Painting And Brush-Building Techniques Made Easy In Photoshop

The “Three Engines” painting in the following tutorial was painted in Photoshop 7.0 using custom brushes and a Wacom Intuos tablet and pen. The pressure-sensitive tablet used in combination with custom-built brushes allows for much more control and expression while painting. This technique was developed as a colorful, expressive approach to use with product illustrations such as children’s toys and clothing.

When observing the objects in this still life, we analyzed the trains and reduced them to simple shapes, then painted the shapes using areas of flat, loose color. Carefully observing the light and how it subtly changed the colors on the product shapes helps suggest dimension of the forms. The new paint engine in Photoshop 7.0 allows illustrators to create a wider variety of brush strokes, and during the course of this technique, we’ll show you how you can create your own custom brushes.

STEP ONE: Making Brushes
All of the brushes were designed to take advantage of a pressure-sensitive tablet and stylus. To begin building the brushes, open the Brushes palette (Window>Brushes).

A brush for sketching: This brush is good for loose sketches. It’s based on the Hard Round 5 preset in the Brushes palette. The shape of this brush changes as you apply pressure to the stylus. To view the controls that make the shape change as you apply pressure, click on the name “Shape Dynamics” in the Brushes palette, and under Size, click on the Control pop-up menu and choose Pen Pressure.

We also want to enable Texture for this brush, so to reveal texture as you draw, click the name “Texture” in the Brushes palette. I like the Wrinkles texture, but want a finer texture look. To reduce its size, choose the Wrinkles texture and reduce its Scale to 25% using the Scale slider. Leave other settings at their default. To save your new brush, choose New Brush from the
pop-up menu on the top right side of the Brushes palette, name your brush, and click OK.

An opaque brush with a custom brush tip: This brush applies flat color while revealing subtle bristle marks and its shape changes as you apply pressure. To create the brush, we'll begin by painting a round custom tip in a new file. Open a new document using File> New (72x72 pixels at 72 ppi) and make a round selection using the Elliptical Marquee tool. Make sure to leave several pixels of space between the edge of the selection and the edge of the file. Choose the Soft Round 100-pixel preset in the Brushes palette. Enable the Airbrush checkbox in the Brushes palette. In the Options Bar, change the Blending Mode to Dissolve. Now, click inside the selection with the brush. Experiment until you have an image similar to the tip shown in the illustration at right. If the tip you paint does not match the example shown here, try lowering the Opacity of the brush to about 50% in the Options Bar.

Then, using the Rectangular Marquee tool, make a rectangular selection around your brush tip image, and choose Define Brush from the Edit menu. Brushes with sampled tips usually must have their Spacing adjusted, and you can do this in the Brushes palette by clicking on the name “Brush Tip Shape,” and reducing the Spacing. (You’ll see the slider at the bottom of the Brush Tip Shape window.) After defining your brush and adjusting its spacing, choose Shape Dynamics, and turn on Pen Pressure using the Size Control pop-up menu.

STEP TWO: Designing the Composition
Now that the brushes are built and ready, start out by setting up a still life. I used my nephew Brady’s toy train engines on a very light surface. I lit the trains using a full-spectrum light shining from above right and behind the trains. The full-spectrum light helps to cast interesting shadows on the light surface. (This could just as easily have been a product setup.) Next, open a new file using File> New. (Our document measures 2950x1500 pixels; if you’d like to use the same size file, type these numbers in the dimensions fields of the New dialog box.) Choose the Brush tool in the Toolbox and select the sketch brush preset that we made in Step One. Click on the Foreground Color Swatch and choose a dark gray color using the Color Picker.

Draw a loose sketch. Let your hand move in a relaxed and expressive manner as you draw. Press lightly to draw a lighter, thinner line, and heavier to sketch a thicker, darker line. Using a tablet and stylus gives you much more control and expression than drawing with a mouse.

When the sketch is complete, we need to put the drawing on a layer so that we can use it as a guide while painting color on a layer underneath it. To cut the sketch to a layer, go to Select> Select All (Command-A [PC: Control-A]), and then choose Layer> New> Layer via Cut (Shift-Command-J [PC: Shift-Control-J]). Set the layer Blending Mode to Multiply so the white on the layer will appear clear, showing only the sketch lines. Because it’s now on its own layer, the sketch can be edited apart from the rest of the image.

To keep your illustration organized, it’s a good idea to name your layers. Name your sketch layer by double-clicking its name in the Layers palette and typing “sketch.”

STEP THREE: Choosing Colors and Saving Swatches
Because the “Three Engines” is a member of a series of illustrations, I planned to use a similar color theme for the other paintings in the series. So let’s set up a custom Swatch palette to save the colors.

To begin your color experimentation, make a new layer in your sketch file (Layer> New> Layer), or create a small new document. Click on the Foreground Color Swatch in the Toolbox and use the Color Picker to choose colors. Then, using your stylus, make pigment dabs on the image. Try out colors until you’ve settled on a color theme that you like. For this image, I used a palette of primary colors (red, yellow, and blue), with some pastels and oranges, purples, and browns as accent colors. (The primary and
pastel color palette will lend to the playful feeling of the illustration.)

When you have several colors that you like, save them into Photoshop’s Swatches palette. Use the Eyedropper to sample a color from your test image and then position it over the lower portion of the Swatches palette where there are no colors. You’ll see the cursor change into a paint bucket. Click on the palette, give the color a name in the Color Name dialog box, and click OK. The new color will appear in the palette.

**STEP FOUR: Roughing in Flat Color Shapes**

To establish the color theme and shapes in the composition, lay in areas of loose, flat color on a separate layer. Make a new layer by clicking on the New Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers palette. Drag the new layer under the sketch layer in the Layers palette and name it—to keep your Layers palette organized (as you did with the “sketch” layer in Step Two). Leave this layer's Blending Mode set to Normal and its Opacity set to 100% in the Layers palette so the color can be applied opaquely, making it appear similar to gouache paint. To lay in areas of flat color as we did, paint onto the new layer using the round opaque brush preset that we created in Step One. To change the size of the brush, click the Brush thumbnail in the Options Bar, and adjust the Size slider. You can click on the Eye icon next to the sketch layer in the Layers palette as you paint to hide your sketch lines so you can monitor your progress.

**STEP FIVE: Adding Texture and Detail**

Next, add another new layer to your file, and name it “details.” Painting details on a separate layer will allow us to experiment with brushwork without editing the loose color layer below. Target the new layer and choose the Brush tool and the opaque brush preset. Reduce the brush size using the Size slider in the upper left of the Options Bar.

Using the smaller version of the opaque brush, add textured lines and some shading to the elements. To access texture for the brush,
Using Painter’s Realistic, Thick Impasto Paint

Illustrators with experience using traditional media such as pencil, charcoal, chalk, watercolor, and oil paint, love using Painter from procreate (www.procreate.com) because it offers very responsive, realistic, natural media tools. Painter, an exciting painting program that works well with Photoshop, contains hundreds of ready-to-use brushes and effects. Here, we'll focus on Painter’s Impasto feature, which allows us to paint or clone with realistic, thick paint.

We start by opening a cropped version of the “Three Engines” Photoshop painting. To give the image the look of smears, wet oil paint with subtle highlights and shadows on the paint, choose the Smeary Round variant of Impasto from Painter’s Brushes palette.

When an Impasto brush is chosen, the Impasto feature is automatically enabled. You can sample color from the image using the Dropper tool as you paint over the image using various sizes of the Smeary Round variant of Impasto. Also, try the Smeary Flat variant of Impasto to paint broad brush strokes over the shadow, and to pull one color into another like wet oils.

The Impasto feature allows you to adjust the angle and amount of the Surface Lighting as you paint. (Surface Lighting is a “live” feature and globally affects the image.) You can also adjust the height of individual Impasto brushstrokes using the sliders in the Impasto section of the Brush Controls palette.

Painter’s Impasto is exciting to use because the brushes are responsive and sensitive to the pressure, tilt, and bearing that can be interpreted by the Wacom tablet and pen.

Choose the preset, and click on the word “Texture” in the Brushes palette, then click on the texture thumbnail. Again, we chose the Wrinkles texture from the texture list, and scaled it to 25% to match the texture used in Step One.

In areas of the multicolored shadows where we wanted more complexity, we varied the opacity of the pigment by changing the Opacity of the brush using the Opacity slider in the Options Bar. As you observe your subject, look carefully at the shadows. You’ll see that they’re not solid gray, but subtle, reflected light. ■

Cher Threinen-Pendarvis teaches digital painting and illustration workshops internationally and is a frequent speaker at conferences. She’s author of The Painter 7 WOW! Book, and her work has appeared in EFX Art and Design, Design Graphics, Digital Fine Art Magazine, Macworld, and more.