



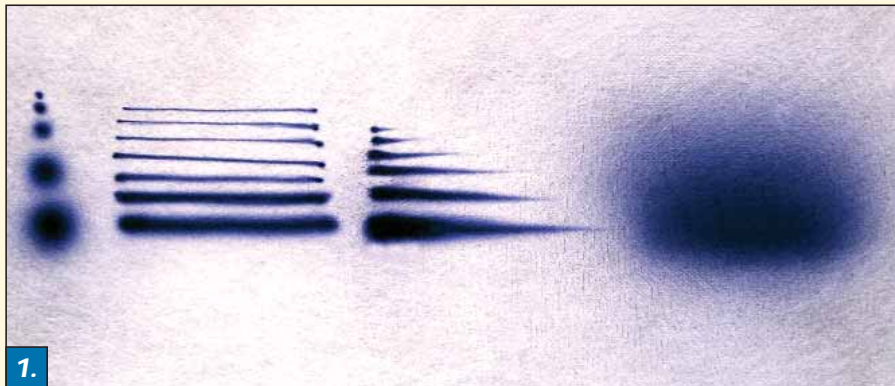
# Back to Basics

PART II

# THE "HARD" DAGGER STROKE

AIRBRUSH MASTER TERRY HILL RETURNS WITH ANOTHER ARTICLE IN HIS BACK TO BASICS SERIES PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY HILL

In the previous two issues I demonstrated a couple versions of the most important stroke in airbrush: the soft and hard dagger strokes. I can't emphasize enough how important this stroke is to master.



1.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE FOUND yourself "late" to this class, please report to the publisher's office for a severe reprimand! Seriously though, I encourage you to catch up with all the back issues dating to January-February 2006. These exercises have evolved over 18 years of teaching, and are designed to progress your skills until they become second nature. Then, and only then, will you be able to unleash your true potential as an airbrush artist.

## THE FOUR BASICS

FIGURE 1

For those who may still be struggling a bit, it bears repeating that the airbrush is only capable of producing four basic strokes or shapes. We see here an example of the dot, the line, the dagger stroke, and basic

shading. Stippling is also possible but requires external manipulation of the brush or special modification to achieve the effect therefore; I will cover it in a later installment of this column as a special effect. In any case, stippling is really just a form of the dot, which brings us back to the ultimate truth that there are only four shapes the airbrush is capable of naturally producing. They are very simple in form but amazingly powerful. Literally anything in nature can be rendered with some form or derivative of these shapes.

In previous installments, we explored techniques to improve our proficiency in all but one of the shapes: shading/blending. In this article we'll complete this task as well as wrap up our further study of the hard dagger stroke.

## CHRISTMAS TREES

FIGURE 2

In the July-August issue I showed a series of exercises designed to teach control of the length of the dagger stroke. This lesson begins with a similar exercise that I've broken down into four components. Here, however, we'll establish a vertical center line with a five-inch dagger stroke followed by a two-inch horizontal dagger stroke to the left as demonstrated in Figure 1. Start your dagger strokes at the base, and make a series of strokes that get progressively shorter until you reach the top. Complete a series of these until you become proficient in this direction. Continue practicing by daggering in the opposite direction as shown in Figure 2. After a series of successful attempts in this direction we're ready to combine the two exercises into a shape that roughly resembles a Christmas tree. Make a series of these shapes until you feel comfortable leaving out the vertical line we've been using as a starter point. Gradually loosen up as you practice. Nature never made a perfectly symmetrical tree, and neither should you! Notice how the tree looks in Figure 4. The strokes are looser and even begin to curve and rock back and forth as they're laid down. This rocking technique, once mastered, is very

useful in creating a variety of textures such as clouds, fur, ripples on the ocean's surface, and a multitude of other effects.

**SWIRLS**

**FIGURE 3**

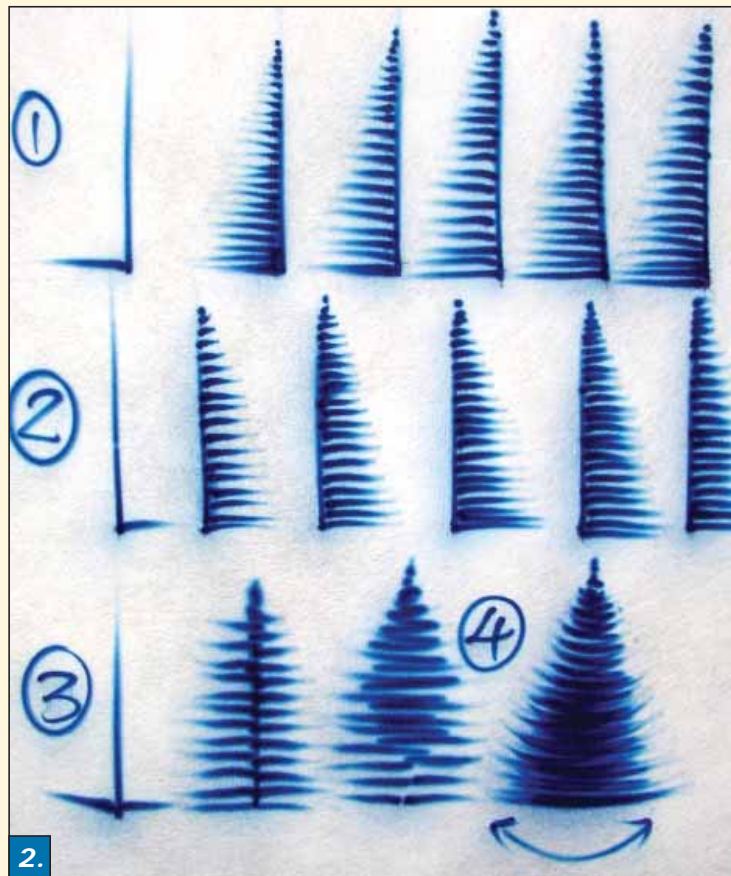
Assuming that you're producing straight dagger strokes, it's time to introduce a new twist: swirls. I've broken down swirls into four basic steps to help you visualize how this exercise is performed. In Step 1, I airbrushed a dot to establish the center of the exercise, surrounded by a soft circle as the outer boundary. In Step 2, the dagger stroke is initiated at the center and curves outward along an arcing path that flares out along the outside border. Step 3 indicates how the exercise should look at about 180-degrees as you progress along counter-clockwise. Step 4 is full circle. This exercise is a little difficult to keep even and neat at first. You may even want to take a second pass around the circle to fill in a few irregular gaps. Practice this direction until you're comfortable with the results, then perform the same exercise in the clock-wise direction. To avoid any possible confusion, the different directions are indicated with red arrows.

**FOLLOWING THE PATH**

**FIGURE 4** (next page)

For further clarification, and to help prepare you for subsequent techniques, I've drawn this graphic to show the actual path the airbrush is traveling from the center out to the edge and back again. Notice that the thin blue line is continuous from start to finish. This solid line represents not only the path the brush has traveled but also the amount of time the air is depressed while performing this exercise. The air is never cut off even though the paint is turned on and off with each individual dagger stroke. This is indicated in the center graphic by the dagger strokes performed in red paint.

I cannot say this enough: **LEAVE THE AIR ON!** This is not a spray can. You don't have to lift your finger off



Start your dagger strokes at the base, and make a series of strokes that get progressively shorter until you reach the top.

After a series of successful attempts in this direction we're ready to combine the two exercises into a shape that roughly resembles a Christmas tree.

the button to stop the flow of paint, just depress the trigger and roll your finger back and forth to start and stop the paint as you move around the path.

The first half of the loop from the center out to the border is where the dagger stroke happens. As you make the turn at the border you should have already rolled off the paint while leaving the air on to complete the trip back to the center, thereby effectively using the backside of the loop as a follow-through. It's important to remember



This exercise is a little difficult to keep even and neat at first. You may even want to take a second pass around the circle to fill in a few irregular gaps



4.



5.

Notice that the thin blue line is continuous from start to finish. This solid line represents not only the path the brush has traveled but also the amount of time the air is depressed while performing this exercise

The path traveled in this exercise is exactly the same as the last. The difference is where you stop and start the paint flow as you complete each loop.

make the fronds is vaguely similar to the swirls exercise. Flushing out the palm fronds to a

that a smooth follow-through while leaving the air on is a critical component in producing a correct dagger stroke.

## PINWHEELS

### FIGURE 5

The pinwheels exercise is very similar in appearance to the swirl, but it's performed from the outside in. The emphasis here is on controlling the point of the dagger stroke. When properly performed, your stroke should start thick along the outside border while tapering through an arc down to a point ending directly in the center. The path traveled in this exercise is exactly the same as the last. The difference is where you stop and start the paint flow as you complete each loop. Perform this exercise until you're competent in the clock-wise and counter-clock-wise directions.

## PALM TREES

### FIGURE 6

Finally, here's an exercise where you can see a useful result immediately! Most of the exercises I teach are developed to subtly teach you a new skill while constantly building muscle memory through repetition. As a result, some may seem pointless and boring.

It's hard to relate the need to do proper pinwheels and swirls when you're really dying inside to crank out a portrait or some demented demon! I know it's been difficult to wade through all the crazy exercises, but they really do pay off in the real world.

The palm tree exercise is a good example of this.

Notice that I have numbered the progression of each item in this example. Let's start by discussing the palm tree itself. It begins as a simple, slightly curved vertical dagger stroke. Step 2 is a basic naked skeleton where the palm fronds will be placed. Notice that the pattern used to

finished look as seen in Step 3 requires a combination of the skills we learned when doing the Christmas tree and the swirls exercises. I have also broken down the technique for flushing out the fronds into three components. Follow the sequence as you practice creating a few palm trees. If necessary, you may



6.

Notice that the pattern used to make the fronds is vaguely similar to the Swirls exercise. Flushing out the palm fronds to a finished look as seen in Figure 3 requires a combination of the skills we learned when doing the Christmas tree and the Swirls exercises.

## Introducing the new "Terry Hill" Compressor!

I'm excited to announce this new version of my compressor. It's unbelievably quiet and has a host of exciting new features including a new telescopic handle. This allows for an overall height of only 26 3/4" when fully collapsed and makes it much easier to transport and store. The handle extends to a full 36" for added leverage and ease of handling while rolling the compressor from one location to another. We've also added strong pneumatic tires and lowered its center of gravity by mounting our new highly efficient compact cooling fan on the side. The air intake filter has been improved and on the output side you'll find a high quality dual air filtration system. Our system features an air pressure regulator w/ moisture trap and auto drain system combined with a high-quality Japanese coalescing oil filter. The 3/4 hp motor is made out of cast iron for durability and it comes with cooling fins to dissipate excess heat. It produces 2.35 cfm and your top psi is 124lbs. The motor sits atop an incredible 6 gal. air tank which has been painted on the inside to prevent rust and a drain hole has been built into the chassis. For added convenience the tank drain is located on top for easy service. If you're looking for a compressor that can keep up with the incredible demands of a high volume professional artist, this is the one for you!

*TERRY HILL*



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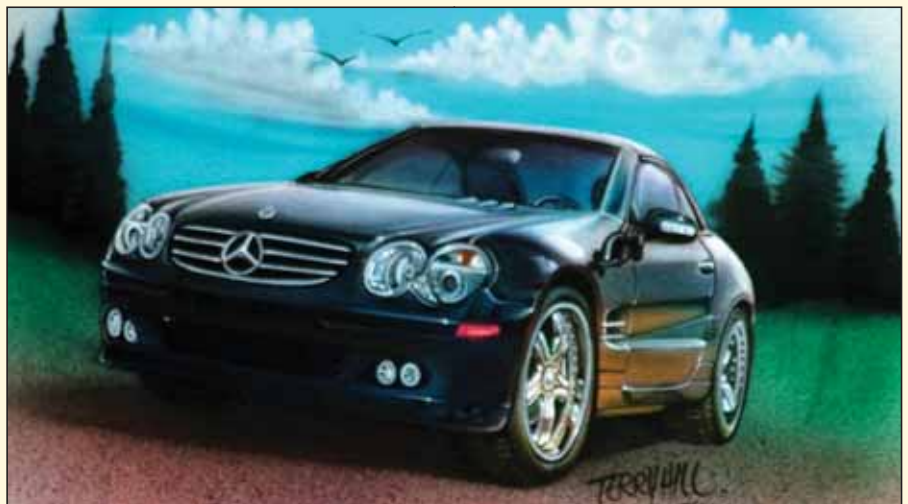
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want to exaggerate the size of just one frond as I have to get the hang of the process. After achieving success with this technique, move on to the grass example at the bottom of the illustration. I've shown an example of the airbrush's path in Step 1. In Step 2's example we see the nicely flowing dagger strokes that were laid along that path creating a believable example of a clump of sea grass. Notice that the grass blades even seem to flow with the wind. This is accomplished by leaving the air on and following the path as seen in Step 1 while varying the paint to control the dagger stroke's length. Essentially, it's the swirls exercise again with a more oval path! Step 3 is an integration of just a few strokes and lines together to create believable depth and perspective. I'll demonstrate a more thorough example of this melding of strokes and lines after we work on Shading and Blending, the last remaining technique of the almighty four. ❖ **Continued next issue.**



**Terry Hill** has been airbrushing T-shirts in the Florida panhandle since 1981. 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.

