

# SHADOWS - the secret of figure painting

How to get Figures that Photograph like the Real Thing!  
(Black undercoat and colour highlight)

by

BRIAN W. K. FAYLE  
Cambridge, Ontario, Canada

THE FOLLOWING LISTS THE TITLE SLIDES OF A CLINIC THAT I GAVE WITH SOME COMMENTS ON THEM THAT YOU MIGHT FIND USEFUL.

A description of the method is given in the Jan/Feb 1997 NG&SL GAZETTE and January 1996 MODELLING RAILWAYS ILLUSTRATED (UK). Please note, though, that there have been some modifications since then which have improved the look obtained. A more recent version is in November 1999 MODEL RAIL (UK).

- **What do people really look like?** Study the prototype just as you would anything else on the railroad! If you do, you will see that there are a surprising number of shadows on people.
- **Current status of figure painting:** Our model figures do not have the depth in their creases to cast good strong shadows. The result is that the figures look flat and lifeless. A gloss finish does not improve the realism either!
- **The difference? Shadows:** It is this lack of shadowing on model figures that is most noticeable in photos of model railway layouts. There are basically two types to consider: Type A - edge shadows & Type B - fold shadows (see overleaf)
- **How do we get there?** The shadow areas in the model need to be accentuated. One way to do this is to apply a dark 'shadow' wash after painting and wipe this off the highlight areas. This works reasonably well for the Type B shadows but does little for the Type A.
- **Put the shadows on first:** If the model is painted black first and the colours painted on so that the black stays on the vertical edges the really defining Type A, shadows are produced. Think of the process as putting on a shadow base and then colour high-lighting.
- **Choosing figures:** As you usually don't need that many figures, spend some time and money on getting good unpainted ones. Figures should be a key part of any scene. The better the detail in the figure, the better the result.
- **Scale/Size & Bulk/Time/Place:** Make sure your figures are appropriate for the era and location modelled. There are also differences in the bulk of figures produced by the different makers.
- **Clothing: Colour:** Think dull and drab! Remember, it was only the widespread use of washers and dryers, and synthetic materials, that made light, bright clothing possible to keep clean.
- **Preparing the figures:** Most figures need some work on them to remove moulding marks of one sort or another. The commonest is a ridge down the side. Use a sharp craft knife and scrape the blade along the ridge to remove it. A fiddly job but well worth doing.
- **Degrease/Mount on base:** Cheap white vinegar makes a good degreaser! Soak overnight and rinse off in warm water. Either leave figures on sprue or mount on something like a piece of wood that gives you something to hold when painting the figures. If using ACC, the debonder will remove the figure later.
- **Brushes/Brush care:** Good brushes are worth every cent but need good care. Some flat and pointed brushes with short bristles are best in sizes from 000 to 4. Do not let paint dry on brush. Keep moist when working. Wash in hand soap and water after using.
- **Black base & dry brushed colours:** Dry brushing is wiping a brush with thickish paint on it across a surface to cover only raised areas. The paint must not be thin enough to run into the creases. I am now using artist quality acrylic paint in tubes. Used undiluted with water these have the right density needed to start. The paint should be MATT finish.
- **We now have figures/paint/brushes:** The next thing to do is put on the 'shadow' base coat of paint. Any matt black paint will do.
- **Black base/thin coat/clean brush often:** As I rarely paint more than a few figures at a time I prefer to hand paint rather than airbrush on the black base coat. You want as thin a base coat as you can get as you do not want to fill in the creases that are going to give the shadows. Remove excess paint by wiping the brush on the pad.
- **Initial dry brush/Build up colour intensities:** There is no special sequence in which I paint the parts of a figure. If using the artist acrylics, mix a fair bit of white in initially into the chosen colour to cover the black and then darken up with later coats. After showing where the high spots are go over them with a thinner mix of paint to give them good paint coverage. Several coats are needed to do this. Acrylics dry quickly so the time taken is not as long as you might think. Go over any black clothing fold shadows (Type B) with a thin wash of appropriate colour, with white added, to tone these down. ALWAYS LEAVE THE BLACK 'EDGES' BETWEEN THE COLOURED FLAT PLANES UNTOUCHED. These are the key to the success of the method and really do bring out the third dimension..
- **Flesh/too dark better than too light :** Most commercially available flesh colours seem to be too light. A darker colour seems to work best. If using artist acrylics, mix white with burnt sienna and add a touch of the red.
- **The face/Possibly the most important part of a figure:** Two black slits for the eyes, and a narrow pale red rimmed line for the mouth, are all that is needed to make an HO face come to life. After the first dry brush the face may look very crude. Using a thinnish mix of paint carefully paint narrow down the black eye sockets. Paint a thin red line for the lips. The white in eyes is visible in real life up to about 40' (10" in O, 5.5" in HO). Average viewing distance for a layout is 30" which is equivalent to 120' in O or 215' in HO so do not add the whites.
- **The hands almost as important as the face:** Carefully brush the flesh colour across the fingers to make them show up well. Incidentally, brushing across the grooves is one of the keys to dry brushing.
- **Little details/Belts/buckles/boots etc:** Ideal subjects for the dry brush technique no matter how you paint your figures.
- **Remove from base or sprue/touch up:** Sometimes paint will come off, or there will be a bare spot where the glue holding the figure to the painting base was, or the sprue was attached.
- **Final check/missed areas/missed items:** Now is your last chance to touch up those little areas that were missed or painted the wrong colour.
- **Testors Dullcote - the grand finale:** This is a clear matt spray varnish which gives a good dull finish.
- **The technique works for non-figures!** There are all sorts of items that can be treated the same way. Theoretically everything on the layout could be painted black first and then dry brushed! The method does bring all sorts of things, other than figures, to 'life'. I almost routinely now spray most scenic items black first and then paint them!
- **Shadows do make the difference:** Once you have tried this method I think you will agree with me! I know the method works for N, HO and O scales. Slight modification is needed to the foregoing for N and O. In O the Type B shadows are especially important.

INCIDENTALLY, A FIGURE IS ONE OF THE EASIEST THINGS ON A LAYOUT TO COMPARE WITH THE PROTOTYPE! TAKE ONE OF YOUR FIGURES OUT ONTO THE STREET, OR TO A MALL, HOLD THE FIGURE UP AND SEE IF IT MERGES INTO THE CROWD! IF IT DOES, YOU ARE DOING THE RIGHT THING. IF NOT, WHY NOT?

## THIS TECHNIQUE CAN BE USED ON MANY OTHER SCENIC ITEMS

If you have any questions feel free to contact me at:

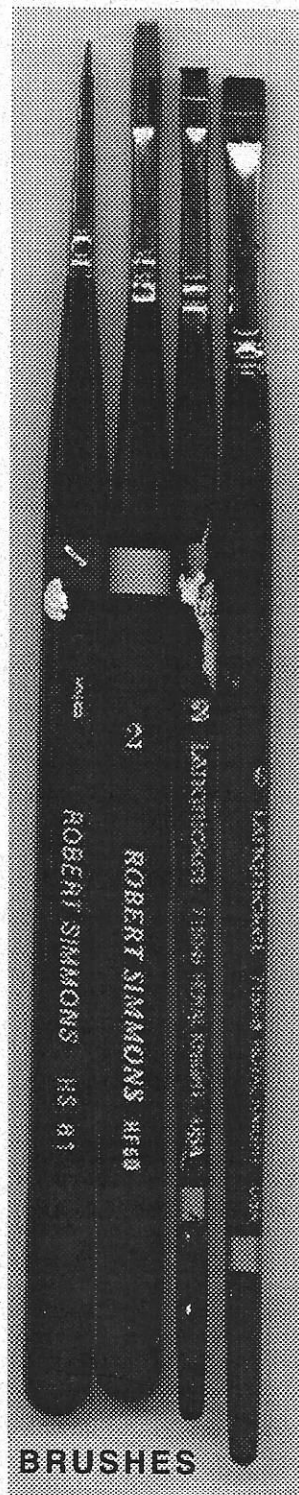
MAIL: 6695 Wellington Road 34, RR 22, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada N3C 2V4 PHONE: 519 - 658 - 6573 FAX: 519 - 658 - 8152

E-MAIL: brifayle@compuserve.com

Revised Nov 24 99

Printed Nov 26, 1999





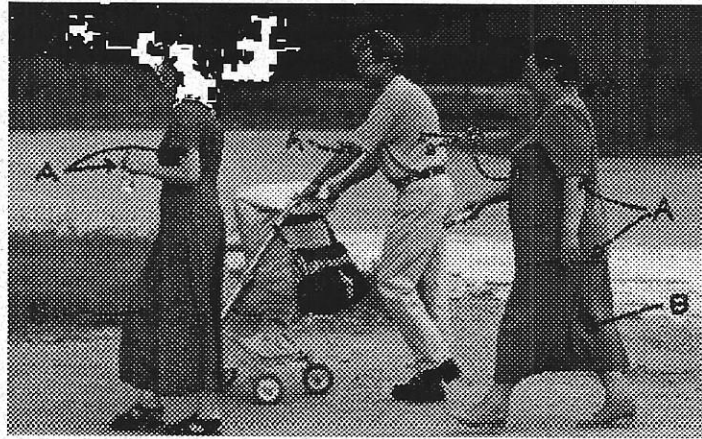
These are the brushes I use at actual size. Remember I model O scale.

Flat brushes with short bristles are best for dry brushing. They can be used on figures to establish the high spots. They are ideal for painting structures and all sorts of things.

The fine pointed brush is used for HO figures and detail work on other items.

**WHEN YOU HAVE PAINTED A FIGURE FOLLOWING THE ABOVE LOOK AT IT FROM THE NORMAL VIEWING DISTANCE. UP CLOSE THE FIGURE MIGHT LOOK BADLY PAINTED BUT FROM FURTHER AWAY IT WILL PROBABLY LOOK GREAT!**

## SHADOW TYPES



I think shadows on figures can be divided into two types:

**TYPE A - (Edge Shadows)** are the shadows that form, for example, on the edges of things like sleeves, collars, belts. They are fine, often vertically inclined, shadows.

These are the key to bringing figures to life.

**TYPE B - (Fold Shadows)** are the large soft shadows that form in clothing folds. They help give the full three-dimensional shape to the figures.

To be successful, therefore, any figure painting technique must be able to show these two types. My method of dry brushing colours over a black base coat produces excellent Type A shadows. The Type B shadows are black and much too strong. Early attempts to correct this by toning down the black areas with a thinned wash of the oil-based enamels I was using failed because the paint opacity dropped too much. By switching to Artist Quality Acrylics it was possible to tone down the black type B shadows very nicely.

With this modification, the method described overleaf, using artist acrylics, produces Type A and Type B shadows that are acceptable. The method works on both O and HO figures, and has many other applications.

### ARTIST ACRYLIC PAINTS

There are so-called "Introductory" sets of artist acrylic paints available for very reasonable prices.

Speedball have one that cost me less than C\$20.00 and consists of a tube of Warm Black, Titanium White, Ultramarine Blue, Burnt Sienna, Quinacridine Red, Cadmium Yellow Light, and Phthalo Green.

The set I use is by Pentel. This has 12 different colours in 11ml tubes for about the same price.

The big advantage of tube paints is that you can squeeze out the amount you want onto a palette of scrap styrene, or whatever, cap the tube and the rest doesn't dry out whilst you work. The paint also comes out thick, which is what you want it to be for the initial stages.

Mixing paints to get the colours you want is much easier than it seems. Just practice! Remember to add a fair bit of white to the base coats, and build up the colour in later coats. Have fun!

Artist acrylics are water soluble and user friendly!

If you have any difficulty finding a paint set at your local art suppliers Wyndham Art Supplies at 164 Wyndham Street North, Guelph, Ontario N1H 4E8 usually have the Pentel sets in stock. Phone 1 800 560 1970

### OTHER PAINTS

Theoretically you should be able to use any paint. In practice you want a paint that will not run off the flat onto the black edge.