



Basics of brush painting

Quality paint jobs with brushes are easier than you think!

Story and photos by Jeff Wilson

One goal in modeling is to give each creation a good finish. Airbrushing is often preferred by experienced modelers, but if you don't have airbrushing equipment, brush painting can still yield great results. Brush skill is also necessary for painting detail items and adding finishing touches to a model.

Successful brush painting requires good brushes and fresh paint, as well as techniques to eliminate brush marks.

For the projects shown here, I used acrylic paints: Model Master Acryl and Polly Scale. Both are quality paints that can be thinned (and cleaned up) with water. The techniques for using enamels are similar, but you'll need to use mineral spirits or lacquer thinner. I painted plastic

parts in these photos, but the techniques are the same for other materials.

Select the right tools. For painting broad surfaces, use as wide a brush as possible. I use round brushes up to No. 5 and 1/4" to 1/2" flat brushes, **1**. The softer the bristles, the smoother the finish will be. For a smooth finish coat, especially with gloss paint, get a good sable brush. A synthetic brush can also provide a good finish, and camel hair is good for rough surfaces and general-purpose painting.

Brush marks are the bane of brush painting. The main causes are brushes with stiff bristles (poor-quality brushes or old ones with bristles hardened by dried paint residue) and overbrushing, which leaves patterns in the paint as it dries.

Preparations. Make sure the surface is clean and free of skin oils from handling. Even a little oil repels acrylic paint, ruining the finish.

Begin by wetting the brush in water (or paint thinner for enamels). Wipe off the brush using a clean cloth or paper towel. This step eases cleanup by keeping paint from drying on the bristles.

Put paint into a separate container or palette – I use an inexpensive aluminum holder. You can use an eyedropper or a soda straw to transfer the paint, **2**.

Avoid painting straight from the bottle for two reasons. First, air is the main enemy of paint, so you must keep the jar closed as much as possible. Second, wiping off excess paint by pulling the edge of



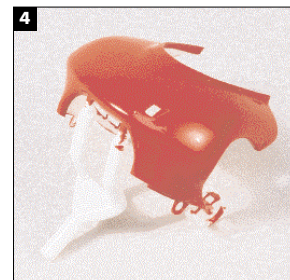
1 Among the author's most-used brushes are (top to bottom) a Model Master No. 0 synthetic, Floquil No. 3 round pure sable, Floquil 1/4" flat camel hair, Floquil 1/4" flat Silver Fox synthetic, and Model Master 1/2" flat black sable.



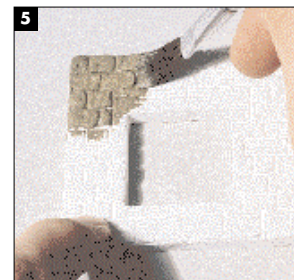
2 Place a soda straw in the paint, then cap the end with a finger. Move the straw to the paint dish and remove your finger. The paint will flow into the dish.



3 Brush the paint with as few strokes as possible. Begin new brush strokes in a bare area and gently brush back to the wet area you've just painted.



4 This finished motorcycle cowling shows it's possible to obtain very smooth results with a brush.



5 When painting a rough surface, use a general-purpose brush like this 1/2" flat camel-hair.

the brush over the lip of the jar often leaves paint in the jar threads. This results in bits of dried paint falling back into the bottle, and they will find their way onto the surface you are painting.

Time to paint. Most paints are already the right consistency for brush painting. Thin the paint only if necessary to get it to flow smoothly on the part. Thinning will decrease the paint's opacity, requiring more coats to cover properly.

Dip your brush in the paint, keeping the paint on the lower fourth of the bristles. Brush the paint onto the surface, using as few strokes as possible. Let the paint level itself.

Follow the general direction of surface lines and details, keeping the brush strokes parallel. Apply paint to the bare surface, then use a light stroke to brush the paint back to the area most recently painted, **3**. Keeping a wet edge at all

times will prevent overlap marks.

You'll usually need to apply two coats, which is what I did on this motorcycle cowling, **4**. Some colors cover better than others, especially black, dark grays, dark blues, and greens. Lighter colors may need an additional coat. If you're painting white or yellow on anything other than white plastic, start by applying a primer coat of medium to light gray.

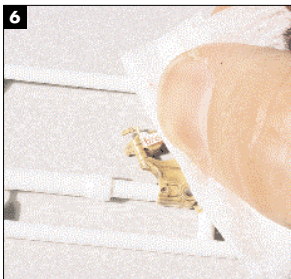
As with airbrushed finishes, small ripples in the finish can be polished out by wet sanding. After the paint is completely cured, start with 320 grit and use progressively smoother grades of sandpaper up to 600 grit.

When painting rougher surfaces, such as stone walls, **5**, cheaper camel hair brushes work fine. Since brush marks aren't critical in this situation, you can move the brush in different directions to work the paint into cracks and crevices.

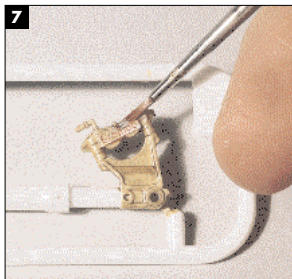
Delight in the details. My favorite brush for painting tight areas and small details is the Model Master No. 0 synthetic. It has a fine point – finer than many 00 and 000 brushes – and it holds more paint than smaller brushes.

When painting details, start with lighter colors and progress to darker ones, but wait 48 hours before painting one color over another. Paint as much of each part as possible before assembling the model. In fact, keep the parts on the sprues as long as you can – as the photos show, sprues make convenient handles.

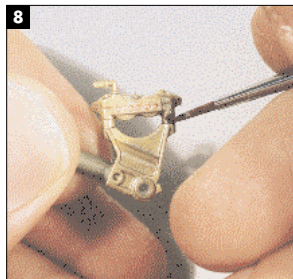
Many different techniques are needed for painting details. For example, the motorcycle wheel fork has recessed lettering that needs to be painted red, while the rest of the part must be gold. I started by painting the area with the lettering red, then wiping the surface with a paper towel, **6**. This removed the paint from the



Paint recessed lettering its final color first, then wipe the surface, leaving paint only in the recesses.



Follow that by using the side of a brush to paint the surface around the lettering.



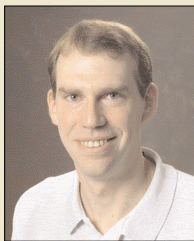
Let the part's topography guide you when painting surface details. Using a fine brush, work the paint slowly to the border.



Here's the completed wheel fork, with four colors applied.



An old mug or glass works well for storing brushes. Be sure the bristles are above the edge of the holder.



Meet Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson has been a modeler for more than 30 years. He enjoys building model trucks, but his main focus is model railroads. That's not surprising since he was an associate editor at FSM's sister publication, *Model Railroader*, for 10 years. Jeff has written six books on trains and model railroading and currently works as a free-lance writer. He is a camera operator for his favorite team, the Milwaukee Brewers, and plays bass in the rock/punk/funk/jazz group Foam.

surface but left it in the recessed lettering. I then painted the rest of the part gold, carefully using the side of the brush to paint around the letters, **7**.

For raised lettering or details, do the opposite: paint the whole area the appropriate color, then use the side of the brush to lightly dab or sweep across the details.

Let the ridges and relief of the part guide the brush, **8**. With a fine brush you'll be able to work the paint to and around raised and recessed details. If you get a bit of stray paint on an adjoining area, don't panic. After it dries, you can

either lightly scrape it off with a hobby knife, or simply paint over it with the proper color. The finished wheel fork has crisp, sharp detail, **9**.

Cleaning up. Properly cleaning brushes will make them last longer and help them hold their shape. After using acrylics, rinse the brush under warm running water. Massage a drop of liquid dishwashing detergent into the bristles, then keep massaging the bristles under running water to rinse them.

If you're using enamel, dip the brush in mineral spirits or lacquer thinner.

Swish it around and roll it gently against the side of the container. I keep three small jars of thinner for cleaning brushes. The first is for getting out most of the paint (this is the dirtiest one), the second for cleaning out any remaining paint, and the third (with clear, clean thinner) for a final rinse.

Never let brushes stand in thinner, and never jab the bristles down into the bottom of a container. This can damage the ferrule (the part that holds the bristles) and cause the bristles to splay and lose their shape.

After cleaning, while the bristles are still wet, form them to the proper shape using your fingers (not your mouth). Store brushes bristles up, and make sure the bristles don't rest against the sides of the storage container, **10**. To protect the bristles even more, use the clear plastic sleeves that come with new brushes.

As with any physical skill, your brush-painting talents will improve with experience. Start by practicing with some spare parts left over from an old kit, and soon you'll be painting your prized models with confidence and getting show-quality results. **FSM**