The Art of Zentangle Drawing

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One day, not so very long ago, Maria—a professional calligrapher—told Rick—who had lived many years in a monastic community—what she experienced as she carefully drew the background patterns on a manuscript she was creating: feelings of timelessness, freedom, wellbeing, and complete focus on her drawing with no thoughts or concerns about anything else. “You’re describing meditation,” Rick told her. They wondered if they could create a simple system so others might enjoy a similar experience. Thus began the journey toward designing the simple and elegant practice called Zentangle®.

Zentangle is a method for creating beautiful images using repetitive patterns. It is easy to learn, easy to do, and is enjoyed by a wide range of ages and skill levels. The materials are simple, low-tech and inexpensive. Zentangle requires only a soft lead pencil, a good quality fine-tip black pen (Sakura Pigma® Micron® 01 recommended), and a 9 cm square—called a “tile” because of its size and shape—of museum quality art paper.

Creating a Zentangle consists of a series of simple steps. It provides a fun and light-hearted way to relax. As an artistic meditation, it supports relaxation, focus, inspiration, and a sense of well-being. It offers artistic satisfaction. It can be a wonderful daily ritual and many find it addictive!

Those who don’t regularly do art may find it an unusual approach because when you begin, you have no idea what the result will be. Your creation is not restricted by your expectations. A zentangle has no pre-determined up or down. It is not intended to be a picture of anything. There is no planning or sketching ahead of time. Ideas and patterns develop as you draw.

For those who are convinced they can’t draw, this art method removes the intimidation of facing a big blank canvas or sheet of paper. It’s a simple, accessible method that allows creativity to flow, yet there is sufficient structure that you can enjoy and benefit from an activity that otherwise might be considered whimsical or even silly.

The Zentangle tile’s small scale is encouraging for both artists and non-artists. Robert Genn, who writes regular e-letters to artists, recently wrote about working small, saying that, “...when students do volumes of small items they become accepting—even proud—of their failures and are more readily able to move on to ideas that work better for them... less commitment widens opportunity... even beginners are seen to produce gems.” I have felt this very frequently while creating a Zentangle. I love the small size of the tile and that it doesn’t take me weeks to finish something. I love being able to mess up, create a dud, appreciate the lessons, and put it aside (or even trash it), all in a short space of time. I must add, however, that most of the time, I’m quite pleased with my creations!

Someone once said, “It’s better to have a small diamond than a large piece of glass.” I often tell my students that they are creating mini-masterpieces. At first glance, a Zentangle looks intricate and complicated, but when you see how it is done, you realize how simple it is. A common thing to hear when working on a tile is that, “Anything is possible, one stroke at a time.” When you see some finished tiles your first thought might be, “I could never do anything like THAT!” Don’t believe it. One line, one small circle, one dot, one stroke at a time, and anyone can create a beautiful Zentangle.

By taking Rick and Maria’s encouragement to make each stroke considered and deliberate, we can come to understand how apparently small and insignificant “strokes” (thoughts, words, actions) of our daily lives contribute to life’s patterns. Making the deliberate pen strokes in a pattern focuses the attention in a way similar to meditation or being “in the zone”. As your eye follows your pen, your attention shifts to a state that allows fresh thoughts, new perspectives, and creative insights to flow unhindered by anxiety or effort.

Tangling can look deceptively like doodling, but doodling it is not. Doodling is something you do with your hands while your thoughts are elsewhere, and can be very useful in some circumstances. In contrast, this art form is very focused. Your attention is on the pen, the paper, the flow of the ink, the patterns, the drawing; each stroke is drawn consciously and deliberately.

There is no eraser in life and there is no eraser in Zentangle. However, in Zentangle, and in life, you discover that even when you make what seems to be a mistake, you can move on in unexpected and exciting directions. You cannot fail in creating a Zentangle.

Learn more at: www.zentangle.com

Margaret Bremner is a Certified Zentangle Teacher (CZT) currently living in Saskatoon. She loves making art and enjoys sharing the Zentangle drawing method with others!

See her blog for Zentangle class information: www.enthusiasticartist.blogspot.com and her Zentangle inspired artwork at: www.artistincanada.com/bremner