

**“As with all model work, painting believable figures is not about using the correct colours, but using whatever colours actually look correct.”**



Many modellers and war-games enthusiasts specialise in sculpting and/or painting miniature figures, indeed over the years I myself have done just this. However, there are many more modellers for whom figures are just a complement or accessory to their main modelling interest, whether they be aviation modellers needing the occasional pilot, railway modellers needing a few passengers, armour modellers needing a vehicle crew, maritime modellers needing a few sailors or any other modeller needing to add a few figures to their models. In these instances few choose to sculpt their own figures, most prefer a quicker and simpler option. This is not a guide for all those wishing to devote hours to producing competition winning miniature figure art, it is aimed at quick and simple techniques for painting commercially available miniature figure castings. It is aimed at those for whom painting miniature figures is a chore rather than a delight. Those who appreciate a competent end result, but who also want to get the job over and done with fairly quickly so they can move on to something else.

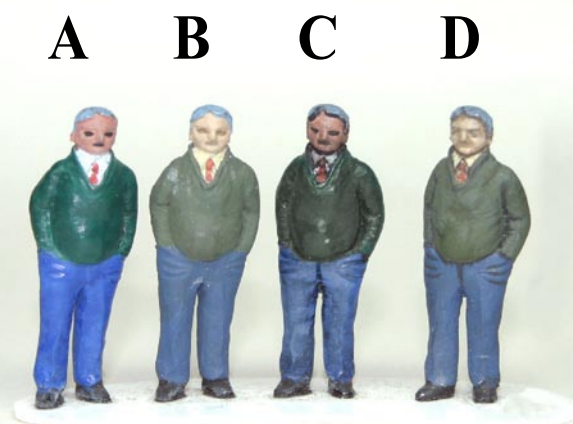
I feel the main thing to appreciate in such circumstances is that your figures need only act as a compliment to your main models. They aren't there to compete with them or distract from them. If we look at a large building, train, aircraft, ship or vehicle in real life it is very doubtful we will notice the colour of the eyes of a person sitting inside or beside it. Small details of figures

just aren't that relevant at distance, what is more, if accurately modelled such fine details can easily become distracting. What we tend to see of figures in association with other subjects is little more than basic shapes along with blurred shadows and highlights. This then is what we need to concentrate on capturing and communicating when we try to paint our miniature figures.

If you haven't already read my guide to 'scale colour' I strongly urge you to do so as the ideas discussed in that particular guide underpin my approach to all aspects of model making including the way I treat miniature figures. If you can appreciate the false perception of distance created by small scale models, and can distinguish between the concepts of scaling down colours to suggest size and distance and weathering colours to suggest age and dilapidation, then my methods of subduing and blurring paints along with some of the simple techniques for shadowing and shading should all seem that much more obvious and easy to apply. If you disagree with the whole concept of scale colour and prefer a far more scientific approach to accurately researching every aspect of your models then you are likely to find my whole approach to modelling frustratingly imprecise and subjective.

The accompanying picture below shows four identical castings painted to illustrate the impact of both subduing colours of paint, and also the impact of painting shadows and highlights. These 1/48th scale figures were never intended to be viewed as stand alone detailed model figures in their own right, they are just quickly painted demonstration pieces. Nevertheless for a modeller requiring many figures for inclusion in a large project, the simplistic style of painting is more than adequate for use as background or incidental accessories.

- A - Typical shop bought pre-painted finish achieved by blocking in colours with brightly contrasting gloss paints.
- B- Although there's no more precision or detail in the brushwork, the impact of using subdued, drab paint is obvious.
- C - Painting in black shadows and white highlights clearly brings each of the features into greater relief.
- D- Painting in subdued dark brown shadows and pale cream highlights gives a much more subtle and believable effect.



I exclusively use acrylics for all my figure painting (and most other model work too). These are what I know, these are what I like. Some military modellers may tell you oil based paints are the best to use because they dry more slowly, giving you a better chance at blending. They may be right but what they do in oils I do in acrylic. Some people even use enamels but I've yet to find anything I can do well with them. If you have a preference stick with what you know and like. I don't have any preferred paint manufacturer, I have used Humbrol, Tamiya, Games Workshop Andrea, Vallejo and many other model paints. I've also used Windsor and Newton, Rowney and other acrylics supplied by fine art shops. However, the vast majority of my paint is nothing more exciting than decorating/craft emulsion from the DIY store. It's cheap and covers well which is all I ask. What I will say is that buying little jars or tinlets of paint based upon the names or labels applied to them is a waste of time. To produce good models you have to mix your own subdued colours of paint, and this is why I am happy to work with a few cheap basics, rather than pay a premium price for hundreds of pre-mixed bottles or pots. However, for speed and convenience I do pre-mix and store all my own blends of paint in little glass jars obtained from a laboratory supplier.



There isn't a magic brand of paintbrush that makes figure work easy, simply buy good quality brushes that hold a sharp point. The standard brush numbering system does not relate to the fineness of the tip of a brush, but the size of the metal ferrule. Whilst a brush's ability to shape a precise point depends not upon the quantity of hairs in the ferrule, but upon the quality and length of those hairs. Very small brushes with very few hairs tend to have very short hairs, this is an immediate disadvantage to shaping a good point as they are far more likely to get paint trapped in the ferrule splaying the hairs out of shape. So whilst you can buy size 'OOOO' and smaller they rarely keep a point as well as a size '5', '2' or 'O', they also hold less paint, consequently I find them of little use. My preference, although difficult to find and often costing four or five times more than the sort of brushes usually sold in model shops, is for good quality size 2 and size 5 signs writers riggers. These brushes with extra long hairs hold a precise point better than any other type of brush, what is more because the hairs are so long you need only ever paint with the tip, keeping the ferrule completely clear of paint, making them

easier to keep clean and in good order. It's also worth looking after your paint. Keep it well stirred and thinned so that it is free flowing. Never wipe off excess paint against the side of the pot, this dries to form a crust which adds lumps to the paint and stops the lid from fitting correctly. Soon all the paint inside dries up. Clean your brush on an old rag, tissue, or the back of your hand. In the long run it wastes far less paint than throwing away half a jar once it's become one solid lump.

So if we start with good brushes and have mixed our own pots of drab and subdued paint the next step is to decide on the colour scheme for our particular figure. This may be dictated by the uniforms or fashions of the subject and period modelled. If possible try to restrict the number of different colours you use on a single figure. Achieve your contrast through using lighter or darker tonal variations of one colour rather than using too many different hues. If it's not possible to restrict the number of colours used, then try give the different colours similar tonal values. When darkening or lightening paint never use black or white. Use creams or pale browns to lighten colours, along with earthy browns and greys to darken them. This again adds to the whole feel of achieving a scaled down, subdued, softened and faded finished result.

We instinctively recognise human beings by their facial features. We are also naturally drawn towards light and away from dark. If we can paint a figure in such a way that its legs are dark, it's torso lighter and the face the lightest part of the figure, we feel comfortably directed up towards the face. For many this is sub-consciously far more pleasing than a figure where the clothes are lighter than the face. At the risk of being accused of some sort of racial prejudice, this can make producing a pleasing finish when painting certain ethnic minorities an interesting, though not impossible, challenge.

So far you will notice I've only really discussed thinking about colour and paint, not how you actually put the paint onto a figure. If you adopt the principle of using a subdued palette of colours, subtly enhance shadows and highlights, and try to harmonise all the colours used on a single figure, group of figures, or even the whole diorama or display you can't go far wrong. With painting accessory figures the important thing is relative use of colour and controlling the contrasts to help them settle into the scene, not fussing over fine detail to make them stand out.

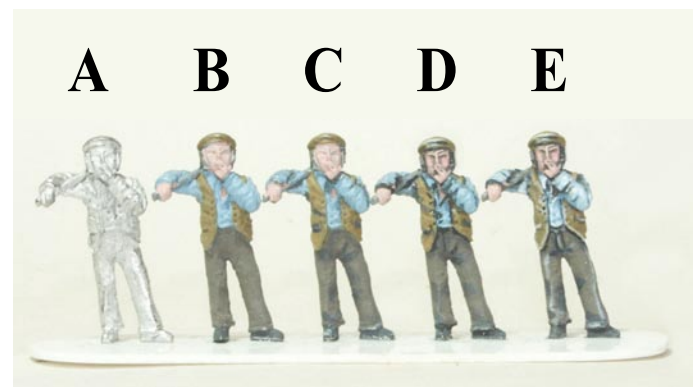


Since this guide is aimed at quick techniques it is important to distinguish what does actually make a difference to our perception of the finished figure and just as importantly what doesn't. As figures are often quite small and seen by many as being difficult to paint, there is a tendency to fuss over getting them "just so". Simply work out how close people are typically going to get to look at your whole project and judge your figures from that distance. You may hold the figure just inches from your nose end when painting it, but you might be the only person to ever judge it from such close proximity.

In the accompanying guide to scale colour I've talked about shadows, highlights and texture, how these define our understanding of three dimensional shape and form, and why we must use paint to exaggerate these on our models. The accompanying photograph is of a set of 40mm tall Trompe'l'oeil figures produced to show the varying effects that can be achieved just by painting false shadows, highlights and textures onto identical smooth, featureless castings. I'm not suggesting such work falls under the heading of quick and simple techniques for figure painting, but it should show just how much we can achieve with paint. Far too often a flat coat of uniform paint disguises much of the shape and form of a sculpted miniature figure. If the three dimensional relief is present in the casting you are working with, then it becomes comparatively easy to just paint shadows and highlights along the edges of these details resulting in a more impressive model figure.



So, if I'm to move on to how I quickly paint figures for use as accessories in larger projects and dioramas, what useful advice can I pass on? Well, the following is a demonstration piece I use when teaching at exhibitions and is aimed at modellers working in the smaller scales who may need several figures in one project. In this instance the figure is a 23mm tall generic workman stood smoking a cigarette whilst resting a sledge hammer over his shoulder. The painting techniques described are aimed primarily at achieving a fast end result, and on a good day when things are going well I can batch paint such figures in an average of a little over 5minutes per figure. This enables large quantities to be rapidly finished for use as incidental background accessories. Those working in larger scales who may only need a few figures for their project may still find the techniques useful, though they may wish to spend a little longer refining the blending and shading.



- A- It's always wise to spend a few seconds tidying up castings and mouldings to remove seam lines and any traces of flashing.
- B- I rarely prime or undercoat simple models, I simply block in the basic areas of colour using subdued colours of paint.
- C- Whilst this is still wet I smudge dabs of dark brown into areas of deep shadow to discolour and darken the paint.
- D- When dry a wash of very dark brown applied over the whole figure will settle in recesses adding relief to the sculpted detail
- E- The final stage is to pick out all the raised details by quickly dry-brushing pale cream over the whole figure.

If I'm demonstrating at exhibitions it's normally about this point that somebody asks how I paint faces. The simple answer is I don't normally bother. If I'm painting incidental background accessories I don't want any fine fiddly details that are going to distract attention away from the main focal point of the project. For real human beings to appear sufficiently small as to be comparable in size to our miniatures we need to be looking at them from a considerable distance, such that the effects of perspective make them look small. At such distances when a human head appears comparable in size to a pea, or pinhead we can't make out fine details, faces are reduced to nothing more than a couple of blurred shadows around the eye sockets and mouth and lighter tones across the forehead, nose, cheeks and chin. Assuming there is enough relief in the sculpting of the face, the above method of using washes and dry brushing achieves this very quickly.



The human brain is conditioned to recognise faces, it even finds them in the shape of clouds and damp patches on walls. You only need the vaguest of blurred suggestions of a face on your miniature figure for people to happily accept it as being human. Alternatively, if we try to paint something detailed, you are actively inviting people to study it much more closely, and we are all sufficiently knowledgeable as to pick up on even the slightest of faults, criticising a miniature figure for looking wrong.

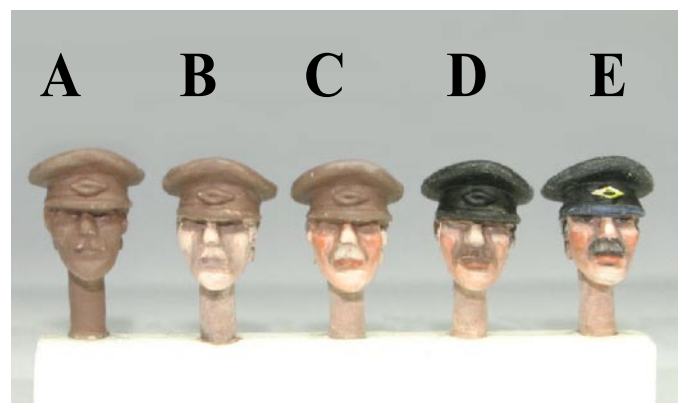
I firmly believe that if you are going to paint in the fine details on your figures you need to be willing to put in the effort and really work at getting these right. You regularly see a huge number of miniature figures spoilt by people attempting to paint in fine details and doing so badly. There seems to be this almost competitive need for modellers to boast about being able to do “this, that or the other” With figures it’s commonly painting the whites of the eyes and pupils on really small figures. The visible part of the eyeball is actually very tiny. Even on something as large as a 1/12th scale doll a painted eye needs to be no more than about 3mm wide by about 1mm high. Far too often the eyes on miniature figures just end up way too big and they stare back at you like a startled animal caught in the headlights of your car. Far better to just paint blurred shadows for the eye socket, they are far easier to reproduce and almost always look better.

However for the benefit of those whose figures may be a more prominent part of their projects. I’ll finish with a few tips regarding more detailed work. This needn’t be restricted to just those working in the larger scales. I’ve sculpted down to 1/800th scale, producing simple micro-figures mounted on pinheads, and produced fairly detailed work in what many would regard as the smaller scales such as 1/144th and 1/72nd.



However, I’ll assume if people are sufficiently competent to sculpt their own figures in these tiny sizes they won’t be needing the painting advice offered here. Consequently I’ll stick to more accessible work in perhaps some of the slightly larger and more commonly used scales, besides the techniques are the same you just need a steadier hand if applying them to smaller subjects.

At the core of painting good miniature figures are the skills of blending and shading. At it’s simplest this means smudging one colour of paint into another to achieve a gradual change. To do this you must paint ‘wet on wet’ rather than let each coat of paint dry before applying the next. There is no right or wrong way of blending, I personally prefer to start by applying a darkish paint then apply touches of lighter paint into the areas of highlight using a clean brush and very short brush strokes to spread this into the existing wet paint, softening the contrasts giving more subtle shading, in for example, the deep creases in costume. Blending can also be used to vary hue as well as tone to suggest the rich lustre of silks or other shiny surfaces. The secret, if it is one, is in achieving the right degree of dilution for your paint; thin enough to not dry too quickly, thick enough not to puddle.



The above illustration is again based upon a demonstration piece I use at exhibitions for teaching quick techniques to those who regard painting figures as a chore. In this instance it covers slightly more detailed faces for those working with larger scale figures that can’t be treated with a simple brown wash and dry-brushed highlights.

- A-** Begin by undercoating everything in a dark version of our preferred flesh colour suitable for deep shadows.
- B-** Blend a much paler flesh colour onto all the raised areas of the face leaving the darker brown in the recessed shadows.
- C-** Blend a richer, pinker hue onto the cheeks and lips to add warmth and colour to the face.
- D-** Paint in the hair, facial hair, hats and any other main features of the face.
- E-** Refine all of the above before finally dealing with any small details like eyes or cap badges.

There’s obviously much more I could have written about painting figures as others have produced entire books on the subject. Since this is just a quick guide I’ve only covered a few of the most important basics. As with all types and aspects of model making, the important bit is observation. It’s not so much about knowing how to achieve a particular effect, but more importantly being able to see which effects you need to achieve. Learn to recognise what we do and don’t see when looking at people and modelling them will become that much easier. That’s when it stops being a chore and becomes enjoyable, and that’s when you start modelling miniature figures as models in their own right.

