

PAINTING SANTA

Getting rich reds while allowing the beauty of the grain to shine through

By Michele Carville

As a teacher of Santa carving and painting, I encourage my students to use craft paints made by Americana and Delta Ceramcoat. They are relatively inexpensive, consistent in texture and color, and they reduce the worry in already anxious woodcarvers when it comes to painting. But there are techniques for using these brands that may surprise you.

Before sharing my “secrets,” I have to admit that I used to paint my Santas with heavy, intense reds so the wood grain wouldn’t show. Santa collectors, I reasoned, did not want the figures done with washes that made the colors look faded. But in the hopes of providing my jolly St. Nicks with shading and depth of color, I would “antique” them with various concoctions of noxious smelling oil paints and a variety of mediums. The look satisfied the collectors for awhile. But several years ago, potential customers started asking why my “castings” were so expensive. When I indignantly informed them these figures were original woodcarvings, not reproductions, the would-be buyers told me they couldn’t tell the difference.

I had to agree with their criticisms. There was no way to know whether the figure was wood or resin without cutting away some of the paint. So the search began for a more effective approach to impart rich colors to the carvings while allowing the wood grain to project through. Needless to say, there were many ruined Santas as I searched for the right paints and

This two-foot-tall Santa, carved by Dave Stetson, is the perfect medium for demonstrating painting techniques like side loading, shading and highlighting. Inexpensive craft colors are used without confusing mixing formulas.



techniques. But as luck and persistence would have it, and with a little help from my partner, Dave Stetson, I came upon a system that works.

Forget the Formula

Heavy applications of colors are not the answer. Layering paint is, and that requires practice and patience. Practice is needed not only for the actual painting process, but also for knowing how much water to combine with the paints. Mixing formulas abound, usually followed up with an old T-shirt used to blend the paint on the carving. You may do a double take when I write that acrylic paints are *not* made to be mixed with water.

Instead, they are designed to be cleaned up with water. When you add a drop of acrylic paint to a pre-determined amount of water, as the typical formulas offer, and mix the two, the paint pigment usually ends up in the bottom of the cup. The process makes it impossible to lay on consistent, even color. If you have ever had your paint look granule-like, you will immediately understand. Ideally, acrylic paints should be combined with a flow medium, glaze or extender. However, most of these mediums delay the drying process, a problem with carvers in a hurry. My approach is to use water as a thinner, but I add it to the brush first and then go to the paint.

Loading the Brush

To ensure an even application of paint, first dip the tips of the bristles in the water and allow the water to wick up to the ferrule. Gently touch the tip of the brush on a dry paper towel to remove any potential water drips; then pull a small amount of paint from the paint puddle on your paper palette with the brush. Mix the color up into the brush with a back and forth motion. Don't be afraid to put some pressure on the brush to allow the bristles to separate. When individual brush hairs collect paint, the brush is evenly loaded. When the water in the brush has blended with the paint on the palette, and the color is still intense but you can see through it, it is ready to be applied to the carving.

As you run out of water, the bristles start to separate on the brush, so repeat the process of filling your brush by dipping the tips of the bristles in the water. Then tap them off on a paper towel. Finally, pull paint from the puddle and blend on the palette. You won't need to wash out your brush until you change colors, unless the paint starts to dry on the brush. However, if you keep your brush saturated with enough water that should not happen.

A Brush With the Past

Here are three terms you need to be familiar with for my style of painting. These terms have been used by decorative painters and hobbyists for centuries, but they are as applicable to woodcarving as they are to flatwork art. Some may take getting used to, but the results will be impressive.

Side loading is a technique that requires filling the brush with water, lightly tapping off excess water on a paper towel to eliminate drips, and then running one side of the brush through the edge of the paint puddle so it picks up paint on that side. Then the brush is moved back and forth, not scrubbed side to side, on the palette so the paint works up in the brush while distributed across the brush.

Make sure to keep the brush in the same track or paint stripe each time you move it back and forth. If you do this, the paint does not get spread all over the paper palette, which will cause you to run out of color prematurely. When the brush is properly loaded, you should be able to paint a swath of color that is intense on one side but fading out to no color on the other. Practice side loading on the paper palette. If you end up with a heavy swath with no variation in color, wash out the brush and start over. This takes a little practice to master, but the effects you will achieve are worth the effort.

Shading means deepening shadows. These techniques are useful for areas such as the folds, wrinkles and creases of clothing on a carving. To accomplish shading, a color darker than the basecoat is needed.

Highlighting requires using a lighter color than the basecoat to accentuate an area where a real or imaginary light source hits. The goal is to create a "higher" light, suggesting that the light source strikes this area first.

Brush Tips

Unless otherwise noted, I recommend a ½" oval shader for most of the Santa painting. Always use the largest brush possible to ensure even paint distribution. Too much time spent with an undersized brush and your chances of successfully applying an even coat of paint are diminished to almost zero. When using any brush, hold the handle perpendicular to the painted surface. This allows the paint to flow off the bristles with the help of gravity.

The brushes I prefer are made of taklon, a synthetic, recommended for acrylic paints and watercolors. They are made by any number of brush companies and generally run in the \$4 to \$12 range. I advise you not use expensive sable brushes on your woodcarvings. Most are too fragile to withstand the abuse that occurs when bristles come in contact with carvings.

Painting Santa in 20 Steps

Editor's Note: Dave Stetson designed and carved the 24"-tall Santa from basswood as a Christmas present for Michele. Working at a carver's bench using a mallet and handtools, Dave spent over 40 hours on the figure. It was Michele's task to paint it.

Step 1: Remove raised grain. Santa, or any caricature or flat-plane carving, should not be sanded for this painting process. Sanding raises the wood grain and leaves grit on the wood, which will not allow the paint to go on smoothly. Still, raised or fuzzy grain must be carved away for a good paint job. Apply a light coat of boiled linseed oil with a disposable 1"-wide foam brush. Wipe the carving down with a paper towel so there are no drips, runs or puddles of oil remaining. Remember to soak the paper towel in water before throwing it away to prevent a fire hazard.

Step 2: Apply two or three thin coats of Rust-Oleum American Accent Clear Matte Finish. Let each coat dry for 15 to 20 minutes before applying the next coat. This protective

Materials & TOOLS

AMERICANA PAINTS:

Black Green	Cherry Red
Black Plum	Primary Yellow
Blush Flesh	

DELTA CERAMCOAT PAINTS:

Adobe Red	Midnight Blue
Antique White	Salem Blue
Burnt Sienna	Timberline Green
Tomato Spice	Charcoal

JO SONJA PAINT:

Rich Gold

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR SANTA:

Paper towels	Paper palette
1" disposable foam brush	Brushes: ½" oval shader
Boiled linseed oil	No. 3 round
Rust-Oleum American Accent Clear Matte Finish	00 Script liner
	Water container



The beard, hair and fur are basecoated with Americana Primary Yellow, and the shadows are deepened with a side-loaded shading of Delta Ceramcoat Burnt Sienna. Delta Ceramcoat Antique White is applied as a final coat.

coating will seal in the oil so you can begin painting immediately. If your carving feels tacky and the oil looks like it is seeping through, spray another thin coat of Rust-Oleum.

Step 3: Side load a ½" oval shader brush with Burnt Sienna and shade around the edges of the fur, between the head and the hat, above the beard on the cheek, in some of the crevices of the beard, below the mustache, and in all the wrinkles and folds of the clothing. Give a light wash of the Burnt Sienna, while it is still in the brush, to the sack, shoes, mittens, belt and belt buckle.

Step 4: Apply two thin coats of Tomato Spice to the coat, pants and hat. Let the paint dry between coats to avoid lifting the previous layer of paint.

Step 5: Apply a thin coat of Cherry Red to the areas painted in the previous step. This color will brighten the Tomato Spice and give the clothing a richer look.

Step 6: Side load the brush with Americana Black Plum and shade all the folds, wrinkles and edges of the clothing.

Step 7: Basecoat the beard, hair and fur with Primary Yellow. Soak the brush with water and mix a fairly transparent wash of the color. Apply just one coat, let it dry and then deepen the shadows by applying a side-loaded shading of Burnt Sienna. You shouldn't put shadows in every single depression of the hair. Make them random and make the brush strokes flow without stopping and starting as you work from the scalp toward the ends of the hair. You want to avoid creating shadows that look like dots in the hair. When shading the fur trim, do only the outer and inner edges where the fur meets the clothing.

Step 8: Apply Antique White to the fur, hair and beard as a final coat. Saturate your brush with water; then touch the tips of the bristles to a



After the figure is sealed with linseed oil and Rust-Oleum American Accent Clear Matte Finish, the coat, pants and hat are given two thin coats of Delta Ceramcoat Tomato Spice followed by Americana Cherry Red. The folds and wrinkles are done with Americana Black Plum using a side-loaded brush technique.

paper towel to remove excess water. The water has to have a chance to flow off the brush, leaving bristles that are somewhat moist but not dripping. Pull some Antique White from the paint puddle on the palette and load the brush with paint. Instead of holding the brush perpendicular to the carving, use the flat side of the brush and go over the hair and fur surfaces. You want paint on the high spots, not in the crevices.



The belt, shoes and sack are given a thin wash of Delta Ceramcoat Charcoal, and the buckle is dry brushed with Jo Sonja's Rich Gold.

Step 9: Next, load your brush with a very thin wash of Charcoal. Apply this color over the shoes and belt, not the buckle. The buckle gets a little dry brushing of Jo Sonja's Rich Gold.

Step 10: Wash out the ½" oval shader, re-form the bristles with your fingers and put it aside. Saturate a no. 3 round brush with water; then touch the tip to the paper towel. Load the brush with Antique White and paint the eyeball, trying not to get any paint inside the lids along the eyeball. Start in the middle of the eyeball and carefully work out. Only one thin coat is needed.

Step 11: Paint the iris with Midnight Blue. This also should be thin enough to cover without running. Paint a U-shaped iris; then fill it in. It needs to come close to but not touch the upper and lower eyelids.



Painting the eyes begins with Delta Ceramcoat Antique White. The irises are done with Delta Ceramcoat Midnight Blue and Salem Blue. The pupils are Delta Ceramcoat Charcoal, and a dot of Antique White is applied to each pupil with a liner brush.

If it does, it will likely creep into a tool cut. If you paint an iris that has white all around it, the eye will suggest the proverbial “deer in the headlights.”

Step 12: Go over each iris with Salem Blue. Leave a very thin line of the Midnight Blue outlining the Salem Blue. The pupil is a dot of Charcoal placed at the upper center of the iris, almost touching the upper lid. Be sure it's in the same place on both eyes and large enough so the eyes don't look like targets.

Step 13: Using a 00 script liner brush, mix a very thin wash of Charcoal and water to make almost an ink-like consistency. Start in the upper center above the pupil along the inside of the upper lid and draw a very fine line down to the outside corner of the eye. Then start again in the center and draw the line down to the inside corner of the eye. The line adds a shadow and cleans up any unevenness in the painted eye.

Step 14: Using the liner brush again and Burnt Sienna, paint a very thin line along each bottom lid. This is usually a straighter line than the eye line painted in Step 13, but

you can still start in the middle and work out to both corners of each eye.

Step 15: Paint a dot with Antique White on the upper right or left side of each pupil. Putting the dot on the same side means you will have a Santa with eyes that are looking forward. If you have any questions about eyes, try looking at someone, preferably a friend so you aren't accused of leering; or there's always a mirror.

Step 16: The eyebrow can be painted with Antique White, using the liner brush. Be warned that an eyebrow that dips in the center toward the eye provides an angry expression. Aim for an open arch that tapers off at the side of the face toward the hairline. Keep a clean damp brush handy in case you need to “erase” your eyebrow and start over. You may need to draw an eyebrow or two on the paper palette.

Step 17: Brighten the face. Flesh colors are not needed for the carving thanks to the linseed oil finish. Instead, the face is brightened with Blush Flesh mixed with a tiny amount of Adobe Red. Before mixing, make sure there is plenty of water in the no. 3 round brush. After loading the brush with paint, tap it vigorously on a paper towel. If the mix looks too light, repeat the application.



Step 18: Paint the tree. With Santa painted, the Christmas tree gets basecoated with two thin washes of Timberline Green. Let the paint dry between coats. Shade under the branches with side-loaded Black Green. Highlight the tips of the branches with streaks of Primary Yellow. The tree trunk is basecoated with Burnt Sienna and shaded with more Burnt Sienna and Black Plum.

Step 19: Paint the cardinals. Basecoat the cardinals with Tomato Spice and Cherry Red; then shade with Black Plum. The birds' eyes are highlighted with a dot of Antique White.

Step 20: Spray with matte finish. When you have finished painting, spray the entire carving with two more light coats of Rust-Oleum American Accent Clear Matte Finish. The paints and spray finish will remain fragile until the linseed oil underneath cures. That could take as long as two to three weeks depending on the time of year and the humidity in your area. If a scratch or a nick should appear, you will need to repaint that area. Then spray with more Rust-Oleum.

About the Author

A Santa carver from Scottsdale, Arizona, Michele Carville teaches and does commission work while selling rough outs, castings and tools along with her long-time partner, Caricature Carvers of America member Dave Stetson. Michele can be contacted at lcnmichele@aol.com.

The Christmas tree is basecoated with thin washes of Delta Ceramcoat Timberline Green. Shading under the branches is done with side-loaded Americana Black Green. And the tips of the branches are highlighted with Americana Primary Yellow. The cardinals are basecoated with Delta Ceramcoat Tomato Spice and Americana Cherry Red, then shaded with Americana Black Plum.