

The Joy of Backdrop Painting

By Jim Spice

We all strive to make our miniature worlds look so much like real life. Every detail, tree, structure etc. is worked on to try and duplicate the prototype so we can impart upon our guests the feeling that they are entering a "Real" world. To this end an often overlooked and neglected area (that is not directly associated with the layout, but certainly is connected with our eyes and brain.) The Backdrop!

How would it seem if you looked out your window at home and saw a green lawn, brown roadway, grey garage, but behind it in the distance you see old mop handles, tools, dirty walls, or even just a plain white wall? Pretty boring and unrealistic.

This is what our eye sees when we visit a model railroad without a backdrop. Especially a modular setup....So many times I have been to train shows where guys have spent hours and hours on the layout only to have nothing behind it! You see a nice track arrangement and some scenery...and a guys pants and belt!! How hard can it be to add a small piece of something behind it with a simple sky? NOT hard at all and that's why we're here today. I want to show you how simple, and quick...not to mention easy, it is to paint your own backdrop.

First let's go into a few options:

A). simple and easiest...Buy one! There are a lot of outfits out there that sell commercially made backdrops. You can even go to their websites and order what you want and how you want it. The upside? quick and easy. Downside: pretty expensive...another variation is to have your own pictures blown up and attached to the backdrop. Again this can be costly

B). easy and cheap...a plain piece of material painted white or blue. Upside? Very Cheap to do and easy to do. Downside? Boring. and un-imaginative.

C). still easy and cheap...add a few cutouts or prints to the B option. some have taken and cut up old Walthers catalogs for the pictures and pasted them to the painted backdrop. You can also use some of the cheaper ready made backdrop sheets in the same manner.

D). easy, inexpensive and fun to do. (this is of course my choice) Paint your own.

You can use any material you want for your base...I prefer masonite, as it is cheap and readily available. It is also very flexible and somewhat durable for portable layouts. Other options are Luan Plywood, styrene sheets, hardboard, and even ceiling panels (the plastic light fixture ones). Pretty much any thing that is light and flat is a good source.

Next you need some paint and a few basic materials....this is easier than you think. Here's the material list:

- Masonite (or equivalent) panel(s)
- White/Blue latex paint (can be either interior or exterior)
- Latex extender
- Squirt bottle filled with water
- Paint brushes- 4 inch, 2 inch (optional) fan brush*, and blush brush*
- Artist paint knife*
- Acrylic colors* : Sap green, alizarin crimson, Vandyke brown, Prussian blue, cadmium yellow, black, and cadmium white .
- Bucket with clean water
- Latex house paint... white and blue flat finish

(tip: go over to your friendly hardware/paint store and see what he has in the "returned" or "goof" bin. A lot of times you can get a gallon -- Lifetime backdrop supply -- for a few bucks. What you are looking for is a deep blue color, but any blue can be made to work. I have used the same quart of Blue for many years and still am using it...Also, White. Now this can be plain ole white house paint. The cheaper the better, nothing fancy but you also want a flat finish.)

If you are simply going with the basic blue sky/clouds effect this is all you need....but, if you want to add details, then we will need a few other things.

Also on the "Basic" list is a product called Latex extender. This is a liquid that slows the drying time of latex paint. We want this to allow our colors to blend and give an overall smoother appearance. If any of you have ever watched PBS and viewed the shows "Joy of Oil Painting" with either Bill Alexander or Bob Ross...you will see how we can use those techniques here to paint our backdrops. Now we aren't going to use Oil Paints...but the way we use our acrylics is similar...It is basically a wet-on-wet technique.

Start by priming your material. Any good household latex primer will work. We are just looking for a good bond and also to start with a fairly uniform light surface. Let this dry thoroughly. Now we want to take our white latex and add a little bit of the extender. You can read the instructions on the bottle but really all you need is a small amount of the stuff to do what we need to do here. If you are going to paint that club sized layout in your basement, you may want to add a bit more to make it last longer.

On to the masterpiece!! Cover the entire backdrop with the white latex paint. Don't be stingy here get a good thick coat on. Use the 4 inch brush and spread the paint laterally. Rinse your brush in the bucket and dry it. Start with the blue paint full strength at the very top of the backdrop go all the way across creating a thick dark blue line the width of the brush. Don't rinse the brush.

Now work the color using lateral strokes slowly down to the middle of the backdrop. What you are looking for is a gradual blend of the dark blue turning to white. It does not have to be perfect!

When you feel you have the blend you want rinse and dry your brush again. Now, take the dry brush and gently brush vertically the entire surface. You just want to barely touch the surface. If it looks like it is drying out too much use the squirt bottle and spray it lightly. Again you are simply trying to blend the colors and soften them.

Now if that is all you wish to have as a backdrop, YOU'RE DONE!! Easy, eh? But let's move it up a notch...

Go back in and rinse/dry your brush again. Go ahead and dip the very tip of it into the white paint.... now using short dabbing type strokes make some clouds. Just touch the edge of the brush to the surface and try to keep the paint fresh and white and don't drag the brush. Notice the highlights? After you have just about used up all the paint on the brush go in and slowly work the paint to connect the highlights to make bigger clouds. You can also switch to the smaller brush for this but that is your decision. You will also notice some of the blue mixing through the white, this is what you want. Continue to blend but try not to over do it. When you are satisfied, (Happy clouds), clean and dry the brush once more. Dip back into the white and go back over where you have just finished and add a few more highlights... see how they have become 3D looking?. Very cool.

So, there you have it...a sky and clouds...your backdrop is ready to enhance any railroad.

Not enough detail you say? Well ok then, let's all become artists!! It's time for the paint knife. This is a really neat tool that can produce just unbelievable results with little or no practice...because of the many ways we can go about the details here I am going to forgo the literary part of this clinic and switch to the "Hands on" section...so watch and learn.

Model Railroading IS fun!!