



Back to School

First of a series on airbrushing basics

Article and photos by Terry Hill

If you visit Internet discussion groups related to airbrushing, you see a trend. Often, three or four “heavies” post a lot of messages regarding very specific topics like clearcoats, reducers, or drying times. Then every so often, a new member pops up with “I’m new at this. Where do I start?”

If you’re new to all this, help is here. In this column, we’ll raise your comfort level with airbrushing.

Airbrush painting has come a long way. Discussions of the art—and the application of paint on certain surfaces—sometimes take a back seat to technical discussions of paint chemistry. This is particularly true in the automotive field. Kustom paint has grown from a “garage wizard” pursuit to a multi-million-dollar industry with its own language, heroes, and rock stars. Paint talk can go from the general to the super-specific in a second. But painting fabric is different; fabric has different absorption qualities than harder, non-porous surfaces such as metal or illustration board. We usually use water-based paint, which has its own predictable characteristics.

If some of us think back, we can remember the light bulb coming on when a mentor said, “The airbrush needs a constant stream of air. Keep the trigger pushed down. Now slowly pull back on that same trigger and let the paint come through.”

“KEEP THE AIR ON”

A note on technique

Like with anything else, seeing is understanding. Some great videos are available to show, hands-on, how some of these techniques work. You can find them in the advertising pages of this magazine. Also, workshops are great. Does your local art store have Saturday-morning demos or classes? How about attending an Airbrush Getaway? Airbrush

Getaways feature one-day foundation classes that introduce new artists to the airbrush and paints.

The T-shirt class has always been one of the most popular Getaway classes. It makes use of top industry experience and has launched the careers of many professionals in the airbrush field. It’s highly recommended as a foundation class for advanced paint work in the automotive or related kustom fields.

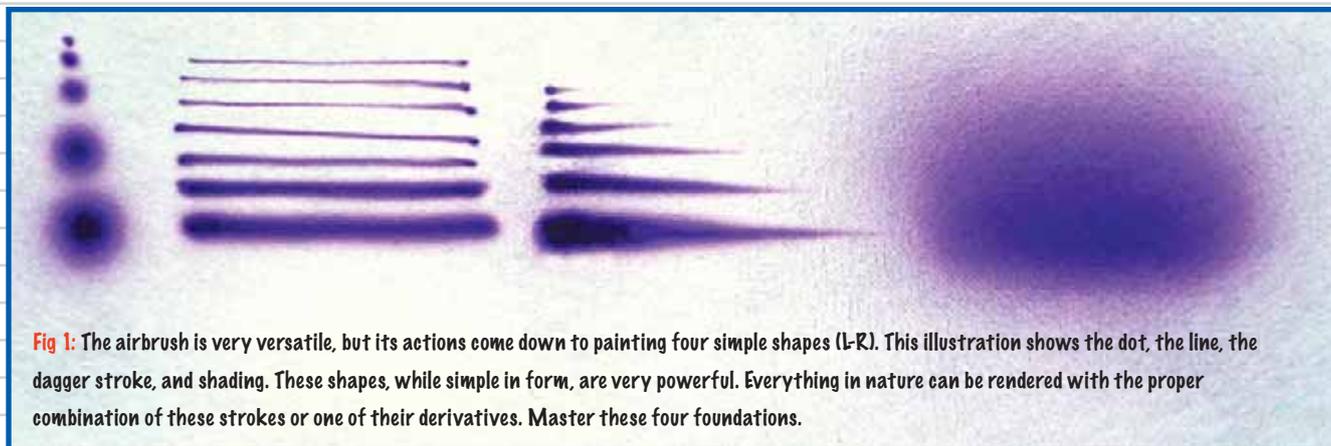


Fig 1: The airbrush is very versatile, but its actions come down to painting four simple shapes (l-r). This illustration shows the dot, the line, the dagger stroke, and shading. These shapes, while simple in form, are very powerful. Everything in nature can be rendered with the proper combination of these strokes or one of their derivatives. Master these four foundations.

A note on equipment

This column assumes that you have a good and constant supply of air (CO2 bottle or compressor), an appropriately thinned airbrush paint, and a double-action airbrush.

Double-action airbrushes allow you to independently vary the amount of air going through by pushing the trigger.

Air pressure should be set between 30 and 60 PSI. The thicker the paint you use, the higher your setting should be.

Once you get a steady stream of air going, keep the trigger down and roll it backwards, gently, to start a flow of paint. It's like rolling a marble back and forth with your forefinger. Keep the air on, and constant. Start and stop the

paint as needed and only stop the air to pause between tasks. This is the smooth, rhythmic way to paint, and your results will be markedly more professional.

Simple Shapes

Art begins with shapes. Airbrush art is no exception. Shapes build into bigger pictures. Pictures ultimately get finished off with subtle shading and color.

The airbrush is a popular, if often misunderstood, art tool because it's superb at doing all those things. This article starts with some basic "shapes" exercises. Future articles will touch on more shapes, as well as shading.

Fig 2: The stipple texture is "dots gone wild." Stippling can be very useful in creating the illusion of texture. We'll cover this technique in a further installment of this column.

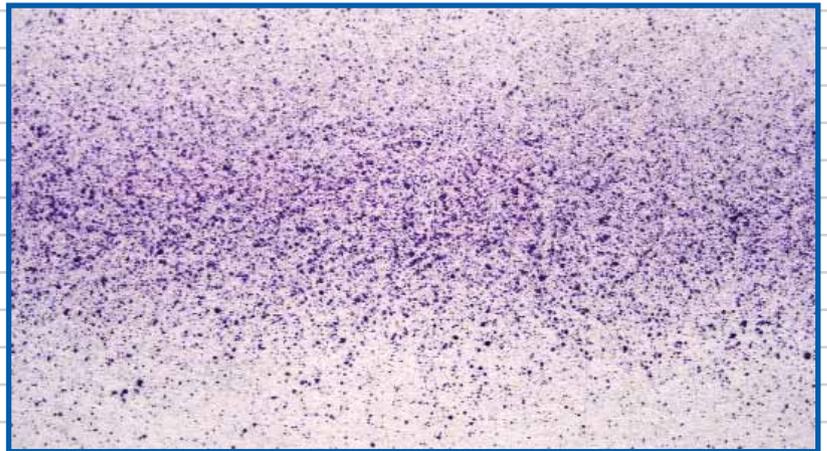


Fig 3: An example of "tip dry." It only takes a small amount of paint dried on the needle to adversely affect proper airflow and atomization of the paint.



Fig 4: An example of a properly cleaned needle. Note that the nozzle, or needle cap, has been removed for cleaning. Gently unscrew the nozzle and treat these small parts, particularly the needle, carefully. Even slight damage can make your paint go haywire. A soft cloth or tissue wetted with cleaning solution, or very gentle scraping with a fingernail, can remove dry paint from the needle tip. But again, go slowly and exercise care.



Connect the dots

The humble dot is a good start. Using a good backstop, in a room with proper ventilation, post a piece of paper to paint on.

Load paint into your airbrush. Push down on the airbrush trigger, and maintain a constant stream of air flowing through. Don't pull back on the trigger yet to start the flow of paint.

Now hold the airbrush at a 90-degree angle to the paper. Get close at first, positioning the nozzle perhaps half an inch to an inch from the surface. Now, with the compressed air flowing like a stream, gently pull back on the trigger; the paint will flow. Keep the air on. Roll the trigger forward to stop the paint.

What happened? You should have a dot on the paper

where the airbrush was aiming. Pause and let the air stop. Admire your masterpiece. Now, let's do it again. Get the air flowing. Point the nozzle to a spot next to your first dot and try it again. Repeat this process several times, striving for consistency in the size and darkness of your dot.

Observe that an airbrush can help you out by drying the paint almost as you spray. This is a collateral benefit to keeping a constant stream of air. You can stop the flow of paint and let the air dry the painted surface. When you're satisfied, and the paint is solid and not running, you can add more paint.

You can paint a sheet of dots to warm up, even as your skill levels advance. This also lets you verify that your airbrush is in good, working order.

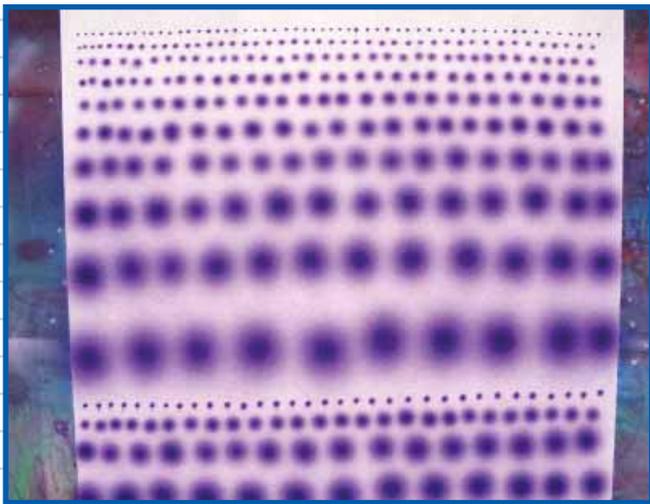


Fig 5: Begin your dot exercises as shown, with a line of small dots first, then move your airbrush slightly further from the surface and use the same amount of paint to make bigger dots.



Fig 6: Position the airbrush nozzle between one-half and one inch from the surface and begin painting. Keep the airflow constant. Roll the trigger on and off to make a dot. Nail it in one shot. In this sequence, I've kept my nozzle cap off the airbrush to facilitate cleaning of dried paint from the needle tip.



Fig 7: Use two hands for good control. I like to gently slide a free finger along the surface for consistency; it keeps me from getting too close. Just be careful of any wet paint!



Fig 8: Here I've moved back to four or six inches from the paint surface. I'm keeping the air constant and pulling back all the way on the trigger, then rolling the trigger forward again. This makes bigger, well-formed dots. Notice that distance also equals softness of the dots' outlines.

Lines

Lines are another important shape for airbrush artists. In technique, a line is just like a dot, but you keep the nozzle of the airbrush moving to complete a shape; in this case, a line. The same trigger control is used.

Press the trigger and get a constant stream of air going. Move the airbrush in a steady, straight line. To start a line, roll the trigger back gently and release a stream of paint. To stop the line, stop the paint but keep the air flow constant. Practice this to make fluid movements. Some artists move their whole body when doing a line, like in tennis or golf where a clean motion demands a good follow-through. A two-handed hold on the airbrush can steady your aim. You can even

uncurl a finger from around the airbrush body to lightly touch the painting surface, thus maintaining a consistent distance.

Heading off mistakes before they happen

Airbrush paint is being pushed out with the steady stream of compressed air. That air should be dry, with your air source fitted with a moisture trap to counter condensation in the lines. Paint dries on the airbrush needle tip and can spatter the paint—the dry paint drags on the edges of the atomized stream and makes it go in unpredictable directions. If this happens, release the trigger, stop the flow of air, and gently

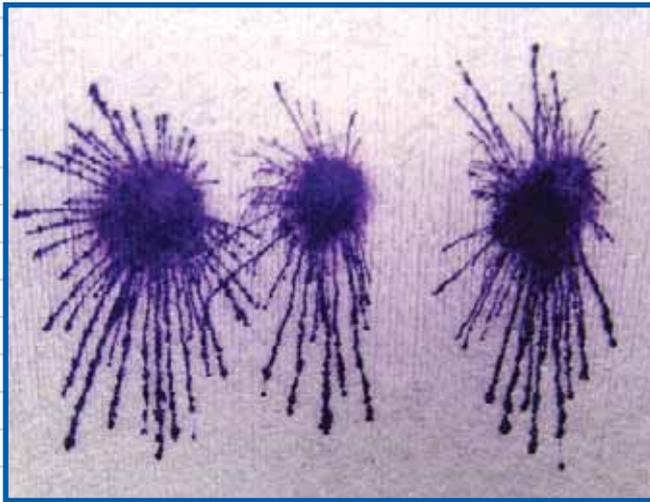


Fig 9: Here's a common error—spidering. This happens when you shoot too much paint, your air pressure is too high, your paint is too thin, or some combination of these. This also happens if you apply too much paint and the surface can't absorb it.

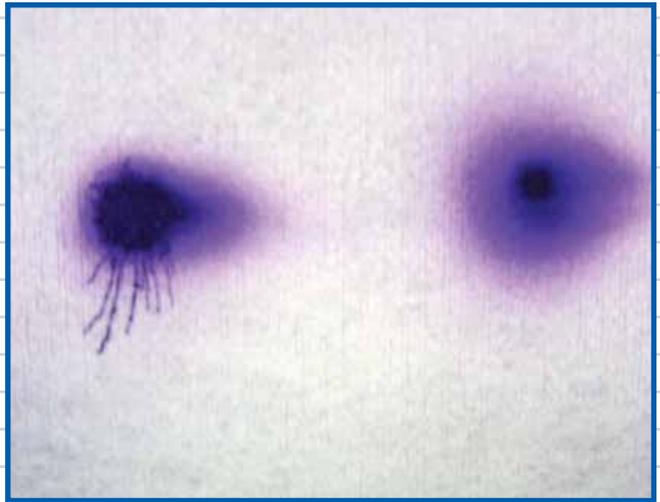


Fig 10: Haste makes waste. Slow down. Moving the airbrush while spraying will make dots into dagger strokes. Keep the air on, and exercise good paint control.

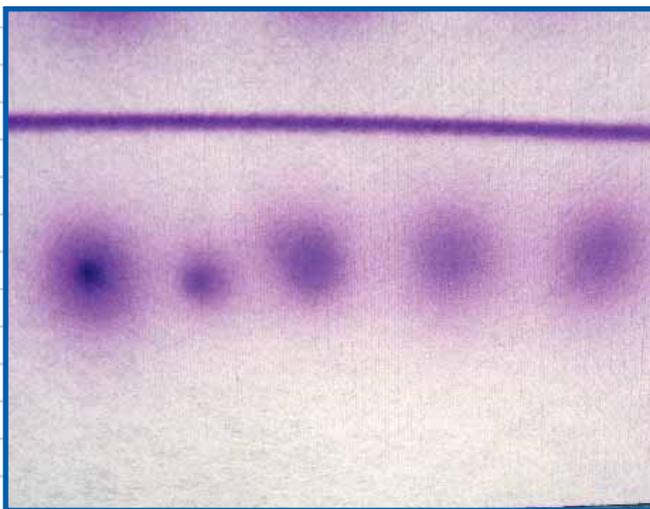


Fig 11: Not enough paint. The airbrush nozzle was too far away from the surface as well. These dots are too subtle and are turning into fuzzy shaded areas.

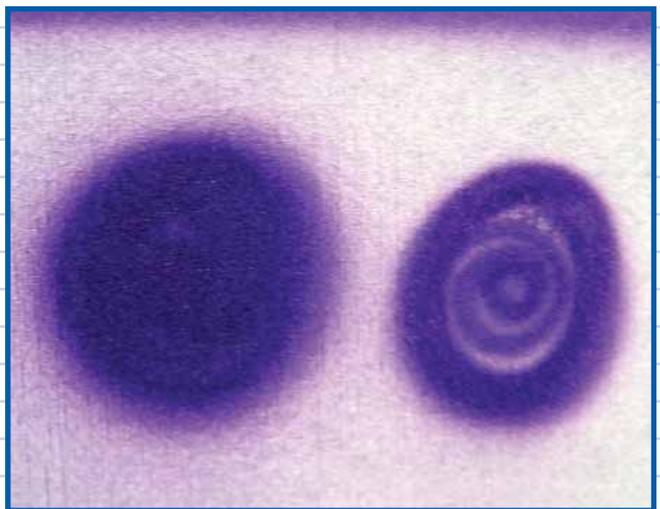


Fig 12: Don't try to "draw" your dots the way you make doodles with a ballpoint. The airbrush's stream of paint will expand and fill in anything you paint. Let the tool do the work. The airbrush's strength is subtlety.

wipe the needle tip and nozzle. I say “gently” because if you bend the needle, that can bend the atomized stream as well. Sometimes it makes sense to do a quick disassembly of the airbrush and use a mild cleaner. Opinions on what makes a good cleaner vary. Solvent-based paint, such as automotive paint, usually requires straight reducer and a little wiping. Water-based acrylic paints, such as those used for textiles or illustration, can be cleaned with mild solutions of ammonia-based compounds. There are good airbrush cleaning compounds available commercially.

Taking the Surface Into Account

Painting on fabric has another dimension—the behavior of

paint on a woven surface. Inevitably, some paint will penetrate the fabric and bleed through. Experience will teach you how much is too much, but you generally don’t want the backstop under your fabric getting too wet.

Troubleshooting

Sometimes the paint flow stops or is interrupted. What should you do?

First, make sure that your nozzle isn’t blocked with dried paint. Discussed previously, this is called “tip dry.” Figures 3 and 4 address this common problem.

Perhaps your paint is too thick. If this is the case, you generally have two options:

- Thin the paint, usually with water (most T-shirt art is done

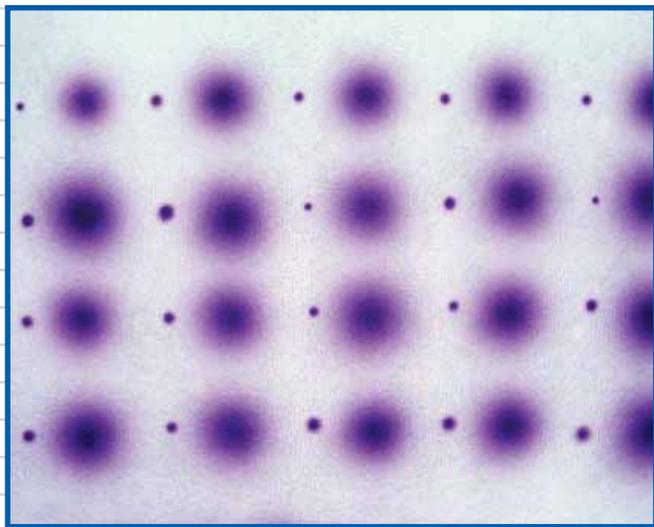


Fig 13: For another exercise, alternate the sizes of the dots you’re painting. I call this one “Big Fish, Little Fish.” When I teach audiences with limited comprehension of English, the students get this one immediately; the big fish are chasing the little fish. This is easy to paint and will give you confidence in your new skills.

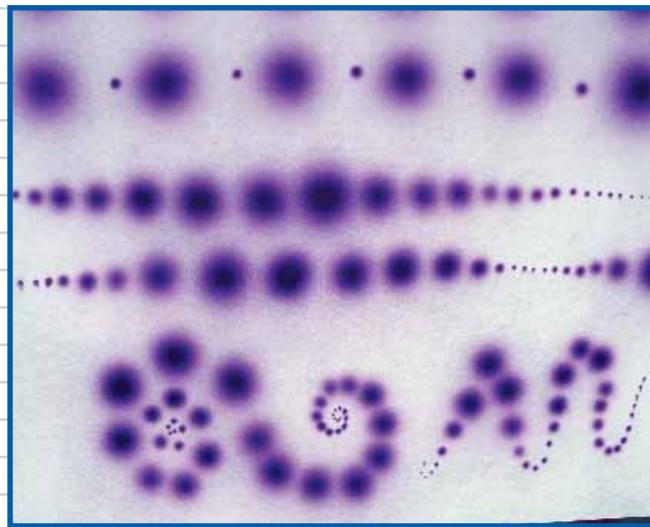


Fig 14: You’re an artist—get artistic! These airbrush drills can be fun, and you will quickly grasp how airbrush fundamentals combine to produce more sophisticated art.



Fig 15: Gridding. Here I’m using a common studio item, a cutting rail, to line off a practice surface. Grids can be used for more precise exercises.

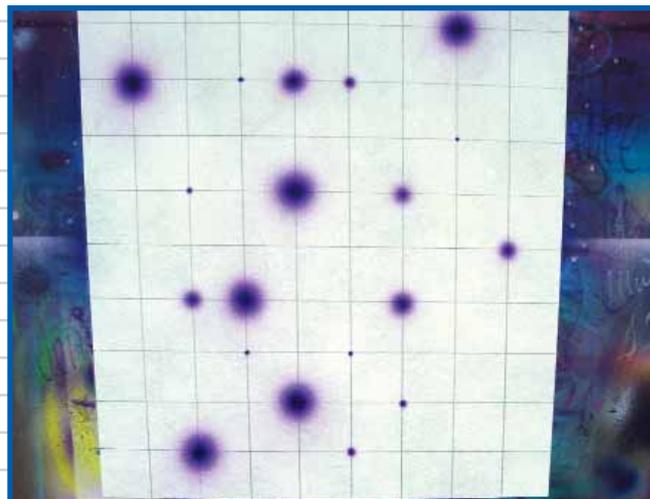


Fig 16: Target practice! Use the crosshairs—intersecting lines on your grid—and vary your dot sizes while aiming precisely for the spots. Controlling paint is the mark of a professional and pays off, because it teaches you to produce very precise work. For added practice, see how quickly you can do this exercise while still maintaining quality. In commercial art, time is money. Working quickly and accurately pays off.

with water-based paint). This requires more testing and experimentation because you might over-saturate the fabric. Remember, you're painting on something that absorbs water.

- Add more air pressure, but don't overdo it. Experience will show how much is enough. Most T-shirt artists work in the 40- to 60-psi range, but you can experiment based on paint thickness.
- If your airbrush's paint reservoir, such as a bottle or covered cup, has an air hole, it must be clear or the paint won't flow into the airbrush.

To sum up: Practice these techniques and they'll become second nature. Seek a mentor or watch a video as well. Don't be discouraged. In our next column, we'll tackle more shapes. Airbrush art comes together quickly, if you practice the basics.

Terry Hill has been airbrushing T-shirts in the Florida panhandle for 22 years. A leading force in the airbrush world, Terry co-designed the air compressor for Silentaire that bears his name, and he has become a leading innovator of new products for the airbrush industry. When he's not working at Airbrush Headquarters in Destin, Florida, he is the director of the distinguished Airbrush Getaway workshops.

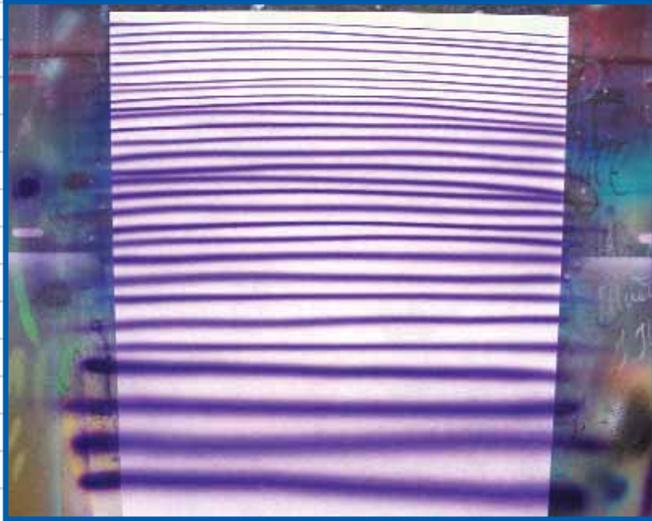


Fig 17: Lines. Work your line exercises the same way you did your dots. Start close, making fine lines, and then increase the distance and line width. Be careful not to bump your airbrush against the paint surface.



Fig 18: Variety is key. Expand your skills to painting vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines with your airbrush.



Fig 19: Add a soft element by using one of the airbrush's trademarks—the shadow. Paint a hard line, then move the airbrush slightly further from the paint surface and follow the line to make a softer shadow. This takes some practice to align, but you'll get better with practice.

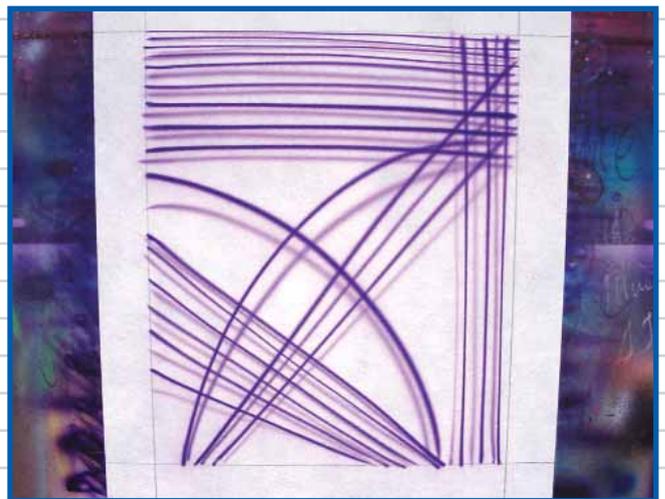


Fig 20: This exercise ties several skills together, and adds another one. Practice using an artificial border in your work as a "no paint zone." Roll the paint trigger off while leaving the air on as you pass over this clean area and keep your work inside a set of limits. Accurate trigger control produces good commercial work.