

Painting Glass Fish Eyes

Part (C) of the National Fish Carving Guild Series

By Dan Blair

Because there are so many countless kinds and sizes of fish found in both saltwater and fresh water environments, it is virtually impossible for the manufacturers of artificial fish eyes to make and supply enough kinds, sizes, and colors of eyes suitable to fill every need in the taxidermy and fish carving trades. As a result, the voids in the selection can ONLY be filled if we know how to use the clear glass eyes, (known as fish “flints”) and the most important knowledge regarding how we use them is knowing how to paint them to look EXACTLY like the eyes in the living fish which we are carving, skin mounting, or replicating with other methods of reproduction.

Some of us have tried to paint glass eyes, only to end up with very plain, unrealistic-looking eyes which, out of necessity, we have often used anyway, even though we knew we shouldn't. Others among us have tried painting eyes a time or two, only to give up out of frustration when we couldn't

bring the quality up to the level we expect and demand of ourselves as professional artist. And far too many of us are completely stopped from ever starting this simple task because we don't know where to start or how to finish. This schedule is written especially for all of those among us.

To begin with, we should be aware that there are more than a couple of kinds of clear eyes that most taxidermists refer to as "flints", and for the sake of simplifying the explanation, we'll use eyes manufactured by Tohickon's, and by Van Dyke's are solid glass with slightly concaved backs. Both can be purchased with the black pupils already fired in place for typical fish eyes, and both offer an alternative eye with white pupils for unique needs such as Walleye/Sauger/Saugeye mounts and carvings. In addition, Tohickon offers a completely clear eye without any coloration of the pupil fired in. (A good time and reason to purchase this eye will be explained further in the following schedule.)

The concave clear flints from Tohickon come in sizes of 10mm and up to 26mm. There is also an eye they refer to as the "Economy Flat Profile Flint" for the larger saltwater species which run from 28mm all the way up to 46mm.

Van Dyke's offers their selection of totally clear flints ranging in sizes from 8mm up to 40mm for fish, but even smaller flints with black pupils may be purchased from 3mm up to huge 82mm. Van Dyke's also offers a selection of flints with elliptical pupils suitable for sharks and some reptiles from 12mm to 36mm. For the fish decoy carver who may not demand a first quality eye in a working-only decoy, there are also eyes in the Van Dyke's catalog called "Economy Flints" which may have some slight imperfections unlikely to be noticed by a hungry Pike or Musky, and which can be purchased for about 60 cents a pair less than the regular grades.

(NOTE: The color-catalogs from some suppliers have excellent photos of the many different eyes they carry along with notes suggesting what the eyes were made for, and which make pretty good references when deciding how to paint the flints for your own fish carvings and mounts.)

To begin the eye painting procedure, there are a few simple tools we need at hand to make the job fast and simple. I use the following items: one Exacto knife with a sharp #11 blade (the one with the sharpest point); cardboard cut from the side of a corrugated cardboard box and cut into sizes and shapes similar to dollar bills; one or two artist brushes in sizes “0”, or “1”, but not larger than a “2”. I also use cotton swabs, rags, and/or paper towels. To clean the eyes, I prefer lacquer thinner, but you may also consider alcohol, Ammonia, Windex, or other suitable glass cleaners.

Before going further with the process, I usually ask students what the MOST important item in the process is, and, by far, their MOST common reply is.....”PAINT!” That’s actually a set-up question to emphasize a point. And that point is”When ever we do anything artistic, the MOST important item is ALWAYS.....

“References”. The most and best references we can have at hand! In the case of painting fish eyes, (or anything else for that matter) we don’t actually know what colors of paint we want or need until we examine our references to see what the original colors are. From them, we can see where we want to go, and decide what colors it will take us to get there. From my experience, I have found that most of the colors I have in my airbrush arsenal for painting fish are more than adequate for painting fish eyes as well. Including a few cans of aerosol paints, I am fully prepared to paint fish eyes with paints already on hand.

The aerosol paints I keep in constant supply are “Flat Black” and

“Flat White” made by Sherwin Williams from the Wall-Mart blue label store brands, and also “18kt Gold” and “True Chrome” made by Krylon which are also available from Wall-Mart. When I clear coat the back side of an eye to seal in all the colors, I use either Wall-Mart’s “Clear Gloss” or Deft’s “Clear Satin”. Some artist prefer to seal in the painted colors by applying a layer of silicon caulk over the underside of the eye. Either method works, and in over 45+ years as a taxidermist and most as many as a fish carver, I have yet to have serious problems with paint detaching itself from the glass after it has been properly set in a mount or carving. (NOTW: It is ALWAYS important to be sure you have thoroughly cleaned the eyes before you begin the painting process. Failure to do so could result in poor adhesion of the paints to the glass eye.)

I have tried to hold the glass eyes between my thumb and pointing finger while painting them and found that to be less than satisfactory. I inevitably drop one or more, and being glass, they can and will break. To make handling them considerably easier, cleaner, and safer, I use the corrugated cardboard sheets. Place an eye on the sheet and trace a circle around it. Then use the Exacto knife to cut out the circle cutting inside the drawn lines. Cut all the way through both layers of the cardboard, and cut as many holes as you have sizes and numbers eyes. I usually insert about 3 or 4 pairs of eyes to each dollar bill-sized card.

Because it is important to end up with pairs of eyes which closely match each other, I arrange the eyes in holes paired off so that I can place the eyes with their elliptical pupils facing (pointing) toward each other. With the eye securely pressed into the hole, you will be able to flip the cardboard over periodically as you proceed to see from the show side what is actually happening to the back side of the eye. The cardboard holders keep the show side clean and clear of over-spray from your airbrush or spray can. Another nice feature

about this method is that the glass eyes themselves act almost like a magnifier to exaggerate what you are doing with the paints, making it easier for you to see what you are doing.

One of the first things you will notice when you do research on the characteristics found in the eye of a fish is a bright, almost 24kt gold, ring which completely surrounds the pupil of the eye. Having looked at literally thousands of fish and even more photos of the, I have yet to see a fish that did not have this gold ring around the pupil. I won't say there isn't a fish that doesn't have it, but if there is, I have never seen one. For that reason, I always start painting a fish eye by applying the golden ring. To apply the painted ring, I prefer the paint pens which come in two sizes manufactured by PILOT in gold and silver applicators similar to Flair and Sharpie marking pens. (Some of the taxidermy supply companies offer these pens for scale tipping.)

An alternative to the pens is to actually paint a gold ring using the smallest artist brush you have. I use the "0" or even a "00" dipped in a cup of gold sprayed from that can of Krylon 18kt aerosol. But don't worry too much if the ring comes out wider than you wish. Adjusting it is quite simple. Because Tohickon provides an indentation in their eye "...for ease in painting the gold ring." And because the Van Dyke's eyes are a black glass pupil melted into a clear glass eye, there is no problem putting the gold where it belongs. For commercial works, a whipping off of the excess with a Q-tip or rag dampened in solvent will usually suffice. When I want to really nail the ring down to hair-thin for competition mounts and carvings, I use the Exacto knife to easily scratch away any parts of the unwanted ring. And with ring in place, I am ready to begin the actual painting of the inner eye surface.

From my references, I determine what the foundation color's of what

the eye will be. Does it appear to be gold or silver? Is there any black texturing? Are there any other colors in bold or subtle display anywhere on the inner surface? From experience, I have learned that I can “dust” a very light hint of airbrushed pearl-essence or shimmering gold over the inner eye for a very realistic effect before I start any other color applications. If there are dark bars of color running vertically or horizontally through the pupil, I add them next, and then I follow them with hints of the more subtle colors I can see in my references. As with ALL air brush work, the best rule of thumb is”Don’t PAINT with an airbrush, TINT with an airbrush! It is ALWAYS easier to add more paint where you need it than to take paint away from where you don’t!”

Remember you are painting a right hand and left hand eye, so be sure to duplicate your actions accordingly on each “pair” of eyes as you go along.

I use lacquer based paints from the WASCO Polytranspar selection, so my paints dry quite fast as I work, but if you prefer to use the Water Acrylics from WASCO or other suppliers, you may also wish to include a hairdryer among your supplies for giving the eyes an occasional warming which accelerates the drying process.

When I am satisfied with the general foundation of the eye, I begin the detailing process. To add small flecks of color, or ragged ribbons which I find most common in an arch over the top and/or bottom of an eye, I use either the blunt end of my art brush’s wooden handle, or the sharp tip of the blade in my Exacto knife. To move the paint, and to even create wrinkles of texture, I may have to dab a bit of solvent onto the painted surface. I look at the show side as I do this and watch the process through the magnification created by the lens of the eye. I may dip the artist brush into cups or bottles of paint and dab a spot of color here or there as I continue to manipulate the

textures with the swab, knife blade, or brush. And I always duplicate in reverse anything I see happening favorably on one eye to the next. For that reason, you will ALWAYS want to work the eyes in pairs.

At any point along the way, I may choose to add another dusting or two of Airbrushed pearls, shimmers, or other colors to the eye where my references show me they are required. And when I have completed the look I like, I have a final coat of paint to apply that locks it all in place and closes the door on the process, so to speak. If my reference eye shows a dark cast, I may apply the final sealer coat using the Flat Black, but if the eye is lighter in its general appearances, I may seal off the process with Flat White. The same rule applies if I see a silver or gold cast to the eye. I use the Truce Chrome for silver looking eyes, and the 18kt Gold is the perfect choice to give a gold look to the eye.

After the eyes have set for an hour (or more) to cure the layers of paint and the sealer coat, I apply the last finish coat to the process, either with the clear acrylic sprays or with the silicon caulk. Just remember, if you seal your eyes with spray clear, to be absolutely certain that you do NOT use a clear “lacquer” spray. The lacquer base clears will almost always undo everything you have done, and the damage is usually not reparable, requiring you to wash the eye off and start the entire process over again.

It happens only rarely, but on occasion, I have been faced with the task of mounting or reproducing a true albino fish. The first one (in 1984) was a catfish taken from the Red River near the Canadian border. And, needless to say, there were no commercially made eyes available for that fish. Since then I have willingly mounted and carved a few of the rarities because I also figured out how to easily and accurately paint clear flints to show the pinkish red pupils and

the pearly pink eyes common to most albinos. I have also entertained the thought of using the entirely clear flints from Tohickon to create milky white, but slightly transparent, pupils in the eyes of an electric Walleye for some very interesting effects in a competition entry depicting a moonlit night-time habitat scene I plan to title, "Night Stalker". In addition, some of those who mount or carve a lot of Walleyes use a clear flint which they have backed the pupil only using aluminum foil to create a unique and reflective look to the eye. (I have even considered cutting a thin piece of mirror glass to fit the elliptical pupil for an even more original and interesting effect.)

After carving literally hundreds of fish, and mounting even more, over the many years passed, there are few steps in the complete process which I still consider to be "FUN". Hand painting glass eyes using the simple methods I've just described is still one of them. Give it a try, and see if you agree that "Painting Glass Fish Eyes" is something worth looking into.