

# TAXONOMY OF TECHNIQUES

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To understand how Remedios Varo constructed her paintings, it helps to start with their supports and move up through their layers. In her works from the mid-1950s on, Varo worked primarily on gesso-coated hardboard for her large-scale oils. Hardboard—high-density wood pulp formed into sheets—is less bulky and more dimensionally stable than natural wood and has both a rough, textured side and a smooth, burnished side imparted by the manufacturing process. Varo exclusively used the smooth side of the support in the works examined for this publication. Preparing the hardboard in the traditional manner, she built up layers of gesso before beginning to paint. The proper application of gesso necessitates applying multiple layers with a stippling brush, compressing and fusing each subsequent layer to create a compacted surface, which is then wet and dry sanded until smooth.

Varo's surfaces were integral to the effects of her pictures, and she covered her gesso panels with fine, shallow scratches before painting. The scratches preferentially absorbed oil paint, making them appear darker, and they provide a distinctive texture in almost all of Varo's paintings. One theory proposed by scholar Tere Arcq suggests Varo used quartz crystals, which she sometimes kept on her easel (SEE P. 161, FIG. 15), to create these scratched effects. Re-creations made in the conservation laboratory showed that whereas other tools often incised too deeply in comparison, gently rubbing quartz crystals onto gesso-prepared hardboard produced microscratches that are similar to those seen in Varo's work. The artist also created complementary textures by scratching, rubbing, sanding, and, at times, stippling on additional gesso.

Varo sketched copiously before making meticulous, full-scale drawings of her final compositions, which she then transferred directly to her prepared supports (rubbing graphite on their backs so that it would offset in a manner similar to carbon paper when she retraced the designs on the front). Like an architect relying on a blueprint with its calculated angles, elevations, and decorative motifs, Varo worked from to-scale preparatory drawings or cartoons that guided her through the composition from its conception to final painted details. A clear distinction can be made between preparatory drawings that Varo used solely for the purposes of transfer, like those for *El juglar (El malabarista) (The Juggler [The Magician])* (SEE P. 69, FIG. 2), and those she used for transfer and subsequently reworked (SEE CATS. 5, 21, 23; P. 147, FIG. 5). Although the latter are also on translucent papers and exhibit physical evidence of transfer (including punctures from drafting tools, graphite on the verso, and heavily reinforced contours), they also exhibit details and modeling (smudging and erasures) that would be superfluous in a purely working drawing. While most of her drawings were not exhibited in her lifetime, the artist clearly had a desire to see her ideas more fully rendered in graphite.

After transferring her composition onto the gesso, Varo did not simply fill in the contours with color. She sometimes completed an entire scene before returning to add important elements (such as figures) that she had planned in preparatory drawings. In the Remedios Varo Archive at the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, photographs taken by Kati Horna in 1958 of Varo painting in her studio reveal that every other element of *La despedida (The Farewell)* (1958; private collec-

tion) was finished before Varo added figures (SEE P. 161, FIG. 15). Her proclivity for mapping made it possible to move fluidly between painting and drawing at any stage of her process.

Varo achieved many of her atmospheric effects by layering colors and textures while allowing glimpses of earlier applications. Although we did not analyze her paints for this book, visual observation shows the artist's skill in preparing and manipulating them. She routinely thinned her oil paint to the point that many painted contours and textures more closely resemble those of drawings in ink or watercolor. The fluidity of her media was conducive to thin washes, precise details, and effects like stippling or hatching, which required her to use the point of a fine brush like a fountain pen. She also worked with a variety of automatic techniques employed by the Surrealists: blotting, decalomania, and soufflage, for example, in which the element of chance plays a greater role in the final appearance of the paint after its application or removal. Varo applied these techniques in a predetermined way. Yet the paintings could evolve; she applied, manipulated, and removed paint in a manner that responded to the composition as it progressed.

As a final step in her process, Varo painted intricate details using extremely fine brushes and scratched through paint layers to reveal the white gesso beneath in a technique called *sgraffito*. She used both techniques to reinforce the contours of shapes and to create fine details such as hair, string, and organic matter like leaves or grasses. The artist also commonly scratched her signature onto the work. Although we don't know conclusively what tool she used for this technique, we set out to test two theories inspired by anecdotal evidence: one

based on the recollection of Xabier Lizarraga Cruchaga (the son of Varo's first husband, Gerardo Lizarraga) that Varo showed him how to use a common household ice pick to scratch into paint, and the other on Gunther Gerzso's memory of Varo pinning artworks to her walls with needles (for more detail, SEE P. 44N9). Using a circa-1950 ice pick and variously sized needles to perform *sgraffito* on wet and dry oil paint revealed that the ice pick could cut clean lines into wet paint; once the paint began drying, however, it became far easier to use the sharper, finer point of a needle. Additionally, the gentle flex of the needle was better suited for applying fine or curved scratches.

Once Varo was satisfied that a painting was finished, she would sometimes apply a protective layer of varnish, as in *El juglar (El malabarista) (The Juggler [The Magician])* (CAT. 8). (Imaging taken under UV radiation reveals that Varo applied the varnish with a brush.) This layer not only protects the surface of a painting, but also saturates the colors and adds an overall gloss. A note at the back of one of Varo's sketchbooks indicates a potential source of damar resin—the principal component of many traditional varnish formulations—suggesting that she made her own.

By skillfully weaving together many techniques and using a wide range of tools, conventional or otherwise, Varo brought to life images of nature, travel, science, mystery, and more from her own fictional world. The list of techniques that follows offers a guide for closely looking at the creation of her magnificent works.

## BLOTTING



Blotting is a subtractive technique that involves removing or displacing paint using an absorbent material such as a cloth or rag. Acquaintances recall Varo using a cotton ball. Although usually used to lighten an area of paint, blotting wet paint can also alter the texture of a painted surface. Adding a solvent (for oil paint this would be mineral spirits or turpentine) to the absorbent material can help remove previously applied paint. This detail of *Ciencia inútil, o El alquimista* (*Useless Science, or The Alchemist*) (CAT. 1) shows an area where Varo blotted and wiped thin black paint to create atmospheric clouds.

## CARTOON



Cartoons are full-scale preparatory drawings used to transfer (SEE P. 38) a design to a support such as a wall, canvas, tapestry, or panel. Varo frequently used cartoons to transfer her drawings to prepared panels. The cartoon at left for *Creación de las aves* (*Creation of the Birds*) (CAT. 7) is one example. Sometimes Varo would also continue to develop her cartoons after using them for transfer; however, she never exhibited them in her lifetime.

## DECALCOMANIA



Decalcomania is an automatic technique in which one material (such as paper, tracing paper, aluminum foil, or glass) is pressed against a freshly painted or inked surface and then removed, forming a pattern or texture. The painted surface and the pressing material become temporarily joined by a thin layer of wet paint. This creates suction as the materials are pulled apart, which produces the reticulated biomorphic or organic textures suggestive of trees or foliage in many of Varo's paintings, as in this detail of *Roulotte* (*Caravan*) (CAT. 2). Decalcomania also refers to the process of applying paint to paper, then folding and unfolding the paper to reveal a mirrored biomorphic pattern such as in *Cazadora de astros* (*Star Catcher*) (CAT. 15).

## ERASURE



Erasure typically involves removing drawing media like graphite with a rubber or vinyl eraser, as Varo did in this detail of the cartoon (SEE P. 147, FIG. 5) for *La huida* (*The Escape*) (CAT. 26). By using the pointed ends, sharp edges, or broad surfaces of hard and soft erasers, an artist can achieve light tonal fields or crisp, precise highlights. Varo employed this technique to embellish many of her cartoons, developing them into more finished drawings after she used them to transfer her designs.

## GRATTAGE



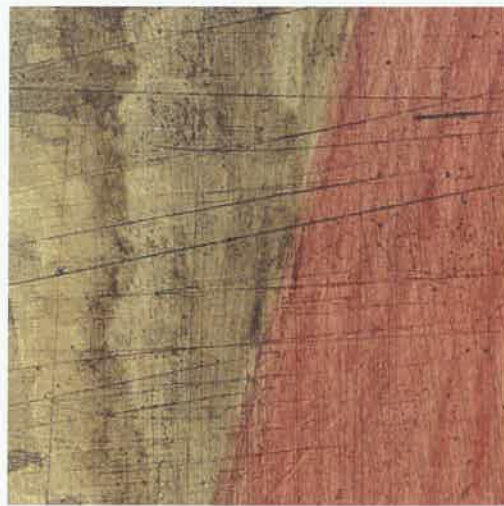
Grattage (scraping) consists of abrading or scraping away paint (usually wet) with a sharp or flat-edged object, a palette knife, for example. Typically, a flexible painted support such as canvas is laid over a textured object and then scraped, the paint revealing the texture of the object. Varo used a form of grattage in some of her paintings in addition to sgraffito (SEE P. 35), which is a more calligraphic form of scratching. In this detail of rocks in *La huida* (*The Escape*) (CAT. 26), scraped paint reveals a smooth layer of gesso underneath.

## HATCHING



Hatching uses closely spaced drawn or painted parallel lines to create tonal, shading, or modeling effects in typically line-based media such as drawing or printmaking. Cross-hatching consists of angled lines that intersect. There are many examples of this technique in the fabrics, especially of clothing, Varo depicted in her paintings, such as in this detail of *La huida* (*The Escape*) (CAT. 26). Interestingly, Varo did not always use the same technique in related paintings and drawings. In the drawing for *La huida* (SEE P. 147, FIG. 5), for example, she conveyed shading with smudged graphite instead of hatching.

## INCISING



Traditionally, incising designates a technique whereby an artist outlines a composition in a preparatory stage by scratching the surface. Here, in reference to Varo's work, we use this term to refer to the scratch marks that she made in the gesso and which are visible as fine indentations or dark lines in subsequent layers. In this way, she imparted subtle irregular texture throughout her paintings without scratching away paint to reveal the layer underneath, as shown in this detail of *Exploración de las fuentes del río Orinoco* (*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*) (CAT. 17).

## INLAY



Inlay involves inserting a piece of rigid material—usually a thin piece of shell, bone, or wood veneer—so that it is flush with the surface of another material in order to create a seamless design. It has a range of applications in sculpture and the decorative arts. Varo added mother-of-pearl, or nacre, inlays to five paintings. In *El juglar* (*El malabarista*) (*The Juggler [The Magician]*) (CAT. 8), shown here in detail, *Vuelo mágico* (*Magic Flight*) (CAT. 11), and *El flautista* (*The Flutist*) (CAT. 12), for example, Varo used a mother-of-pearl inlay for each main figure's face.

## SANDING



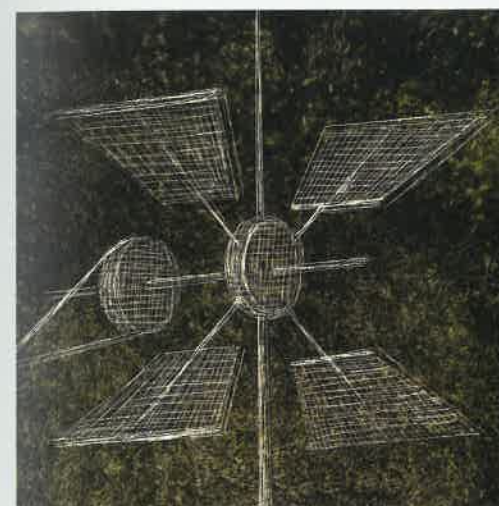
Sanding is the (wet or dry) process used to progressively smooth the finish of a support layered with gesso, likely applied with a stippling brush. Although we have not analyzed the chemical composition of Varo's gesso, it is typically a mixture of a binder such as rabbit-skin glue with chalk, gypsum, or pigment, or a combination thereof. Occasionally, sanding marks—small voids, pits, or other imperfections—remain where the gesso was not completely smoothed. Varo often kept these imperfections, which created the appearance of texture beneath the paint, such as the small chatter marks above the cat in this detail of *Mimetismo* (*Mimesis*) (CAT. 6) and in the boat in *Exploración de las fuentes del río Orinoco* (*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*) (CAT. 17).

## SCUMBLING



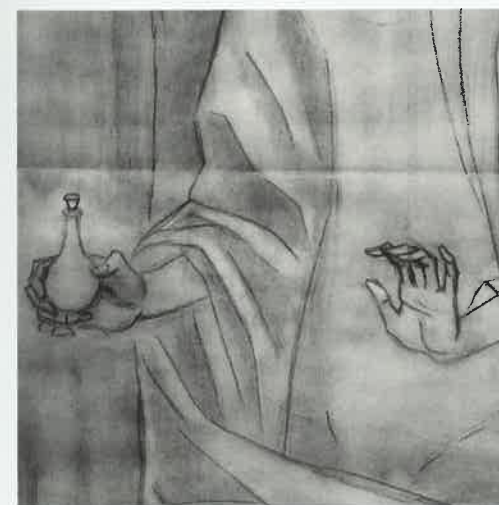
Scumbling is the application of a thin coat of opaque paint to soften or dull the effect of an area. Varo often used this technique to create clouds or mist in her paintings, such as the white paint across the cobblestone walkway in this detail of *Mujer saliendo del psicoanalista* (*Podría ser Juliana*) (*Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst [Could Be Juliana]*) (CAT. 22) and throughout the dramatic sky in *Hacia la torre* (*Toward the Tower*) (CAT. 24).

## SGRAFFITO



Sgraffito is a technique that originated in pottery and plaster, and it involves creating a decoration or pattern by scratching through the surface layer to reveal a layer of a contrasting color underneath. In Varo's work, she often scratched through paint to reveal the white gesso layer. The tower in *El flautista* (*The Flutist*) (CAT. 12) is an example of sgraffito. Varo also used sgraffito to form tiny highlights in most, if not all, of her oil paintings and to create fine details such as string and hair. In some paintings she completed entire passages in sgraffito, such as in this detail from *Vagabundo* (*Vagabond*) (CAT. 20).

## SMUDGING



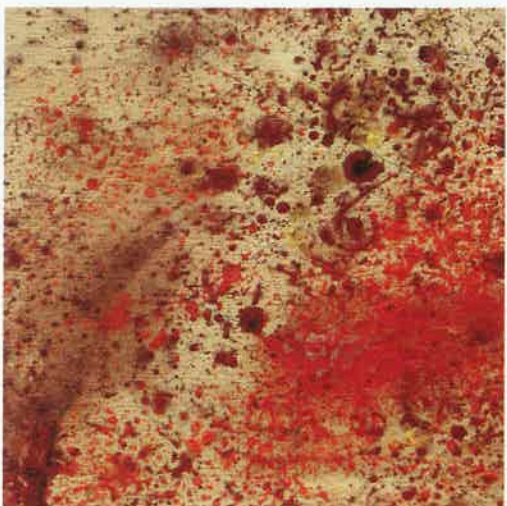
Smudging, which creates tone or modeling in a drawing, is accomplished by smearing the medium, usually graphite or other dry media, with fingers, cloth, or a drawing stump (rolled paper). This detail of the cartoon for *La llamada* (*The Call*) (CAT. 21) illustrates this technique.

## SOUFFLAGE



In soufflage, paint is thinned to an extremely fluid consistency, applied to the support, and then moved with blown air (often through a straw) to create abstract blotches or patterns, as shown in this detail of *El juglar (El malabarista) (The Juggler [The Magician])* (CAT. 8).

## SPATTERING



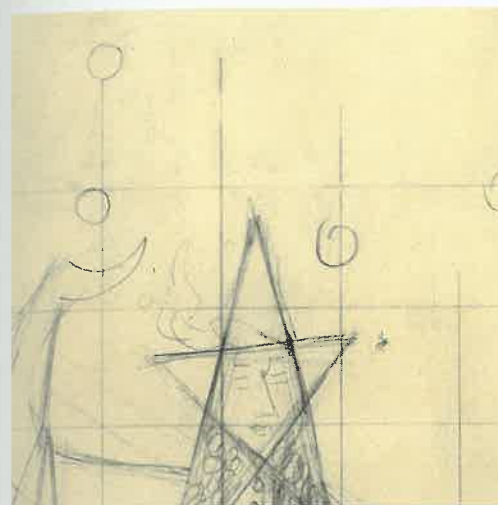
Spattering is a technique in which fluid or thinned paint is sprayed onto a support, often by flicking the bristles of a stiff brush. The size of the drops depends on the fluidity of the paint. This detail shows how Varo used this technique in *Tauro (Taurus)* (CAT. 18).

## SPONGING



Sponging is an additive technique that uses a porous material to apply paint, which then takes on the texture of the applicator. The implement need not be a sponge. This detail shows how Varo used this technique in *Nave astral (Starship)* (CAT. 13).

## SQUARING



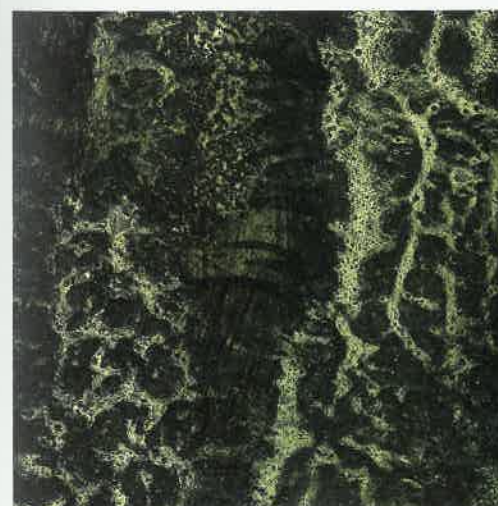
Squaring (also known as gridding or the grid method) is used to transfer a design from one surface to another. The technique—sometimes used for scaling up a drawing—involves marking a grid of squares on the original design, marking a proportional grid on the surface to which the design is to be transferred, and then copying each box of the original into the corresponding box of the copy. This sketch of the juggler from *El juglar (El malabarista) (The Juggler [The Magician])* (CAT. 8) reveals that Varo sometimes used this method.

## STIPPLING



Stippling is an application technique that uses tiny dots to create light and shadows. For paintings, the dots are often created with a fine or stiff brush. This detail of *Vagabundo (Vagabond)* (CAT. 20) shows how Varo stippled small dots of paint to create shadow.

## TEXTURED GESSO



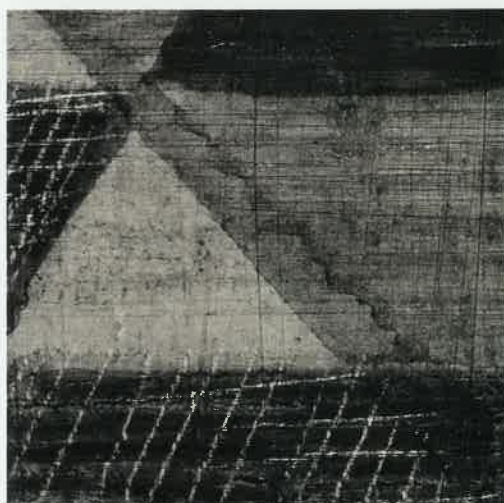
Textured gesso is similar to the Italian Renaissance technique *pastiglia* (paste work), in which gesso is modeled with a brush to create a low-relief image or pattern. It seems Varo created sections of textured gesso in her paintings by applying the gesso with a stiff broad or round brush and then pressing the surface with another material, such as glass or foil—in a manner similar to decalcomania (SEE P. 32)—before pulling it away. Varo created this low-relief textured pattern in some of her works, including *El flautista (The Flutist)* (CAT. 12), shown here in detail, and *Hallazgo (Discovery)* (CAT. 10). The artist then painted these areas, allowing white peaks of the gesso to remain visible (SEE P. 83N4).

## THINNING



Thinning involves adding a diluent (such as turpentine or mineral spirits), varnish, or other media to oil paint to create a more fluid consistency. Varo appears to have thinned her paint regardless of the method of application, applying it by brush in detailed areas and broad washes, by sponging (SEE P. 36), and even by decalcomania (SEE P. 32). This detail of *Exploración de las fuentes del río Orinoco* (*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*) (CAT. 17) shows decalcomania performed with thinned paint.

## TIDELINE



Tidelines are effects caused by thinned paint pooling and drying slightly more thickly on the edges. When working with watercolors, artists sometimes deliberately create a bloom or blossom by adding additional drops of water onto a freshly painted passage. As the water spreads, the pigment moves, creating marks that are a little darker at the edges. Varo likely did something similar in oil paint by using turpentine or mineral spirits to spread thinned oil paint she had previously applied to her support, as evident in this detail of *Ciencia inútil, o El alquimista* (*Useless Science, or The Alchemist*) (CAT. 1).

## TRANSFER



Transfers are graphite underdrawings (see next entry) applied to a support by means of an intermediary sketch or cartoon rather than drawing directly. To transfer an image, Varo first drew on a piece of translucent paper, as she did in this detail of birds. She then turned the sketch over and applied a layer of graphite (usually with the broad side of a pencil), covering every contour that she wanted to transfer. Then she placed the drawing right side up against her support and applied constant pressure while retracing her drawing, which transferred the graphite on the back to the surface of the painting support, creating an effect similar to that caused by tracing carbon paper.

## UNDERDRAWING



Underdrawings are drawings used as guides when painting. They are often made in graphite (but can also be executed in charcoal, paint, or other materials) directly on the support and are then painted over. If the drawing media contains carbon, these marks show in photographs taken with infrared-sensitive cameras, as illustrated in this detail of *Tauro* (*Taurus*) (CAT. 18). Although Varo seems to have used transfers (see previous entry) mostly on gessoed panel, this infrared detail reveals that she drew with pencil directly on the paper support before painting. A line that is directly drawn looks more continuous or smooth than a transferred line, which has a more granular appearance.

## VARNISHING



Varnishing is the application of a resin, coating, or varnish to the surface of an artwork. Varo sometimes used varnish to coat her paintings. Under normal lighting conditions, varnish can be almost imperceptible, but in this detail of *El juglar* (*El malabarista*) (*The Juggler [The Magician]*) (CAT. 8)—taken under UV radiation at 365 nm—the varnish gives off a yellow-green fluorescence. The pattern in the varnish indicates that Varo applied it with a brush.