

How To Paint Faux License Plates By Ray “El Vago” Smith

This may not be the most high tech post, but it's what I do so if you're interested follow along. The plate will be a Michigan tag but the technique applies to all license *plates*.

The base color of the plate is 1-Shot Light Blue and the numbers are medium gray. I used the Light Blue rather than Process Blue so I could impart a slight highlight with the Process and the same for the Gray using White as a highlight. Actually the colors are mixed on the palette but I'll describe how that is accomplished.

I also think I'll do this one a little different in that I'll post the pictures with the text to make it an easier read. This is going to take awhile so please wait to post comments until the whole thing is strung together.

I start by selecting a scrap piece of aluminum (left over from a panel I cut up) and lay out the dimensions. FYI all license *plates* are now a standard 6"X12". I believe that has been in force since 1957 so if you are doing a plate that is earlier than that be sure to measure it. I know my 55 *plates* are larger.

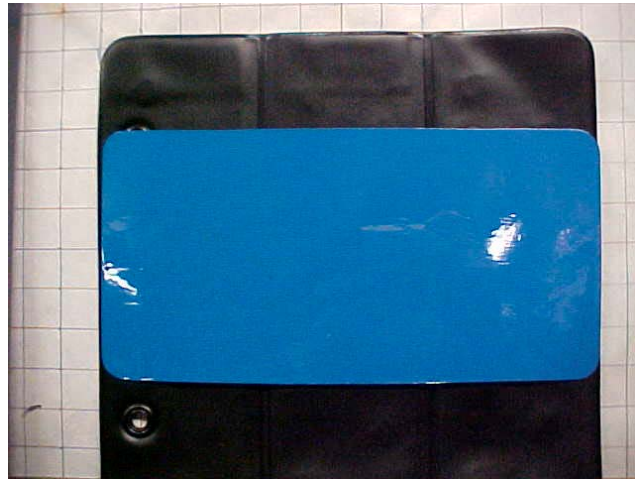
Anyhow I use a standard pair of tinsnips to cut the blank to size. You can drill holes in it at this time but the one I am painting is going to have painted holes in it. It's just a display piece anyway.



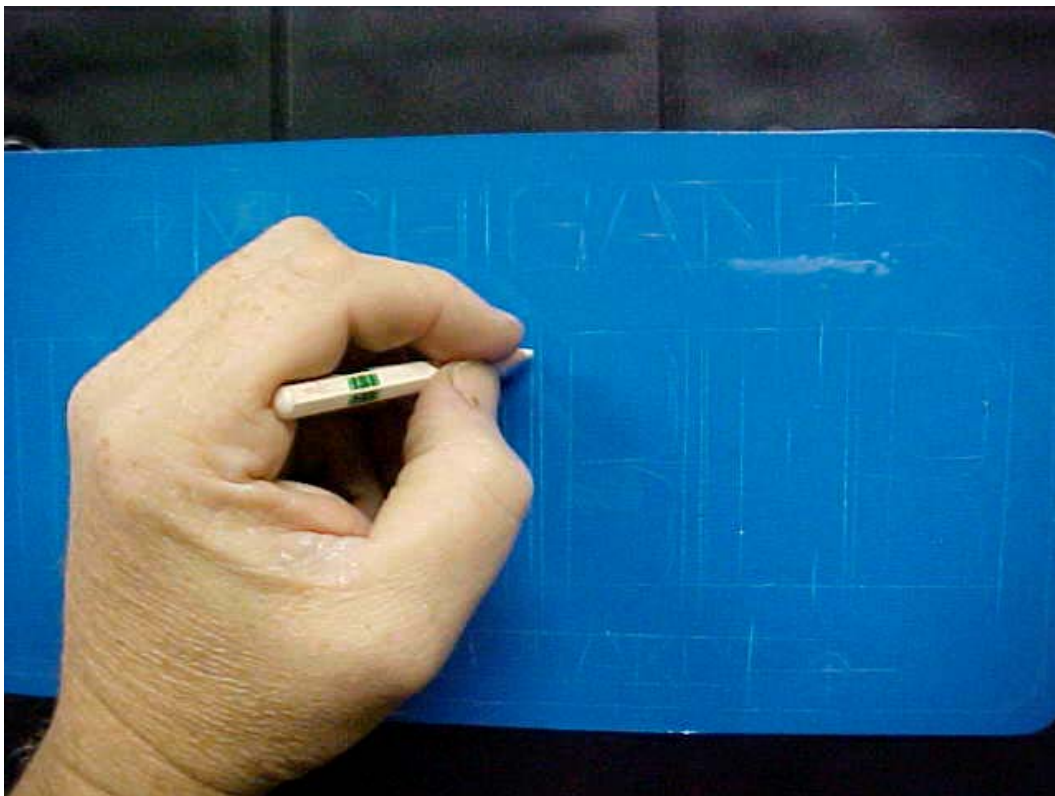
trimming the piece. Yes I use the hood of my car for a workbench; it's just the right height and it's got the scratches to prove it!



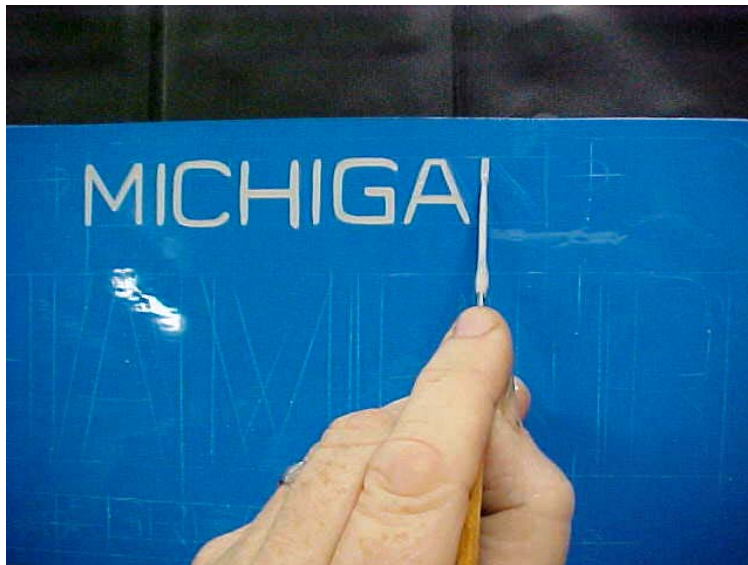
Next I paint the base color. In this particular case, I elected to brush paint it rather than spray it because 1-Shot goes everywhere when you spray it and I have an open flame heater(s) in my shop and we don't even WANT to go there! Besides I have a very nice (and expensive) 1" lettering brush that works great for this. After it has dried I lay out the lettering with my trusty Stabilo using another painted plate for a reference. I could've used a real plate but they are buried in a box somewhere and I didn't want to take one off a car (too lazy). At the end of this I'll show a couple examples of *plates* I've done plus a real one for comparison.



the lay out



I then start the lettering using 1-Shot medium gray and a #2 Jenson Swirly-Q(available from Mack Brush).I use this brush for a lot of things from small lettering jobs to small flames to striping on model cars. I don't use tape to define the top and bottom of the letters and numbers because if you look closely at a plate the letters are raised and when paint is applied they have slightly rounded corners and are not dead even.Also on a Michigan plate(the blue ones anyway)the plate area is raised slightly starting about 1/4" in from the edge(which is the highlight in the picture).The lettering base color is then finished.



another painted plate in background



Now the shadow is added to the letters. As stated in previous techs, the shadows I prefer are located at 4 o'clock position. To explain, look at the letter and think of it as the face of a clock. If the light source that is illuminating the letters is at 10 o'clock, the shadow will be 180 degrees opposite or at 4 o'clock. This has to remain constant throughout in order to make it look real.

For my shadow, instead of using a standard color, I mixed the plate color 50/50 with a darker blue (Reflex Blue) to obtain a realistic shadow of the raised letter and the raised area of the plate and the holes. This is painted on carefully to make sure it is in the right position.



Gee it's almost starting to look like a plate!



Next I mix up a batch of base color and medium gray;not quite 50/50;mix and try a spot and see how it looks.Remember you're trying to make it look slightly lighter than the base but not a "hot spot".More about that later.The lighter highlight is done 180 degrees from the shadow.Don't forget the raised area around the perimeter of the plate and the holes!



Now the "hot spots" are added. These are nothing more than a white dot or two located at the 10 o'clock position and serve to show the light source reflecting on the high spots of the numbers and letters. You'll notice that they reflect not only on the raised sides of the numbers but also slightly onto the surface of them. It may not be technically correct but it brings them out better and besides it's only a painting!

The last thing to do (at least for now) is to paint in the bolt holes in black. And it's finished! (almost)

You may notice a small green square in the lower right corner of the plate. That is the validation sticker which I will add later when the paint is dry. Just black lettering with the month and expiration date and plate number.

And that is basically it. I've included pics of two fake and one real plate here also.

Hope you enjoy this and I welcome your comments.

Ray



the almost finished product



The final version with detailed validation sticker



an unreal plate



