



## The art of aviation

*Fancy immortalising your pride and joy in oils? Private pilot and aviation artist **James Brown** tells a few trade secrets*

It should have been the old familiar story: new technology replaces traditional skill, traditional skill is consigned to the dustbin of history. It has happened countless times, from the invention of moveable type to the coming of the digital revolution.

By all the rules of economics the market for traditional representational paintings ought to have died out when colour film became available. Why pay an artist to paint a portrait when a photograph can show you what someone looks like? Why purchase a landscape when you have the means to record the view at the press of a button? Why have a painting of your aircraft when you can take a picture instead?

The reason is simple: a camera can only capture what it sees at the time, give or take a little digital sleight of hand. A painting can express the essence of a subject in a way the camera cannot. A good painting can help you to see, rather than merely look. That's why portraiture still exists, because it can show character as well as what the subject looks like.

At its best, aviation art is a blend of landscape painting and technical illustration, an evocation of a machine in its natural

element. It can bring out atmosphere and depth, as well as the sheer romance of flight. The only limit is the artist's skill and imagination. It's possible to recreate aircraft that no longer exist, portray incidents that are otherwise unrecorded, and show airfields long since built over.

I don't know how other aviation artists work, so let's assume you are commissioning a painting from me. How do I go about it, and what do I need from you? Obviously the first

thing I need to know is the type of aircraft I'm going to paint. I'll then ask for as many photographs of your aircraft as you can let me have. It's not that I don't know what a Piper Arrow or a Pitts Special looks like, rather that I don't know what your individual example looks like. In particular I need pictures of the colour scheme and registration, plus as much other information as you can give me. It's impossible to have too much reference material, but often the case that there's not enough.

You might be surprised to learn that the most important part of an aviation painting is the background. It determines both the mood of the picture and the lighting. I usually spend at least twice as long on the background as I



**Top: Socata TB10 Tobago - the coastline always makes an interesting background, whatever the aircraft**

**Right: The background to this Piper Arrow IV is the Northern Irish coastline**

do painting the aircraft. One great advantage an artist has over a photographer is that he has the leisure to choose his background, and alter it if he thinks it detracts from the subject.

Some clients are happy to leave the choice of background to me, others want a specific background. Specific backgrounds present a real challenge and usually take much longer to paint, a fact that is ultimately reflected in the cost of the painting. The most challenging are undoubtedly farm strips: farmers who fly want to see every field, crop, fence and hedge in exactly the right place.

The next thing I need to know is the size of the painting. Most people go for either 18" x 24" or 20" x 30" canvases, which are readily available commercially. Much bigger than that and it's difficult to find somewhere to hang it; much smaller and I have problems painting the details. If someone particularly wants a non-standard canvas then I have one made.

From now on it's down to me. My first step is to do some thumbnail sketches of the position of the aircraft. I'm limited in what I can do with the viewpoint because it's vital to see most if not all of the registration, otherwise your pride and joy could be any aircraft of that type.

Next I search through my own reference collection of photographs, books, magazines and models accumulated over four decades. Artists shouldn't be coy about using photographic reference. Most aircraft look different in the air, and you can't tell from the ground exactly how they will appear in flight. When I was learning to fly back in the mid-eighties, someone produced a print of a Cessna 150 flying at a couple of thousand feet. The artist had based his painting on a photograph of a 150 on the ground, and the nosewheel oleo was still compressed...

I learned the lesson and trust my experience

as a PPL to prevent such errors. Painting a light aircraft means getting the details right. Accuracy really is important. As a pilot I know what the dangly bits are, and shouldn't miss off pitot tubes or flap brackets.

The need for accuracy means I have to paint as realistically as possible. Nobody has ever asked me for an abstract Auster or a cubist Cessna. My paintings are sometimes mistaken for photographs, and I'm not sure I'm flattered by the comparison, well-meaning though such comments are. A painting isn't a photograph and shouldn't attempt to be one. There's a balance to be struck between accuracy and detail and the overall effect - something should be left to the imagination after all.

Having decided on the main elements of the painting, it's now time to get out the brushes and paints. One of the things I learned as a young commercial artist was to make use of any assistance you can get, so I use Alkyd,



which is fast-drying oil paint. Conventional oils take ages to dry, but with Alkyd I can work on a painting, leave it overnight and it's dry in the morning.

The gleaming white of a fresh canvas makes it impossible to judge colours correctly, so the first thing I do is paint a wash of neutral colour over it and kill the white. Then I paint the entire background. In my experience painting a background around an aircraft ends up by simply looking wrong.

Clouds are notoriously difficult to paint well. Most aviation artists can paint an aircraft competently, but even well-known aviation artists sometimes struggle with clouds. The closer they are to the viewer, the more nebulous they are and the harder to get right. I have been known to spend a couple of weeks just pushing paint around the canvas to get the right effect. Here again, photographic reference can help. I've taken hundreds of photographs of skylines while flying, often to the bemusement of my passengers, and many pictures in aviation magazines have backgrounds I keep for future use. I bought my eldest son a pocket-size camera when he got



**Top left: a good example of a time-consuming background – in this case the Cessna Golden Eagle's home base of Guernsey**

**Top right: Pilatus PC12, Swiss-built and shows appropriately among Alpine peaks**

**Above: this pretty Grumman Tiger only needed a summer evening sky to complete a satisfying painting**

**Left: dramatic view of a Piper Saratoga with an equally dramatic backdrop**

**Right: a scene that never happened: a Jodel Mascaret as it is now, over Bernay airfield in France as it was in the late 1970s**

his first job as a commercial pilot, and in return receive a regular supply of cloudscapes that are out of reach of the average PPL.

One of the many joys of flying in this country is the varied landscape you pass over, even during just an hour's flying. The coastline is endlessly fascinating from above, and often makes an interesting background for an aircraft painting. When painting a foreign landscape it pays to do your research, otherwise to someone familiar with the Algarve or France, for instance, any inaccuracy will stand out like a beacon. I've taken great care to get it right with American commissions, and sometimes wish American artists took the same pains with English backgrounds. I'm sure most of us have seen paintings of Mustangs or B17s over an England consisting entirely of straight roads and geometric fields, redolent of the mid-west but nothing like the real thing.

The background finished, I now turn my attention to the aircraft and produce a detailed drawing which is done directly on to tracing paper or else carefully traced. Then, omitting the smaller details such as the registration, panels, ailerons and so on, I transfer it to the canvas on top of the background.

Painting the aircraft is simply a matter of working at it until it looks like a three dimensional object in space. This is where light and shade and highlights come into play. Most light aircraft are predominately white, and tend to look better if they are partially back-lit. Highlights are dangerously seductive

and only to be used sparingly. One of the tricks of the trade is not to keep all the edges sharp, otherwise the aircraft looks like a cut out. Using a mixture of soft and hard edges helps to accentuate the curves of a fuselage or wing.

Another trick is to restrict the number of colours you use, which gives the painting a unified feel. I try to stick to the colours that are actually on the aeroplane plus a couple more, a theory that rather comes unstuck when someone asks you to paint an all-red aeroplane. An even more awkward task is to paint mainly black aircraft at night.

At this stage the aeroplane looks rather like a plastic model with no markings or decals applied. When I'm happy with it, I reposition the drawing and trace down the remaining details, then paint them using a long fine pointed brush known as a 'rigger', because it

was originally used by marine artists to paint the rigging on ships. All those hours I spent as a studio junior learning to do lettering pay off when it comes to the registration and any other markings.

How to paint the propeller - indeed, whether to paint the propeller - is a problem all artists face. There's no right or wrong about it either. In reality a prop spinning at cruise revs is usually invisible to the naked eye, save sometimes for the tips if they've been painted, but we are all conditioned by photography to expect at least some indication of the prop. Different artists have different solutions: mine is to use brush and finger in a combination of painting and smudging.

What I'm trying to achieve in the end is to make the viewer feel as if he's in another aeroplane alongside the subject. When the

painting is finished, I hang it over my desk and live with it for a few days. Any mistakes soon become apparent, and can be easily corrected. I also check the painting against all the reference photographs to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

I always have each painting professionally photographed. They used to be copied on large transparencies, but these days they are done digitally. I need the image not just for record purposes, but also to reproduce in advertising, on the internet, and occasionally as greetings cards

and prints. Clients are often intrigued to learn that while they own the painting, the copyright remains with the artist.

After photography, I protect the painting with a coat of retouching varnish. Final varnishing should only take place after about six months, when the painting has properly dried out. Most people want their painting framed, which is done by our framer, who also makes a protective plywood box if the painting is to be posted. I prefer if possible to deliver a painting, mainly because you can tell instantly from the reaction whether the recipient likes it or not.

Along with the painting goes a recommendation not to hang it in direct sunlight or over a source of heat such as an open fire, both of which may cause the pigments to fade and the frame and stretcher to warp.

I began by saying that technology often makes traditional skills redundant. It can also give enterprising artists new ways of promoting their work via the internet, and new opportunities to produce images. I could never get the hang of traditional airbrushing, but digital airbrushing has been a revelation, the great difference between the two being the existence of the delete command, and I've recently been producing and selling airbrushed profiles of aircraft. My history as a graphic designer combined with the advent of the Mac has also opened up another fruitful area of work, that of designing colour schemes for owners looking to respray their aircraft.

Artists shouldn't be scared of new technology. It will never oust traditional representational art because (in marketing-speak) it has added value, but it can open up new and interesting areas for the artist to exploit. Watch this space.

To see further samples of Jim's work or to discuss a commission, call 01359 251766 or email [j.brown27@btinternet.com](mailto:j.brown27@btinternet.com) ■



**Left: evocative portrait of a pair of 1929 Travelairs for a client in the US**  
**Above: the Eurocopter EC120, a sleek and beautiful aircraft to paint**  
**Below: my favourite aircraft to fly, the Robin DR400 seen over the owner's Suffolk farm strip**

