



KEEP THE AIR ON! KEEP THE AIR ON! KEEP THE AIR ON! KEEP THE AIR ON!

Back to Basics

THE "SOFT" DAGGER STROKE

Airbrush master Terry Hill returns with another article in his *Back to Basics* series.

In his previous article, Terry discussed basic shapes and paint flow. Of course, every new artist asks "Is there a point to basic shapes—lines, dots, dagger strokes, and so on?"

Terry's answer is, "You'll be surprised to see how they combine to make recognizable shapes and objects. They are designed to build upon one another while increasing your skills until you garner an intuitive sense of exactly what stroke to use. Airbrush basics are a tool kit. You, the artist, use your imagination to combine these basics and the new art you create is greater than the sum of the parts. It becomes fresh, it looks completely unlike these practice shapes, and the best part is, it's all yours!"

This article tackles the first type of dagger stroke, known as the "soft" dagger stroke.

Overall, the dagger stroke requires some practice and coordination. You have to get the hang of simultaneously moving the airbrush, starting and stopping the paint, and varying the distance between the nozzle and the substrate (the material or object you're painting on). It's a little like rubbing your head and patting your tummy at the same time! Here are some general rules:

"KEEP THE AIR ON"

Exercise patience. If you get tired or frustrated, and things aren't working out, check your airbrush and make sure it's not

clogged with paint or some other malfunction.

Take breaks. If you're tired or hungry, you won't perform these exercises as well as when you're rested and nourished. Get some music going; airbrush art is active, and can be very rhythmic. People often lose sight of that. You're moving around with the brush, you're checking and evaluating your paint surface, you're grabbing a new bottle of paint, adjusting the lighting...you get the idea. It's not like competing in the Olympics, but ask professional airbrush artists how tired they get after several straight hours of laying down paint.

The other benefit of taking breaks is to get a fresh look at your art. I don't know how many artists have told me stories about nearly throwing away a painting or a shirt, hitting a car hood that looks bad with a hammer in frustration, or selling the airbrush and joining the circus. BUT—then the artist goes away, sometimes overnight, comes back fresh, and is amazed at how good the work really looks. Any problem parts are now obvious, as are the solutions for fixing them.

Don't get down on yourself. Learning to airbrush is unlike any other art form you have ever tried. First of all, there's no sensory feedback. You can't feel the substrate. It's all visual! No matter how hard you try, you can't clearly see the paint transferring from the airbrush to the surface. You can

"Don't get down on yourself. Learning to airbrush is unlike any other art form you have ever tried."

observe the results as they magically follow your every move but you don't really get to feel the texture of the surface or

the thickness of the paint as in other traditional art forms. Suspend any preconceived notions you may have, relax and let the exercises in this column bring you along to a new understanding of this unique art form.

Also, and this is long-term wisdom...seek out other artists, classes, or videos, and then paint, paint, paint. Musicians playing alone usually don't get the boost that they get when they show up to a basement or practice room to jam with other players. Airbrush art obeys the same laws. Attendance at an Airbrush Getaway workshop can cement your skills and open your eyes to fresh approaches.

OK, the philosophy sign is now extinguished, and let's move on to the soft dagger stroke. I call this "soft" in the sense of soft edges and a gentle application. The biggest asset of an airbrush is the ability to put down paint with blended or soft edges. This has been its greatest appeal over the years and it's tough to use a conventional brush to do that quickly. An airbrush's advantages are speed and uniform results. But those only come with practice and a certain amount of knowledge regarding technique.

The "soft" dagger strokes in this article are mostly a mixture of paint control, varied nozzle distance from the substrate, and follow-through (that's the active body language that accompanies good airbrush art).

OK, load up an airbrush and let's paint!

For these exercises we're using a transparent purple/deep violet. This is a good color for practice, because it allows both subtle and deep shading, depending on how much paint you allow to build up. Second, the paint doesn't dry as quickly on the tip of the airbrush needle, causing blockages (the dreaded "tip dry"). Use any dark transparent color you wish to perform these exercises as long as you avoid heavily-pigmented colors such as opaques. Black is a definite no-no for now, due to its tendency to quickly build up and cause tip dry on the needle.

Getting Started

Figure 1: "Soft" and "hard" dagger strokes.

This illustration shows the two different versions of the dagger stroke. The top dagger stroke is an example of the soft dagger stroke and will be the main focus of this article.

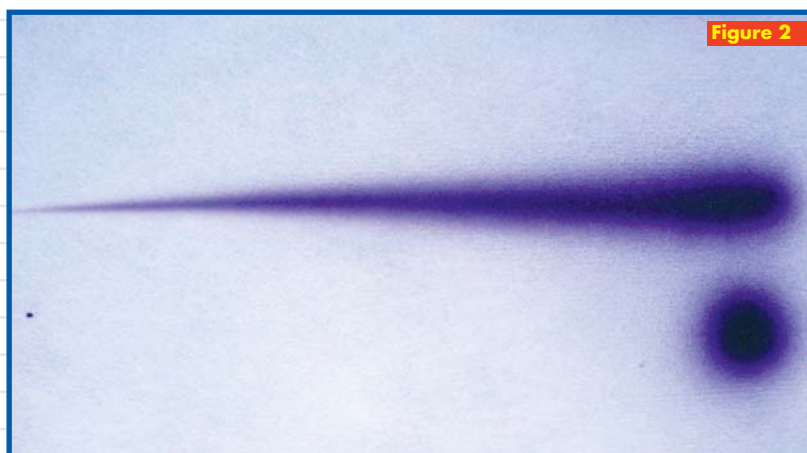
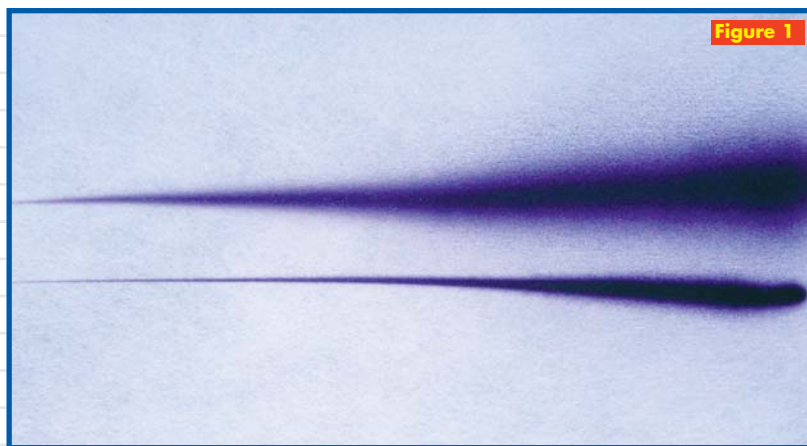
To accomplish it correctly, we'll use a combination of distance and trigger control. Begin with a wide-open trigger position akin to making a very large dot. You then keep the air and paint flowing, and move the nozzle along a line, moving from thick to thin by smoothly bringing the nozzle closer to the surface as you reduce the flow of paint. Don't bump into the surface and damage your needle; it's a common error when starting off. Notice that bringing the nozzle closer makes the edges less fuzzy, and defines the shape, while still finishing in a soft point. Remember, a properly done dagger stroke, whether rendered in a soft or hard fashion, is always finished by stopping the paint flow completely while performing a full and complete follow through.

The bottom dagger stroke in the photo is the hard dagger stroke. It's much more sharply defined and is slightly different in technique than the soft stroke. In this example, it begins with a dot much closer to the substrate and moves parallel to the surface to the left, trailing off from thick to thin into a comet-tail. We ease the trigger forward, reducing and eventually stopping the flow of paint while maintaining a distance very close to the surface. The stroke is completed with a strong follow through similar to that of a bowler or golfer after releasing or striking the ball.

For these shapes, (1) always keep the air on and (2) always follow through.

Figure 2: Beginning a soft dagger stroke.

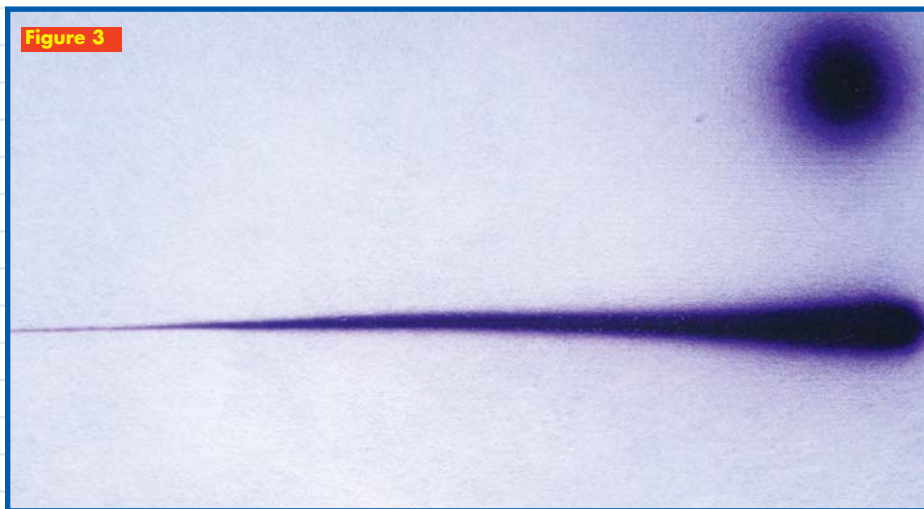
As mentioned earlier, every stroke essentially begins with a dot. In this example, we can see the finished stroke as well as representations of the relative sizes of dots necessary to produce this effect. You should be well-practiced at relative dot sizes and their relationships to distance from our



previous column's exercises. In fact, we could think of a line as simply a dot that you move by moving the airbrush while you keep the paint flowing. A dagger stroke is the same thing, except you add a third dimension—you then move the nozzle closer, swooping it down to the surface as you make your line. Imagine that the nozzle is an airplane that you're landing while you're spraying paint. Keep gliding down to

the substrate, with the paint on, then stop the paint and glide along without touching down.

But the dot is the start. Notice that we mostly focused on dramatically varying the distance. That change in distance, combined with a little trigger control, is your key to success with this stroke. More distance makes a larger-radius shape, and makes the edge softer.



“Imagine that the nozzle is an airplane that you’re landing while you’re spraying paint. Keep gliding down to the substrate, with the paint on, then stop the paint and glide along without touching down.”

Figures 2a and 2b: *Practicing the movement for a soft dagger stroke.*

“Measure twice, cut once” is an old adage. It was never truer than in airbrush art. Rehearse your movement. This helps to build muscle memory. Do this as often as you paint. There’s no penalty for not shooting paint. But once it’s on, it’s hard to remove.

I start a dot with the paint flowing and keep it flowing to the end of the stroke. Concurrently, I’ll ease off the paint at the end of the stroke, and follow through. These are posed shots and my main intention is to show you just how dramatic the difference is between the start and finish.

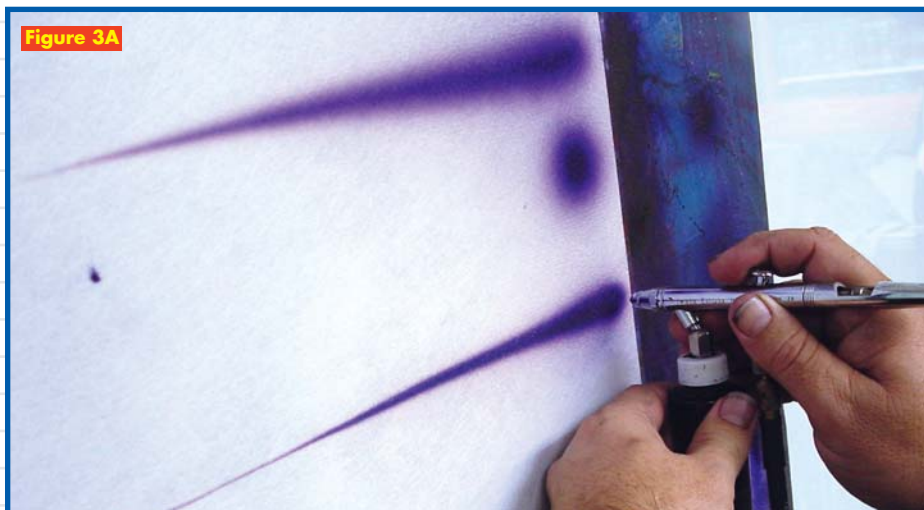
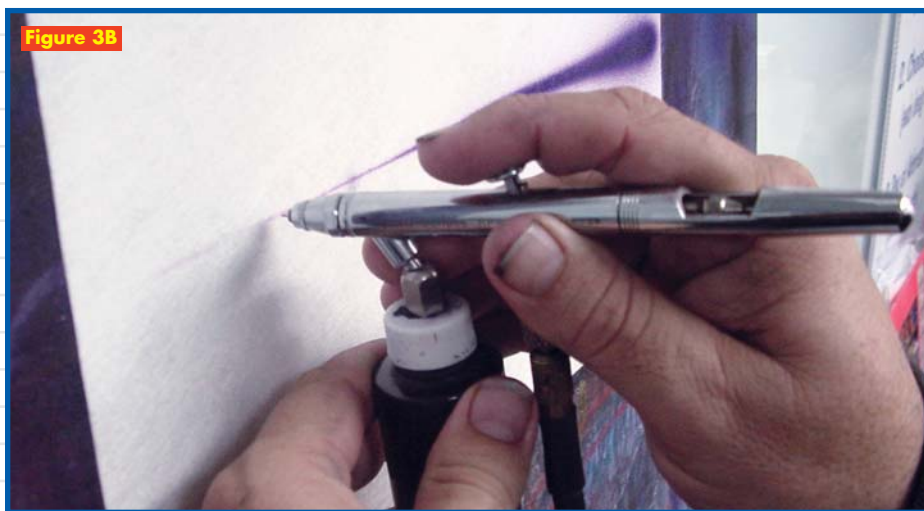


Figure 3: *The hard dagger stroke.*

Just to further clarify, the hard dagger stroke shown here is much more tightly rendered than the soft version. The word “hard” is more a description of the look of the stroke than the difficulty of the technique. Of all the strokes used in freehand airbrushing, this is the “Mac Daddy” of them all! It’s so important that we will devote our entire column to it in the next issue.



Figures 3a and 3b: *Hard dagger stroke technique.* The relative distance of the airbrush from the surface from beginning to end of the hard dagger stroke

doesn't change very much at all. The variation in line width is controlled almost exclusively with trigger movement. Also note that I achieve some consistency of distance and a little bit of sensory feedback by dragging my finger along the surface.

Control Exercises

We practiced, rehearsed it, and now the moment of truth. We begin with the air on, start the paint flow to make a dot, and sweep the airbrush to the left and down towards the substrate to bring the dagger stroke to a point. Cut off the paint and follow through.

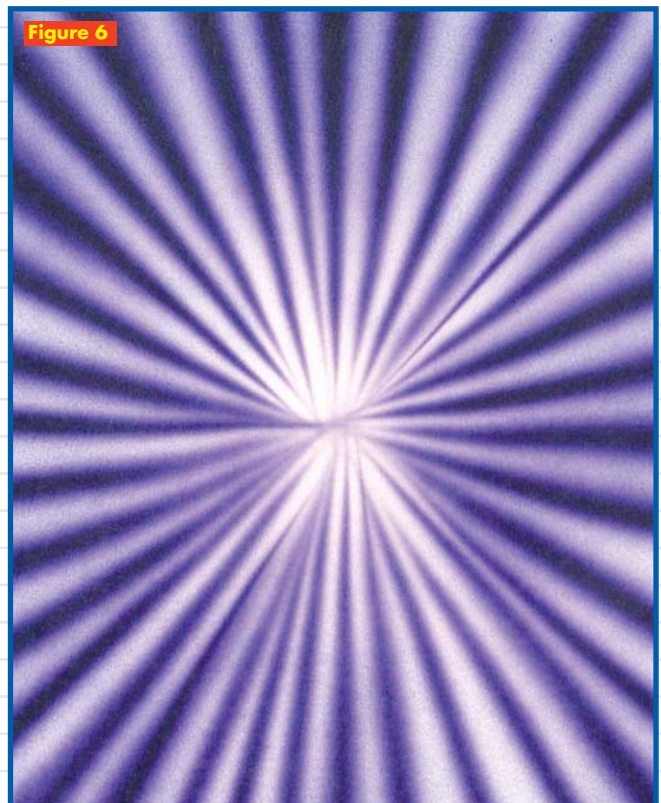
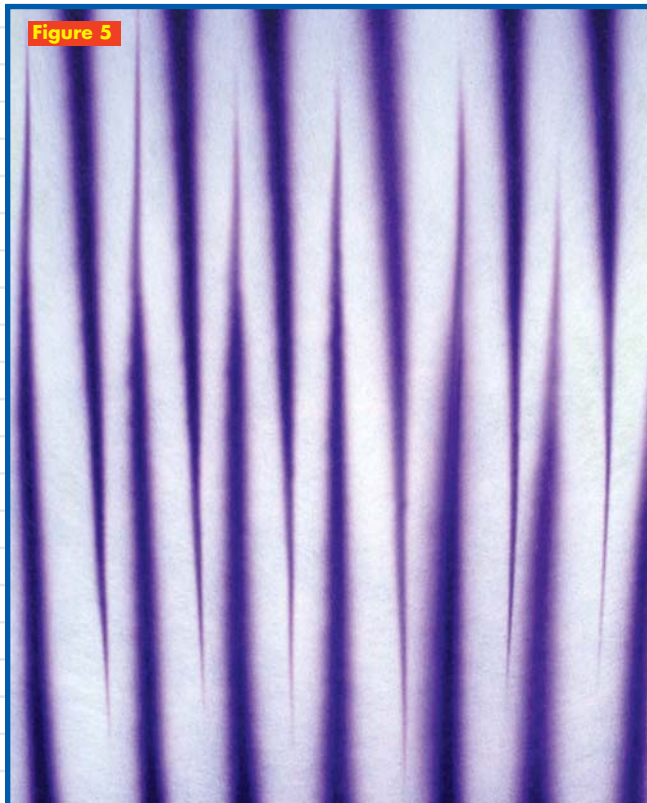
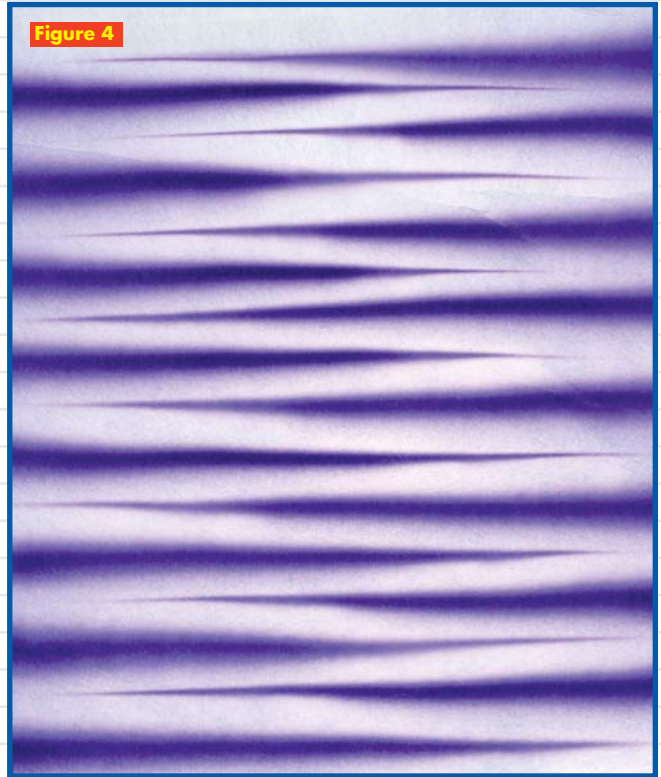
Do you have it? If not, don't panic. Make sure you have a good flow of air and paint, and try again. Rehearse, then put down some paint. When you feel like you've figured it out, move on to the next set of tasks. Remember, we are only working with the soft version of the stroke at this time. If you learn the soft dagger first, you will have much better success as we move forward in the next issue with the hard version.

Figure 4: Tiger stripes. The single shape, in this case the soft dagger, is a building block for more complex shapes. An important skill is arranging the shapes in relation to one another. The next sequence will give you some confidence in this. Since we've started making the shapes right-to-left, switch off and make one left-to-right. Then drop down and make another one. The idea is to control your paint and movement and to gain an awareness of the effect that changing distance dramatically can achieve.

One direction may be more comfortable than another. Why is this? Since we're right-or-left handed, we handle directions differently. For example, if you ride a motorcycle, you probably are better at making tight turns in one direction, say to the left, than to the right. And so on. Practicing your painting will level out these problems.

Figure 5: Vertical tiger stripes. We're not going to let you rest. When you master the horizontal tiger stripes, think about going vertical—top-to-bottom, bottom-to-top. Be sure to make nice long purposeful strokes and really work on using distance to accomplish most of the variance in the stroke.

Figure 6: Diagonals. This looks like a thousand T-shirts I saw at Grateful Dead concerts. Master this pattern for some



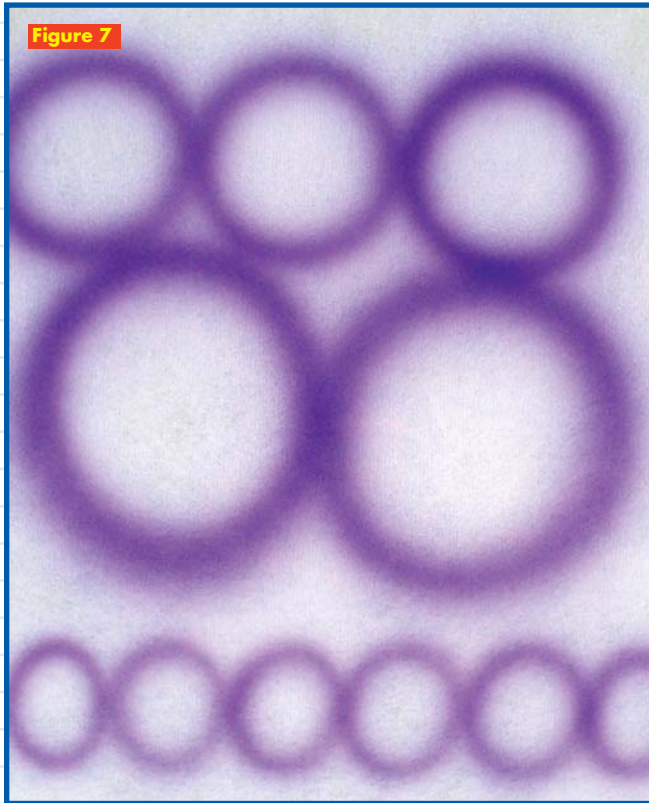


Figure 7

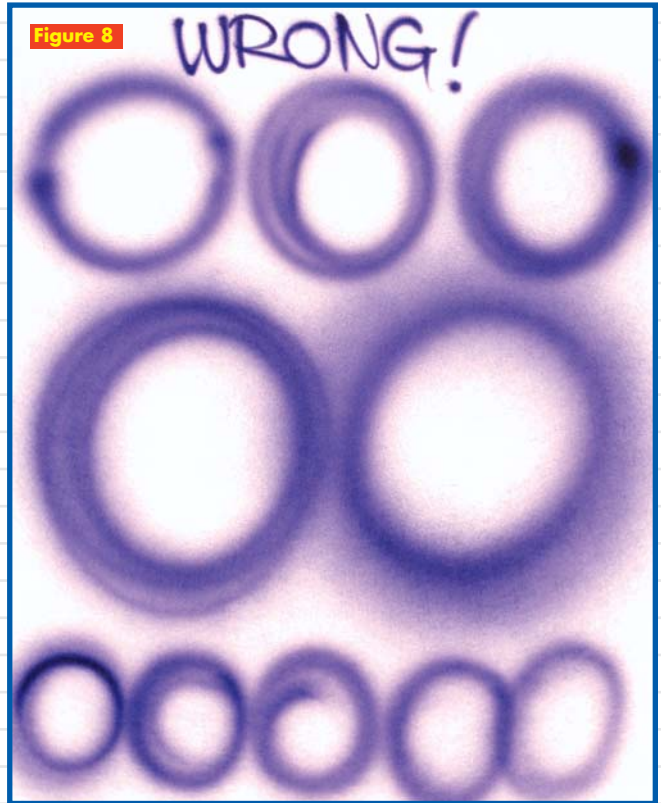


Figure 8

possibly forays into the mellow market. But honestly, with some practice with the trusty dagger stroke, you can probably do this. The idea is to point the strokes into the center, trail off with no paint flow, and leave the light spot in the center. Because of the way paint density and contrast work together, it'll look like it glows. Wow, man.

“Get some music going; airbrush art is active, and can be very rhythmic...You’re moving around with the brush, you’re checking and evaluating your paint surface, you’re grabbing a new bottle of paint, adjusting the lighting... you get the idea.”

Figure 8: *Circles gone bad!*

Or, what not to do. These circles have all the sins we cautioned against in Figure 7. In some of the top circles, we stopped the movement, and as we paused, we kept the paint on and it built up in hot spots. In other circles, the strokes don't lay down on top of each other uniformly and so we get some stripes in the circles where we

Figure 7: *Circles and circles.* Nobody can draw a perfect circle. OK, maybe somebody can, but we'll help you along if you can't. Let's practice a slightly different set of shapes that we can later combine with dagger strokes to produce real-world designs. Warm up for your circular shapes by moving the airbrush in gentle circles a consistent distance from the substrate. No paint yet, just air flowing as you warm-up. When you feel you have it, get a good motion going, keep the air on, and gently roll the paint on and off while continually moving the airbrush in a circle, starting and stopping the paint as we did with the daggers. When done correctly, soft circles will appear.

To make these circles look their best, and this is important, move on a clockwise motion, painting some, then go back and work counterclockwise, continuing to lay down strokes of paint with the air continuously flowing. This eliminates flat spots.

Note in this exercise that we strive for the circles to be very soft and to blend with each other with no obvious overlap. Why? Because you don't want paint to build up and darken. These are called "hot spots" and can really distract from the smoothness and professionalism of your artwork.

don't want them. In others, we've started from way back, then gone up close, and inadvertently made parts of the circles much darker.

Also, notice that some of the circles aren't circles—they're ovals. This usually is a result of making circles on one direction—in this case clockwise—and not going back over them with counterclockwise motions.

Continued in our next issue.

Terry Hill has been airbrushing T-shirts in the Florida panhandle for 22 years. 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.

