

by Pat Gaines

T-SHIRT BASICS

High-End Custom Design: The "Wow" Factor - PART 4

If you have been following the three previous installments of T-Shirt Basics, you have got a pretty good idea of the types of design that make up the majority of a shop's T-shirt display. In this installment, I will cover the high-end designs (meaning designs that sell for \$25 and up).

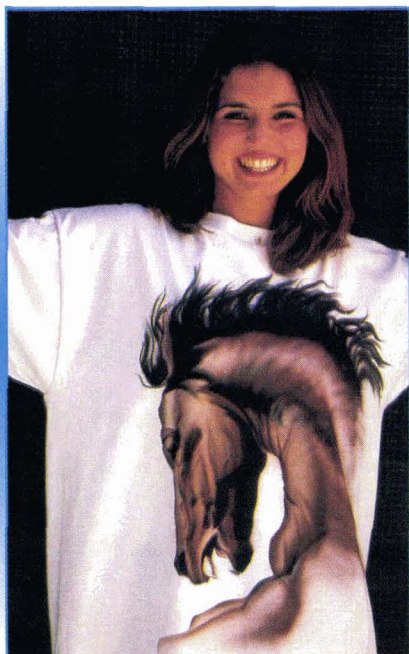
At West Coast Airbrush Stores we will, of course, paint just about anything and for whatever amount a customer wants to spend. In most cases, what customers want and the

display and assumed that everything in your store is too expensive.

#3 If you spend a lot of time and demonstrate your truly amazing artistic talent on a display piece for your shop, you may have to reproduce the design for a customer at some point.

The more elaborately a display piece is painted, the harder it will ultimately be to recreate. In the past, I've had

Designs modeled by Brooke Jerdan, Traci Alms & Hally Dixon



price they are willing to pay remains fairly predictable. Knowing this, we are able to create a display that, in most instances, reflects customer interests rather than our own.

Keep in mind that your shop's display of custom design is necessary, but it is also easily overdone. There are three ways to "overdo" a custom display.

#1 In most busy t-shirt airbrush shops, high-end custom jobs account for 20% or less of your overall income. So it is important not to have more than 20% of your display represented by designs in this category.

#2 You don't want to confuse your customer into thinking that all of the designs in your shop are expensive. For example: If a customer comes to your sales counter to ask about prices for designs and is told: "Well, that one is \$50, and that one is \$65, and that one is \$70," it won't be long before that customer is out the door thinking, "Man those airbrush shirts are just too expensive for my pocketbook."

Because the customer was distracted by too many custom designs, they paid little attention to your lower-cost

customers order real high-end designs from a display. I would paint the design. Then, when the customer came back to pick up the shirt, they would look at it, study the shirt on display, look back at their shirt, and the worst thing an airbrush artist can hear rolled across their lips: "Well, I like it butttttt, it does not look just like that one on the wall."

You want to say: "You know I'm not a copy machine — I'm an artist. A hand done design will never be exactly the same twice."

I'm sure you get the idea. Try not to overdo your custom display. Make the majority of your samples easy to reproduce.

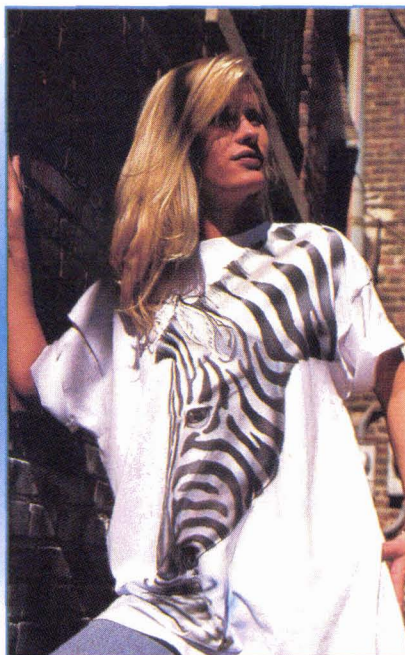
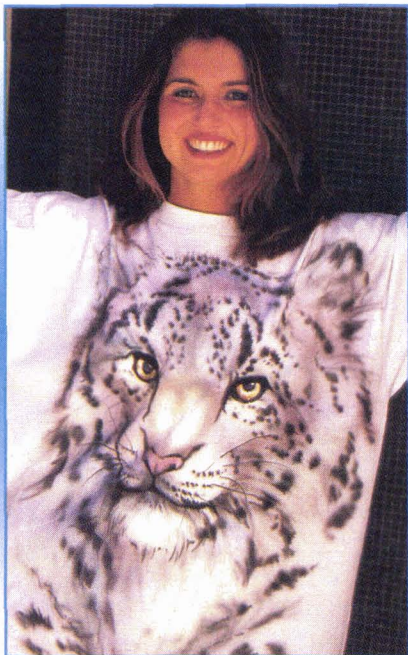
At West Coast Airbrush Company Stores, we stick to \$1-per-minute format, whether we are painting a \$4 name design or a \$45 custom animal portrait. But how do we avoid spending two hours on a custom piece and having to charge \$120? There are only certain ways you can render certain items, and you should be sure to use all of the tools and aids you have at your disposal.

When painting custom designs, how you paint really matters when you are working in the \$1-per-minute format and trying to keep most of your work under \$50 or \$60.

For example, freehand ¾-view cars can be done all day long for \$50 or less, if you simply use an opaque projector to lay down the image onto the shirt quickly. Then, trace in all of the appropriate lines with a soft lead pencil. Simply go over all of the pencil lines with a black airbrush line, model the car with the proper shadows, and fill in the colors. Add a color background and lettering, then highlights, and you're done.

Most experienced painters can accomplish this in less than an hour; many in less than 40 minutes (see August 1997 *Airbrush Action* article "Ol' School Hot-Rod T-Shirtin'" by Randy Wariner for a complete how-to of this painting method).

Like cars, human portraits that sell can also be done quickly. Again, use an opaque projector to lay out the face, lightly sketching out lines with a soft lead pencil. When



painting, use only sepia tones to render the face — no other colors. Set up your shop display to show only this type of portrait.

Painting portraits in sepia tones is far less time consuming than trying to get all of the color tones necessary for a full-color portrait. Ultimately, it can cut your overall production time by ⅓, and sepia tones work well for rendering people of all different races.

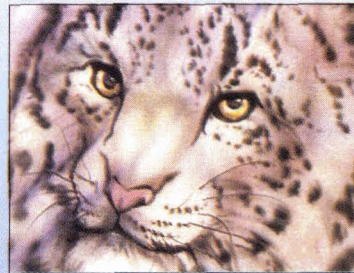
I suggest your portrait display predominantly depict youngsters and that you offer your portraits on canvas boards as well as T-shirts. At West Coast Airbrush, one of our artists sells portraits of kids in sepia tones painted on 12"x16" canvas boards for \$35 apiece at Christmas time as fast as he can take the orders. This is just an idea you might try.

Another very popular custom design category is animal portraits. These designs are great if you have a display window in your shop — they will really attract customers. We call them the "wow" factor designs because people say,

"Wow, check that shirt out!" when they pass by our shops.

One West Coast Airbrush artist, Mark Daehlin, is a stenciling wizard. He came up with the most popular exotic animals, all done with large full shirt stencils. The trick here was to paint a wolf or tiger or any number of other animals in only 25-30 minutes and have it turn out almost exactly the same way every time.

The Mark Daehlin Custom Airbrush Design Portfolio



25 FULL SHIRT DESIGNS IN THE \$25 TO \$60 RETAIL PRICE CATEGORY.

Each portfolio includes designs (tiger, snow leopard, lion, three Bald Eagle designs, horse head, horse rearing, tree frog, rhinoceros, two wolf designs, zebra, housecat, black unicorn grizzly bear, dragon, falcon, elephant, and gorilla), all stencil patterns and material, and a 3"x5" color photo of each design. All designs are painted from start to finish on 14 hours of instructional video, priced at \$159. To order, or for more information, call West Coast Airbrush Company at 800-500-4599 or see it now on our web site <www.westcoastairbrush.com>.

In this way, the customer, as I mentioned earlier, will never find differences when comparing the displayed design with the finished product. In the "How-To" following this article, Mark Daehlin demonstrates how to paint one of these fast animal portraits.

Remember, showing off your great work will establish your artistic credibility with your customers, but don't show off too much unless you're ready to reproduce the work.

How your custom work is displayed can add a great deal to its over all customer appeal. Take time to work out a nice display for your custom work — it will pay off in the end.

Until next time, just do it!

About the Author

Pat Gaines is the owner of West Coast Airbrush Co., the largest chain of T-shirt shops in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Kansas, and Arizona. He has been airbrushing for 20 years.

