AIRBRUSH CLEANING

Cleaning your airbrush after every use is vital to its performance and longevity. A neglected airbrush will not spray properly the next time you want to use it because of the dried paint that is in it. An airbrush that is properly maintained, on the other hand, will last a lifetime.

I see post after post on forums regarding poor airbrush performance. It is my opinion that the vast bulk of airbrush problems can be eliminated with a thorough cleaning. It does not take much dried paint to prevent an airbrush from working properly. I also see post after post asking something along the lines of, "How should I Clean my airbrush?" This is simple: Read the manual that came with your airbrush. It will tell you how to clean it. But for those who prefer to read a web page instead of their owner's manual, here is how I do it.

There are two methods of cleaning an airbrush:
- The quick-and-dirty just blow some thinner through it method
- The complete disassembly and cleanup method

Both are useful and have their place. On a day-to-day basis, and in between colors, I usually just blow some thinner through my brushes. I pour thinner in the cup (or bottle) then swish it around and use a Q-Tip to get the bulk of the paint loosened and dissolved. I normally don't blow that highly paint-saturated thinner through the airbrush, I just dump it out. Pour some more thinner in the cup, wipe everything down with a clean Q-Tip and a small paint brush, and then blow it through the brush at high pressure. Repeat this one more time and the airbrush is normally pretty clean.

For intermediate cleanings such as this the thinner used to clean the airbrush should be matched to the type of paint used. For acrylics Windex, alcohol, or sometimes even just water can be used. More caustic thinners such as mineral spirits or laquer thinner will also work very well on acrylics. For enamels use either mineral spirits or laquer thinner, and for laquers used laquer thinner.

An excellent cleaner for acrylics can be made by mixing 2 parts distilled water, 1 part Simple Green, and 1 part Windex. This mixture came from my good friend Mike VanBuskirk. I'm not cure where he got it but it works great on most acrylics and is not nearly as caustic as mineral spirits or laquer thinner.

For the environmentally conscious people out there, the used thinner should be collected and disposed of properly. Also, you will be spraying a good bit of thinner at high pressure so you should always take precautions to prevent inhaling the fumes. A respirator is a very good investment. Matt Swann also has an excellent article on his web site about constructing a Paint Fume Can (see this link: http://www.swannysmodels.com/FumeCan.html) from an old respirator cartridge that works quite well.

Occasionally you should completely disassemble your airbrush and thoroughly clean it out. This may not be appropriate to the Aztek line of airbrushes since I understand that they are not designed to be disassembled. I've never owned one so I can't comment on that.

Different people have different ideas regarding airbrush disassembly. Some people completely tear them down after every day's use and clean them thoroughly. Others discourage this practice since it increases the likelihood of losing small parts. I normally tear mine down about once a week or when it starts to feel "Sticky" or rough.

Important concept and disclaimer here: REFER TO YOUR AIRBRUSH OWNER'S MANUAL TO DETERMINE HOW TO DISASSEMBLE AND REASSEMBLE YOUR AIRBRUSH! Don't send me an email saying you got it apart and can't get it back together because unless it is one of the brushes I have then I have no idea how to get it back together either.

I completely disassemble every component of my brushes. Everything that can be taken apart is taken apart. All of my airbrushes are Badgers (or Thayer and Chandler which are now manufactured by Badger) so I know that solvents will not harm them. I soak everything EXCEPT the air valve in laquer thinner for an hour or so. I don't know if the o-ring in the air valve is solvent resistant and I don't really want to find out. Paint seldom gets in there anyway so it isn't a big deal.

After everything has soaked for a while I start brushing everything out. I use Q-Tips, pipe cleaners, and inter-dental brushes, and old toothbrushes for that. I soak them in laquer thinner and wipe and brush everything I can find. Pay particular attention to paint and air passages and anything that paint might come into contact with. If your Q-tip, pipe cleaner, or brush comes out of a crevice with paint on it then focus on that area until they come out clean.

I then put a thin coat of airbrush lubricant on the needle, any threaded surfaces, and the trigger mechanism, and reassemble everything. After assembly, make sure the trigger feels right and everything is tight.

There is a very thorough article on the Stockholm IPMS web site pertaining to cleaning airbrushes. It has lot of photographs and goes into a lot of detail. Here Is A Link To The Page: http://www.ipmsstockholm.org/magazine/2005/03/stuff_eng_tech_airbrush_cleaning_2.htmI It is well worth reading. There are a couple of things that I would like to add however:

o Most airbrushes have air passages that go from the air valve to the front of the body. Contrary to popular belief, air does NOT blow through the nozzle of most airbrushes, it blows around the nozzle and pulls the paint out through the nozzle. The air passage is bored through the body from the front to the air valve and from time to time it should be cleaned out. Steel airbrushes can be soaked in laquer thinner (remove anything that might have an o-ring in it to be safe) and then blown out with compressed air. The smaller inter-dental brushes can also be used to clean parts of the passages but will seldom be long enough to get much of it.

o Dry threads will occasionally seize. I like to put a tiny bit of airbrush lube on everything that is threaded, as well as my trigger mechanisms.

o Regarding the small inter-dental brushes, I actually prefer the "Refills" that are available to the ones with a handle. Both types are handy, but I drill a hole in the end of a wooden toothpick and glue a "Refill" into the hole (they have a wire stem that makes that easy). That allows me to get to the needle bearing and other tight spots in the body that the handles prevent me being able to get to.

o Pipe cleaners are very handy for cleaning hard to reach places, but be sure to blow everything out with compressed air afterwards to remove any "Fuzz" that might get left behind.

o Some head assemblies have very tiny nozzles (such as the Badger 100, 150, and 200) that thread into the head. They are usually sealed but if the seal breaks loose and you start twisting a piece of tissue or a pipe cleaner in them the nozzle can unscrew and get lost. Always twist countercloskwise when viewed from the rear of the nozzle. This will tighten the nozzle rather than unscrew it.