T-SHIRT PET PORTRAITS, PART 1: THE FAMILY DOG

by Pat Gaines and Mark Daehlin

Next Issue: T-Shirt Pet Portraits Part 2: "Romeo" the Cat.

With the holiday season coming up, many of us T-shirt artists are looking for ways to supplement our income or "punch up" our display to attract more customers. Many shoppers want a special gift for someone, and a portrait of the beloved family pet is a natural. But beware—these shoppers can be demanding.

For this article, I've gone to an artist with lots of experience at making these shoppers happy. Mark Daehlin is a T-shirt painter and animator who works out of his home studio in Minneapolis. He trains other professional artists for West Coast Airbrush in Mattoon, Illinois, and is designing a line of custom airbrushing aids for the intermediate painter. Daehlin has long supplemented his standard T-shirt designs with custom art of all kinds. Wildlife and pet portraiture have long held a special place for him.

"I enjoy not only the technical exercise of reproducing fur and feathers but, even more, the magic of seeing the animating force directed through an inanimate medium so that the viewer experiences the presence of the life force through one's work. In this sense, all true artists are 'animators.' This is the artist's highest calling—to summon up the spirit in all life in art. More than an occupation, it is a divine calling that none of us should take for granted. Earning a living with it is a secondary benefit."

There is a practical reason for this awareness. Daehlin explains, "By keeping this divine connection in mind whenever possible, I find it much easier to remain 'in the flow,' that state wherein one works without effort, relaxed, as much observer as participant. It is simply accepting one's appropriate place in the process: that of conduit through which the creative force of one's highest nature flows unimpeded. In this context, 'talent' is simply keeping out of one's own way. Loving the work and working with gratitude help to keep the channel open."

Daehlin's skill in this area and obvious enjoyment have resulted in a very practical technique and a beautiful product. I asked him to show us how he paints and markets these shirts. "With pet portraits on shirts, my approach is very basic, the goal being speed and accuracy," the artist explains. "The customer is not paying for a fine canvas portrait, so keep the artwork relatively simple."

On the following pages, Daehlin takes us through the process of painting a portrait of the family dog, in this case an Irish setter. But first, he shares a few of his marketing tips regarding this kind of custom airbrush work.
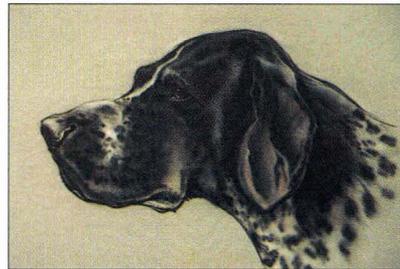
The key here is not that you sell huge quantities of shirts but rather that displaying and (especially) painting animals will draw lots of attention to your location and generate good word of mouth. Many people will inquire but will not want to pay the price for custom work. Nevertheless, it's drawn them into your store, perhaps to buy something else. I display my custom work prominently and also have a book of photos of past work. Only show work you are proud of, *never* anything you must explain or apologize for.

Some warnings are in order. Though the temptation may be great to give customers more than they pay for, especially with an appreciative, adoring audience watching, you must try to resist. You will charge $30 to $60 for one of these shirts; if you give certain customers a $200 job for $30, all of their friends will expect the same and may descend on you during the busiest days of the year. Give your customers a great job, but one appropriate to the price and the medium. That is fairest to all concerned.

Do not underestimate the time that it will take you to do one of these custom pet portraits, especially if you're just starting in this market. Spread them out as your back orders stack up. People do complain about waiting a few days, but most agree to do so, even if it means picking the shirt up after Christmas. Also remember that the mundane, bread-and-butter designs are always more lucrative in dollars per hour, so you should always schedule custom items around them.

At some very good locations (for example, the West Coast Airbrush mall stores I've managed and painted in) or at certain times of year, you're so busy that the time-intensive nature of this custom work makes it inefficient. At such times, I remove the most prominent displays and the photo album to avoid idle, time-consuming questions. You must strike a balance that suits your location, needs, and willingness to endure lengthy, possibly fruitless conversations.

If you are new to this type of work, be prepared for some big challenges and lots of practice as you develop the necessary skills. As artists (and as people), we never stop learning. Each fresh challenge just adds texture and depth to the endless journey of the artist. Enjoy your "mistakes" and the lessons they impart; they are our very best teachers.

Animal portraiture is a joy to create and can really enhance your business when marketed properly. The pleasure it gives our customers is immeasurable. Allow your personal vision to expand on these seed ideas, and make them your own. The possibilities are truly unlimited, and the opportunities for profiting from them, artistically and financially, are vast. Persistence and enthusiasm for the work are what keep us going. Good luck!
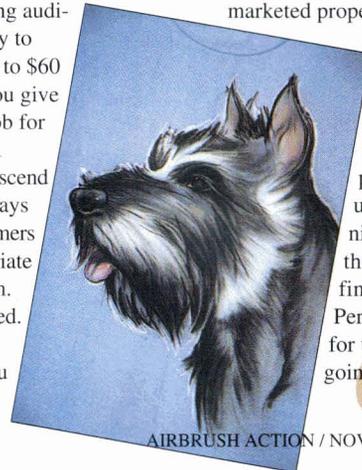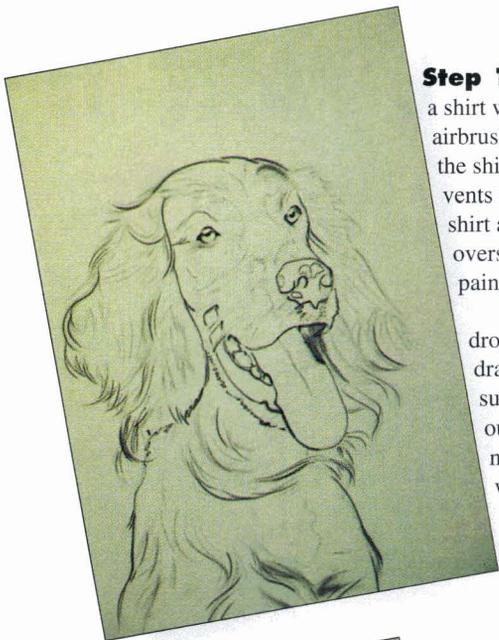
Step 1. Project or sketch the animal onto a shirt with an extrasoft reed charcoal. Then airbrush on a coat of top binder and press the shirt for five to ten seconds. This prevents the sketch from "blowing off" the shirt and flattens shirt fibers to prevent overspray from creating "fuzz balls" of paint around your picture.

Using a transparent gray (20 to 30 drops black opaque in 1 oz. water), draw the major outlines and dark areas such as pupils, eyebrows, and the outer corners of the eyes, edges of the nose, tongue, and chin, and some windblown hairs on the chest.
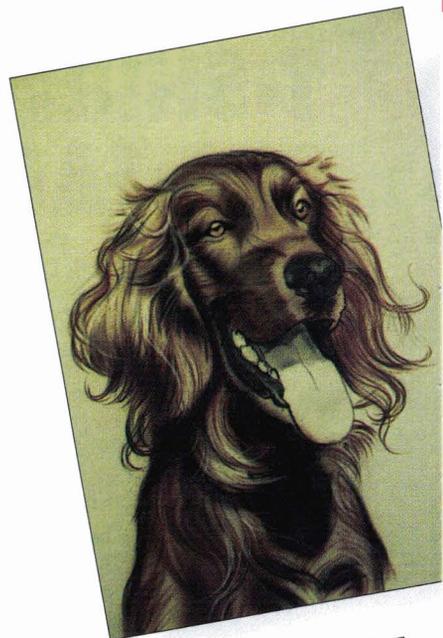
Step 2. Next color in the fur using a dark brown shade a little lighter than the final picture will be. Paint the brown eyes also. Paint brightly lit areas appropriately lighter. No texture is necessary now—just concentrate on area coverage at this point.
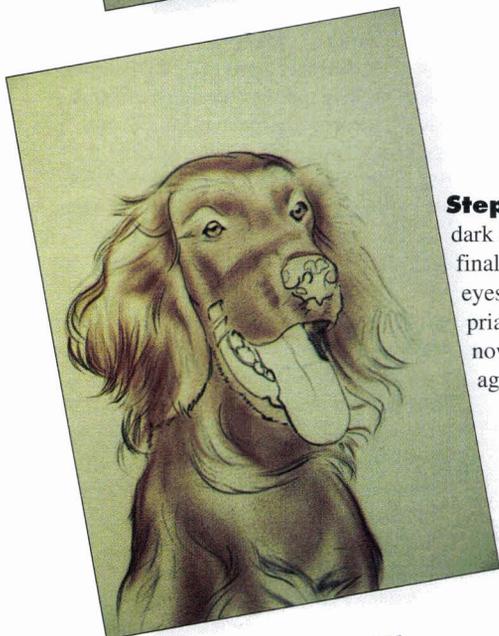
Step 3. With the same dark brown, draw in the majority of the hair. Be patient; this step sets the tone for the rest of your work. For realism, use variously tapered and feathered lines, softer where appropriate (such as the upper ear tufts). For "pretty dogs" like collies and Irish setters, which have long, flowing hairs on the ears, I embellish the painting with carefully curved lines for an idealized look. If you're in a hurry, you needn't detail the hair as finely as I have here; simply suggest fur with lots of varied soft strokes, and later highlight carefully. Also darken in the major shadows such as under the chin, ear, and tongue and on the darker areas of the eyebrows and snout.
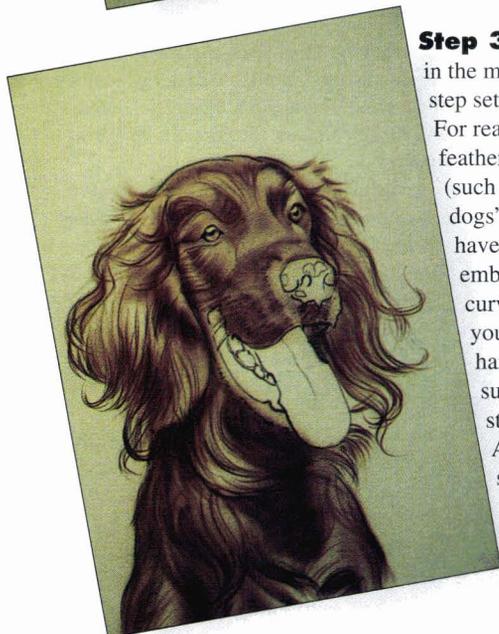
Step 4. Using the transparent gray, paint in the chest hair, bottom edges of the ear, the snout, eyes, eyebrows, cheek, and the dark areas of the ears next to the eyes. Use this color as well on the shadows under the chin and the ear. Use expressive lines, as with the brown in Step 3. Color in the nose, gums, and shadow on tongue, and darken the outer edges of the shoulder and the top of head for a more rounded appearance.

Step 5. With white opaque, highlight the brightly lit portions of the entire animal, using thin, tapered, and feathered lines as before. Also fill in highlights on the eyes, lower eyelids, nose, teeth, and tongue. Lighten the entire tongue, including, to a lesser degree, the part that is in the shadow. With the same white paint, enhance the jowls, the inner edges of the ears, and the outer edge and crease on the tongue. Throughout, keep your tip clean for best line quality.

Step 6. Spray a thin layer of yellow transparent over the entire dog (except for the tongue, nose, teeth, and gums) to tint the white highlights a golden color. A little of this goes a long way. Apply a thin layer of red to make the tongue pink and a very light application of the same to warm up the shadows on the lower ears, throat, cheeks, and chest. Layer both red and yellow lightly on the eyes to give an orange tint to the brown.

Step 7. With pure black, outline the eyes, color the nose, gums, lower jaw, edges of ears, teeth, top of head, edges of shoulders, and inner edges of ears. Darken the pupils, nose, gums, shadows under the cheeks, ear, and jaw, and shadow under the upper eyelids. Softly darken the sides of the snout, shadows on the tongue, and areas outside the eyes. Use a back-and-forth "scribbled" line for the fine, short hairs around the eyes.

Step 8. This entire step is optional, for when you have a little extra time. Use a thin layer of violet to deepen the shadows under the ear, chin, and tongue, the part of the face under the edge of the ear, alongside the snout, at the bottom of the ear, and on the forehead. Also with violet, add a light shade to the shadow on the teeth and tongue and darken the area around the pupils of the eyes. On black, gray, or silver animals, use blue and violet.

Step 9. Use white to add some final highlights: shine on eyes, nose, and tongue and a few highlights on the hair, whiskers, and teeth. Don't get carried away, as is often so easy to do with white—follow your reference photo closely. Finally, add a bit of white "scribbling" in lighter spots on the snout and face. Look the painting over. Check for errors and touch up as needed.

Finally—a very important step—add a healthy coat of top binder or clear coat, and heat-press the shirt to ensure washability and durability of the artwork.