let your inner artist out!







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# GETTING YOUR KIT TOGETHER

On the following pages, you will find an inventory of all the baking equipment and specialist decorating tools that you will need to make the projects in this book. You should be able to purchase the cake-making equipment from a general kitchen shop, or in the kitchen section of a large department store. If you are fortunate enough to have a cake-decorating supply shop near you, then you should be able to find the more specialised equipment there, or they will probably be able to order anything they don't have in stock. But, if you don't have access to a store, then you can find many specialist suppliers online – search for 'cake-decorating equipment' or for the specific tool you need.

Don't feel pressured into immediately rushing out and buying everything on the list. If you don't have a particular cake tin for a project, you can easily substitute it for one you already have in a different size or shape. Or you may have friends who will lend you items until you can purchase your own equipment. I built up my stock gradually over the years, buying new equipment as I needed it, rather than indulging in one big splurge ... but I am quite frugal!



## BAKING EQUIPMENT

Cake tins – If you are just a beginner, then by all means use whatever cake tin you can get your hands on. However, if you wish to become a professional cake decorator, then I would advise you to invest in good-quality tins. The cake tins you buy from a specialist supplier will be made with a thicker metal (usually aluminium) which helps prevent any burning, and they will have perfect right angles and straight edges, both of which help when you cover and fill the cake. The sides of the tin should be at least 3"/75 mm high.

When making larger cakes that are assembled from separate layers, some bakers will use multiple tins of the same size to bake individual layers that are then put together to make the whole. The alternative is to bake the cake as a whole in a single tin and then cut it into layers afterwards. Tins can take up a lot of space and if you have multiples of the same size then you can't store them inside each other. Sadly, my kitchen is very tiny, with only one small cupboard for my tins, so this dictates how I bake: I stick to one tin per cake.

Most specialist cake-decorating supply shops sell cake tins measured in inches, however general kitchen shops are more likely to sell the tins in metric measurements, and sometimes these are not always the equivalent size in inches. If the size of your cake tin isn't exactly the same as the one I

have used for a particular recipe, then you may find that the baking time is slightly affected, so just keep an eye on the cake as it comes to the end of its cooking time, to prevent any burning. Standard tin sizes are as follows:

Round tins: 4"/100 mm; 5"/130 mm; 6"/150 mm;  
7"/180 mm; 8"/200 mm; 9"/230 mm; 10"/250 mm  
Square tins: 4"/100 mm; 6"/150 mm; 8"/200 mm

**Baking strips** – These are insulating strips that go around your cake tin, to prevent the edges of the cake from burning and help your cake bake evenly. You can buy them from specialist baking suppliers.

**Cupcake/muffin tins**

**Cupcake cases** – I never use patterned cases when baking cupcakes; I find that the butter in the cakes affects the paper, and the pattern becomes lost. I bake the cupcakes in white or dark brown cases and then place the decorated cupcakes (still in their original wrappers) into my chosen cupcake cases. I bake the [Fruit Cake recipe](#) in foil cases: these are thicker, which helps prevent the fruit burning while baking.

**Baking trays** – If you intend to make large batches of cookies you will need at least three baking trays. The same is true for cupcakes – buy three tins so that you can make up to 36 in each batch.

**Cookie cutters**

**Cooling trays** – Using stacked cooling trays is a fabulous way of saving space if you have a large order.

**Baking paper, for lining.**

**Greaseproof paper or tin foil, for wrapping fruit cakes.**

**Kitchen film**

**A rubber spatula**

**A cake tester** – If you don't have one, a skewer is perfectly adequate to check everything is baked through.

**An oven thermometer** – As every oven varies in its temperature range, you should double check your oven is at the right temperature for the recipe you are making. If the thermometer does not match the temperature you have set the oven at, then adjust the dial accordingly.

**A sieve**

**A variety of bowls**

**A pastry brush** – I find the brushes with natural bristles easiest to use, however I cannot find one that doesn't shed its hair – not so nice! I've resorted to using a pastry brush with silicone bristles; it's not as effective, but at least you don't end up with a mouthful of bristle while you eat your cake.

**An electric hand-held whisk or a table-top mixer** – You need an electric hand-held whisk for smaller cakes. For larger cakes, or to mix the ingredients for two cakes at the same time, I would advise you invest in a table-top mixer, also known as a stand mixer.

**Scales** – I would always use electric scales, as they give a more accurate weight, but I know that some bakers prefer traditional scales; either type will be perfectly fine for the projects in this book.



## CAKE-DECORATING EQUIPMENT

A cake leveller – You can just use a serrated knife, but I find this tool much easier.

An offset palette knife – This is sometimes called a crank-handle spatula, as the blade sits below the handle bent at an angle. This tool allows you to cover and smooth surfaces that you may not be able to reach with a conventional spatula.

A cake scraper – This is a flat rectangle of thin plastic or metal used to create perfectly straight sides of buttercream covering a cake, and I also use it to smooth down fondant.

Rolling pins – To roll out fondant, and cookie dough, you will need a long rolling pin about 18"/460 mm, preferably in plastic. Wooden rolling pins can leave marks and indentations on the fondant. You will find it useful to use a small rolling pin (6"/150 mm) when rolling out modelling paste.

Spacers – These are long thin plastic strips that you use when you are rolling out fondant, marzipan or cookie dough in order to get an even thickness. I use ¼"/5 mm spacers.

A turntable, tilted or untilted – Many of my students prefer the tilted turntable: if the cake is at an angle it is easier to paint the sides of the cake. I use an untilted turntable, which keeps the cake straight; I prefer this, especially when painting tiered cakes, because there is less chance of cracking



or bulging sides.

**Smoothers** – These are paddles with handles that you use to create a beautiful smooth surface on the fondant. You place the flat surface of the smoother onto the surface of the fondant and, with even pressure, move it around the surface of the cake until it is perfectly smooth (or as near as you can get it).

**Cake drums** – These are cardboard boards thick enough to carry the weight of a cake (usually  $\frac{1}{2}$ "/12 mm thick), even a tiered cake. The cardboard is covered with a foil coating, often silver or gold; there are also metallic pink or blue versions. However I always cover these boards with fondant and hide the edge with ribbon – my pet hate is an uncovered board under a beautiful cake.

**Cake boards** – Similar to cake drums, these are also made out of cardboard and are covered with foil, but they are much thinner than cake drums. You can buy  $\frac{3}{16}$ "/4 mm thick boards, double thick boards ( $\frac{1}{8}$ "/3 mm thick) or single thick boards ( $\frac{1}{16}$ "/2 mm thick). None of these boards would be suitable as the base board, as they are not thick enough to hold the weight of a cake. They are used to create support for tiered cakes.

**Cocktail sticks**

**Dowels** – Long thin poles used to add support to tiers, these can be plastic or wooden.

**A small spirit level** – This is a tool used to test whether a surface is completely horizontal. You may be able to find some cake-decorating suppliers that sell spirit levels, but your local DIY store will definitely stock them. Keep one purely for cake-decorating purposes.

**A scalpel** – Round-handled scalpels will be easier to use when cutting out fondant, but any scalpel is acceptable.

**A foam mat** – You place sugar-paste flowers or toppers on this mat while they dry out. They will dry out more quickly than on a work surface and will not stick.

**An extruder** – A large syringe or gun, this comes with a variety of discs which create different effects with fondant, such as rope, hair or grass.

**A ball tool** – This modelling tool is a stick with a ball attached at each end. There are many uses for it but for the designs in this book you'll use it to create ruffles.

**A lace impression mat** – This is a plastic or silicone mat that you press into rolled-out fondant which creates a lace pattern on the fondant surface. You can also buy lace impression rolling pins that you roll over the fondant to create the same effect.

**A lace mould** – This is a mould that you press thinly rolled modelling paste onto, to create a lace effect. You normally need to trim away any excess paste around the edge with a scalpel.

**Cookie sticks**

**Edible-paint pen**

**A large star-tip piping nozzle** – This is to create the lovely buttercream swirl on top of the cupcakes.

**A piping (icing) bag** – Plastic ones are disposable, or you can get cloth ones that can be washed and re-used.



## PAINTING EQUIPMENT

A pot for water – You can also use a mug or clean jam jar.

An artist's palette – You can get these from most art and craft shops, however, when I started I used a plastic plate or the clean lid from a margarine tub – anything with a smooth plastic surface will work.

Kitchen paper

Paintbrushes, sizes 8, 4 and 0 round-tip brushes; a  $\frac{3}{4}$ "/20 mm flat brush – The bristles of a round-tip brush come to a point rather than having a square flat edge like a flat brush. While there are internationally recognised sizes for paintbrushes, there can be variation between manufacturers' distinction of each size.

For the purposes of these projects, a size 8 is a brush with a base width of  $\frac{1}{4}$ "/5 mm and is  $\frac{3}{4}$ "/20 mm long; a size 4 brush has a width of  $\frac{1}{16}$ "/2 mm and a length of  $\frac{5}{8}$ "/12 mm, and a size 0 brush has a width of  $\frac{1}{32}$ "/1 mm and a length of  $\frac{3}{8}$ "/7 mm. Don't worry if the brushes you use aren't exactly the sizes I have given – as long as they are roughly the sizes I have described, you will be able to paint all these projects. Some brushes may be the correct width but have a much longer length; I would steer clear of this type as long bristles can be hard to control.

If you have had any experience with traditional watercolour painting then you will know that a professional artist will normally use a sable-hair brush, as these are the best that you can buy. However, that's not the best for what we want to do; a brush made from natural hair combined with the gooey sugar paste and the sticky food colours will be unusable.

Instead, always buy synthetic brushes, with a round head. I normally opt for a medium price brush, but sometimes I 'borrow' my children's cheap-as-chips paintbrushes and they are just as good. These three round-brush sizes (8, 4, 0) are all you will need to complete the painting part of the projects in this book and, unless you are painting a truly enormous cake, you will not need to buy a bigger brush.

The flat brush is used for moistening the fondant when you are applying edible printed icing, and also for creating the **Splatter Cake**.

As with all the equipment mentioned here, you should keep your brushes solely for cake-decorating purposes.

**Gold edible spray** – You can buy this spray from specialist cake-decorating suppliers. It looks like something a graffiti artist would use, but it is totally edible (it should state this on the tin, otherwise you have bought the wrong product!).

**Edible food colours** – The massive growth in the baking and cake-decorating industry has brought many fabulous products to the marketplace and there is a very wide variety of food colours that are suitable for painting onto fondant. I use paste colours because they have an opaque quality. You can use gels, but they will be more translucent (this will result in a different quality to your work, and in the long run you may discover this suits your hand better); but some varieties will not dry out on the fondant and remain tacky.

You can also use lustre dusts and liquid colours, and again each different type of colouring will give different results. A word of caution: there are powder and lustre dusts available from cake-decorating suppliers that are not actually edible (I know, this sounds counter-intuitive). Cake decorators dust these products on to sugar-paste flowers that, even though they may be placed onto a cake, are not for consumption. If you are using a powdered product, please make sure that it is an edible variety.

**Gold paint** – There are lots of types available. Find a liquid one that can be diluted in water. Some require alcohol to paint with. You can use gold lustre dust, but it tends to revert to a powder once it has dried and so can be smudged very easily.

**White powder** – Often overlooked, one of the most important colours in your paintbox is white. Again, make sure that it is edible. I always use the powdered version rather than liquid, as I tend to find the latter is too translucent to paint with. If you can't get hold of white powder, then try a very pale lustre dust, which will give you the same results. Mixing up the white into a paste for your painting is a skill that takes a bit of practice: if it's too watery, you won't see it on the fondant, but if it's too thick it will crack when it dries. Once you have applied the white you need to either work another colour into it immediately or leave it to dry completely. This is because, as the white dries, it forms a skin, and if you paint on top of it at this point in the drying process then you will just lift the skin up (the same is true for the metallic colours).

You also need to be sparing with the white, and just use it for little touches in minimal areas. It will bleach through any colour painted on top or underneath it, and can have the effect of deadening the design if you use too much of it. Frequently, if my students feel that they do not have enough tonal value in a flower they have painted, they go a little bit crazy with the white in an attempt to rectify it, but this only results in their design becoming terribly flat.

A note of caution: if you paint on top of dark-coloured fondant with white (or, indeed, any other

colour) the background colour will bleed through, and sometimes colours you were not expecting will appear. I once painted white onto grey fondant, and the flowers I was designing became blue! So, if you have plans to create a design on coloured fondant, then have a practice run beforehand to be completely sure that the colour palette you have chosen will work.

Non-toxic pencils – Most pencils that you buy from art and craft shops are made from graphite and are non-toxic, but double-check the make-up of any pencil that you intend to use on a design.

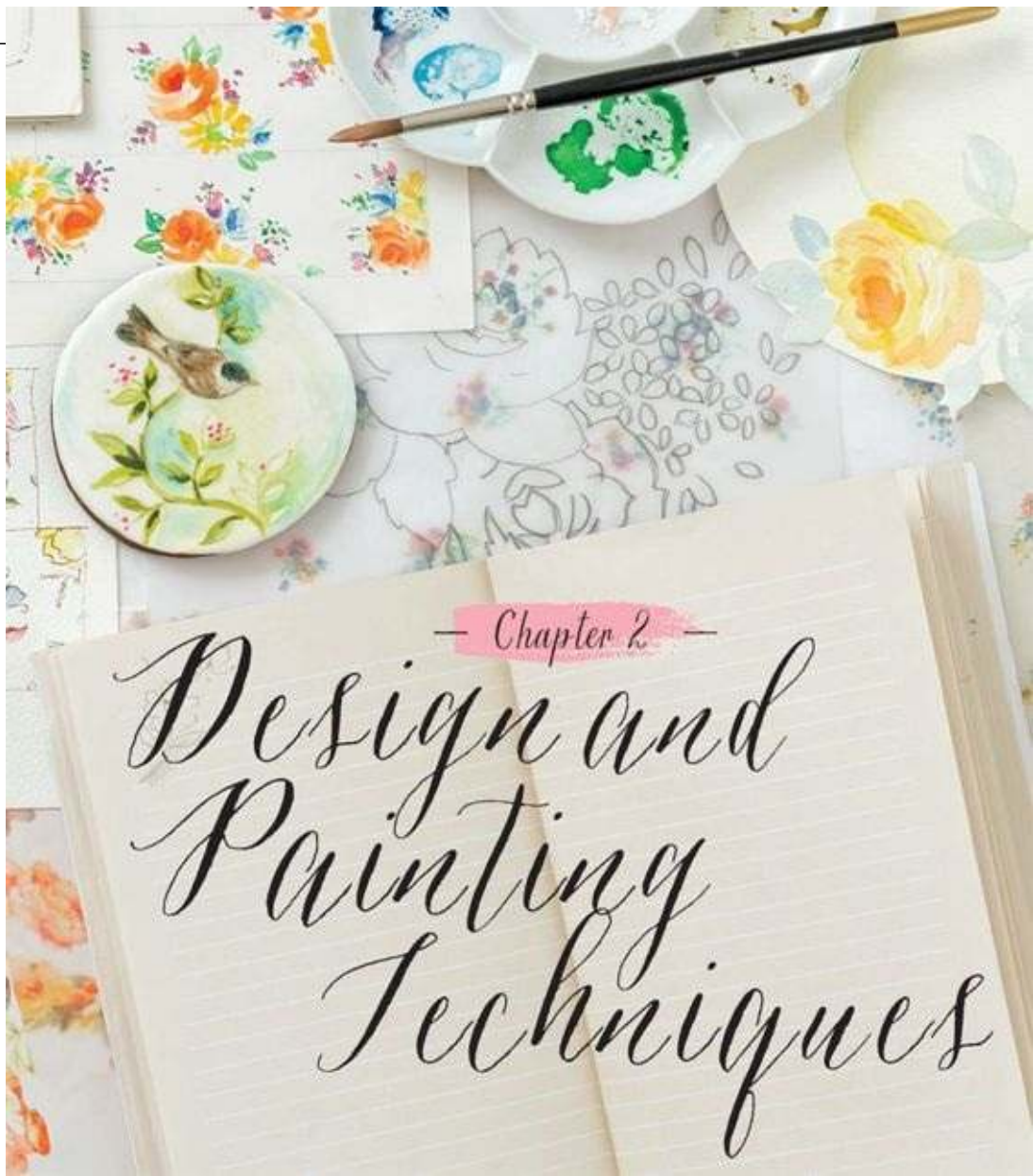
Tracing paper – You can purchase this from an art supply shop, or you can use greaseproof paper.

Craft stamps – You can purchase these from art supply shops. Make sure you keep them solely for cake-decorating use.



Edible food colour chart





— Chapter 2 —

# Design and Painting Techniques

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# GETTING STARTED

In this chapter, I will take you through general techniques and practices for painting on fondant. I describe a few different methods for transferring the designs. Once you are confident in your skills, I would encourage you to paint using the freehand method, as this helps to create a looser, more expressionistic feel – but you should use the method that will make the process easier for yourself. My motto is use any technique if the result is worth it (that's only related to painting, of course – not in my private life, although there was that one time ...).

Here I teach you how to water down your paint so it is the right consistency. You will also learn how to mix tones – one of the most important skills to master – and how to add interest to a design with highlights and lowlights. Your paintbrushes are your most important tools and I give you advice on how to care for them properly, so you get the most use from them (otherwise you may need to change brushes after just one project). These are all skills you will need to use in the various projects. You will find that more specific methods and details are included in each project, but do read the following notes thoroughly so you have a good understanding of the techniques. Until you feel very comfortable with these practices, keep referring back to this chapter.

## CREATING YOUR BASIC LAYOUT

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Before beginning to paint a design onto a cake, I sketch very faint circles to indicate where any flowers (or other elements) of the design will be placed. I find it difficult to begin painting onto a completely blank canvas – somehow my mind functions much better if there is already a mark on the fondant. I have often observed that my students sometimes take more than 10 minutes to make their first mark on the fondant – they sit looking at their brush, then at their cake and then back again, as a anguished look flits across their face. I appreciate how daunting it can be because I still feel nervous every time I approach a new design. But this is all part of the excitement when painting onto fondant. So, by creating a rough outline, you have, in effect, already sullied your pristine canvas, and any marks you now make will only improve it. Well, that's my logic, anyway.

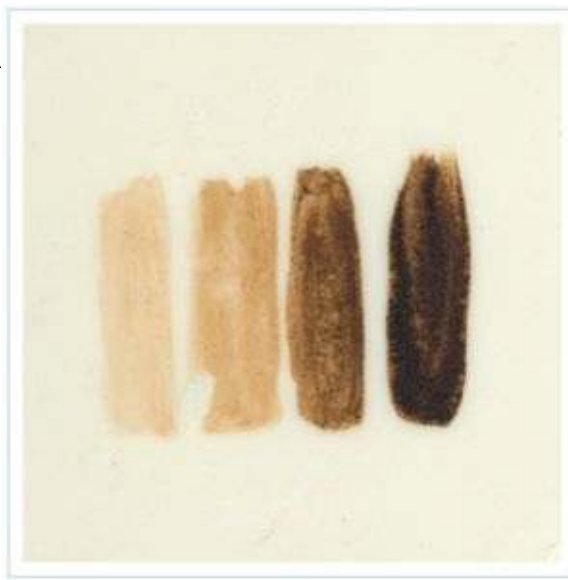


Positioning guidelines on cake

The second reason is much more practical, which is that you need to create a rough layout before you commit to a design. You don't want to begin work on your cake's final group of flowers only to discover that you have left too much of a gap between that cluster and its neighbour. Worse, you don't want to realise that there is not enough space left between the flowers you've already painted to add the final elements without everything becoming too crowded.

So, you should always create a rough layout first – but even taking this advice into account, be prepared for things to change as you go along with the design. Painting is a fluid process, and the spacing between design groups will slightly alter as you build up all the various elements of the design. Even so, the difference in spacing will be a lot less pronounced if you do use a rough guide.

You can paint your guideline in any colour, but think about how this will affect the final design. I nearly always paint my guidelines in a very watered-down brown. Experience has told me that this will blend with most of the colours I use. Using a pink guideline will look great for the flowers, but it will clash terribly with the green of the leaves, creating a muddy colour. The faint brown I use mixes in with the other colours and simply adds tone, rather than clashes with my palette.



It is best to use the lightest tone of brown

When you are painting flowers which have larger petals, such as roses, you shouldn't need to wash out the guidelines – just paint over them. However, with smaller flowers (such as forget-me-nots) or flowers which have many small petals (like daisies), you should wash out the lines before you paint. This is because the faint brown outline can appear in the gaps between the elements, spoiling the overall appearance of the design.

#### TRANSFERRING A DESIGN TO A CAKE

Although I will always mark out a rough outline of where the key elements will appear in my designs this is not definitive and will only show positioning guidelines. I usually paint flowers or leaves 'freehand' – this is the term for painting without a comprehensive outline of the subject, letting the final appearance be guided by the flow of my hand. So, if I am painting a rose on a cake, I may paint a circle (as described opposite) so that I know where to place the rose, but that will be the only guideline I employ. Everything else will be painted freehand: I use my brush to create the petals, rather than painting an outline of a flower first and then 'colouring in'. By working freehand, I can achieve a design which has a much more lively quality with more movement and personality in the finished piece.

That said, I do appreciate that if you are a beginner, you might find the thought of freehand painting very intimidating. If the idea of using a more detailed, planned guideline appeals to you, then go for it. As I say to my students, you must find the easiest method that allows you to paint, so maybe drawing the outline of a flower first will give you more confidence. It is better to paint using this process than not to paint at all.

You can paint the shape of the flower and its petals with watered-down brown paint, or you can use a non-toxic pencil. If at first you feel that drawing a flower (or any other element) is too difficult, you can trace a design onto the fondant. I often use this method if I am going to be painting a figure or an animal – tracing will make sure that the element will fit on the cake, and that the proportions are correct.



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