

# Painting Tactics for Solo Wargamers

By Bob Stewart

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We all want to spend more time gaming, and less time painting, right? (OK, so some of us seem to spend most of our time collecting painted figures, despite what they say, but let's stick to the premise of more-gaming-less-painting-equals-better, for the moment). Who doesn't want to produce MORE troops painted to a better standard, and in less time? So how do we paint more efficiently, so we can find more time for Solo gaming? Here are a couple of tips for improving production, that apply whatever the figure scale, from 6mm to 54mm.



## Workspace:

The first requirement is an easy-to-access painting workspace, preferably a permanent set up (although a purpose-built shelf that slides under your bed will do in a pinch). The aim is to recapture all those little slices of time that can be put to good use, in painting. So, if the wife is late getting out the door, we can paint up half a dozen shields; if she's talking on the phone in the middle of our TV-time, we can slip away and do some touch-up until the wife yells down to the basement (or wherever) that she's ready to resume the program. And if we wake up 15 minutes early, that lets us undercoat a handful of little guys. You can

get a lot more production for the week, by recapturing those little slivers of time. (Even if you are an avowed bachelor!)

Keep some old towels or worn-out sweaters nearby to throw over your lap, in case you are wearing your business/dress clothes; pulling an old sweater over top of your dress shirt will save it from stray flecks of paint, too. I tend to blow away excess paint that gets into fine-detail areas (like faces), so these coveralls are essential equipment.

A great tip is to do the really messy stuff (like priming figures) wearing hospital-style latex gloves. Not only does it keep your hands clean, but when you peel off the gloves, any "mess" that would have been on your hands or that could transfer to other figures, is inside-out, in the gloves. I reuse a set of gloves about 6 times or more before they tear --- before you put them back on, simply turn them correct (painted) side out, and blow into them to get the fingers to pop out the right way. It helps to give your hands a coating of talcum powder before you reuse gloves, too.

## No See-ums

You can't accurately paint that which you cannot see. And for older eyes like mine, that means my figure work-space (and my wargames table, for that matter) have a number of adjustable-necked -lamps each equipped with 100-watt energy-efficient spiral bulbs.

When I'm doing fine-line work, I typically have one of those lights about 6 inches away from the little guy, with the lamp shade

keeping the klieg-light out of my own eyes. Better vision means less need for correcting messy painting (due to sloppy brush-work that goes over the lines), and that means more production output.

If you are having trouble with fine lines, you may want to take a look at one of those magnifier head-sets, with the flip-up lenses. Once I hit my late 50's, I had to adopt a set of these, and my accuracy on painting fine lines has improved dramatically. The plastic magnifier lenses don't last forever, either. I finally had to replace mine after about 10 years, because I just couldn't get all the smears off the plastic magnifying lenses, in spite of using sprays meant for coated eye-glasses. So magnifier head-sets are a consumable, just like paint brushes are.

### **Stability is Key to Fine Lines (or Fine Lines, Part I)**

Getting a peek at other people's painting stations is really informative, and I've learned a lot, over the years, by asking friends if they could show me how they paint up little guys. The thing is, many of them have a range of great ideas, which they just assumed everyone figured out. One of the things that comes out pretty quickly, is that we need to have a stable painting platform, if we want to churn out a lot of figures in a short period of time. You wouldn't dream of trying to write a letter, as you're walking down the street, would you? Too much vibration, too much wobble, no place to rest your hand to get the needed accuracy. The resulting printing is a horrible scribble. And yet lots of figure painters think they can do a quick and decent job, holding a popsicle stick in mid-air, with their other hand dipping into a bottle near their waist, transferring great globs of acrylic up 2 feet or more, to their eye level.

Almost ALL of the people I know who do lots and lots of figures (including all my friends who produce over 100 or more figures per week), have some sort of solid painting stage set up, that allows them to rest both the figure, and their painting hand, on a firm, well-lit surface. And that surface is usually pretty close to their eyes (so they don't get back-strain, leaning in to see what they are painting). In my case, I use a converted Ping Pong table (a sturdy 80-pound one that notches together, not the flimsy light fold-up kind that comes on wheels --- Derrick's suggestion), and I use an old wooden box (bought from a garage sale, and originally intended as a kitchen container for flour or some such), to get the "right" painting height. That gives me a little platform, about 6" x 8" on which to stuff a dozen figures that I am working on, and my paint. I can rest my hands on the front lip, and everything is rock-solid.

Wooden boxes on wooden Ping-Pong tables tend to slide, at the most inconvenient times. So I put an old rubber mouse-pad down between the box and the table top --- problem solved.

Alternatively, if you have the space, one of those metal-and-pressed-wood workbench kits is a great investment.

### **Derrick's Platens**

My buddy Derrick has an amazing paint-shop for little guys, and anyone could learn a LOT from a half-hour looking over his shoulder. One of the first things that struck my eye, were all the little "tiles" (or platens) that he organized his work-in-progress on. These are each about 12" square, and maybe half an inch thick. They cover a whole ping-pong table in Derrick's basement, like a loose coating of tiles. The idea is that you can do silver on ONE tray (of knights, let's say) and then switch and do the same color

on a platen of Greek Hoplites. Or, if you get tired of one period, you just put that platen away, and change periods to a different platen. That's a great way to stave off boredom, and your numbers for the week goes way up (although it may be spread over several different projects).

Derrick must have at least 20 tiles on-the-go at any one time, with another dozen sitting on thin shelves, tagged for the contents and set aside.

Now I've extended that idea, with a series of stackable plastic muffin tins. Each tin is labeled with whatever brown-undercoated little guys are hiding within it. Sometimes when I don't feel very inspired, I might just prime and brown-undercoat a handful of little guys that I KNOW I am going to use up in the next couple of weeks.

### **Fine Lines (Part II, The "I's" Have it)**

There's something peculiar about the human eye, in that we think that an image with dark lines highlighting the lighter areas (like the face) or separating two lighter colors (like yellow markings on a powder-blue shield), look somehow "sharper" if there is a microscopically fine dark line, separating any two light areas. That black-lining is also behind some of the sharpest TV's (they sometimes call it Edge-Enhancement). The brain doesn't seem to consciously recognize the fine lines; it just "sees" the figure as sharper, somehow. As an aside, I'm putting the final touches on a bunch of Swiss pikes, and the bland ones are getting fine-line pin-striping. Nothing makes a dull gray coat "snap" like adding white pin-striping along the sleeves or the hems of the tunic.

So how do we draw those super-fine lines?

Here are some painting tips on fine-lines, which I learned from Victor K, many years

ago. Victor was a master draftsman, and one of the few people I know who made his living using ink pens (the kind you dipped in an ink well). In effect, he was paid to produce accurate, super-fine ink drawings (one of the few crafts that might even exceed what we try to accomplish in painting little-guys). And his hand-drawn notes looked like they had been printed by a computer, or a type-writer. Victor's first commandment was to paint fine-lines top-to-bottom --- anyone can draw a series of very tiny "I's" that are both fine, and close together. Make sure you draw the first line AWAY from your hand, and progress with the next line closer towards your hand (so you can see the previous line). Right-handed people draw a series of closely-spaced I's from left-to-right so you don't cover up the work. Sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people try to paint fingers onto 15mm figures going the "wrong" way, with less-than-stellar results.

If Victor had to draw a circle (like the letter "o"), he turned it into a series of arcs (maybe 8-to-the-circle), and he would release the drawing paper from the drafting board, so that he could turn the paper around, and even upside down, so that most of the arc was drawn as close to vertical as possible. I know I know, you say you can do just as well when you paint from the bottom to the top, or from left to right (and so can I, on SOME days). But if you ever hope to cut down on all that wasted time, correcting splotches where you accidentally went over the line, then heed Victor's hard-won experience. Tumble your figure so that you can paint those fine lines DOWN, like a series of I's.

Victor's second trick for fine lines was using many passes, and not just one stroke. He'd pick up a bit of ink, and then each new stroke would start with a bit of an overlap on the previously laid-down (usually still-wet)

stroke. As a corollary, I've seen Victor get rid of excess ink on a scrap piece of paper, and then "start" a line, with many small passes, each a fraction of an inch closer to the good-copy paper --- a neat trick for "correcting" where we might have obliterated that dark-brown line separating two lighter areas.

Victor's third tip, was to paint only one edge at a time. In other words, if he had to paint to match a certain width (like we were painting on a strap, or a stripe of paint), then Victor would treat it as THREE projects --- The left line limit, the right line limit, and the fill-up-the-middle bit. We may not use this all the time, but it is really useful on fine-detail for shield patterns. As an aside, never seen any production manual that medieval manuscript-writers may have had, but this must be how they did those exquisite super-accurate illuminated Bible pages.

You can't paint fine lines with molasses. Paint should be the consistency of 1% milk. If it is too thick, stop and dilute the paint jar with a bit of water, shake thoroughly, clean off your brush and start again.

Practice your fine-line technique. A great way to get better at fine-line control, is to do a crossword puzzle in ball-point pen. Not only do you get to practice better penmanship (which is really all about fine lines), but you also have to practice fitting the printing into the given space. The aim is to get neat, equally-large letters, aligned side-to-side and top-to-bottom. Not as easy as it sounds. Think you are pretty accomplished? Now you can practice putting in FAINT letters (for answers you THINK might be right), in very light-weight pen-strokes. Done right, these phantom solutions are almost invisible. It's the same skill set you need to start microscopic thin lines on shield patterns.

### **Don't Paint Their Underwear**

Occasionally, I get to ask someone what they think of my paint-jobs, and I still remember my buddy Brian telling me that I had to stop painting their underwear. (Eh??) What Brian meant, was that I used up a lot of valuable time, painting areas that most wargames would never see --- like behind the shields, or under the droop of the chain-mail. In effect, Brian was telling me to "allocate" my painting time better, such that more time was put into areas that jumped out at first glance (faces and shields), and less time and effort on inconsequential items (the girth or belly strap on a horse's saddle).

Brian also suggested I use lighter colors, because the drab (realistic, to my eyes) colors didn't allow the fancy painting to "snap" out at you, at first glance. He was right, too! I also included some lighter shades like pink and sky-blue, where historically justified (pink on some medieval pike trim, and sky-blue on some Macedonian pikemen).

### **Simplify, Simplify**

Along the same lines, I decided to simplify some of my Solo Wargaming painting --- now all non-essential equipment on my latest figures (like spear-shafts, belts, shoes, belt-pouches, etc.) are left painted Burnt Umber. We can always go back, and add more detail to these areas later on, if we like. I used to paint up 20 different kinds of horses (roan, sables, bays, whatever) and now I've reduced that to 6 that are significantly different. If I need a dozen horse, then I just paint up 2 of each kind.

We can also save time by painting several things the same, over a bunch of figures, and then mixing those up within the whole group. So I might paint 4 figures at a crack with the same base-color for trousers, or a different batch with a similar color forage-cap. No need to have 16 different color socks on a

merry band of 16 figures. We can simplify that to 4 colors, alternating over the 16-man line.

### **Brown-Lining and Paint-Away**

This is sort of like black-lining, but a bit more subtle. After I prime my little guys in Zinc-Chromate (a model train coating from Accu-Paint or from Scalecoat that chemically bonds to lead), then I give the figure an over-all thin coat in Burnt Umber --- a very, very dark brown. The idea is to “paint-away” panels of the figure, leaving a very fine Burnt Umber line between adjacent colors. And the shadows or underwear are left in the Burnt Umber color. I do the Burnt Umber undercoat as a production run, where I might brown-coat 30 to 60 figures at a crack, and set the platen aside to dry thoroughly overnight. Done this way, the Zinc Chromate and the brown-coating only add about 30 seconds per figure, and they save me a LOT of time, not having to detail straps, boots, shafts, and so on.

An interesting observation: if we paint a brown line between two colors, we MIGHT be able to get that line down to a scraggly  $1/64^{\text{th}}$  of an inch, with a lot of practice, on a good day --- something around the thickness we get with a medium pen on paper. However, by “painting away” on either side of that brown area, we can get a fraction of that thickness (maybe  $1/4$  as fine as we can actually paint that line --- somewhat finer than a fine-tipped pen).

### **Three-toed Sloth**

It's fun to play painting tricks on your unsuspecting friends and buddies. I take a yellow-and-white shield, and ask some visiting relative what color HE calls it. Very few people mention the brown line between the color segments; the brain doesn't work that way. Alternatively, I take 4 painted-up figures stuck in a row, and ask which paint

job they prefer. Almost uniformly they pick out the one with the brown-line, although many can't quite figure out why that one seems “sharper”.

A similar trick that requires the dark-brown undercoat, is to paint 15mm hands, using only 3 fingers, instead of 4. The eye is “fooled” into seeing fingers, but while it recognizes fingers, it doesn't seem to automatically “count”, and say to itself, “Oh, there's a finger missing!” The big advantage is speed, and ease of painting. You can paint the outer two fingers at an angle, so that most of the paint is 45 degrees to the “outside” of the hand, and the paint for the middle finger flows into the cavity between the center two fingers.

Doesn't matter if you mess-up, once in a while. Get 8 out of 10 “right” and the eye sees 10 sets of hands.

### **The Case for Using Pennies**

The most common painting “base” for figures, is the lowly popsicle stick. It's cheap, readily available, and you can mount several figures onto one stick. People use any kind of glue to stick the figures down, all with reasonable success. But I would suggest that mounting a figure (any scale, from 6mm through to 28mm) on a penny, is a much more versatile idea:

You can tumble the figure to any angle, to get into the smallest nook. (Popsicle sticks have blind spots.)

You can get two fingers and a thumb on that penny, regardless of the pose; a very stable, drop-proof grip.

You can mark the penny with a dot of paint for errors, and keep the production line going.

A dropped figure (who me?) usually falls on the penny, with minimal paint damage or bending.

A penny base lets you mount a roofing nail on the opposite side, if you want to dip the painted figure in Minwax.

You can dispose of any painting crud or brush hairs by wiping it off on the penny. You can dispose of too-much-paint (when doing fine lines) by wiping the brush off on the penny.

You can mix-n-match (like 4 trousers, same color, in a unit of 16) then shuffle pennies (try that with popsicle sticks).

You can make extra figures (as painting masters, or as surplus to this production run, but for some other project).

You can “practice” your 3-finger-grip anywhere, just by tumbling a penny in your hand.

There are lots more reasons, but this should be enough to get you to at least TRY pennies as painting bases.

By the way, I start off my painting sessions by painting the tops of the pennies with a throw-away color (in my case, usually some sort of baby-doll flesh --- I don't know HOW I managed to accumulate so many excess bottles). I like a nice thick (cream consistency) coat for this, and either puddle the paint on, or do several layers of paint. Let the coats dry thoroughly between layers. Then mount the figure using a dab of 5-minute epoxy, trying to glue only half the base of the figure (the part nearest the front of the figure, or nearest the shield --- pick a strategy and stick with it). This acts as a kind of mechanical “fuse” so that when I slice the finished figure away, using an Exacto knife, the figure just pops right off the penny. The bonus is that the epoxy acts as a wider more-stable base, which I can trim to shape with nail clippers. Or, if I don't need the extra width, after I pop the figure off the penny, I can just grab the edge of the dried epoxy with needle nose pliers, and

usually pull the 5-minute epoxy right off, in one go.

Warning! Don't make the mistake of ignoring that mechanical-fuse layer of baby-doll paint! If you use too much 5 minute epoxy to glue the figure directly to a penny, you will have a horrible time trying to slice the figure off the base! And the adherence gets worse over time, as the epoxy fully sets up.

Recovered pennies go back to the baby-doll paint line, and get recycled. The whole penny thing takes about a minute per figure (including painting the penny, scraping it from the figure, and prepping it for recycling); the penny process saves many times that, by reducing touch-ups and back-painting when I used to go over the lines.

### **Impressionism**

There was a time when I would painstakingly paint the smallest shield, with microscopic dabs of paint, to a degree that was unappreciated without resorting to a jeweler's loupe. What a huge drain on painting time! That all changed thanks to Craig T, a life-long railway guy. He was making up some cardboard buildings for his massive layout one day, and I noticed that he was taking some shortcuts on fine detail, and asked about it. For example, he would paint brick-work at the corners, and leave 80% of a wall as a dappled brick color. Craig explained that he wasn't PAINTNG a building, so much as he was giving the IMPRESSION of a painted building. Another kind of optical illusion.

Or to apply the same thinking to little guys, we don't need to Paint a shield, so much as to give the impression of a painted shield. That Lion Rampant on the shield can be more of a cartoon, if it is small enough. The effect from 2 feet away is the same as a

finely detailed miniature. And three gold crowns on a shield can be three yellow blobs, like McDonald arches, with a tiny cross on top --- it's the impression that counts. From 3 feet away, it's hard to tell the difference.

And to round out the list:

### **Growing with the Unfolding Story**

The Solo Army doesn't have to be fielded all at once, fully painted in its glory, before you start a campaign. One way to keep your interest up (while painting those thousand or more new figures for the latest big-battle), is to paint the front ranks to a greater degree, and paint the back ranks up as minimalists. Alternatively, units that are far enough away from the battle line might just be a blob of cotton batten on the "right" size base. This simulates a unit arriving on the field, but beyond the dust and stirred-up turbulence, we can't make out exactly who they are --- tyros or elite.

You can even "force" yourself to paint a few more bits, before you move that stand. Pop a marker down on the spot, and whisk away the offending unit for a quick touch-up. (OK, so I usually have "spares" that I paint up, and then I replace the offending unit with the guys fresh-out-of-the-paint-shop --- easy if they are one of 20 Zulu warbands; not so easy if they are the sole unit of British Colonial home-guard).

### **Conclusion**

So there you have it: a dozen ways to salvage more Solo playing time, by rethinking how we produce skads of little guys for our next Solo Wargames project.