Painting Chequered Patterns

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Everyone knows elaborate patterns look good, whether they be on shields as part of the heraldry, or on caparisons, banners or elsewhere as decoration.

One of the most effective and popular patterns are chequers.

But many people find it difficult when first going about painting these awesome designs.

In this article, I will attempt to give a few tips and techniques to make it easier for beginners, and maybe add an inspiration or two for the more advanced…

First off, I think having a good plan beforehand is half of the successful paint job. Personally, I make pencil drawings of most of my conversions and paint schemes before I start. Also, try to use coloured pencils to test colour schemes on paper beforehand (you’ll only ever approximate the colours, of course, but still it may help you decide, for example, whether you like blue-yellow or green-yellow better…).

Once you’ve established a plan (I know there are also people who can do it entirely in their heads, so that first step may as well be skipped if you’re one of those), you are ready to grab a few brushes, paints and water. I would recommend using larger (size 2) and finer (anything that suits you from size 0 through 0/3) brushes, and several cans/glasses of water (you’ll want clean water to mix each of your different paints with).

So much for the preparations, now to the actual painting: Don't paint each square separately (say, if you’re going from black primer, don’t paint a blue square, then a white one next to it, then another blue one etc.) Rather, make a basecoat of one of the colours you wish to use, and then "fill in" the squares (or rectangles, or rhomboids) in the other colour. Which paint to use for basecoating, is not generally easy to say - I'd consider whether, for example, it would be easier to paint red over white, or white over red... depending on what you come up with (according to your own painting style, of course) as an answer to that, you then use the easier-to-paint-over colour as a base coat.

In the case of white-red, I would prefer first white, and then red over it (I think it’s easier that way, lest the white turns out having a pink tint when you paint it over red) Here is an example of one of my QK (it's still a WiP, obviously), where I painted the black sections over a vomit brown basecoat.

There's still no highlights done on that one, but that is yet to come...

For another example, if you want to do checks of two very similar colours, like black and blue, (see an example below), it is next to irrelevant which colour you start with - except there is such a thing as black spray...

The same is true for, say, green and red chequers. Both can be painted rather neatly over each other, so which one you start with is not so important in that case…

Generally, it helps if you are able to paint a straight line, but more important is that you are willing to correct it again and again... it may be a demanding task at times (when you need to go over the small squares for the third time…) but I repeatedly found that it pays off with a clean and precise look to your model in the end.

One technical thing I would recommend is to use quite a lot of water with your paint (but very little water-paint-mix on the brush, don't soak it too full). I’ve recently heard the term “milk consistency” and I think it describes well what I usually use.

If the area you want to have chequered is very large, it may help to first either draw the pattern with a pencil (for reference while painting it on), or make a few "guiding lines" on it, to which the other lines will be parallel, or as well as it will become...

For instance, on this Battle Standard, I first quartered the field, and then intersected each quarter into nine, roughly same-sized rectangles... this helps so your pattern doesn't suddenly start to look drooping or wavered during the process of painting it.

I'll show you a simplified step-by-step now:

begun with quartering the field

then further quartered each quarter

now fill them out, and there you are. One might now want to correct the white fields a little, so they're the exact same size as the red ones, or also just leave it the way it is...

Also, that way, you are less likely to find out towards the end of the work that you can not neatly finish the design within

the limits of the given space. Nothing is worse than spending time and effort on a paintjob like this, only then to realize you can only fit five-and-a-half rows of squares onto a knight's shield, for example. This tends to happen if you just simply start from the top of the area or something, settle for a convenient square size, and go from there… ultimately, having a plan beforehand can save you that kind of trouble… or else you'll probably have to re-correct your each and every line of squares (or rectangles, or rhomboids), until you reach a format which will fit into the available space.

For highlights: with any angular pattern, I would usually pick a number of the angles, and always highlight only them... In the case of the Battle Standard above, I highlighted all the topside and rightside edges of the rectangles...This emphasizes the regular-ness and orderly-ness of your pattern and makes it pleasant for the eye to look at. Again, here, use lots of water in the paint to get a smooth shift from darker to brighter colours...

On choice of colours with regard to highlighting: I would distinguish two kinds of chequered patterns for this purpose: patterns which include a colour and a metal (red-white, blue-yellow etc.) and patterns which include two colours (blue-black, green-red etc.).

With the first kind, it is usually not even really necessary to highlight at all (unless you wanna do it anyway). It still looks better when highlighted, but it doesn't have to be. This is because metals and colours contrast well with each other, and it makes that kind of pattern very appealing to many people.

With the second kind, you usually must highlight both colours in order to make them stand out, contrast well, and generally look stunning. Try painting a plain blue-black pattern and you'll see what I mean…

Especially with that second kind of patterns, but useful for all kinds of highlighting really (not just chequered patterns) is the following technique: start out with a colour one level darker (at least) than what you ultimately have in mind.Say you want a Skull White – Blood Red pattern, you should start with chequers in Fortress Grey – Red Gore (at least, you could also start from Codex Grey – Scorched Brown… and have yourself more work… but and even more sophisticated result) and then highlight them to SW-BR.

There is a principle in optical perception which basically says that the brightest colour you paint on a garment, shield or anything, is perceived as the 'true' or 'real' colour of that piece. So, the last highlight you do is most likely going to establish what colour you garment/heraldry/pattern is seen as… the other, darker colours (that went before) are regarded as shadows of that 'real' colour.For example, a Scorched Brown – Red Gore – Blood Red shading for your square pattern makes it look like it's all a bunch of Blood Red squares – with shadows/light effects… no-one would very likely see this as a brown colour, even if (comparatively) lots of the Scorched Brown still shows through in the end.

Making use of this principle effectively means that you can be quite daring in the degree of extremity with which your colours advance in brightness… many of the best painters out there do rather extreme highlights (it has been said that the last highlight should always include white! I don't personally subscribe to this, but it emphasizes the point) – it's just a matter of technique for making this look good… and then, that's just a matter of practice, after all…

Hoping this has been helpful, and wishing all my fellow knights good luck with painting their own chequered patterns,

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