

DRU BLAIR'S WICKED SKULL ON METAL



ABOUT

This painting is a class project for an automotive workshop that I taught at my school in April, 2009. I chose the combination of a skull and flames due to the challenge they represent, and for their popularity in the automotive genre. The class also used a new formula of water-based automotive paint evolved from the Wicked line by Createx, so my students and I were excited to try them.

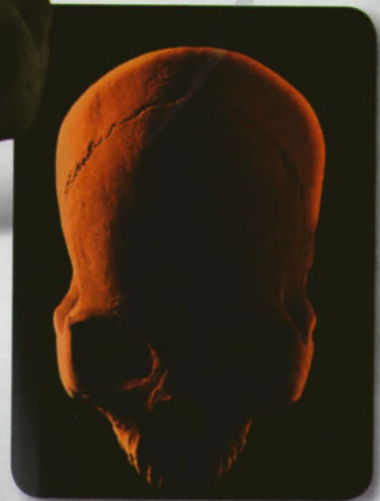
Step 1

The first step was to gather reference photographs of our subject. Using some modest lighting equipment and an 8-megapixel camera, I shot several photographs of a replica of a human skull that I purchased online. As luck would have it, a bulb on my light failed, and I was forced to shoot under less than ideal lighting conditions.

Step 2

Using a digital image editor, I used a set of curves to correct the poor exposure of the image, and boost the saturation of certain colors. In this case, I warmed up the highlights, and added violet to the shadows. The approach to imagery in automotive applications differs slightly from that of traditional illustration, in that automotive paint is usually viewed at a much greater distance, and therefore requires stronger contrast and colors for impact.

Insufficient lighting resulted in a lot of noise in the photographs, but the extra noise created an excellent exercise for the students, so I allowed the noise to remain rather than clean it up digitally. For the fire reference, I used various images that I had on hand.





Step 3

◀ Rather than have students spend time drawing their images on their metal panels, I ran the panels through a Giclee printer. My line drawing was transferred onto the panel, saving a lot of time.



Step 4

I began this painting at the lower half with the fire. The large areas of individual colors in the fire were easy to re-create compared to the complex colors of the skull. Once the surrounding colors of the fire were established, it was easier to determine the proper colors for the skull.

While matching the colors in fire might be relatively easy, rendering convincing flames can be intimidating due to their complex transparent structure and subtle undulating lines. There is also a tendency for artists to unconsciously stylize their flames, based on preconceived notions surrounding their appearance. My suggestion is that artists treat fire as they would any other object, and make it a priority to create accurate colors. In this case, my students and I pre-mixed opaque paint to represent the lightest yellow, most predominant orange, lightest red, and darkest red in the fire. After the

colors were mixed, the next priority was to manage the edges and transitions around and within the flame, noting which edges were sharp, and which edges were soft. I used various techniques, such as free-hand airbrushing, paper shields, pencil erasers, and an electric eraser to create a wide range of transitions.

After establishing some of the yellow colors, I realized that it was much easier to use red to paint in the negative space, and planned to revisit the lighter incomplete areas with a transparent yellow to fill the voids.



Step 5

◀ The next step was to establish the lower half of the skull using two colors: first, a light opaque orange for a base, and then a dark opaque violet for the shadows.

An aggressive pencil erasure lightened and created texture on the inside of the left eye socket.

Step 6

Once the dark areas of the skull and the surrounding red background were well established, it was easier to judge the correct amount of yellow to apply. Visible in this image are the wide variety of edges created within the fire. The lighter areas of yellow were achieved by removing paint with an aggressive pencil eraser.



Step 7

The remaining skull colors were blocked in using the original light opaque orange and dark opaque violet. Then, transparent red, green, and burnt sienna were applied to create more visual interest with a greater range of hues. To create the texture between the highlight and the shadow on the upper part of the skull, I first lightly sprayed a light orange base color, and then used an electric eraser to create a random dot pattern. Afterwards, the base color was re-applied to make the dots more subtle by reducing the contrast. Transparent red-orange was then airbrushed over the area to alter the hue.

The smoke was established by using paper shields to block in the negative black space, and create soft and hard edges. Then, transparent color was applied over the black to tint the smoke. When the smoke became too dark, an opaque white was applied as a correction.

The lines in the top of the skull were created by spraying through torn paper.



Step 8

Returning to the fire on the right side of the skull, the negative space was filled with an opaque red. Next, the fire was reshaped using a pencil eraser and an electric eraser for the small dots. Afterwards, a transparent yellow was applied.



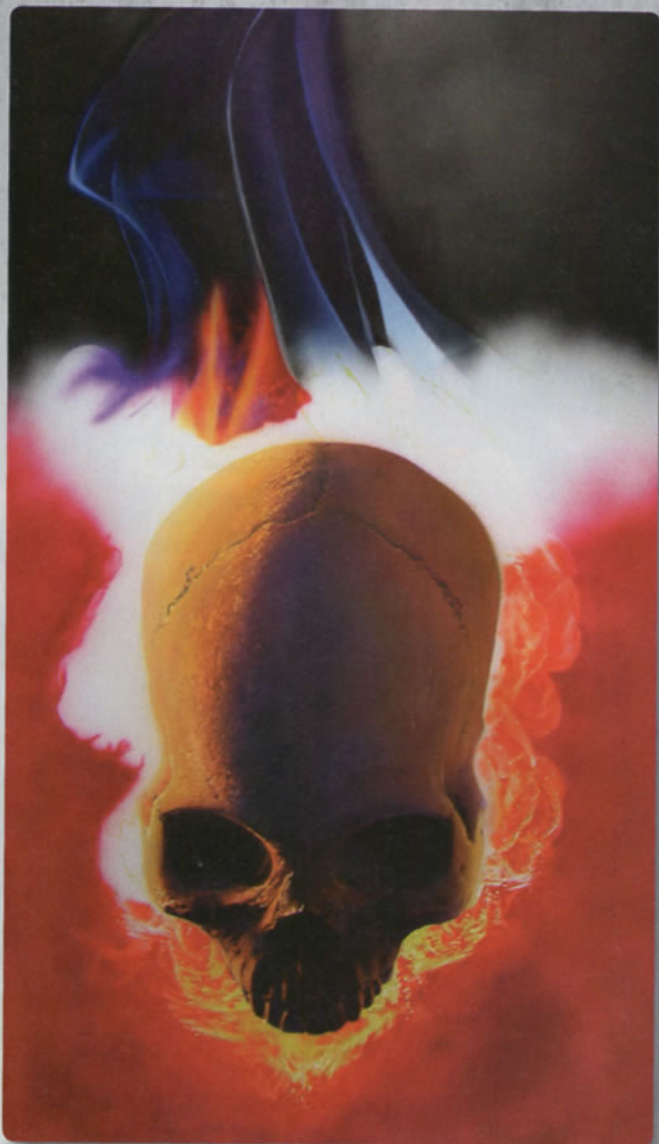
Step 10

The white of the board interferes with color discrimination, so I made efforts to conceal it during the early stages of the painting. Therefore an opaque red was established on the left side to bury the white of the metal panel. I also tried to take advantage of any spitting and spattering I could create by crimping the air hose with my hand. I didn't want the airbrush to spray too smoothly, because smooth transitions create a sterile look, and my goal was to create a varied background that contained some visual "noise." When it comes to creating realism, this is where I feel that the water-based paints hold an advantage over the smoother-spraying urethanes.



Step 9

Moving upwards, more opaque red outlined the negative space of the fire, while a cooler and darker opaque red was applied further away from the skull. At the far right a red sketch line is visible, indicating where a subtle transition will occur during the next step. I sketched the image with a lighter color, knowing that darker colors applied later would conceal my sketch lines.



Step 11

To create a very hard edge in the background, I cut out my desired shape from a piece of copy paper. Often, I pre-draw the shape as a cutting guide, and other times, I'm more random with my cutouts. Once the paper was in position, I sprayed a light coat of black on the exposed area on the right.

Step 12

With the paper stencil removed, the addition of more black reduced the contrast of the hard edge. The hard edge was still there, but bringing the colors from both sides closer in value diminished the severity of the edge. The random shapes in the darker areas were created using freehand techniques, with the expectation of making them more subtle later. Again, it's important to maintain some sense of visual interest by adding "noise" within the open areas, even if the "noise" is very subtle.



Step 13

Having established some black at the bottom and both sides, I turned my attention toward details at the top of the skull, using black to establish the negative space. I wasn't sure how I wanted to handle the subtle shapes at the bottom of the painting, so I deferred making that decision while I addressed other areas of the painting.



Step 14

After establishing some color, the electric eraser was used to create dots and meandering lines. Afterwards, transparent colors were used to color the dots and lines created by the eraser. The biggest challenge here was to maintain a chaotic look to the fire. Often the subconscious mind will organize and resize shapes that result in an unnatural, contrived appearance, which I wanted to avoid.



Step 15

Moving down the left side of the skull, a red-orange color established the fire near the temple. This section of the fire had less detail to distinguish it from other sections of fire. Greater variety in the fire adds to the believability of the final painting.

Step 16

This detail shows the added transparent yellow, and the subtle shapes created by a combination of free-hand, paper shields, a pencil eraser, and an electric eraser. I often alternated back and forth between spraying and erasing to create more subtlety. I also sprayed a few lines with opaque orange on the blue bands of smoke at the top. The orange in the opaque paint reduced the tendency for the paint to color-shift towards blue, which is a phenomenon that occurs whenever an opaque color is sprayed over a darker color.

At this point, the lack of finish on the skull was evident, notably the dot pattern created by the electric eraser near the edge of the shadow on the skull.



Step 17

After establishing a base color of magenta and cyan, I carved out different shapes using the electric eraser; constantly changing both angle and pressure to avoid creating contrived lines and dots of similar size and shape.



Step 18

Overspraying the same area with the same opaque color reduced the contrast of the shapes, thereby creating more subtlety.

Step 19

◀ Reapplying the electric eraser created another level of shapes that are more distinct than the last set. The purpose of layering the shapes was to add depth.

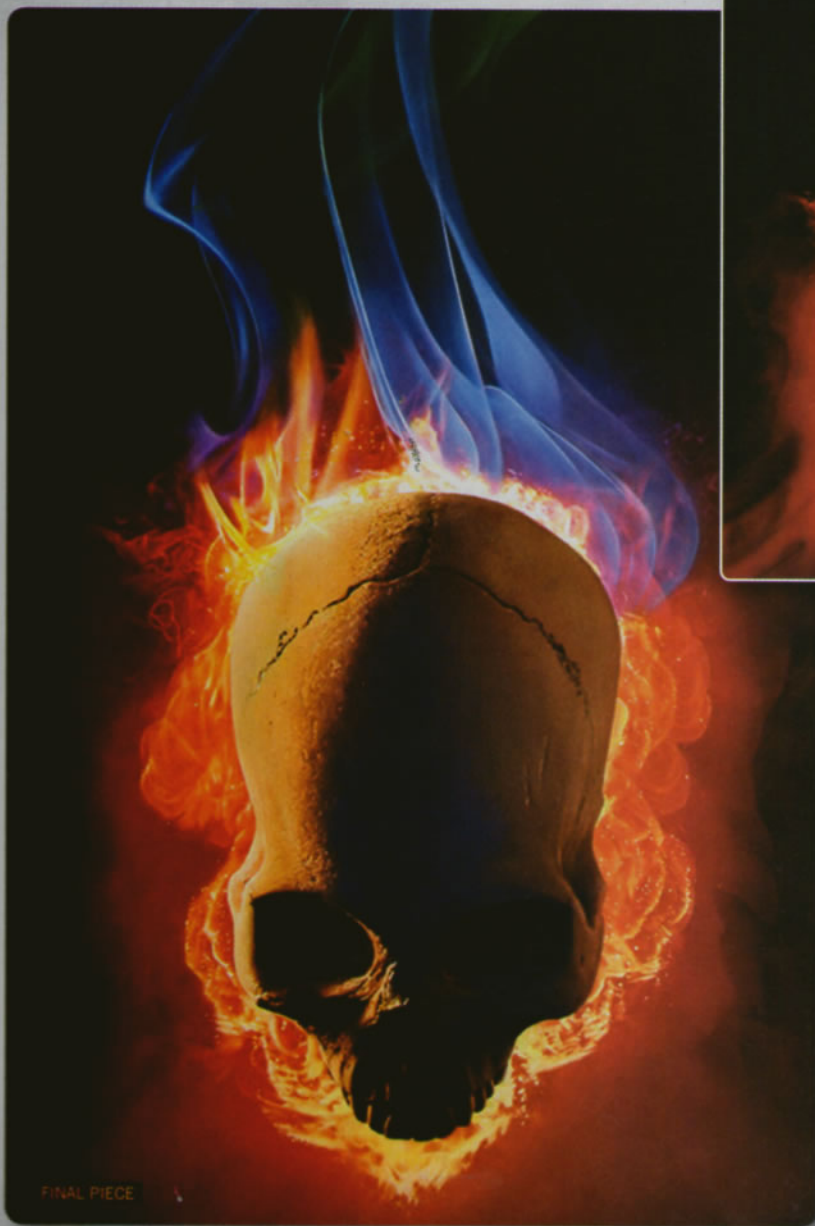


Step 20

◀ Adding transparent blue deepened and strengthened the color intensity of the smoke.

Step 21

After blocking in all the elements and adding detail, it's important to step back every now and then to evaluate your progress. In this step, I was trying to decide whether to keep the elements at the very bottom.



Final

◀ After adding a few tweaks, along with some green smoke, I decided to eliminate the bands at the bottom of the image. I increased the black around the edges, and used the electric eraser to add a few more lines to the right of the blue smoke. The texture on the skull was also further refined.

Fire is a great exercise for beginners and pros alike. It's important to keep in mind that fire has a sense of randomness, not only by its shape, but also in the variety of edges within it. Study the various shapes within fire, and render its shapes as if you were replicating an abstract painting. If you don't think about your subject, and just see the edges of the shapes, it will be much easier to achieve greater realism in your work.

Dru Blair conducts Photorealism workshops at the Blair School of Art in his hometown of Blair, SC, and Airbrush Action's Airbrush Getaway program. For more information check out www.dru-blair.com, or www.airbrushaction.com.