

Painting Flesh Colour in Oils

Flesh colour is notoriously difficult. No commercially available colour that I know is any good. Over the years I have evolved a mix which I am quite happy to share with those of you who are still pondering the subject. I use oils exclusively for flesh. Although they can be disturbingly different to begin with when compared with enamels or acrylics, they are very controllable and dry to a wonderful sheen that beautifully represents healthy skin. So why not have a go? If it's disastrous you can wash the whole lot off in a few seconds with thinners and an old stiff brush.

I begin by undercoating the flesh areas of the figure using either Humbrol HN5 Hull Red or 180 Red Leather. This will highlight any imperfections - however hard we try there always are some! - so they can easily be filed or filled with a little Milliput then repainted. Let this dry for at least a couple of days. I use the following oil colours: (Winsor & Newton) **Permanent White, Venetian Red, Transparent Gold Ochre, Alizarin Crimson, Brown Madder Aliz** and **Cobalt Blue**. Use **Mars Brown** not Venetian Red if painting a male figure. Using a toothpick make a basic mix of the White and the Venetian Red. This will be very pink, but ignore this and mix it to a fairly middle flesh tone. The tone of your own skin can help, as can magazine adverts for direct comparison. Divide this initial mix into one larger portion in the centre with a smaller one to each side. To one add more white, to the other more Venetian Red, ending up with the tones for upper surfaces, side and undersides. Don't worry about the colour itself at this stage, aim only for the tone. **ALWAYS** wipe your toothpick or brush when changing from one mix to another. Then begin adding Transparent Gold Ochre to each mix.

Transparent Gold Ochre is one of the major miracles of modern man. As the 'transparent' implies, it does not change the basic colour, but changes the shade of it in some mysterious way. As you add it to the pinky substance you started with, it will gradually change toward suntanned skin and on into dark latin or arab. I don't thin the paint at all myself, but you may prefer to as it will lessen any brush marks. Use enamel thinners, but remember that the more thinners the faster the paint will dry and the less it will cover, so two coats may become necessary.

Once you're satisfied, the painting can start. One of the beauties of oil paints is that you can at any time you wish take a break of up to twenty four hours as long as you leave it in a cool place! Holding the figure upside down cover all the underside areas with the darkest shade. Check what you're doing and keep rigorously to the right areas. Turn the figure the right way up to check. If you go over, just wipe it off with a tissue and a bit of thinners.

With the figure the right way up and a clean brush, paint on the lightest shade everywhere the skin faces upwards.

Then fill in all the bits in between using the medium shade. It's a bit like painting a contour map, and it will also be looking extremely garish at this stage, but don't be alarmed, it's all part of the process! Especially as you should be leaving a slight gap between each colour at this stage. Don't allow the colours to touch if you can help it. You will end up with a rough three toned very shiny figure covered in dark red tracer lines standing proudly before you. It will look absolutely horrible!

Clean your brush, then begin working along all the gaps between the colours, blending the edges together. Clean the brush each time you move from the light/medium to the medium/dark blend. On the face, the darkest colour would be under the chin and the nose, a touch above the eyes and a thin line running around the hair line. The lightest colour on the lower forehead, upper cheeks, nose, chin, with a touch of lightness along the jawline. Add a touch, just a touch, of Alazarin Crimson to the lips and cheeks. This can be direct, just a touch dotted on then blended in carefully with a clean

brush, or you can mix a little with some of the right shade then apply it, in which case you should have left the lips bare of paint until now. A spot of Crimson on the cheeks works well, it adds life and colour. A touch of cobalt blue or dark brown on the upper eyelids. Brown Madder Aliz is added to define actual creases, as at the elbow, under the arms, under the breasts. Nipples would need a touch more of either Venetian Red or Brown Madder Aliz depending on what type of skin colour you are going for.

When you have finished the figure will still look pretty awful. Not as awful as it did, but expect to feel quite depressed! It will be very shiny and covered in brush marks, although you should do your best to minimise these. You can sort of pat the paint down with the flat of a brush if you're careful. About twelve hours or so later you can go back and pat it down again as the paint will be firmer then. Form the remaining paint into three neat little piles and put them somewhere cool. They may skin over eventually but break the skin and you will have a reserve of colour to use for any retouching you may want to do once the figure itself is dry.

Over the next couple of days - less if you stand it near a radiator or lamp or in the airing cupboard - it will dry and both the texture and the colour will transform so that, if you have the shade right it will become almost alive. Avoid touching the painted bits, remember oil paint takes at least a couple of weeks to dry thoroughly, probably longer where white is concerned.

Make a thin wash with thinners using Brown Madder Aliz. This should run easily along any creases. Apply it around the eyes, under the breasts, around the hair line, along the edges of any clothes or belts, anywhere you feel an emphasis is needed. It will dry lighter, if it dries too light add a little black and try again.

I prefer to paint the eyes at this stage. Using gloss enamels I add either brown or blue to white for the whites of the eyes, This can be quite a strong colour yet will still appear white when painted in. It avoids that awful 'wild eyed glare' so many figures have. Then a centre of blue or brown, almost always nearer the upper rather than the lower lid, a smaller dot of black gloss in the very centre. Any smudging can be easily removed by dipping your brush in thinners, wiping it lightly, then using it to lift the unwanted colour away.

Now paint all the remainder of the figure in whatever colour and type of paint you prefer, still retaining the original oil mix in a cool place for any final touching up.

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Added December 2011:

Twenty years later I'm happy to see that Winsor & Newton are still there and still selling the colours listed above, with only one exception:

Mars Brown isn't there any more. This was a shade darker than Venetian Red, on their current listings I'd reckon Indian Red [317] would do fine.

Brown Madder Aliz is now just called Brown Madder it seems.