THE FOUR 'Cs' OF PAINTING

By Joe Sleboda

Hello, fellow hobby-friends! I am here today to talk to you about a way to cure what ails you, help you get a date, and put hair on your chest. Follow my advice for a brighter, better tomorrow that will include a better job, a faster car, and more money in your pocket. What I have for you is new, it's great, and it can be yours today!

Ok, not really. Of all that baloney in the preceding paragraph, the only thing that is true is that what we're going to cover in this article can be yours to use today.

This hobby of ours, that of using paint to depict little representations of warriors and conflicts, has been around for a long time. From the cave paintings in Lascaux to the basements, garages, and work rooms of our homes and apartments, people like us have been putting finger or brush to stone/metal/plastic for thousands of years. For a long time there was not much change other than the jump off of the canvas (or stone wall) to a physical model. Somewhat recently, geologically speaking, refinement to the hobby of painting toy soldiers for war games has seen a bit of a revolution. Just like how

Egyptian art took thousands of years to change appreciably, and then suddenly we had Picasso, Pollock, and Warhol, so too has miniature painting undergone a revolution. We used to use enamel paints, rough blocks of color, and a bit of dirt to bring our little armies to life. That worked for a very long time. Now we see new-fangled techniques like non-metallic metallics, object source lighting, and zenithal highlighting. Companies sell us paints with a higher pigment density, paints in color-grouped sets to speed up highlighting and shading, jars of ink, cans of furniture wax re-branded as something called "dip," and all sorts of other products aimed at making us better (or in some cases, simply faster) painters.

Well, I'm here to say that you don't really need to latch on to the newest fashionable trend to be a better painter. Throughout

the evolution of our hobby, right up to today, with old materials and new, there are some basic concepts that have remained true. That's what I am writing about today. These are things I have been asked about, talked about, and written about for years. I've been painting toy soldiers for more than 26 years now, and these things are as true today as they were when I started. I refer to this set of ideas as the Four Cs.

We'll explore each "C" in detail, but here's a summary:

COLOR - Choosing the wrong colors can destroy an otherwise well-executed paint job.

COMPOSITION - Deciding where to place those colors on a model will have a huge impact on how viewers take in the overall effect of your work.

COLOR

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Blue and purple are very close to each other on the color wheel, making for a slightly jarring result, particularly with these saturated examples.

Red and green, however, work well together as they are opposite each other on the color wheel. The use of a muted tone for one of the colors helps too.

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This lone splash of bright red "blood" draws the eye away from the rest of the model. These muted "blood" splashes, meanwhile, form a triangle that frames the model's face

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Poor composition choice has resulted in a big mass of yellow: the right boot, pants, and belt.

Good choices mean that large areas are broken up, but linked to other areas of the model: yellow detailing links the pants and tunic, bone detailing links the pants and shield, blue detailing links the shield and the arm.
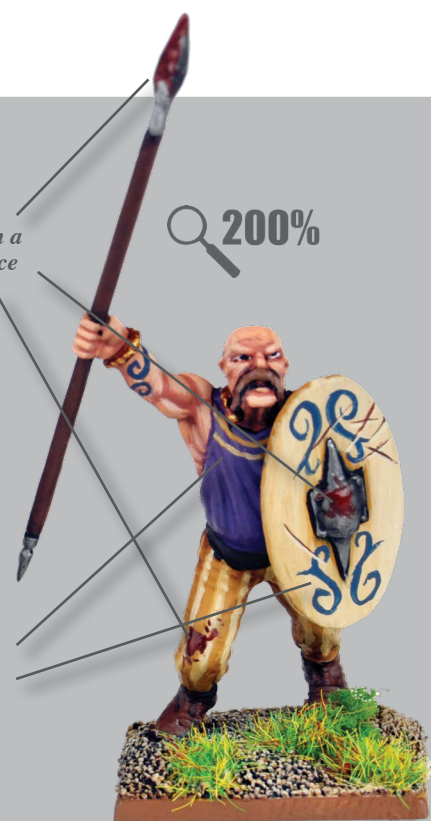
CONTRAST - Even within simple color selection, finding just the right interplay between light and dark, highlight and shadow, peanut butter and jelly (ok, not really) can create a striking effect. Get this wrong and see an otherwise remarkable paint job turn into...blah.

CORRECTION - I refer to miniature painting as "the fine art of correction" for a reason. Even the best of us will make the occasional (or not so occasional as we age and our hands start to shake) mistake. The only real, unforgivable, mistake is to not correct them.

Those are the general ideas. Now it's time to go through each one and put some flesh on those bones. In collaboration with miniature painter Dave Taylor (also the U.S. Editor of this august rag), I will explain each of my Four Cs through the use of painted examples. Each example will show what happens when one of the Four Cs gets ignored. Think of it as our version of "What Not To Wear" (What Not To Paint) only with a subject we actually care about, way less advertising, and (marginally) less arrogance.

Here we go....

Thanks to the good people at **Warlord Games**, **Gripping Beast**, and **Perry Miniatures** we have a nice variety of models as the subjects of our painting attentions. One photo in each case is what that model should look like when painted with all the correct decisions made. There's something about him that just looks right. The colors don't make you want to avert your gaze. Your eye does not wander off the model. You are able to pick out the distinct areas of the

model and are not distracted by smears, runs, and other flaws in the work. Again, he just looks right. The other photo in each section was deliberately painted ignoring one of our "Cs" (very much on purpose - Dave is much better than these abominations show, as you can see in the good versions).

So, what if we messed with our first "C" - the color choices - using one of the Celts from **Warlord Games**? Instead of the sensible colors Dave chose for the good example, what if his pants were purple and his tunic slapped our faces with a nice light blue? Can you imagine the things his fellow warriors would say about him? "Ha! Bran spent too much time in Gaul, I think!" That might be the kindest thing. Take a look for yourself.

Color choices generally go wrong in two ways. The painter either uses colors that do not work well together or he uses too many colors.

I recommend a limit of three main colors for a model. You can do bits and bobs like belts and ropes in neutral colors and not think of these as additional color choices. I'm talking about things like shields, shirts, kilts and other major 'block' areas. Don't make each of these a different color and then introduce more colors with brightly-dyed hair, tattoos, pouches, scabbards, or whatever else. Give your viewer two or three main colors to process. These models are quite small. Using too many colors will have only one effect - scattering the focus of the viewer. If your goal is to camouflage your warrior so he or she can blend into a circus diorama, then great. Otherwise, keep it under control.

Once you limit your number of colors, you are left choosing which colors to use. For many historical periods, the choices are already made for you in the form of uniforms and the like. For the times when you can choose, such as with our Celt, you get to be creative. Now, I know that not everyone has a keen artistic eye. The good news is that you don't have to have one to pull off a great scheme. Two things can guide you in your selection: the color wheel and big-business marketing.

There are books on color theory out there, most of which are written by learned men and women with letters after their names and huge student loan payments. If you want to understand the science of color theory, check some of those out. For our purposes, all we have to know is that colors opposite each other on a color wheel generally look good together. Yes, this is why Christmas is so successful - it has good colors (nothing to do with tradition, family, consumerism, and whatnot, noooo...). Red and green are great together. So are blue/orange and yellow/purple pairings (dark chocolate and a fine red zin are another great pairing). Once you expand beyond a basic six-color version of the color wheel you start to see more great combinations. Colors next to each other on the wheel are too similar (in fact, they share the same pigments - sort of like kissing-cousins), which makes them stand out against each other less and just kind of mush together. Mush is for orphans. Art is for wargamers. Make art, not mush.

There is, as previously mentioned, another way to pick colors other than a color wheel. This other way is by taking

advantage of the vast marketing budgets of corporations around the world.

Products that look better than others sell better than others. Comic book characters, video game models, and sports teams are often given uniforms that have stunning visual appeal. It's not a surefire method of color selection, to be sure, but it is a good guide. There's a good chance that the character or team that you think looks fantastic has had its look influenced by color selections that will appeal to viewers. Let those marketing dollars work for you!

Alright then, you've got your colors, but what do you do with them? It's not enough to randomly splash your choices around and hope for a good result. Never hope. Plan. You have to pay attention to where your colors run. This is where "C" number two comes in - Composition.

Take a look at Dave's crazy, messed up, freak - creatively named Celt #2. Mr Taylor had to work really hard to mess up a guy this badly. The main two problems with the color placement choices on this model are: grouping, and the "Ooh, ooh, over there" effect.

Grouping refers to the distribution of colors over the model. It does little good to pick good colors, say yellow and purple, and then arrange them poorly. In Dave's nasty, nasty, nasty version of this Celt, he has put the colors on the model seemingly at random. One boot, his belt and his pants are yellow and the tunic is purple*. The sections of the model are at the same time broken up too clearly and not interesting at all. There's no cohesion, no plan - nothing to keep the

eye interested. This is not the case in the well-painted model. Not only are the boots and belt a sensible neutral color, but the yellow of the pants is carried up into the purple of the shirt by a bit of freehand work. This is really great technique on Dave's part. Even models without several distinct components can spread the color-love around with a bit of freehand. Having yellow up high and down low on the model, balanced by a 'heavier' color in the center, the eye is less inclined to wander or to settle on just one area. The viewer (you!) takes in the work as a whole. Much better.

The other problem with the sad little Celt is the bright, garish blood on his spear tip. Yes, we get it. It can be fun to add some flair that says "Grr! I'm a fierce and bloodthirsty warrior!" In this case, all it does is say "Ooo! Look! Up here! No, no, don't look at me, look at my spear tip... waaaay up there!" Since there is no other red on the model, and red is a particularly eye-catching color, sticking a single splash of red far away from the center mass of the model draws the viewer's eye to that single point and off of the model as a whole. By contrast, the good Celt has no such distraction and is consequently a much more successful paint job.

The Saxon from **Gripping Beast** is a great model to use for the Contrast example. He has chainmail, a metal helmet, straps - all sorts of generally 'greyish' sections that don't usually get a lot of colors. In order to create visual appeal, careful use of contrast is a must.

Begin by looking at Wulstan the Saxon. In addition to his metal sections and

straps, he has had his tunic painted a basic grey. The wood of his spear is a weathered grey-brown. This scabbard is non-descript. The leggings look like twenty year old hospital gauze. This model just seems flat.

However, standing next to him we see what can be done, even with limited areas for color application, to make a model really stand out. See how Dave has opted for a lighter wood for the spear, a lighter leather for the scabbard, and more depth in his leggings (by adding highlights). These alone would be enough to help, but Dave has not stopped there. By going with a dark color for the moustache, he has not only tied in the darker tones of the pants and the boots, but he has broken up the face/neckline and torso/hips, creating more sections of the model that gain individual attention. Do note, though, that his color choice and his composition with those colors keep your eye on the complete model rather than each of the sections. It's not easy to make models that are mostly wood, leather, and armor have some visual pop, but Dave's done it by keeping the Cs in mind. You can as well.

Finally, we come to a personal favorite - Correction. I meant what I wrote earlier about shaking hands. I have been painting for more than 26 years. My eyes and hands are not what they used to be, but I love my hobby far too much to give up on it. Despite my love, I make lots of mistakes. As easy as it would be to ignore them and move on to my next figure, it is my dedication to Correction that keeps my models looking even remotely passable as I meander off into my dotage.

CONTRAST

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Contrast is one of the easiest things to "mess up". Darker colors are generally quicker to paint as they usually have better coverage. Neutral colors (browns and greys mostly) can also tend to have very similar tonal qualities.

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As you can see, most of the colors chosen for the model on the right were used on the model on the left. The model on the right, however, has had contrasting tones applied alternately across the model. There is a deliberate effort to put light next to dark or mid-tones, and dark tones next to mid- or light tones, etc.

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CORRECTION

Perhaps the most important C to practice, particularly if your chosen period leaves you with little freedom for painting uniforms (ie. the colors are assigned by history).

As Joe says in the article, he refers to miniature painting as "the fine art of correction". Initially Correction will seem like the most time-consuming aspect of painting. With more and more practice and attention paid to where you brush is going, you can cut down on the number of "mistakes" you make, therefore reducing the number of corrections you need to make. Over time (and an army project) this will increase not only your painting speed but, more importantly, also the quality of your finished models.

Dave has been kind enough to make a great number of obvious mistakes while painting the Napoleonic French soldier from **Perry Miniatures**. Hopefully you can easily spot most of them. From the running mascara of the eyes, to the completely missing the pom-pom on the fellow's shako, the mistakes on this model are easy to spot.

If you can get past the flak-storm of mistakes on the model, you will see that it is otherwise the same as the soldier who knows that pride in uniform is part of a soldier's duty. The color selection is the same, as you would expect from a toy soldier selected from a uniformed historical force. The composition and contrast displayed in the execution of the painting are both virtually identical. The only difference is the time spent correcting.

The well-painted soldier has no running makeup, no smears of shading washes that were not covered by mid-tones and highlights, no highlights (speaking of which) that missed and hit a shadow area, and so on. It also has no areas which were just plain missed. Though technically not "correction" as such, I count missed areas as things to be corrected just the same.

Honestly, there's not much to say here. It's not about an artistic eye, color theory or hard to pronounce terms like *chiaroscuro*. It's just taking the time while painting to be neat and having enough pride in one's work to go back and fix the things that got messed up along the way.

I think the key is to not get discouraged when you make a mistake in painting. Know that you can go back and fix it.

Have a plan. Some people like to paint darker colors first, some last. Some like to start with areas closer to the naked flesh, others...not so much. Find a method that works for you and be willing suffer minor setbacks, knowing that you plan to fix them later. It's better to expect the little mistakes and be ready to fix them than to expect perfection and be put off when the smallest of things goes wrong (and make no mistake - or do, I suppose! - these little guys are small, so you will miss your mark now and then).

As you can see, "The Four Cs of Painting Toy Soldiers" are pretty basic. It's not hard to keep them in mind while working on your armies. Whether you plan to just play in your basement or to take your force to a tournament where painting might be scored as part of determining who wins, if you apply the Four Cs your results will set you apart.

I'm always glad to talk to fellow figure painters. This little hobby of ours is like the Force - it surrounds us, penetrates us and combines us. It's the shared wisdom and experiences of our fellows that keeps us growing and having fun. None of us has all the answers, but we should all be willing to listen to others. To that end, if you have input or questions, I'd love to hear them. You can reach me at:

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* A note on muted tones. While I refer to colors by common names like purple and yellow, keep in mind that this does not have to mean highly saturated, pure tones. In fact, with many historical eras or cultures, colors will be significantly less brilliant than one might find in the looms during the Age of Chivalry. Just because we call a color "purple" it doesn't mean it has to scream "Look at me! I'm a Barney the Dinosaur!"

...and there you have it! Through the use of a variety of miniatures we've shown you the four most important aspects when it comes to planning out and executing any painting project you are about to embark on. Please remember too, that the techniques can be applied to any period, color scheme, uniform, or miniature range you might want to tackle. Have fun!