



Back to Basics

SHADING & BLENDING

INCLUDING THE PRACTICAL USE OF THE ALMIGHTY FOUR STROKES AND SHAPES

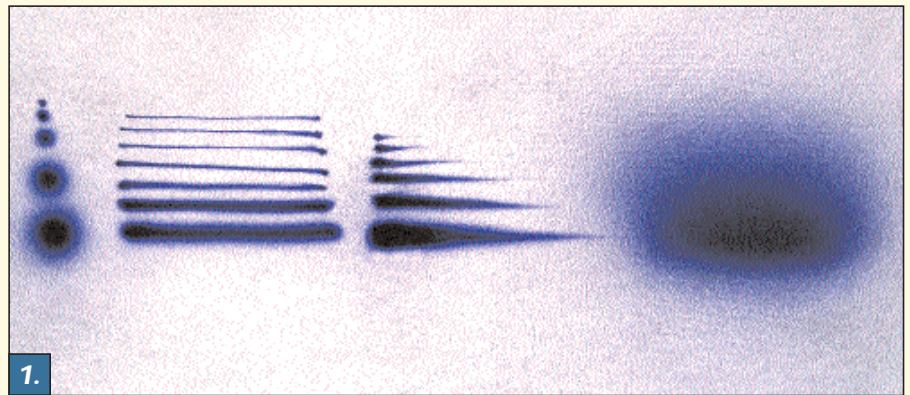
Last issue I demonstrated the dagger stroke, the most difficult and important of the almighty four basic strokes in airbrushing. Ultimately, if you master the dagger, you've pretty much conquered airbrushing. However, to render you completely rounded as an airbrush pro, I'd be neglectful if I didn't introduce the fourth & final stroke to produce shading and blending.

SHADING AND BLENDING ARE deceptively simple because just about anyone can achieve a reasonably good blend of two or more colors on a flat surface with little experience using a double-action airbrush. Nonetheless, the skill and control required to produce the subtle blends and shades commonly used in portraiture, complex graphics, murals, and more require a level of skill only attainable with a solid mastery of the three strokes covered in this series: the dot, the line, and the dagger (Figure 1).

Each stroke and exercise was presented in a specific order to optimally build your skills, confidence, and control. To perform proper shading and blending requires a combination of all the skills taught thus far. From the simple dot we learned to control the relative distance from the substrate and the amount of paint required to


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

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY HILL



produce a given size, shape, and intensity. In the line exercise we mastered smooth and confident control over any given distance or shape. The dagger stroke bolstered our confidence and control to start and stop seamlessly at any point on a design and to draw with an airbrush with an emphasis on using line weight.

Until now, we used a single dark transparent color for the demos. The dark color provided crisp and easy-to-read results; avoiding transparent colors spared us from dealing with a lot of tip dry on the needle. Opaque colors could also have been used, but the level of frustration would have been stratospheric in comparison. For blending, we'll use a selection of light transparent primary colors: hot pink,

hot yellow, and hot blue. When any two of these colors are blended, they produce a secondary group of colors. For example, hot pink and hot yellow form a beautiful hot orange when blended equally. I know that some of you who are savvy with color will want to object here and remind me that the color wheel says that the true primary colors are red, yellow, and blue. I don't disagree, but I offer an alternative combination of colors that seem to work better in T-shirt airbrushing where bright colors are better accepted than in traditional art circles. Although this is not intended as an article on color theory, some knowledge of color is necessary to understand how to avoid problems when choosing colors to blend. 

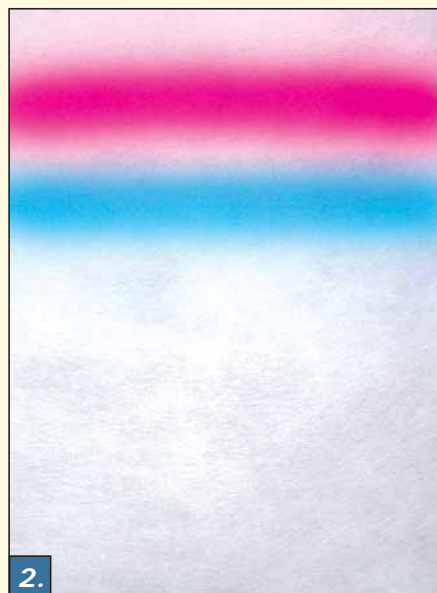


FIGURE 2

Start by airbrushing a soft but saturated line of hot pink. Follow this by spraying a similar, saturated line of hot or Caribbean blue. Be sure to leave a space of pure white background between them. Also, if you're using a single airbrush to apply these colors, be sure to thoroughly wash out the previous color with water, and test your new color on a separate surface before airbrushing the next step. This extra measure ensures that you'll get clean pure colors.



FIGURE 3

Now spray hot yellow between the pink and blue. Notice that it's a pure and bright yellow where you sprayed over the pure white background, and when equally blended with the pink you get that nice hot orange mentioned earlier. Also, a beautiful hot green results when properly blended with the blue. Notice that this sequence has produced a variety of colors that are of relatively equal value and intensity. None are particularly darker than the other and their blends are smooth and well-transitioned.

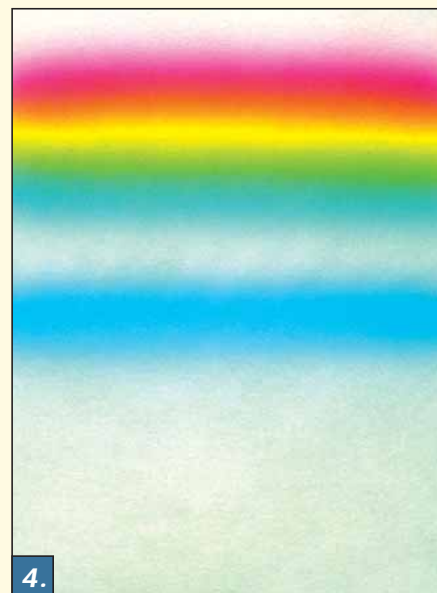


FIGURE 4

Leaving some space between the previous exercise, spray a smoothly saturated line of blue.



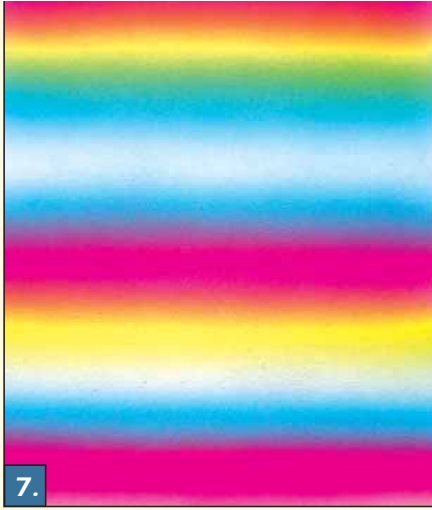
FIGURE 5

Now, prepare a clean airbrush, load hot pink, and blend evenly with the blue. You should easily achieve a beautiful purple as shown in the photo.

FIGURE 6

Finish by adding hot yellow, blending into the pink until you achieve a nice hot orange. Although these are the same three colors we used in the previous blend, notice how different the two exercises look. The order and placement of color can have a dramatic effect on the final outcome of your artwork. The purple seems to be darker than the other colors, but in reality it is equal. We'll use this knowledge to our advantage later in this article.





7.

FIGURE 7

The final exercise begins with an equal blend of hot pink and blue, which should produce the beautiful secondary color of purple.



8.

FIGURE 8

Notice what happens when we choose a poor color blend. Until now, the blends have been primaries on primaries. This is always safe, and as we've seen they can produce beautiful and vivid secondary colors. Here, I sprayed hot yellow along the blend of purple (produced by blending hot pink and blue in the previous step) with a predictably bad outcome. An earthy brown color emerged along the area where the purple's influence was seen. I still got a nice green and orange from the rest of the blend but that brown kind of kills the joy a bit. I say it was predictable because yellow is purple's compliment and the blending of compliments always produce a darker, earthier color. If you need a deeper understanding of this concept, then I suggest that you purchase a color wheel from your local art store.



9.

FIGURE 9

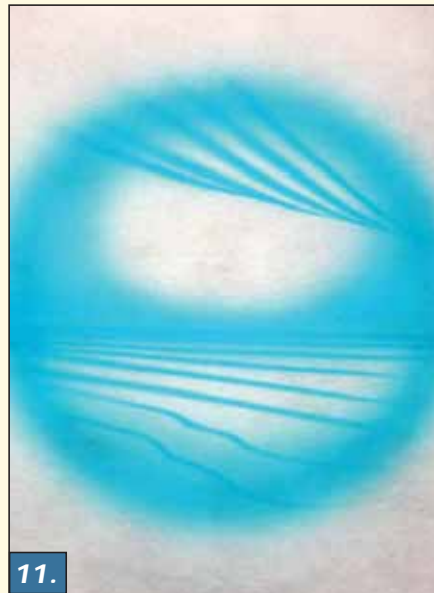
Now that we have a basic understanding of how colors and blends work together, let's incorporate all that we've learned into a tangible, useable design. We'll start with a simple soft circle of Caribbean blue.



10.

FIGURE 10

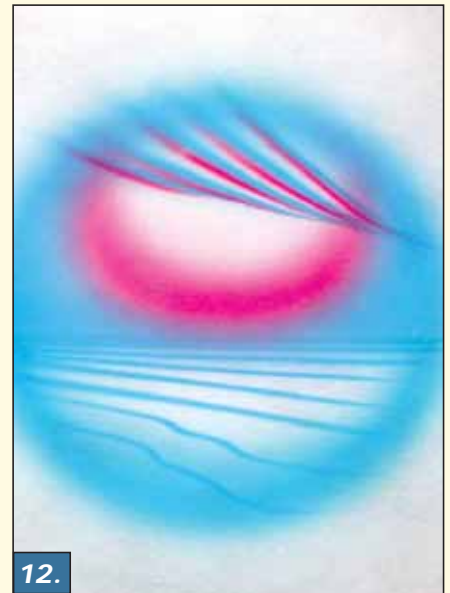
Horizontal lines are added to help show perspective.



11.

FIGURE 11

Step clouds are added to the sky by laying in soft dagger strokes, and the horizon is blended with soft shading.



12.

FIGURE 12

Hot pink is blended smoothly into the horizon, and soft dagger strokes are added under the step clouds to simulate reflected light.



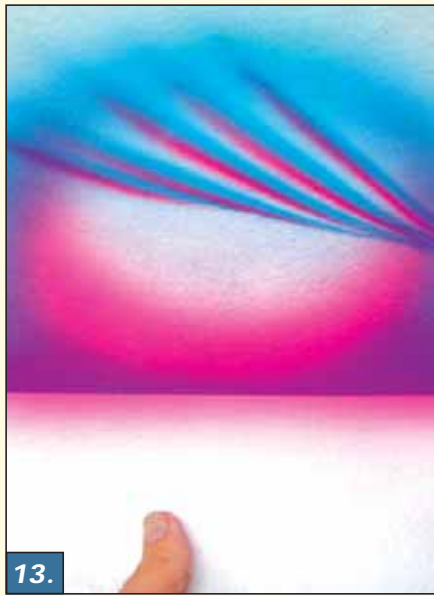


FIGURE 13
The use of a straight edge is helpful to achieve better separation of the colors at the horizon. Hot pink is layered over blue here to produce a darker purple at the bottom of the sky.



FIGURE 14
I used a cap from a paint can as a simple mask to produce the sun. Simply back away with the airbrush and shade hot pink around it. Notice the clean horizon resulting from the use of the straight edge in the previous step.



FIGURE 15
Then, blend the sun into the horizon by spraying a little more pink at the bottom of the sun.

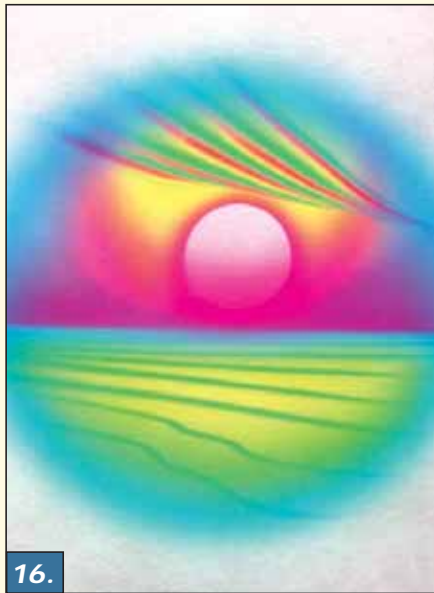


FIGURE 16
Blend hot yellow over the foreground water and into the sky to produce a vivid green. Be careful to avoid all areas where the pink and blue have previously been blended to form a purple.

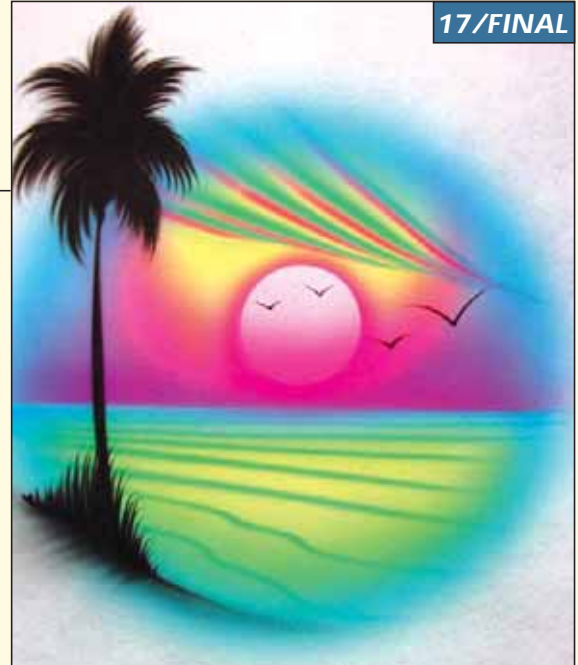


FIGURE 17
Using the hard dagger stroke with opaque black, I added a palm tree, sea oats, and a few sea gulls. This is now a complete and marketable design. It's easy to produce this image in just a few minutes, and you can easily command \$12 to \$14 for the art plus the T-shirt. Not bad considering that most people don't make that in an hour!

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.

