

Starting to Paint Miniatures

A few words of warning

Mini painting is addictive. Once you start you're done for. There's so many wonderful sculpts out there and so much to learn. The first time you paint something and say to yourself "Darn. That's one fine mini" you'll know what it's about.

It takes practice, practice, decent tools, patience and practice to get a mini to look as good as the image in your head. Don't expect to be painting minis like the ones in the display cases in a month. Instead focus on getting your technique down and painting clean.

At the end is some information that we won't cover in class too much but is important to remember. Our goal here is to paint a mini that will look good on the table when you're playing your game. Only you know just how much work you want to put into painting these little pewter beasts.

Preparation

Here's the basics:

File off the mold lines and flash (raised areas where the mold comes together);

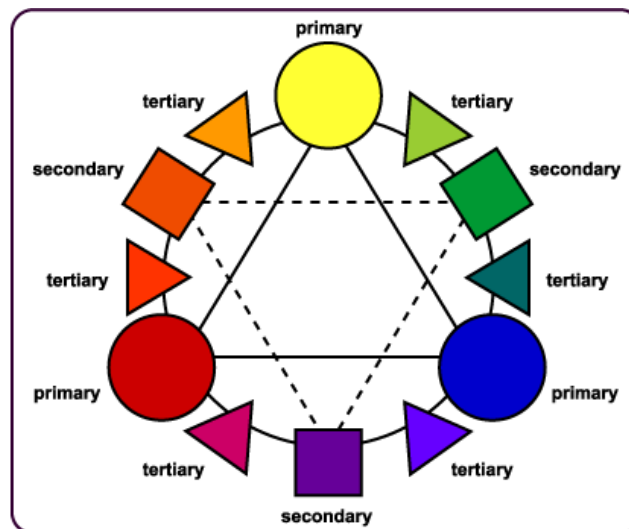
Glue the mini to a base so you're not handling it and rubbing off the paint. Bottle caps are great;

Prime it. Spray primer or brush primer but prime it so the paint stays on.

Painting – Pick Your Colors

Now you're ready to paint. Have a good look at the mini. You want to identify one main color for it. That could be the cloak, the armor or some other large-ish area. I won't go into heavy color theory here but you don't want it looking like a box of crayons. Some restraint is needed.

This is Mr. Color Wheel. Make friends with him. Pick up a cheap one at Walmart or your



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hobby store. Refer to him often. The most common way to pick colors is complimentary – the ones across from each other on the wheel. A VERY brief discussion of color theory is at the end.

Once you pick a main color you want one more COLOR on the mini. So if you picked blue you would want orange. If you picked green you would want red. See the pattern?

And now you fill in the rest with neutrals. Brown, white, ivory, grey, and black are all neutral colors. Silver is a neutral and gold can be one. You can use as many neutrals as you want but again, don't go nuts.

Ready, Set, GO!

Yup. You're ready to paint. Or are you?

Paint as it comes from the bottle is generally too thick. Sure it covers well but it also covers up the details. So you want to thin it a little. Put some on your palette, add a little water and stir it with the blunt end of your brush. You want the paint to be smooth but still opaque. If you can see swirls as you stir add a little more water. If you get it too thin you can always add more paint.

Very few paints can be used right out of the bottle. Get in the habit of using your palette and thinning them before using. You may have to use more than one coat of paint but you'll like the results better. Trust me.

OK – NOW Go!

Paint like you're getting dressed – from the inside out. That means you want to start painting with the innermost details and work your way out to the stuff on the outside. This keeps you from slopping paint on things you've already got done. Paint in smooth strokes on the long lines. That means paint down pant legs and not across. Paint cloaks from top to bottom in nice smooth strokes. Paint belts across the length. You're trying to let your paintbrush do the work.

If you can't get into an area to paint it it's a shadow. Do your best to get the color in there and we'll take care of it in just a bit. Under the arms, behind the legs, under armor. It's all shadows. Don't go nuts trying to get everything painted perfectly. Sometimes you really do need to just jam the brush up there and hope. If you can't see it when looking straight on it will be fine.

Try to paint as neatly as possible. Work up to where surfaces meet. If you slop a little you can always go back and touch it up. But if you control where you put the paint the faster it will go and the better it will look. Brush control is essential for painting minis that look good. Take a deep breath and just paint. It will happen.

Base Coats – 90% Done

Remember that the goal here is something that is going to look good on the game table. So really, look at it from that distance. Bright colors and clean lines are going to do a lot. At this point it is going to look a little flat and like a cartoon. That's OK. It means that you've got paint on the entire thing and that's what you want to do to start. Smooth color in all the right places.

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Washes – 95% Done

Here's where things will start to look interesting. Washes are paint you've thinned even more so it flows into all the nooks and crannies, leaving the high points alone. This will give you shadows and will also naturally separate various areas – a process also known as darklining or just “lining”. Suddenly your mini will have a face, the hair will have depth and the details will stand out.

The fastest and easiest wash is a reddish-brown paint thinned down until it's slightly thicker than water and you can mostly see through it. Or you can get pre-made washes to do the same thing but even some of those need to be thinned. The idea is to get it into the recesses while leaving the surfaces alone.

If you're painting armor use a black wash. The reddish-brown looks great on skin but makes armor look rusty. If that's the look you want then you're ahead of the game.

Thin twice as much paint as you'll think you'll need. Wash gets used up really, really fast. Now take a larger brush and start painting it on. Don't drown the mini – use your brush to paint it on. After you put on a coat of wash rinse your brush, wipe most of the water off, and draw the wash off the high points by painting with the empty brush. You'll begin to see how you can direct the wash where you want it to go.

Let it settle into the eye sockets and other deep points on the face. You won't be painting eyeballs yet so the dark socket will give the impression of eyes. Again, use a slightly damp brush to take the wash off areas you don't want it to be.

Wash the entire mini. The wash is going to slightly darken the color of your paints so you want it to be consistent.

Dry Brush – 100% Done!

What the heck is dry brushing? It's pretty much just what it says – painting with a mostly dry brush. We're going to do this to get some highlights on the mini to balance out the shadows the wash put in.

Since the paint darkened a bit with the wash we can use the same colors as the base coat for the dry brushing. If you want it to be just a little more emphatic you can add a touch of white to the color but until you're comfortable just go with the base coat.

In this case you want the paint thick so put some on your palette but don't thin it. Get a stiffer brush wet and wipe off as much of the water as you can. Press it between two layers of paper towel. It should be just slightly damp. So it's not completely dry brushing.

Pick up some paint and then wipe the brush on your paper towel. You want very little paint on the brush. If you see a solid line when you wipe it off you've got too much paint. When you only hit the bumps on the paper towel you're there. If you don't see anything you need more paint.

LIGHTLY brush across the places where you want highlights. You're going to paint opposite as when you did the base coat. For dry brushing you want to pick out where things would be brightest so go across the leg, not down it. Brush across the curves and edges of the cloak to

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bring out the high points. The nose, forehead and cheek bones of the face should stand out. Pick a few places you want to emphasize and dry brush them. Again, you're going for an emphatic look about 3 feet away.

Varnish

I recommend always putting at least one coat of varnish on your mini. For a gaming mini that's going to take a lot of abuse I'll put 3 coats on there – 1 of gloss and 2 of matte. I encase them in a hard candy shell. You do want to protect the paint you just put on there, don't you? The gloss gives a bit more protection (opinions do vary here) and the matte keeps it from looking like plastic. This also lets you see when there's wear because you'll see a shiny spot. Another coat of matte fixes that right up.

Basing

Basing is an art all by itself. However, you'll probably want to put your mini on the appropriate size base for the game. Glue it on using whatever glue you like and let it set. Then spread a layer of white glue and cover it with sand or ballast. Let it sit for about 30 seconds, then turn it upside down and tap the bottom to remove the excess. Paint the sand the same as you painted the mini – base coat, wash and dry brush.

You can go all kinds of ways with basing but this is the easiest way to go with limited supplies. You can get fancy with flocking, static grass and all kinds of different materials. But the sand method is used a lot and that's because it works.

Extra Stuff

Yes, this is important.

Brushes and Brush Care

Get the best watercolor brushes you can afford. Go for sable or some other natural material. Synthetic brushes will always, always, always hook. Always. Did I mention that synthetic brushes will always hook? Don't try to trim them either. As soon as you do that you've changed the shape of the bristles and it will splay.

Dry brushing is hard on brushes. It just is. And you want something that's got more resistance than the brush you've been using for painting. A cheap synthetic flat brush will work just fine but use what you have.

Don't leave your brushes sitting in your water cup. And don't drag them across the bottom of your water cup to clean them. Swish them back and forth in the water then wipe them across a paper towel, rolling them to keep the brush shape. If you get paint on the paper towel, do it again. Keep doing it until you get all the paint out.

Only use the end 1/3 of your bristles. You don't want to dunk the brush in paint or wash all the way up to the metal part (ferrule). If you do that you're going to get paint up in there and it will ruin your brush when it dries. So just use the end of the brush and keep it clean.

Use the largest brush that will work. The important thing is that it comes to a sharp point. I know your friend swears by the brush with about 7 hairs but it really isn't any good. The paint

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will dry before you ever get it to the mini. A good brush with a good point will hold a lot of paint and give just as much if not better control.

Brush cleaners are a good idea and occasionally wash your brushes. You'll be amazed at what comes out of what seems to be a clean brush. Make sure you get a cleaner for acrylic paints. Pink Soap in the art department of craft and hobby stores is perfect.

Let There Be Light

Good light is essential to painting. Natural lights are really good and you can get them at craft stores when they're on sale. Office supply stores have them too. A desk lamp with a natural light bulb works just as well. Regardless you want to make sure you have a good light source for painting or you'll end up frustrated. You need to see it to paint it.

A lot of painters get portable lights if they're going to paint in various locations. These fold up relatively small and give a good light. I use the hobby store brand natural light task lamp that I got with their very regular online 40% off coupon. It cost me about \$15. The LED arch is very popular and if you have the space go for it.

Color Theory

No, there won't be a test. The color wheel in this handout will give you all the basics you need to know about complementary colors, triads and analogous colors. What do those all mean?

Complimentary – we already went over this. The complement of a color is the one directly opposite it on the color wheel. You don't need to use equal amounts. Green with a touch of red somewhere is just fine.

Triad – three colors that work together. Look for the triangles on the color wheel. Again, pick one main color and accent with the other two. Yellow can mean gold, so don't think you have to go all comic book with your colors.

Analogous – simply put these are the colors next to the one you chose. Use them like triads, pick one color then accent with the color on either side. It's a more subtle way of using color than the other two but can be really nice.

Neutrals are colors like brown, white, ivory, grey and black. They go with everything. Now, mind you, there's red browns, yellow browns, green browns, etc. But generally you can get a neutral brown and it really will go with everything. This is how you fill out your mini since you are limiting yourself on 'real' colors.

Tints and tones just mean adding white or black to your colors to make lighter and darker versions. You'll see that on the more complicated color wheels. So red with a light green works just as well as bright green and a rusty red.

Magic Wash

Yes, this is a real term. Everyone has their own mix for magic wash. This is like the wash you made with water but is "stickier" so it stays where you put it. By the craft paint you can get bottles of matte varnish and something called glaze medium. Either one of those will work. My personal mix is 3 parts varnish/glaze medium (pick one), 3 parts water and 1 part paint. Paints

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can be more or less pigmented so you may need to add more of the other two but keep them in relatively equal measure.

Magic wash will give you more control over where the lines and shadows go. I keep a bottle mixed up so I can use it whenever I feel like it. It works great on terrain too.

The Difficult Colors

There are five colors that are officially called “difficult”. They are: red, yellow, black, white and purple. These are considered difficult to paint because they’re not easy to highlight and/or shadow. You can’t shadow black and you can’t highlight white. Adding white to red makes pink and no one wants to highlight with that.

Here’s some very basic hints on using each of those colors. There are painting classes out there just on painting them, sometimes focusing on one color, so don’t choose red and black for your first army. Just don’t.

Red – Shadow it with mixing in some brown and highlight with mixing in a little yellow.

Yellow – Shadow it by mixing in some orange and highlight by mixing with a little white.

Black – Highlight by mixing a little color into dark grey. Or just use dark grey. Highlight black hair with dull blue.

White – Put down a base coat of light grey or light blue then paint everything but the shadows white. Try putting a little more white on the highlights if you can still bring up the color.

Purple – Shadow it by mixing in dark blue and highlight it by mixing in light blue. You can use reds as well.

Those are very basic concepts and try them out as you paint more minis.

Paints

If you’re tabletop/army painting you want coverage. I’m not going to suggest any specific paint line and you can mix paints from any of them. You’ll find the ones you like and it can be one line for metallics, another for red, yet another for browns, etc. This is where finding a painting group comes in particularly handy since you get to try various brands.

Regardless remember to thin them except when you’re dry brushing.

Palette

Get a palette or three. I prefer the ceramic or porcelain ones myself but the cheap plastic ones work just fine. Some people will tell you a flat ceramic tile will work and it will. But your paint will dry really, really fast before you get a chance to use it all. Palettes with wells keep paint workable longer.

There’s also something called a wet palette. It’s a container with a sponge inside and baking parchment paper on top. The paper wicks up the water and keeps the paint wet. These kinds of palettes will keep paint wet for days when they’re covered. Unless you’re making up custom mixes to use on a lot of minis don’t invest in one until you’re sure it’s what you need.

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Notice every step said to put paint on your palette? That's so you can thin it when needed but it also prevents you from knocking over the bottle and it keeps the paint from drying out because you've left it open. Palettes are useful.

What's Next?

Once you get brush control and the “wash and dry brush” method of painting down you'll probably want to do things a little better. Try something a little more detailed. Paint eyeballs. Try to layer another color into a cloak. Paint the fancy bits on the armor.

Honestly I'm going to recommend that you find a painter or paint group to help you get to the next stages. It's so much easier to watch someone and ask questions as you go. Ask around at your local game store or in your gaming groups to see who paints. And don't forget to make use of the treasure trove of information on YouTube and Facebook.

The best thing you can do is paint. Paint a lot. Learn the “feel” of painting because there is one. But most of all enjoy it and paint what makes you happy.