



COLUMN

This Gaming Life

Apples and Oranges

The other day I was admiring a photograph of a particularly finely sculpted and expertly painted model in the pages of this very magazine. The execution was flawless in every respect: the modelling was skilful and painstaking, the paint job meticulous and precise, and the photography a crisp exposition of the model's quality and character.

"Imagine an army like that!" I chirruped, between gulps of tea and mouthfuls of steaming cob (fear not – in this part of the world, a cob is a bread roll and not something that comes out of the back of a horse).

"Fantastic stuff", replied my entirely imaginary interlocutor. (You see what I am reduced to these days – holding conversations with myself over breakfast. If only the dog could talk ...)

"Ah, but you couldn't really, could you", I say, pensively. "I mean, aside from the cost and the time involved, I'd be nervous to even *touch* models painted like that! You can't compare that model to a wargames figure – it's like comparing two different things. It's like comparing apples and oranges."

And it's an interesting thing, isn't it – how what we see presented on websites and in magazines is increasingly divorced from what a wargamer of yore would have considered an entirely appropriate standard. Much of this is to be applauded, as quality is always to be welcomed and artistry should be rewarded. We have all come to expect the very best. But I do sometimes wonder what we mean by 'best'. I know that my best is no longer good enough, by a long country mile – not good enough to stand comparison with that superbly sculpted, painted and photographed model, at any rate. And, in a way, that disheartens me a little. Is it just me, I wonder? I mean, there is certainly something stirring about these fantastic models; something undeniably inspirational, which excites desire and fuels the imagination! Yet, I know its beyond me, as a painter, to create work of that standard. Or at least, of that *style* and standard, because a lot of what I'm talking about isn't really a reflection of quality, at all. It's about a *style* of painting and presentation.

What do I mean by style? When it comes to painting a model that's about an inch high, it was once considered entirely satisfactory to merely cover it with a coat of paint: red here, white there, flesh for the face and hands, brown for the musket, and – Bingo! Done! Getting the paint in the right places was a worthy enough aspiration, in itself. It's how the old-fashioned Britains-style 'toy soldiers' were painted, and it's how our pioneering wargames heroes painted theirs. We sometimes call it 'block colours', because the basic colours are just blocked in. To this, we might add the 'lining' tech-

nique, which takes the blocked model and paints in dark lines – usually black – around the cuffs, belts, webbing and other distinct parts of the model, to pick them out. Very effective this looks, too. Especially once you've favoured your troops with a good thick coat of gloss varnish! Eventually, talented painters started to adopt simple wash-and-highlight techniques from large-scale figure modellers. Then blending techniques, source-point lighting, non-metallic metals, and the full gamut of techniques and skills...

Now, I both admire and applaud skill wherever I see it. But, over recent years, I have become aware that all the painted miniatures I see on box packaging, on websites, and in magazines are painted in more or less the same way. I might concede that there are two approaches: the fully blended style, where highlights and shadows blend imperceptibly together, and the contrasting layered style, where these are deliberately and neatly separated, giving the model a slightly 'stripy' look. The first of these comes from large-scale figure modelling really, and it was primarily pioneered by the incomparable Mike McVey, when he was leading the Games Workshop 'Eavy Metal team. It's a dry-blending technique, where the darker colour is gradually drawn over the lighter colour and thinned or feathered, often with progressive layers. The second involves painting a dark under-colour, picking out the raised areas with a mid-colour, and then picking out the highlights (with a highlight), keeping each area distinct, without blending. This technique is associated with the talented Kevin Dallimore, who developed the Wargames Foundry range of paints specifically for this style of painting.

The reason why standards have leaped forward in recent years must be that companies selling miniatures have understood the value of presentation. That might be presentation on the catalogue pages of a website, or on the packaging of boxes, in magazines, and throughout the World Wide Web on blogs, forums and so-called social media. I think this has gradually changed the way we all look at wargames armies.

Once we sought inspiration by strolling around the display tables at conventions and the games played at our local clubs, now we all look at photographs. Those might be on a box cover, in a magazine or on the web, but they are all photographs, often considerably enlarged, and frequently



Same manufacturer, same range, different painters and painting styles. Note though, that 'Pro Painted' does not automatically exclude 'accuracy gaffes'...

indulged with a dab of Photoshop. Fantastically-painted models undoubtedly sell products! This has created a commercial incentive for manufacturers, retailers, publishers, and – yes – even magazine editors to present models not as armies, but as individual models, smack in front of the lens of the camera. This has proven such a success that, when it comes to marketing a new range, it would now be commercial suicide to settle for any other style or quality of painting. Commercial organizations, on the whole, now accept that spending money – often a great deal of money – on having models painted is just part and parcel of getting a range to market.

Now, the camera is an unforgiving brute, and has always wrought its influence upon wargaming fashions. Once, practically all wargamers applied gloss varnish to their armies, so that they might more easily survive the rigours of battle (the armies, that is ... not the wargamers). I remember the moment when, all of a sudden, younger gamers began to recoil in horror at the sight of shiny, varnished miniatures, where previously no one had batted an eyelid. I think it was because, at Games Workshop, we had started to fill our books and magazines with colour photographs. And, because you can't photograph glossy models without getting spots of reflected light on the images, we stopped applying varnish to the models. This meant that they were rather too delicate to use for gaming; but, as they were being painted for box packaging and posed shots in books and magazines, that didn't really matter. So, the generation that grew up with *Warhammer* in its various guises were raised with the expectation that models would look a certain way – namely, flat or with the natural sheen of the paint. In fact, where varnish is applied these days, it's usually flat varnish – I know we do that at Warlord Games specifically so that we can photograph models without any reflective bits spoiling the images.

As with gloss varnish, so with other styles of painting that do not lend themselves to close-up photography. Dip-and-wash techniques, unless very carefully applied and highlighted, just don't cut it in front of a camera. There are talented individuals who can carry it off – Dr Phil Hendry's armies are the ultimate example of that – but this is all achieved by very careful blending of the 'dip' material, in a way comparable to full paint blending. To really do justice to a model in a commercial presentation, a paint job not only has to do justice to the sculpt – wherever possible, it has to flatter it, too. Now, I'm not suggesting that this perpetuation of a style and quality of presentation is a bad thing. In so many ways, it is a very *good* thing, and an entirely positive way of presenting our hobby, both to fellow hobbyists and to prospective ones.

The reason why all this leaves me feeling a little hollow is simply this – I know I can't do it! Where, once, I could paint

an army with a certain sense of individualism, with confidence, and with pride in the finished result, now I sometimes despair of picking up the paintbrush and showing the results to my fellow gamers. How many times have I laboured my very best upon a special general or character, only to elicit the comment, "that's really very good ... for army standard". Army standard, I tell you! What is *that* supposed to mean? To paraphrase Oscar Wilde (not hitherto considered much of a wargamer, I must admit, but bear with me), surely a model is either well painted or badly painted, and that is that! I suspect what is often meant is not that the model is well or badly painted in any sense, but that it doesn't conform to what has become the accepted style for photography and commercial presentation.

So, where does this take us? And what of the future, for us mere amateur painters, working away at our 'army standard' forces and enjoying our wargames for the simple pleasure of it? I think that, for many, it has certainly encouraged us to up our game – our painting, I mean! – and, where we have good, clear examples to copy and learn from, I think many of us have benefited enormously. But, at the same time, it has introduced a barrier of a kind, too. Speaking for myself, projects I would once have embraced unhesitatingly, I now find quite daunting, simply because I know that the time and effort required to bring a painted force to the table would be a real challenge. I don't know if I'm altogether typical – whether I am alone in feeling that slight sense of being left enjoying a no-long-acceptable aesthetic.

However, for my part, I shall continue to admire whatever I find well done, whatever the style, regardless of whether it would survive exposure to the merciless cameraman or not. A well painted and carefully assembled wargames army can be a marvellous and stirring sight in itself, and I know that *that* is what drew me to the hobby and has kept me enthralled, all these years. I guess, when it comes down to it, I have to consider myself as a wargamer whose armies are merely part of my hobby, rather than as a collector of individual models primarily intended for display. Both are good – both are admirable, in their way – but they are as different as apples and oranges.

Some people have the gift of painting to an excellent standard. For them, playing with excellently painted miniatures is a simple matter. The rest of us can only dream of playing with such gorgeous miniatures, after we've cried ourselves to sleep at night, that is...

Miniatures by Wargames Foundry from the collection of Jasper Oorthuys (the good ones!) and Guy Bowers (the other ones!).