

HOW I PAINT DIMESTORE CONVERSIONS (PART II)

By Roger Dubois

In the 2007 spring issue of the *Old Toy Soldier* journal, I described how to convert a Barclay (711) figure to a wounded World War I German soldier. At the end of that article, the conversion was primed and ready for painting. The figure has now been painted and is shown in Photos 1 and 2. In this article, I'll describe how I paint my Dimestore conversions, employing at times Photos 1 and 2 to illustrate my points.

When I first began painting Dimestores, I found the entire process daunting. I had many questions but there was no one around to help me. For example, setting color aside, what kind of paint should I use? Regarding paintbrushes, what size and shape should I buy and how many will I need? After a figure has been primed, what part of it should I paint first? Is there a preferred paint stroke that produces good results? How do I hold my hands and figure steady so that I can carefully paint my conversion? With time and experience, I found to my satisfaction the answers to these and other questions.

But before I present these answers as tips for your consideration, you should know that I have never had any kind of formal training in the art of painting. The painting skills I have acquired over the years have come solely from the school of trial-and-error. Nevertheless, as shows my painted conversions have frequently received favorable comments and have even won a few awards. So with that in mind, let me pass on to you what I have learned and what has worked for me.

Paints: There are three kinds of paint: oil, enamel, and acrylic. I use the latter two with either a gloss or flat finish. I have not tried oil paints. The manufacturing brand names that have given me good results include Model Master Enamel and Acrylic, Poly, Tamiya Color, and Testors. All can be purchased at any well-stocked hobby store.

When I begin to paint a uniform that I have never painted before, my major challenge is to choose an appropriate set of colors. The colors must reasonably match the colors of the real uniform and must work together to make a figure aesthetically pleasing.

For color authenticity, I consult my reference books. My conversions at this time are of World War I soldiers (American, British, French, and German), and over the years I have collected a number of references that show the colors of uniforms of many nations for the war.

Of these references, my favorite is *World War I in Colour Photographs* (Europa-Militaria No.3) written by Laurent Mirouze and published by Window & Greene, London, 1990. I frequently take this book along with me when I buy paints.

My next challenge revolves around my aesthetic values. After choosing the most authentic colors I can find and after I have painted the first coat, I sometimes discover that collectively the shades of colors are not visually pleasing; they simply don't go together. For example, the shade of green I chose for the uniform and the shade of brown for boots and belts are not aesthetically pleasing to me when painted side by side. So it's off to the hobby store to buy different shades of green and brown.



Photo 1. Front view of painted figure.



Photo 2. Back view of painted figure.

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If the colors are authentic, then why am I concerned about the aesthetic appearance of a figure, which is relative anyway? It is because the aesthetic appearance of my figure is extremely important to me, and for that reason I'm willing to sacrifice a bit of authenticity, not to mention time and money. Looking at what I regard as an aesthetically pleasing toy soldier makes me happy.

On the other hand, if I wanted to paint a conversion so that it looks like an original Dimestore soldier, then obviously I would need paint that would match the colors of the old figures. To find that kind of paint, I would begin by consulting Ron Eccles' Dimestore catalog.

Brushes: Artists who paint military miniatures tell me that Windsor & Newton brushes are the best on the market. I paint with Loew-Cornell brushes that I purchase at a local craft store. For one of these brushes, the average price is about \$4.50. The best advice that I can give about brushes is to resist the temptation to buy inexpensive brushes or a bag of brushes for a few dollars. Buy quality brushes.

When I began painting my conversions, I bought cheap brushes, which impaired my ability to control where I wanted the paint to go. My paint jobs looked terrible. Every figure had sloppy edges where two different colors met. In addition, my inexpensive brushes had a tendency to shed bristles. This made matters worst if I did not find and remove them before the paint dried.

It was at this time that I nearly gave up converting. Why bother to convert a figure if it will look horrible after it has been painted? However, instead of quitting I invested in better brushes. In return they gave me control of where I wanted the paint to go and with practice that has made all the difference.

Paintbrush heads come in numerous shapes such as rounds, liners, and spotters. Rounds have a full body bristles that come to a point. They hold quite a bit of paint for a given size and in the hand of an artist, they are great for painting detail work. I have not developed the skill to use this type of brush for detail work because I often press too hard on the tip thereby spreading the paint to areas where I don't want it to go.

As the name indicates, liners are used to paint lines. I use them instead of rounds to paint an even edge that separates one color from another such as where the skin color of a neck meets the color of a collar.

Lastly, spotters are used to place a dot of paint at a specific location. I use one to paint buttons on the front of some uniforms.

Each of these shapes comes in different brush sizes as indicated by a number marked on the handle: the larger the number, the larger the brush head. For example, a number 5 brush has a larger head than a number 3, and a 3 has a larger one than a 0. Larger heads hold more paint, but can be more difficult to control in tight spaces.

Below the number 0, brush sizes progressively decrease as 00, 000, 6/0, 10/0, respectively; in this case, the larger the number before the slash, the smaller the brush head.

I use a number 1 or 3 round (Series 7000 marked on the handle) to apply paint without much regard for neatness. When neatness counts, I switch to a 6/0 or 10/0 liner (Series 7350) to paint an even edge between two different colors. I paint buttons with a number 4/0 spotter (Series 7650). So in the end, I draw on only a few brushes to paint my conversions; I need just two when I don't paint buttons.

Finally, enamel and acrylic paints dry rather quickly on figures and brushes. When paint dries on a brush, it stiffens the bristles and decreases my ability to control the distribution of paint. This leads to a sloppy paint job. Therefore, when painting with one color, I frequently clean my brush during a work period that exceeds the paint's drying time. After I finish painting with one color, I immediately clean my brush before I start painting with a different color.

I clean wet acrylic paint from a brush by washing it in a container of soap and water and then rinsing it in clean water. I remove dried acrylic paint as well as enamel paints, wet or dry, with lacquer thinner followed by a rinse in clean water.

Steady Hands: To me an important factor that leads to good work is to have steady hands and a steady figure when painting. I steady my hands by resting them on the edge of my work surface, which happens to be a plywood board resting on an open drawer of my basement workbench.

When sitting next to this surface, which is 34-inches high above the floor, my hands rest comfortably on the rounded edge of the board. At this height my hands are relatively close to my face, thereby giving me a good view of a figure. I hold a figure steady on the board with one hand while painting it with the other hand (Photo 3).

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Photo 3. Resting hands and figure on a work surface.

Sometimes shortly after I down a mug of caffeinated coffee and then try to paint, my painting hand begins to shake uncontrollably. To control the shakes, I rest my forearm and painting hand on the work surface. That usually stops it, and from that position, I proceed to paint.

Hanging from the ceiling, a bank of fluorescent bulbs lights my workspace. I prefer fluorescent to incandescent light.

Painting and Finishing Touches: There are primarily two styles of painting Dimestore conversions: traditional and precision. The traditional style follows the way figures were originally painted by factory workers. Because production time directly equates with cost, figures were painted fairly quickly. This resulted in a rudimentary paint job in that colors often extended into areas that they should not have. For example, the flesh color of hands and/or the head often extended onto a uniform and vice versa. To many collectors today, the traditional style yields a visual appearance that typifies what a Dimestore figure should look like.

The second style emphasizes precision painting. In this case, the flesh color of the hands and head stops right at the edges of the cuffs and collar, respectively. The color of one article does not run onto the color of another article. Therefore, the signature of this style of painting is the smooth edge that separates one color from another.

Which style you follow depends on your aesthetic

values. I prefer the second style. Therefore, the remainder of this section will focus on precision painting. I will not attempt to offer any tips on the traditional style mainly because I have not tried painting in this manner.

Before I start painting, I fortify my lap by placing an old towel across it for the simple fact that loaded paintbrushes and open paint bottles have been known to suddenly leap out of my hands and bomb my lap, for reasons heaven only knows.

After a figure is primed, I begin by painting the face, neck, and both hands with a flesh color making sure that the paint overlaps onto the collar and cuffs. Next comes the uniform, which I paint to the edge of the flesh color, followed by the boots, waist belt, and base.

Once the flesh color is dried, I go over it with a second coat. As you may have surmised by now, neatness does not count during these early painting stages.

Now comes the serious painting. If I have not done so, I put on reading glasses. Although my hands are relatively close to my face when resting on the edge of my work surface, I want a very close look at what I'm about to paint.

Using a liner, I dip a tip of the brush in the paint color of the uniform. Then beginning at a corner of a collar, I paint a smooth line along the collar-neck border until I reach the next corner. Because the brush head is small, I have to dip for paint a few times before the task of painting over the flesh color on the uniform is completed.

I use a specific stroke over and over when painting an edge separating two different colors. With my painting hand resting on the edge of the board, I always *draw the paintbrush away* from me in one smooth motion. After I finish a segment of an edge and while holding the position of my painting hand fixed, *I turn the figure* with my other hand until the figure is in the most optimum position for my painting hand to continue to draw the paintbrush away from me. And so it goes until an edge is completed: paint, turn the figure, and paint some more.

I have found this stroke very effective for painting straight edges. And in turn, the visual appearance of a figure is vastly improved when edges are painted straight.

After I complete the collar, I move on to paint the edge around each cuff followed by other edges that separate different colors on the torso, arms, legs, and feet. Once the edges are completed, I

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return to the uniform, boots, belts, and base to give them a second coat, being carefully not to paint too close to finished edges. I finish by painting details on some uniforms such as piping and buttons (Photo 1).

After the paint has dried, I turn my attention to the head. Using a liner and brown paint, I start the hairline at the top of one ear and paint down, then across the back of the neck, and finally up to the top of the second ear. From the top of the second ear, I paint down a bit to form a sideburn, then up and across the top of the forehead. From here I paint down, stop next to the first ear to form the sideburn, and then paint up slightly to the top of the ear where I began painting the hairline. After the hairline has been painted, I paint the rest of the hair on the head. For the conversion in this article, I painted the mustache brown and the head bandage white with an added touch of red to show a bloodstain on the bandage (Photo1).

I end work on the head by drawing the eyebrows, eyelashes, and eyes with pen and India ink, and paint the lips red making sure I stay within the upper and lower lip margins.

If there is equipment that will be attached to a figure such as a backpack, I paint the equipment and the surrounding area on the figure where the equipment will be glued. I do not, however, paint the surfaces where the pieces will come together. When both are dried, I fasten the equipment to the figure (Photo 2) using two-part epoxy glue.

After I have painted a figure, I spray it with a clear-gloss acrylic coat to preserve the paint and prevent the ink in the eye area from smearing, to smooth out minor surface irregularities, and to even out the finish of different types of paint (gloss and flat) I may have used. I like the appearance of a glossy toy soldier and the silky smooth feel of the finish. On the other hand, if you dislike a glossy appearance, you can coat your figure with a matt finish. And instead of spraying, you may choose a brush to apply a protective coat.

When a figure is completed, I sign my last name under the base and spray it with an acrylic coat followed by a second coat after the first has dried.

Summary and Conclusion: In summary, if you are starting to paint toy figures or are planning to do so, I offer the following tips that with practice should improve your painting skills. (1) Buy quality paintbrushes, and (2) keep them clean. (3) Before you start painting, find a way to steady your hands

and your figure. (4) Wear some type of magnifying glasses so that you have a close look of what you are painting, and (5) paint under good lighting. (6) When painting edges, you might try drawing the brush away from you. (7) If part of a finished paint job does not meet your high standards, repaint it, which is what I *often* have to do. (8) Keep in mind that it may take some time to develop painting skills that will yield favorable results, so be patient and above all don't give up.

If you have questions or comments, pass on your concerns to me at dubois@umbc.edu or when you see me at toy soldier shows. As I stated at the beginning, I'm not a trained artist but I'll do my best to help you. By the way, if you are a trained artist and have noted that I have omitted something important that every figure painter should know, please do not hesitate to e-mail me your thoughts.

Let me conclude by offering a suggestion. If you are looking for a way to escape from normal daily stresses, try painting toy figures. When I'm painting, the problems of the world simply disappear.

Painting consumes my full attention. There is no time to think about anything else. After I put on my reading glasses and look down at what needs painting, my vision is totally filled by a conversion in one hand and a paintbrush in the other hand; that's all I see. No other space exists. In turn, my mind is focused on placing just the right amount of paint at just the right location on a figure, and that's the only thing that matters, nothing else.

With such an intense focus on painting, it is not unusual for me to look up at the wall clock and see that an hour or more has passed since I began painting, although in my mind, it seems like I just started a few moments ago.

Consequently while I'm working, space shrinks to the size of a toy soldier, time nearly stops, and the only thing that matters is painting a figure. I am truly lost in my hobby. Even after I have finished painting and have walked away from the workbench, my mind is still focused on the figure and the next painting task. It frequently takes me a few moments to come back to reality.

Interestingly enough, others who paint figures have told me that they have experienced basically the same thing.

So, want to make the world go away for a while? Paint toy figures.