

## **Fluid Boundaries: Water Marbling as Creative-Critical Practice in Transcultural Material Culture**

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**Abstract** This article examines the centuries-old practice of water marbling (known variously as ebru, suminagashi, and paper marbling) as a site of transcultural exchange and a model for creative-critical scholarship. Drawing upon practice-based research methodologies and material culture studies, I propose water marbling as both metaphor and method for understanding how artistic practices move across cultural boundaries while retaining traces of their transmission history. Through analyzing historical documentation, contemporary artistic applications, and pedagogical implementations, this study demonstrates how material art practices embody theoretical concepts of fluidity, hybridity, and cultural memory. The research reveals that water marbling's transcultural journey from East Asia through Islamic cultures to European and North American contexts provides a valuable framework for reconceptualizing creative-critical approaches to both artistic practice and scholarly inquiry. By developing the concept of "liquid aesthetics," this article contributes to emerging conversations about embodied knowledge, material literacy, and transcultural artistic practices in educational contexts. The findings suggest that engaging with traditional material practices like water marbling offers unique opportunities for students to physically experience theoretical concepts related to cultural transmission, textual instability, and aesthetic hybridity.

**Keywords:** water marbling, creative-critical practice, material culture, transcultural aesthetics, practice-based research, embodied knowledge, arts pedagogy

## **Introduction**

The boundaries between creative practice and critical inquiry have become increasingly permeable in recent decades, with scholars across disciplines embracing what has come to be known as creative-critical approaches to research and pedagogy (Bammer & Joeres, 2015; Hawkins, 2018). Such approaches recognize that artistic practices themselves constitute forms of critical inquiry, while critical analysis can be enhanced through creative engagement with materials and processes. This methodological convergence has proven particularly valuable for examining transcultural artistic practices; those that traverse cultural, geographic, and temporal boundaries, accruing new meanings and applications while retaining traces of their transmission histories. Water marbling represents one such practice, with a rich transcultural history spanning East Asia, the Islamic world, Europe, and North America. The technique, which involves floating pigments on a prepared water surface before transferring the resulting patterns to paper or other materials, emerged independently in 12th-century Japan (as *suminagashi*) and later in 15th-century Turkey (as *ebru*), before traveling to Europe in the 16th century where it flourished as a bookbinding technique (Wolfe, 1990). Each cultural context adapted the practice to serve different aesthetic, spiritual, and practical purposes, creating a rich tapestry of technical variations and symbolic associations. This article proposes water marbling as both subject and method for creative-critical inquiry into transcultural material culture. By examining how this practice has moved across cultural boundaries while simultaneously analyzing what the process itself teaches us about concepts like fluidity, hybridity, and cultural memory, I demonstrate the value of material engagement for embodied theoretical understanding. The research addresses several interrelated questions: 1. How does water marbling's transcultural history illuminate processes of cultural transmission and adaptation in material practices? 2. What theoretical insights does the material process of water marbling offer for understanding concepts of fluidity, chance, control, and aesthetic hybridity? 3. How might water marbling function as a creative-critical methodology for research and pedagogy in arts and humanities contexts? Through addressing these questions, this article contributes to scholarly conversations about practice-based research methodologies, embodied knowledge, and arts-integrated approaches to critical inquiry. It advances the argument that material engagement with transcultural artistic practices offers unique opportunities for understanding theoretical concepts through sensory experience, physical engagement, and creative production.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Creative-Critical Practice and Material Culture**

This research is situated at the intersection of creative-critical scholarship and material culture studies. The creative-critical turn in humanities research has challenged traditional divisions

between artistic production and scholarly analysis, recognizing that creative practices can constitute rigorous forms of inquiry (Hawkins, 2018; Nelson, 2013). As Robin Nelson (2013) argues, practice-based research produces knowledge that is "embodied in the practice" itself (p. 10), requiring researchers to engage in what Donna Haraway (1988) termed "situated knowledges"—forms of understanding that acknowledge their embodied, material, and contingent nature. Material culture studies provides complementary frameworks for examining how objects and the processes that create them embody cultural values, histories, and knowledge systems (Miller, 2005; Ingold, 2013). Tim Ingold's (2013) concept of "making" as a process of growth and formation rather than imposition of design onto passive matter is particularly relevant to water marbling, where practitioners work with rather than completely control their materials. Similarly, Ingold's notion that materials have their own "vital materiality" resonates with water marbling's dependence on chemical interactions and environmental conditions that are never entirely predictable. Drawing these perspectives together, I approach water marbling as a material practice that embodies knowledge through its processes and products. This approach aligns with what Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2007) describe as "material thinking," where the interaction between practitioner and materials generates forms of knowledge that cannot be attained through theoretical analysis alone.

## **2.2 Transcultural Aesthetics and Liquid Metaphors**

To analyze water marbling's movement across cultural contexts, I employ frameworks from transcultural studies that recognize culture as fluid rather than fixed (Dagnino, 2012; Juneja, 2011). Monica Juneja's (2011) concept of transculturality as a historical process whereby cultural forms and practices change through encounter, provides a useful lens for understanding water marbling's evolution as it traversed cultural boundaries. Rather than tracing linear influences or maintaining strict cultural categorizations, a transcultural approach examines the entangled processes of mixing and translation (Juneja, 2011) that characterize artistic practices as they circulate globally. Water itself provides both the literal medium for marbling and a powerful metaphorical framework for understanding cultural transmission. Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) concept of "liquid modernity" and the associated "fluidity" of contemporary social structures offers productive parallels to water marbling's physical processes. Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity provides a compelling theoretical lens through which to examine the art of water marbling. In contrast to the "solid" structures of earlier modernity, marked by stable institutions, fixed identities, and enduring norms, liquid modernity describes a contemporary condition characterized by perpetual change, mobility, and uncertainty. Social bonds loosen, identities fragment, and individuals are increasingly compelled to adapt, reconfigure, and reimagine themselves in response to shifting economic, technological, and cultural currents. This sociological framework resonates strongly with the material and metaphorical properties of water marbling, a practice that inherently embraces impermanence, motion, and the ephemeral nature of form. In marbling, pigment is delicately

placed on the surface of water, where it floats, diffuses, and reacts to the movement of air, breath, and brush. The resulting designs are never entirely predictable, and the artist's role becomes one of collaborating with fluidity rather than controlling it. Just as individuals in liquid modernity must navigate constant flux with no guarantee of stability, the marbler engages in a process that demands presence, intuition, and an acceptance of the uncontrollable. The final transfer of the pattern onto paper can be seen as an attempt to capture a moment of flow, a fleeting intersection of elements that, once fixed, can never be replicated. Thus, Bauman's notion of liquid modernity does not simply serve as a sociological concept; it also opens up an evocative way of understanding how marbling, as both craft and metaphor, reflects the aesthetic, philosophical, and existential conditions of our time.

Similarly, Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and the 'Third Space of enunciation' resonates with the flowing, never-fixed nature of marbled patterns, as both emphasize the emergence of new forms through cultural encounters rather than fixed, pure origins (Bhabha, 1994). These theoretical frameworks of fluidity, flow, and contingency provide conceptual tools for analyzing both the material practice of water marbling and its transcultural movements. I introduce the concept of "liquid aesthetics" to describe artistic approaches that embrace contingency, embodied knowledge, and material agency; characteristics exemplified by water marbling but applicable to other creative-critical practices as well. This framework acknowledges that meaning emerges through material engagement rather than being imposed upon it, echoing what Karen Barad (2007) terms "intra-action" between humans and materials.

### **3. Methodology**

This research employs a mixed-method approach combining historical analysis, practice-based research, and pedagogical case studies to examine water marbling as a creative-critical practice.

#### **3.1 Historical Research and Visual Analysis**

Historical research draws on primary sources including instructional manuals, practitioners' accounts, and preserved examples of marbled works from Japanese, Turkish, European, and North American contexts. Archives consulted include the SakıpSabancı Museum's collection of Turkish ebru works and the British Library's historical bookbinding collection. Visual analysis identifies technical and aesthetic patterns that reveal how the practice was adapted to different cultural contexts while retaining core technical elements.

#### **3.2 Practice-Based Research**

Following methodological frameworks established by Barrett and Bolt (2007) and Nelson (2013), I engaged in practice-based research through sustained water marbling practice over a

fifteen-month period. This immersive engagement included: • Learning traditional techniques from practitioners in three cultural traditions (Turkish ebru, Japanese suminagashi, and Western paper marbling) • Documenting material behaviors, technical challenges, and moments of discovery through research journals and photographic evidence • Analyzing the embodied knowledge acquired through practice and its relationship to theoretical concepts • Creating a series of experimental works that explore water marbling's potential as a creative-critical methodology. This practice-based component generates what Nelson (2013) terms "know-how" knowledge that complements the "know-that" knowledge of traditional scholarship, providing insights that could not be obtained through historical or theoretical research alone.

### **3.3 Pedagogical Implementation and Analysis**

These workshops were implemented as part of a non-mandatory summer enrichment program offered to incoming university students prior to beginning their formal General Education coursework. The program, designed to ease the academic transition into university life, provided interdisciplinary learning opportunities that emphasized creativity, critical thinking, and foundational skills development. Data collection methods included pre- and post-workshop reflections, observational field notes on student engagement, analysis of the creative-critical artifacts produced during the sessions, and follow-up interviews conducted three months post-workshop to assess long-term impact.

## **4. Water Marbling's Transcultural Journey: Historical Analysis**

Water marbling's development across cultural contexts represents a complex history of parallel invention, cultural transmission, adaptation, and transformation. This section traces key moments in this transcultural journey to demonstrate how the practice has embodied different cultural values while maintaining core technical elements.

### **4.1 Parallel Developments: Suminagashi and Ebru**

The earliest documented form of water marbling appears in 12th-century Japan as suminagashi (literally 'floating ink'). Practiced primarily by Buddhist monks, suminagashi involved dropping Sumi ink onto a still water surface, where it spread in concentric patterns before being lifted onto paper (Wolfe, 1990). The resulting images were valued for their suggestion of natural phenomena; ripples on water, cloud formations, geological strata—and their embodiment of Zen Buddhist principles of non-attachment and acceptance of impermanence (Chambers, 1993). Independently, Turkish artisans developed ebru (from the Persian word "abru" meaning cloud-like) in the 15th century. Unlike suminagashi's monochromatic simplicity, ebru employed multiple colors and incorporated techniques for manipulating pigments with styluses to create floral and abstract designs (Wolfe, 1990). Historically associated with Sufi spiritual practices, ebru's cosmic patterns were understood as

manifestations of divine creation, with the marbler's role being to guide rather than impose form; an embodiment of submission to divine will, as recognized by UNESCO in its inscription of this art form (UNESCO, 2014). The comparison of these independently developed traditions reveals how similar material processes were integrated into different cultural and spiritual frameworks. While technical similarities exist, both use water as a medium for suspending pigment, the aesthetic values, technical approaches, and cultural meanings diverged significantly.

#### **4.2 European Adaptation: From Spiritual Practice to Craft Technique**

Water marbling entered European consciousness in the late 16th century through trade contacts with the Ottoman Empire. European travelers' accounts from this period describe marbled papers used in Ottoman administrative documents and book arts (Wolfe, 1990). By the early 17th century, European craftspeople had adapted the technique for bookbinding, where marbled papers served both decorative and practical functions as endpapers. This cultural transfer involved significant transformations. Severed from its spiritual contexts, marbling in Europe became primarily a utilitarian craft. European practitioners developed standardized patterns with specific names (e.g., "French curl," "peacock," "Dutch wave"), reflecting a desire to systematize and categorize the technique (Wolfe, 1990). Technical innovations included the introduction of carrageenan (extracted from Irish moss seaweed) as a size medium, replacing the plant-based solutions used in Turkish ebru. By the 18th century, water marbling had become a specialized trade with guilds and apprenticeship systems, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy. The technique's commodification is evident in the publication of trade manuals that attempted to standardize and codify marbling processes, though many practitioners kept their specific formulations secret (Wolfe, 1990).

#### **4.3 Contemporary Resurgence and Hybridity**

After declining in commercial importance during the industrial revolution, water marbling experienced a revival in the late 20th century through the studio craft movement and book arts renaissance. Contemporary practitioners draw from multiple cultural traditions, creating hybridized approaches that reflect global artistic exchange. Modern material innovations have expanded the technique's applications beyond paper to include fabric marbling, surface design for commercial products, and fine art applications. Digital technologies have introduced new possibilities, with some artists creating digital simulations of marbling effects while others use technology to document and share traditional techniques, contributing to what could be termed a "digital revival" of water marbling practices. This historical analysis reveals water marbling as a practice that has been continuously reinvented as it crosses cultural boundaries, with each context emphasizing different aspects of the technique and integrating it into local knowledge systems and aesthetic traditions. The practice's resilience through centuries of cultural



transmission suggests its capacity to embody different values while maintaining a recognizable technical core—a quality that makes it particularly valuable for examining transcultural material practices.

## **5. Liquid Aesthetics: Water Marbling as Creative-Critical Methodology**

Practice-based engagement with water marbling reveals how the technique itself functions as a form of embodied theory, making tangible such concepts as hybridity, contingency, and cultural memory. This section examines how the material processes of marbling can serve as creative-critical methodology for research and pedagogy.

### **5.1 Embodied Knowledge and Material Agency**

Water marbling exemplifies what philosopher and chemist Michael Polanyi (1966) termed "tacit knowledge"—forms of understanding that are difficult to verbalize but can be demonstrated and acquired through practice. The technique requires practitioners to develop sensitivity to numerous variables: water temperature, humidity, paint consistency, timing of movements, and subtle changes in surface tension. This knowledge is fundamentally embodied, residing in the practitioner's hands and accumulated through sensory experience rather than verbal instruction. My practice-based research revealed that successful marbling requires what anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013) describes as "correspondence" with materials; entering into relationship with their properties rather than imposing predetermined forms upon them. As one participant in the pedagogical workshops observed: "You can't force the paint to do exactly what you want. You have to learn what it wants to do, and work with that." This correspondence with materials offers a powerful counter to notions of artistic creation that center human agency and control. In water marbling, the final image results from collaboration between human intention and material behaviors that cannot be entirely predicted or controlled. As described by contemporary marbling practitioners, the marbler does not create alone but in partnership with water, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the process where practitioners work with rather than against their materials (Ingold, 2013). This perspective resonates with new materialist theories that recognize agency as distributed between human and non-human actors (Bennett, 2010).

### **5.2 Chance, Control, and Theoretical Insights**

The tension between chance and control in water marbling offers rich metaphorical parallels to theoretical concerns across humanities disciplines. Literary theorists have long engaged with questions of authorial intention versus reader interpretation; historians debate the roles of individual agency versus structural forces; cultural theorists examine tensions between tradition and innovation. Water marbling makes these theoretical tensions tangible through material practice. The marbling process begins with careful preparation and technical

knowledge but always includes elements beyond complete control. As pigments float on the water surface, they interact according to chemical properties, creating patterns that the marbler can influence but never entirely determine. This process embodies what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2004) described as the "play" essential to aesthetic experience, a dynamic interaction between intention and openness to unexpected outcomes. When transferred to paper, the floating pattern becomes fixed, a moment that parallels theoretical concepts of textual fixity and the documentation of ephemeral events. Yet even this fixity is partial; marbled papers fade and change over time, their colors responding to light and environmental conditions. This material reality offers a concrete demonstration of what textual scholars term the "social text"; understanding texts not as stable entities but as processes that continue to evolve through reproduction, circulation, and reception.

### **5.3 Pedagogical Applications: Making Theory Tangible**

The pedagogical workshops conducted as part of this research demonstrated water marbling's effectiveness in making theoretical concepts accessible through embodied experience. Graduate students in literary theory, cultural studies, and art history participated in workshops that integrated hands-on marbling with discussions of theoretical texts addressing transcultural aesthetics, materiality, and hybridity. Students reported that physical engagement with the marbling process helped concretize abstract theoretical concepts. One participant reflected: "Reading about hybridity is one thing, but watching colors blend and transform on the water surface made me understand it differently." Another noted that the experience of working with materials that cannot be fully controlled provided insights into theoretical discussions about agency and structure: "It's like theory you can touch." The workshops employed a scaffolded approach that moved from technical instruction to creative experimentation to critical reflection. Students first learned basic marbling techniques, then created experimental works responding to theoretical prompts, and finally engaged in group discussions connecting their material experiences to assigned readings. This integration of creative practice with critical analysis exemplifies what Robin Nelson (2013) terms "praxis"; the interweaving of theory and practice. Student reflections revealed several consistent themes regarding water marbling's pedagogical value: 1. Embodied understanding: Students reported that physical engagement with materials helped them internalize theoretical concepts that had previously seemed abstract. 2. Productive failure: The unpredictable nature of marbling meant that students experienced moments of unintended outcomes, which created valuable opportunities to discuss how meaning emerges through process rather than solely through intention. 3. Material metaphors: Students spontaneously began using water marbling as a metaphorical framework for discussing other academic concepts, suggesting its value as a conceptual tool. 4. Cross-cultural engagement: Working with a technique that has evolved across multiple cultural traditions prompted students to reconsider assumptions about cultural boundaries and influences. These findings suggest that incorporating material practices like water marbling



into humanities education can enhance students' engagement with theoretical concepts while developing their capacity for creative-critical thinking.

## **6. Case Study: Water Marbling in Transcultural Literary Studies**

To demonstrate water marbling's application as a creative-critical methodology, this section presents a case study from a graduate seminar in transcultural literary studies. The seminar examined literary works that thematize cultural transmission, hybridity, and fluid identities, with water marbling serving as both analytical framework and creative practice.

### **6.1 Textual Analysis Through Material Practice**

Students analyzed Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red* (2001), which features descriptions of Ottoman miniature painting and includes references to ebru. Rather than approaching the text solely through conventional close reading, students engaged in parallel marbling practice, creating ebru works responding to passages from the novel. This material engagement revealed aspects of the text that traditional analysis might miss, particularly the novel's attention to the sensory and technical dimensions of artistic practice. One student's reflection exemplifies this integrative approach: "Pamuk describes how the miniaturist's hand trembles between tradition and innovation. When I tried to create traditional ebru patterns, I physically felt that tension between repeating established forms and allowing my own gestures to emerge. This gave me a new way to understand the novel's central conflict."

### **6.2 Creative-Critical Response**

Through Marbling Building on this material engagement with the text, students developed creative-critical projects that used water marbling as both medium and metaphor for analyzing literary works. These projects included:

- A series of marbled papers visualizing narrative structure in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, with patterns representing the protagonist's evolving relationship to her cultural heritage
- A video essay documenting the process of creating marbled papers in response to Ocean Vuong's poetry, examining how both marbling and Vuong's writing navigate cultural hybridity
- An installation pairing marbled papers with excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, exploring how both works engage with concepts of fluidity and boundary-crossing

These projects demonstrate how creative-critical approaches can generate insights that complement traditional scholarly methods. By engaging materially with concepts of fluidity, hybridity, and cultural transmission, students developed what Jill Bennett (2012) terms "practical aesthetics"; a form of understanding that emerges through creative engagement rather than being applied as external theory.

### **6.3 Outcomes and Implications**

Assessment of student work revealed several benefits of this creative-critical approach: 1. Interdisciplinary connections: Students made connections between literary analysis and other fields including art history, cultural studies, and material culture. 2. Theoretical sophistication: Rather than simply applying theory to texts, students engaged critically with theoretical frameworks, questioning and refining concepts through material practice. 3. Alternative knowledge forms: The approach validated multiple ways of knowing, including embodied and practice-based knowledge alongside traditional scholarly analysis. These outcomes suggest that integrating material practices like water marbling into humanities education can enhance students' capacity for creative-critical thinking while developing transferable skills in material literacy and cross-cultural analysis.

## **7. Liquid Aesthetics Beyond Water Marbling**

The insights gained through examining water marbling as a creative-critical practice have implications beyond this specific technique. This section explores how the concept of "liquid aesthetics" might be applied to other creative-critical practices in research and pedagogy.

### **7.1 Principles of Liquid Aesthetics**

Based on the analysis of water marbling as creative-critical practice, I propose several key principles that characterize what might be termed "liquid aesthetics": 1. Material agency: Recognition that creative outcomes emerge through collaboration between human intention and material properties rather than through complete human control 2. Embodied knowledge: Valuing forms of understanding that reside in physical practice and sensory experience alongside abstracted theoretical knowledge 3. Productive contingency: Embracing unpredictable elements as generative rather than as failures to achieve predetermined outcomes 4. Transcultural flow: Attention to how practices and forms move across cultural boundaries, accruing new meanings while retaining traces of their transmission histories 5. Process visibility: Making visible the processes of creation rather than presenting only finished products These principles can be applied to diverse creative-critical practices across disciplines, from experimental writing to participatory research methodologies.

### **7.2 Applications in Research and Pedagogy**

The liquid aesthetics framework offers several promising applications for research and teaching: Interdisciplinary research methodologies: The principles of liquid aesthetics can inform research approaches that integrate creative practice with critical analysis across humanities and social science disciplines. Such approaches value process documentation,

embody theoretical concepts through material engagement, and remain open to unexpected discoveries. Pedagogical innovation: Educators can apply liquid aesthetics principles by designing learning experiences that engage students in material practices as modes of inquiry. Such experiences might include experimental writing practices, collaborative art-making, or digital media creation approached as forms of critical thinking. Institutional implications: Embracing liquid aesthetics has implications for how knowledge production is evaluated and valued in academic contexts. It suggests the need for assessment frameworks that recognize diverse knowledge forms, including those embodied in creative processes and material artifacts. These applications demonstrate how insights derived from specific material practices like water marbling can inform broader approaches to creative-critical work across contexts.

## **8. Conclusion**

This examination of water marbling as a creative-critical practice demonstrates how material engagement with transcultural artistic techniques can generate valuable insights for research and pedagogy. By analyzing water marbling's historical transmission across cultural contexts alongside practice-based exploration of its material processes, this study has revealed how the technique embodies theoretical concepts of fluidity, hybridity, and transcultural exchange. The research contributes to scholarly conversations about creative-critical methodologies by demonstrating how material practices can make theoretical concepts tangible through embodied experience. The proposed framework of "liquid aesthetics" offers a vocabulary for describing creative approaches that embrace contingency, material agency, and process visibility, characteristics that can inform diverse research and pedagogical practices. Future research might explore how other traditional material practices can serve as creative-critical methodologies, examining their potential for generating embodied understanding of theoretical concepts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate how students who engage with material practices like water marbling develop transferable skills in creative-critical thinking that inform their subsequent academic and professional work. As humanities disciplines continue to explore the productive intersections of creative practice and critical inquiry, water marbling's centuries-long history of transcultural adaptation offers a compelling model for how material engagement can enhance our understanding of cultural transmission, aesthetic hybridity, and embodied knowledge. In its fluid interplay of chance and control, tradition and innovation, water marbling embodies the very processes it helps us understand.

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