How to Paint a Baltimore Window Screen
Secrets Revealed

by Master Screen Painter Anna Pasqualucci
2022

"*There's more than one way to skin a cat.*" What does this have to do with painting a window screen? Well, like this old adage says, there's also more than one way to paint a decorative privacy exterior window screen. Different screen painters of the past and present have their individual styles, preferred techniques and favorite brands of paints and screen materials.

That said, there's *no right way or wrong way* to paint a screen. However, certain contemporary materials and techniques can produce a higher quality longer lasting piece of art in the following ways:

A) Make the screen easier to paint
B) Prevent unsightly clogged holes that will end up looking like "*dead flies*" or black smashed bugs when looking out the window from inside
C) Add vibrancy, durability and longevity to the painting which will be exposed to the outdoor elements year after year

Materials and Methods

SCREEN:

A metal window screen mesh or "pet tear resistant" screen is preferred over cloth-like fiberglass mesh for durability. Fiberglass screens are more common today but they tend to wear thin over time, especially around the edges and they can eventually tear out of the frame. Either bare aluminum wire or "coated" anodized aluminum wire will work; but for added longevity, **anodized aluminum** is less likely to form white powdery oxidization on the unpainted surfaces and along its edges after many years of exposure to the elements compared to unprotected aluminum screen. This is especially true in salty ocean air environments. "Coated" anodized aluminum wire may look black instead of gray. While paintings on heavy duty vinyl pet density screen last long, one disadvantage of some common very thick pet screen is that it is less transparent and obstructs a clear view through to the outside. Chose materials that will best suit your purpose.

Important: Mark the "TOP OUTSIDE" of the screen so you will know to paint the outside and in the correct orientation, not the inside nor upside-down. Most screens fit in a window in one direction.

The screen canvas is easiest to paint when it is **stretched** in the original house window screen frame for the window for which it will be intended. Otherwise, the screen may be stretched and painted like an art canvas on a temporary frame, then later installed in it's appropriate final frame. In this case, enough extra material must be allowed on all sides for easy installation and centering the design.

Handling your screen: Take care not to punch out the screen from its frame. Only carry the screen by the sturdy frame edges. Never put excessive pressure on the screen when carrying or painting it. Screens are not easy to reattach if not next to impossible.


Start with a clean, lint and dust-free screen to help avoid messy paint clogs and make for a happy paint session. Hold screens to a light source to check for the least little dust, hair, and lint. Just a single pet hair can be frustrating to remove from wet paint when you are "in the zone" of painting. Dust, fur and hair can become glued to the screen by the paint and impossible to remove once the painting dries. Dirty used screens can hosed off outside with a garden hose and gently brushed with a none abrasive dust broom that's been squirted with dish-soap. Allow the screen to dry in a dust-free location. Take care not to put too much pressure on the screen so as not to punch the screen out of its frame. You may want to lay the screen on a flat cement sidewalk or driveway when scrubbing with the soapy brush then tilt it upright on a wall to hose the soap off of both sides. Clean the frame edges too.

Optionally, a screen that's not overly grimy may be vacuumed indoors with a **lint-free** furniture brush attachment or wiped with a wet sponge.

Painters tape can be applied on both front and back of the screen frame to protect the frame from paint spatters for worry-free painting. I prefer Duck-brand blue painters tape in various appropriate widths because it tends to peel off easier with minimal tearing and without leaving as much sticky adhesive residue as say 3M brand. Tape can be especially difficult to remove if it's been left on the frame for a long period of time, like over a month or more. Room temperatures will effect adhesion and removability too. Carefully tape over every millimeter of screen all the way to the screen edge, front and back, and over any crossbar, springs and pull tabs. Tape a few millimeters OVER THE SPLINE so it doesn't show. This will leave the frame clean and ready to reuse should the painted screen ever be removed and replaced with new screen. As a bonus, later, when painting, the taped edge provides a very convenient surface on which to dab excess paint from your paint brush.

Painters Tape
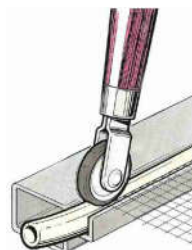
Spline holds the screen in the frame channel
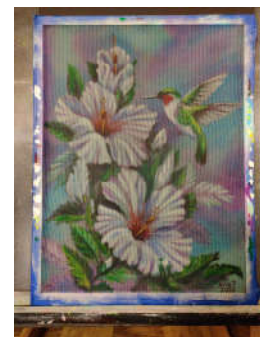
Taped Screen

EASEL OR PAINT SURFACE:

- The backdrop behind the screen should be black (or a dark color) to help see what you are painting. Painting a screen that is laying on top of a white or light surface is difficult to see.
- Improvise a suitable dark backdrop by using items like black poster board, a disposable black vinyl table cover or even a black trash bag.
- Non-shiny background materials will be easier on the eyes.
- To prevent the paint from touching the backing and to prevent accidental bleed through to the other side, the screen should be propped up and not lay flat against the surface of an easel or a table. Prop the frame of the screen, but not the screen mesh, on something like a 2 x 4, box, foam insulation strip, anything stable that will elevate the top edge two or three inches from the table top. Be sure not to lay the screen itself on a prop to avoid putting pressure on the screen and risk loosening it or punching it out of its frame.

PRIMER:

Like with most anything in life, a good foundation is critical. In the case of screen painting, a base coat or **"first coat"** is the foundation of a quality painting. It will help the painting process go smoother, limit clogs, reduce the need for repeated layering of weak paint pigments, and greatly extend the entire life of the painting.

Not all primers are equal. Use a good **<u>exterior water-based primer</u>** such as Kilz or Zinsser Bulls-Eye. Rust-Oleum brand primer can tend to roll-off the screen and not coat adequately. When it was available, Krylon grey pigmented primer proved superior.

A certain amount of "bleed-through" to the back side of the screen is an inherent nature of a painted screen. It is difficult to completely avoid. Grey tinted primer can reduce "bleed-through" of glaring white and light color primer and paints to the back and inside of the window screen. A thorough coating around the wire improves durability of the painting but excessive bleed-through can be disturbingly unsightly when looking out a painted screen, particularly at night. Sometimes the back of the screen can also be coated with grey primer to reduce undesirable bleed through of light color paints. If "bleed-through" bothers you, about the only solution is to draw the shades at night or turn off the lights or go as far as to intentionally paint a reverse mirror-image design on the back of the screen. Regardless, at times, depending on the lighting, or if looking out the window from a side-angle (as opposed to straight on), a faint view of the outside painting may still be seen from the inside

How to apply primer:

Learning to apply the correct amount of primer properly, without clogging holes, is good practice for later painting your design on your screen. It's easier to apply primer than to paint a screen.

Applying several light coats of primer and waiting a few minutes between coats to allow for drying will provide the best foundation possible for a long-lasting and vibrantly colorful screen. The preferred exterior paints and primers will dry quickly compared to interior and craft acrylics.

No clogs allowed! Any holes clogged with primer will remain as paint-covered clogged holes on the finished screen. They will look like "dead flies" on the screen when looking outside the window.

Use the **correct brush**! Like primers, not all brushes are equal. Some are too stiff and others are too soft, even of the same brand. Find a somewhat stiff paint brush that's appropriately sized for the canvas area you are covering. It may take some practice and experimenting to find a brush that's right for you. Don't be afraid to go BIG. An inexpensive 2-inch or 3-inch natural hair utility brush can work very well. A softer brush can work well on softer cloth-like screen material whereas a stiffer brush can work better on a thick vintage metal screen. There's no need to buy expensive artist brushes. Latex paints and harsh metal screens can ruin a good paintbrush. Some painters even use sponge brushes. DO NOT USE SOFT CAMEL HAIR BRUSHES.

> *Tip: Scissor trim soft brush bristles to to shorten them and make them stiffer, as needed.*
> *You can also trim brushes to form angled, fanned or rounded bristles for specific effects.*
> *Uneven fluffy "bushy" brushes can make nice tree foliage, shrubs and field grass.*

Mix primer and follow manufacturer's instructions.

DRY BRUSH TECHNIQUE. No water! Do not dip your brush in water until you're done priming several coats and ready to wash the brush. Load very little paint on the tips of the bristles, only about ½ inch deep.

Use very little paint/primer. Painting a screen is not like painting a solid wall of a room. Unlike slapping paint on a wall, it takes surprisingly little paint to cover the tiny surface area of the thin wires.

DIP & DAB. Dip the brush tip in paint and dab or wipe the excess wet paint off the brush onto a plate or palette *before* touching the brush to the screen. Too much paint will clog the screen holes. But too little won't coat well. Find your happy medium. The dry brush technique can take some practice and experimentation and it varies with the viscosity of the primer, screen material, type of paint brush and your individual brush stroke techniques.

Fixing clogs and paint clumps:

- The instant you notice clogged holes, **STOP** painting! Proceeding will only clog more holes.
- It is much better to get rid of clogs right when they happen and while the paint is still wet than to remove them later.
- If you applied too much paint, _immediately_ wipe your brush dry (or use a clean dry brush) to make circles or X's with the dry bristles to redistribute the excess wet paint around and beyond the heavy area. If it's necessary, go ahead and spread the paint around on the back side with a dry brush too. Alternatively, use a dry non-shredding paper towel or lint-free dry cloth to blot any excess paint from the back or front side of the screen.
- If you notice clogged holes after the primer/paint has already hardened, use a toothpick or unfolded paperclip to punch the holes open. Unfortunately this can leave thickened wires that may be noticeable once the screen is completed and installed in the window. Don't worry, this can happen to the best of us.

Apply the first of several layers of primer onto the screen. Load a small amount of primer on the dry brush **(DIP & DAB).** Stroke up and down, moving from left to right across the screen to lightly coat the screen. Reload the brush as often as necessary to give good coverage. Allow this coat to dry for a minute or two. Test for dryness by gently touching a finger to the screen. If no paint came off onto your finger, you are ready to apply the second coat of primer.

Apply a second coat in a similar manner, but this time use left and right brush strokes, starting at the top of the screen and moving to the bottom. This is intended to coat all sides of the woven wires, right, left, tops and bottom. When done correctly, primer will ever so microscopically thicken the surface area of the wires so the color paint will have more surface area on which to better adhere, show better and last longer. It would make sense that paint/primer will hold up better the more it wraps around the screen wires.

If the second primer coat appears too thin, gives poor coverage, or if any areas look bare, apply a third coat.

Alternatively, if it suits you, make circular strokes from one corner of the screen to the other to cover all sides of the wires and the entire screen. Let dry and repeat.

Priming the back (inside) of the screen is an option to consider. It can reduce the amount of unsightly bleed-through to the inside of the screen but it lightens an otherwise dark screen mesh and causes lower clear visibility when looking outside after dark. To get fancy, a reverse image design can be painted on the flip side for interior decoration at night and to distract from any blotchy bleed-through… but that's a technique for another time.

Wash your primer brush. Do not reuse until it's completely dry.

Ready to Paint?

Before you start painting, lay out, sketch or have an image handy of your composition that will fit your screen dimensions and portrait or landscape orientation.

Have you marked the TOP AND OUTSIDE of the screen as it fits in the window?
Be sure to paint the outside and right-side up.

PAINT:

Screen painters use a variety of paints and brands: outdoor acrylics, oils, exterior sign paints, exterior water-based house paint, Behr, Duron, Sherwin-Williams, **Rust-Oleum**, Krylon, McCormick, Ronan, etc. Find these paints at home improvement stores or paint stores. There's no need to go to art supply or craft stores unless you want to use Ronan Aqua-Coat. For the accomplished screen painter, pints of Ronan water-based Aqua-Coat sign paint is an excellent product, but expensive and should be used in a ventilated work area.

Glossy exterior water-based latex house paints are highly recommended.
Gloss paint is more vibrant, showy and reflective in the sunlight than satin or flat matte.
"Rust-Oleum Painters Touch" indoor/outdoor gloss is very suitable.

A moderately viscous, less watery, high pigment paint gives good one coat coverage with less chance of clogging holes.
Paint that is too thin can spread across the holes like liquid soap on a bubble wand and clog holes.
Paint that is too watery can be thickened by leaving the top open and exposed to room air, with an occasional stirring or two, overnight or for a day or as long as it takes to reach the desired consistency.

NEVER USE TEMPERA, WATER COLOR OR THIN ACRYLIC CRAFT PAINTS.

All you need to make almost any color of the rainbow is 5 or 6 colors of paint:
- Three true primary colors (red, yellow, and blue)
- White
- Black
- True green or purple, as needed
  - Some blues and yellows don't mix to make a good true green
  - Some reds and blues don't mix to make a good purple
  - Rusto-Oleum hunter green is not the best prettiest green. It is dark and dull and can be mixed with blue, yellow and a drop of black.
- White and black do not need to be glossy.

Pint or quart sizes are more than enough to get you started.
Typically you will use more blue and white than other colors.

Tip: Color choices and light-dark contrast can enhance both the privacy effect and visibility of the design. Whites and light colors reflect light and offer an opaqueness that is less "see-through" and thus enhances the privacy effect. On the other hand, dark colors appear almost invisible and more "see-through," as it the screen wasn't even painted, offering little privacy effect. Without light, there is no dark. Contrast in values help the painting stand out.

Now, the moment you've been waiting for… painting!

How to paint your screen:

After successfully priming your screen, you are ready to paint your design.

Again, no clogs allowed! They will look like "dead flies" on the screen when looking outside the window.

Use the **correct brush**! Like primers, paints and screens, not all brushes are equal. Some brushes are too stiff and others are too soft, even of the same brand. DO NOT USE SOFT CAMEL HAIR BRUSHES. Find a somewhat stiff paint brush that's appropriately sized for your canvas area you are covering. Start with big 2" and 3" brushes for large background areas and work your way down to smaller brushes for smaller subject matter and details. It may take some practice and experimenting to find a brush that's right for you. A softer brush can work well on softer cloth-like screen material whereas a stiffer brush can work better on a thick vintage metal screen.

Paint supplies. Do not use thin acrylic craft paint

Mix paint and follow manufacturer's instructions.

DRY BRUSH TECHNIQUE. No water! Do not dip your brush in water until you're done using that color. Load very little paint on the tips of the bristles.

DIP & DAB. Dip the brush tip in paint and dab or wipe the excess wet paint off the brush onto a plate, palette or on the taped frame edges *before* touching the brush to the screen. Too much paint will clog the screen holes. But too little won't coat well. Find your happy medium. As when priming your screen, the dry brush technique can take some practice and experimentation and it will vary with the viscosity of the paint, screen material, type of paint brush and your individual brush stroke techniques.

Use very little paint. Dispensing some paint onto a plate or palette can help prevent overloading the brush while keeping the stock paint clean and pure. Painting a screen is not like painting a solid wall of a room. It takes very little paint to cover the tiny surface area of the thin thread-like wires. Typically two dollops the size of a large post-it note is sufficient to cover a sky on half of a 3 ft x 3 ft screen. A dollop the size of a quarter may be sufficient to paint a house roof or a tree. You can always dispense or mix a little more paint.

> *Tip: Make a mistake and put paint where you don't want it? Wrong color? If you act quickly while the paint is still fresh and wet, you can immediately ERASE the paint. Gently scrub the boo-boo area with a very wet stiff brush (YES, NOW YOU CAN USE WATER). Then blot the watery mix with a dry paper or cloth towel. Repeat if needed. This will not work if the paint has begun to dry.*

PAINT IS "APPLIED," Gently! IT'S NOT RUBBED ON LIKE RUBBING A CRAYON ON PAPER. Brushing paint over and over an area will not make the paint color richer nor make it adhere better. In fact, it may do just the opposite and rub the paint back off. Simply touching a loaded brush to the screen will transfer a good amount of rich pigment to the screen. Like the old Brylcreem hair tonic jingle, "A little dab will do you."

> *Tip: The Secret Behind the Trees*
> *Beautiful life-like trees and clouds can be painted by simply touching the brush on the screen and lifting it up without spreading the paint.*
> *First paint the silhouette shape of the evergreen tree black, let dry. Then load a "bushy" brush one-stroke style with half yellow and half green. Dab spots of paint over the black shadow silhouette, leaving generous black spaces between the dabs. Do not spread the paint. Do not paint the entire tree green, or else it will defeat the purpose of painting the original tree shapes black to begin with. Let dry, then repeat, dabbing with a loaded "dipped and dabbed" brush until the tree is highlighted to your liking, still leaving smaller black shadows among the branches. Stop and look. Don't overdo it. Less is more. You can always add more paint, but it's hard to undo too much painting. Try adding more yellows or whites to just one sunny side of the tree to give it dimension.*
>
> *Tip: Fluffy clouds are painted in a similar fashion with white dabs on blue painted sky, leaving empty spaces between the cottony fluffs. A large 2-inch utility brush can make nice clouds.. Repeat and overlay whites until you get the effect you like. Stop and look. Again, never overdo it. You can always add more, but it's hard to undo too much painting. Overworking the paint can turn the painting to "mud" and mush.*

Fixing clogs and paint clumps:

- Use similar techniques to unclog holes and remove excess paint as when priming the screen.
- Again, it is much better to get rid of clogs right when they happen and while the paint is still wet than to remove them later. STOP painting immediately and remedy clogs before proceeding.
- If you applied too much paint, *immediately* wipe your brush dry (or use a clean dry brush) to make circles or X's with the dry bristles to spread the wet paint around and beyond the heavy area. Alternatively, use a dry non-shredding paper towel or lint-free dry cloth to blot any excess paint from the back or front side of the screen.
- If the clogged area is larger than 1 or 2 inches across, try sharply tapping the screen frame against a hard surface like a protected tabletop to dislodge the paint. It should splatter out onto the table. This method won't spread paint to areas that you might not want painted or disturb previously painted details.
- Another method that won't spread paint to areas that you might not want painted or may have already painted is to take a deep breath and blow out the clog/excess paint, like blowing out candles on a birthday cake.
- If you notice clogged holes after the paint has hardened, use a toothpick or unfolded paperclip to punch the holes open. Unfortunately this can leave thickened wires that may be noticeable once the screen is completed and installed in the window.

> *Tip: Clogs of black or dark color paint hide from us and are difficult to see while the screen is on a dark background. When applying dark colors, discover hidden clogs by occasionally slipping a sheet of white paper behind the screen or by holding the screen up to a light source. Viola! The clogs will be readily visible to pick, smack or blow out.*

Layering vs. Blocking:

To layer, paint in stages, the broad background first and foreground objects last. For example, paint the entire background colors first, such as a blue sky, then green grass. Use solid colors or blends of different hues and shades as you wish. Other colors and shapes can be overlaid on top as soon as the paint dries. Save detailing and highlights for last. Load a small amount of paint on the dry brush **(DIP & DAB).** Stroke left to right or in a circular fashion, moving from top to bottom down the screen to lightly coat the screen. Reload the brush as often as necessary to give good coverage.

Test for dryness by gently touching a figure to the screen. If no paint came off onto your finger, you are ready to layer objects and colors on top of the blue, such as white clouds, then, once dry, another layer of trees or other colors on top of that. Add as many layers as you wish as long as you don't clog holes.

> *Tip: As you become confident in your painting technique, get fancy and fun with your techniques and try a one-stroke painting technique. You can apply two shades at the same time by loading different colors or two shades of the same color on either end of the brush for quick effects. This works well for painting trees and flowering shrubs quickly. Be sure to dip and dab excess paint from your on-stroke brush.*

A traceable template may be placed under transparent screen if you do not wish to paint free-hand. Continue to keep the screen from touching any paper or back board to limit "bleed-through."

Alternatively, you can paint coloring book style by blocking out and painting around areas. Unlike layering over a painted background, here you must take care to paint within the lines and around objects. Some artists find this more tedious. Others prefer it.

One-stroke

Layering

Blocking

Finished your painting session?
Stop and look it over. Take a break. Stand back, way back, to see how your painting will look from across a street. Take a cell phone picture and sleep on it when you go to bed at night. Take time to review and revise. Look at the image again with refreshed vision the next morning. Modify as needed.

CLEAR COAT PROTECT:

Lastly, an appropriate protectant can add years of life and preserve the colorful painting. Spraying a screen can be tricky and nerve-racking scary, even if you've had other experience with spray paint. A good even coating is important to uniformly preserve the painting without leaving noticeable faded streaks after the screen has been displayed in a window several years.

Check for stray clogged holes before spraying the screen by holding it up to a light or in a window and punch them out using a tooth-pick or unfolded paperclip.

Use a **non-yellowing GLOSS UV-resistant acrylic aerosol spray** or liquid as per the instructions on the can.
(Rust-Oleum makes a suitable clear coat spray.)

Warning: Some varnishes and shellacs are not compatible with certain paints and they can discolor the screen painting, turning it yellow or brown. Use of other liquid polyurethanes or acrylics is not addressed here.

How to apply clear coat:

Leave the painters tape on and take the screen outdoors to spray clear coat.
Be sure to have a few toothpicks on hand.

Do not spray if it's below 45F (for small screens) or 50F (for larger screens) or if it's raining or windy.
Close all house doors and windows to prevent the smelly spray from entering the house/building.
Like priming, applying several light coats of spray can help prevent over-spraying and clogs, rather than trying to give a heavy coat all at one time. Better safe than sorry.

Hold the spray can 6 to 10 inches from the screen and **keep it moving** across the screen as you spray **UP AND DOWN in a zigzag pattern to cover the entire screen.** Take care not to clog the holes with shiny clear bubbles. Over-spraying one spot can clog holes. Over-spray happens when the can is either held too close or held in one spot for too many seconds.

If you see clogs, **STOP** *immediately* and toothpick them out while they are still wet and pliable. Hold the screen up to the sunlight to visualize any shiny bubble-like clogs. If there are many clogged holes, STOP! It may be too cold to spray or the can may be held too close to the screen or it may not have been moved across the screen quickly enough. Don't panic, stray clogs may still be tooth-picked out after the screen dries.

Next, repeat spraying but **keep the can moving LEFT TO RIGHT in a zigzag pattern** across the screen as you spray from top to bottom to cover the entire screen, again taking care not to clog the holes with shiny clear bubbles. Hold the screen up to the sunlight to check for shiny bubble-like clogs and tooth-pick them out.

If there are no clogs and all looks good, give a third spray over any special design areas that should be preserved. The third coat may be applied by holding the can 6 to 10 inches from the screen and spraying briefly in a circular pattern, always moving the can.

Allow the screen to cure in a well ventilated non-inhabited space, such as a garage, patio or porch, for at least 24 to 48 hrs.
Remove the tape once the screen stops giving off a strong odor.

Install the screen in the window and enjoy!

Congratulations on painting your screen!

Appendix

Introduction, "There's more than one way to skin a cat."

Materials and Methods

Screen
Handling your screen
Cleaning the screen

Painters Tape

Easel or Paint Surface

Primer
How to apply primer
Correct brush
Dry Brush Technique
Dip and Dab
Fixing Clogs and Paint Clumps

Paint
How to paint your screen
Correct brush
Dry Brush Technique
Dip and Dab
Fixing Clogs and Paint Clumps
Layering vs. Blocking, One-stroke

Clear Coat Protect