

PRODUCT REVIEW

Silentaire's Spectrum 2000

by Terry Hill

I recently had the opportunity to test out the new Spectrum 2000, the product of three years of development, redesign, and testing by a diverse group of artists and engineers, and I'm very impressed with its performance. The original concept for the device came from Hollywood artist and art director Ron Gress, who found it frustrating to crawl out from under the models he was working on (for a little movie you might have seen called *Star Wars*) to change or refill the colors in his airbrush. When he came up with a method for changing colors with a simple turn of dial, Ron knew he had a hit, so he went in search of a manufacturer to produce his new invention.

The first version, the Chamelion, was produced by Binks. Eventually bought out by Houston, Texas-based Silentaire Technology, the device underwent a major renaissance at the hands of Kurt, Walter, and Max Lieber. Max, the most mechanically inclined of the three brothers, immediately set out to improve on their new acquisition. Most of the machining for the conceptual prototype was done by Max himself, but when the brothers agreed on a final design, they turned it over to the world-renowned precision machinists of their homeland, Switzerland. Finally, they had product they could send out to a select group of artists and designers for testing. After making a few minor adjustments, they debuted their new product in April at the NAMTA (National Art Materials Trade Association) trade show.

The Spectrum 2000 is an exciting new concept. It features a pressurized aluminum paint manifold and nine bottles for color, with an attached regulator to adjust air pressure rather than the usual siphon method of paint delivery. This regulator, however, does not regulate the air pressure to the actual airbrush, so you can set the pressure at your air source, and attach the air hose to the Spectrum 2000. Easy!

This method of pressurization allows the airbrush to be very comfortable in just about any position. You can even paint upside-down without any worries about dripping paint, because there are no bottles attached at the airbrush. Paint is supplied to the brush through a combination air/paint hose that allows you simply to dial in the color of your choice and get to work.

The unit is also very portable, and there are two methods for mounting it. Either hang it from the clip supplied or, if there is no place to hang it, you can clip it into an optional Plexiglas table mount. I've even hung it from my belt loop! Paint flows from the bottles through nine separate small paint delivery tubes that run bundled through a coil-type air hose to keep everything neat. The air hose attaches to the airbrush in



a standard manner, and the delivery tubes are routed into the paint dial mechanism through a small length of conduit, which plugs into any bottom- or side-feed airbrush that features a needle packing seal. The needle seal is important because paint enters the airbrush under pressure—without the seal, you could experience problems with paint backing up into your airbrush trigger chamber.

Equipped with an Iwata HP-BC, my test model worked flawlessly with absolutely no paint leakage into the chamber. (Check your manufacturer's specifications to determine which of their bottom- or side-feed brushes take advantage of this needle packing seal.) While the need for the seal does somewhat limit your choice of airbrushes at the moment, Kurt assures me that Max already has developed a side-feed adapter, which should allow for a more diverse selection of brushes.

The out-of-the-box painting experience was very good. The Spectrum 2000 uses a dial mechanism to select the various colors. To take full advantage of the dial, placing the colors in rainbow order (ROYGBIV) will help you blend out of one color and into the next. This technique will also expand the available color range of the dial. For example, place

pink next to yellow on the bottle manifold, set the paint dial at the airbrush somewhere between the two, and you wind up with a bonus third color—orange, in this case. With some practice, I found I could even vary color intensities, such as yellow-oranges and orange-pinks.

I tested this unit using Createx paints, and I was worried about their ability to flow through such small paint tubes. The pressurized paint delivery system had no trouble whatsoever handling the paint. Even thicker colors, such as opaques, were no trouble for the Spectrum 2000. I actually experienced fewer paint problems than with a conventional airbrush, because the pressurized system basically forces small clogs and paint imperfections right out. Color changes are made right at the airbrush, so if you want to move from one color to another without any blending, simply spray into a rag or a paint collector to clear the previous color from the nozzle before continuing.

Overall, I find this to be a very innovative approach to the old problem of multi-color airbrush systems. One of my favorite aspects is its compact size. If you're using the dial mechanism, the nine-color range can be equivalent to a rack of at least seventeen colors. That's a lot of power in a small package, and the hassle of traveling from one project to another is greatly reduced. If you're tired of frequently changing from color to color for the same project, then the Spectrum 2000 may be just what the doctor ordered!

