I F YOU CAN PAINT A GOOD NATURAL FISH, YOU CAN paint a good reproduction fish. The only difference in painting the two is the prep-work required on a reproduction prior to coloring.

A skin-dried fish ready for painting has a natural tone that combines varying intensities of gray, brown, and black (undertone coloration). Even though all the color of a fish disappears during the drying, this natural undertone coloration remains and provides a textured background over which transparent colors are applied. This undertone is known as the vermiculation-patterning and provides the patterning that makes a painted fish look natural.

As to reproduction fish, a plain white fish blank does not have this vermiculation “undertone.” Thus, achieving a natural appearance on any reproduction requires first re-creating this vermiculation “undertone.” Fortunately, re-creating this undertone is quite simple. Let’s take a close look at how I do it.

1. First, all fish blanks produced in a mold require a release agent be applied to the surface in order to remove the fish blank. Thus, the fish blanks that you purchase are likely to still have all or part of this release agent remaining on the surface. Paint will not adhere to this release agent, and it must be removed. I simply use a cloth and lacquer thinner to wipe it away. Note: be sure to wipe the entire head, body, and fins.

2. Now it is time to prep the blank to accept paint. To achieve this, a sealer coat must be applied. I prefer using Lifetone paints, so I seal the fish blank with Lifetone Basecoat Sealer. One good, even coat is enough. The sealer usually requires approximately 5 to 15 minutes drying time (depending on how heavily it was applied).

3. I protect the eyes from over-painting by applying a ball of clay over each eye. This is a non-hardening oil-based clay called Roma clay. Bowen Eye Protect can also be used.

4. Simply push the clay in place until the entire eye is covered out to the edge.

5. I will be applying three colors to the fish blank, the first color being Rich Brown. This color is applied heavily along the back, medium along the side, and lightly along the belly. All coloration along the body should be extended through the head as well.

6. Color darkness decreases as you move down the sides of the fish. Here I am applying Rich Brown lightly as I reach the belly area.
7. A medium coat of Rich Brown is “angle-sprayed” on the front and back of all fins. Notice that I am applying the Rich Brown from the side of this fin. This “angle-spray” creates a natural textured appearance by coloring only the protruding rays. The recessed part of the fin remains unpainted, creating a contrast along the fin surface.

8. The next color to be applied is Silver Metallic. Apply Silver Metallic with the same intensity and application in the body and head areas, heavier along the back and decreasing as you move to the belly. Only a very light mist coat is applied to the fins. Note: Silver Metallic is used when painting a fish that has a silvery base. Some trout have a golden base, so Gold Sparkle should be used in place of Silver Metallic on such fish.

9. Once the Silver Metallic is applied, Jet Black should be applied on the body and head, from the top of the back to the belly (again, decreasing in intensity toward the belly). Remember how and where I applied the Rich Brown? Well, I have done the same with the Jet Black. Jet Black is applied heavy along the back, medium along the side, and lightly along the belly.


11. The colors that create the vermiculation undertones are applied. Now comes the fun part. We want the undertones to remain, but only in the recessed areas, so I use steel wool to rub off the excess color. The steel wool should be rubbed in a circular motion (“wax on, wax off”) to evenly remove the color. Rubbing back and forth will result in uneven removal of color and unnatural lines. I use two grits of steel wool throughout the fish. First, I do the rough removal of color with #2 medium-coarse steel wool. After the majority of removal is complete, I smooth the vermiculation undertones with #000 extra-fine steel wool. The extra-fine smooths everything together. This photo shows the head complete and using the #2 steel wool to move on to the body.

12. I rub steel wool to the head juncture, but not beyond. Do not rub the top of the head with steel wool. Trout heads have a smooth appearance and should remain that way.
13. I have rubbed the entire length of the fish with #2 medium-coarse steel wool. Now I am using the #000 extra-fine to smooth everything. You can see that the head and body have regained the natural vermiculation undertones. Now it is time to work on the fins.

14. The adipose fin should remain painted and untouched with the steel wool.

15. Texturing of the fins is accomplished with a wire brush or toothbrush (depending on the texture you desire). First, dip the brush in lacquer thinner.

16. Second, dab off the excessive thinner on a towel before moving on to the fins.

17. Third, rub with the rays, allowing the brush to remove some paint lengthwise along the fin. Do this on all fins.

18. The texturing is completed and the natural vermiculation undertones create a natural base on which to begin color paint application.

19. I want to quickly touch on toning artificial heads. This photo shows how the tone of an artificial head is nothing like the natural tone of the original fish skin. If you were to paint this fish without toning the head, the fish would end up with a plastic-looking head and a natural looking body—not a good combination. The head must be toned and textured in the same fashion as a reproduction fish blank. The difference is that you want the toning only in the head area.

20. Masking tape is used to mask the natural skin area. First, apply masking tape along the edges of the gill covers.
21. Once the masking tape is applied, use a scalpel to trim along the edges of the gill covers.

22. Once the masking tape is trimmed along the edges, remove the tape from the head, exposing the artificial head. Now the head can be painted and textured to match the natural skin without changing the tone of the natural skin.

Final note: Fish will vary in regard to undertone darkness and lightness. You must consider the tone of the fish prior to applying any Rich Brown, Silver Metallic, or Jet Black. On lighter colored fish, you would obviously apply less paint than for a darker, spawning fish. Take a minute to think about it before you begin. Have a game plan and try to stay with it. Good luck with your repro painting!

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