BACKDROP PAINTING

MADE EASY

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PAINTING BACKDROPS

For my last layout, (Gazette July/Aug. 1990) I painted relatively simple backdrops, as they were short scenes separated with large areas of rocks. (Additional photos of this layout are on my web site at: **www.drgwrr.com)**

I was hesitant to paint complicated backdrops as I had never done this before, so I made the mistake of building the layout and scenery first and a year later had the courage to first paint the background sky, hoping this would be sufficient. It soon became apparent that although the blue sky was an improvement, there was no depth to the layout as it was a basically a shelf with a flat blue back panel. No matter how careful I was, even using drop sheets, I still had blue paint spots all over track and scenery that had to be cleaned up. Finally I decided to jump in with both feet. I started with the horizon keeping it low so as not to have to paint large detailed scenes. My approach was to paint the backdrop in a "cartoon" style that would be secondary to the main focus... the layout.

It is important to paint all the backdrops before the scenery but after the track has been laid to give a visual reference. I hope the following steps will help you to understand a few basics for setting up a backdrop and a slightly more detailed method of painting that backdrop. The examples here will be based upon basic elements: skies, mountains, trees, shrubs and grasses.

STEP 1.
Study:
Study photographs of examples that you want to create. These references help you decide on how complicated your subject may or may not be.

STEP 2.
Horizon:
The first thing that you need to establish is a comfortable and pleasing horizon level. An understanding of the visual effect is necessary before proceeding. The horizon will suggest the viewer's ideal viewing level and will give a base for distant mountains. Using the tabletop as a base, mark two spots suitably far apart and using a chalk line, snap a horizontal line on the wall. The chalk will disappear when painted. A high horizon (e.g. 12" or more) will give the effect of the layout being quite low and establishes an apparent elevated viewpoint.

See Figure 1. This works well if your layout is low and you view it from above. This requires filling in more foreground detail between the layout base and the horizon as can be seen in this photo.

Fig. 1
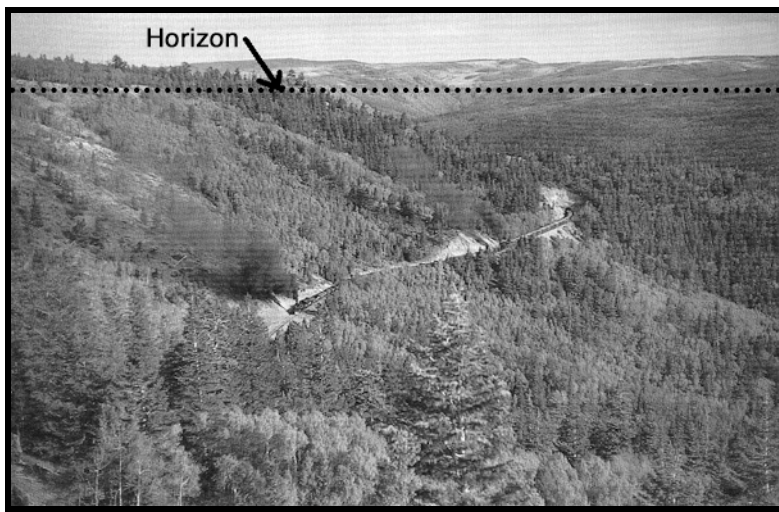
A low horizon (e.g.. 3" to 12") will give the opposite effect of the layout being higher and brings the viewer's ideal eye level closer to track level. Therefore, less foreground detail is required as most of the area is foreshortened. Of course the perfect horizon level is a scale 5' 6" above the ground which is the approximate normal eye level. **See Figure 2.** The purpose is to give the viewer the opportunity to adjust his viewing position in line with the horizon. Now if your layout is too low or too high, this will make it difficult to physically adjust.

Fig. 2
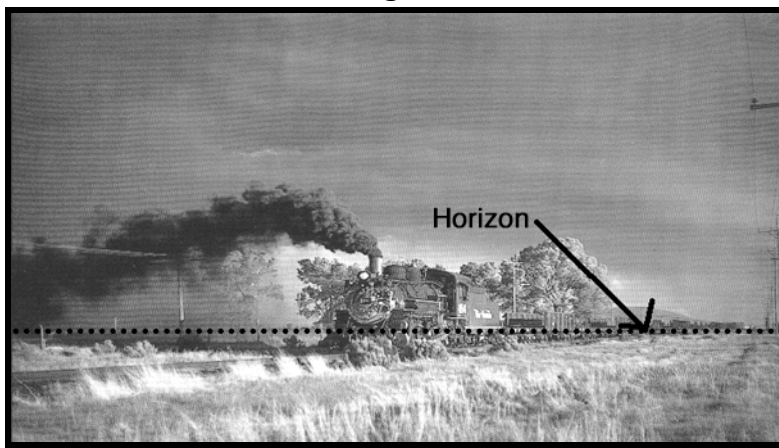
STEP 3.

Sky:

First paint the sky blue. The simplest method to paint is a single flat colour top to bottom. There are many tones available so find one that pleases you. If you feel a little more creative, paint the sky a very light blue at the bottom where the haze may be, to a deeper blue at the top. This is best done with spray equipment. However, I used an 8" paint roller slowly working the layers into one another with a dry brush technique. Wet on wet also works well. In both my skies I added deep grays to create the ominous approaching thunderstorm using both the roller and a 4" paintbrush with bold random strokes.

Clouds are very difficult to do well. But a very successful method is to use cut out profiles and spray tones of white and gray using aerosol flat acrylic paint. This method has been described in the Gazette. In my first layout, I used white on the roller, pressed most of the paint out and applied it in a dry brush method using the outer edge of the roller, maneuvering it around to create cloud outlines. Experimenting a little first on a piece of scrap material helps. On my new layout, I used sponges to daub the cloud formations using a fine sponge for makeup. **See Figure 3.**

Fig. 3.

STEP 4.

Distance:

Creating the effect of distance basically involves two things: fading and layering. Distant objects are pale and almost neutral in colour, a result of atmosphere and/or mist. Details are faint or non-existent. So when painting distant mountains, they should be barely visible through the mist or sharp in bright clear light, but without distinctive detail and with soft colours. Even then, the colour will vary between a pale blue or violet to grey greens as the hills approach. Work from the back which each successive layer becoming deeper in colour and with objects becoming clearer. A good basic example of this is trees. This can be seen in **Figure 4.**

Fig. 4

STEP 5.

Paint Colours:

There are essentially two types of media to use. One is oil and the other is acrylic. Oils can remain moist and workable for a longer period of time but will have a lingering odour. It also may be more difficult to control the flatness of its final finish. Acrylics tend to dry more quickly but this can be extended with additives such as gel.

For these murals, I used the following colours: White, Prussian Blue, Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, Raw Umber, Cobalt Green, Hookers Green, Vivid Lime Green, Sap Green, Olive Green, Naples Yellow, Cadmium Yellow and Cadmium Orange.

STEP 6.

Equipment:

      small (1/2" or medium 3/4") fan brush

      1" basting brush

      chisel edge palette knife

      natural sea sponge

      artificial makeup sponge (fine)

      palette tray (round plastic or metal cookie tray)

      2 jars for water (one for washing brushes, one for adding to paint)

STEP 7.

Snow/Rock- Mountains:

The next most important factor is to determine the direction of the sun. This must be kept consistent all through the following steps.

Rough out the various shapes lightly using white chalk. I recommend this, as the paints will absorb the chalk when painted over while pencil may show afterwards. Whether painting rocks or snow, mix the various colours desired loosely with the flat side of the palette knife leaving the colours marbleized. Then pick up a small amount on the back edge; gently drag the knife down lightly touching the surface. This will create the effect of the rock or snow shadows, highlights and contours. Drag the knife down in the direction of the slope. **See Figure 5.**

Fig. 5

STEP 8.

Techniques:

It is important to have a coloured background completely behind the final painting, not white, as any unpainted area will look exactly like that… unpainted. I extend the sky blue gray down to the tabletop. So when painting trees such as aspens, I scrape the paint while wet with the knife tip to create the trunks. The same method can be used to create grass blades. This is faster and more effective than trying to paint individual trunks unless the trunks are close-up.

First scrub in the darker green background for the treed areas filling in the slopes completely. You can vary the colour tones and the clarity of the colour depending upon the distance as previously described. This will provide the inner and backside of the trees that will be dark and in shadows. See Figure 10.

Fig. 10

STEP 9.

Coniferous:

Distant trees will barely have distinction. Lay a little extra paint along the top edge of the hill. Then, holding the basting brush upright, lightly lift the paint up vertically with small strokes to break the crisp painted edge. This will create small pine tops. Create slightly larger ones as they get closer. You can add the odd treetop with the tip of the fan brush to the middle foreground. . **See Figure 6.**

Fig. 6

Remember; work from the back… forward! Starting with the pale colours and stronger colour towards the front.

Middle ground trees can be stroked in using the fan brush in the green primed background with small short vertical strokes with the brush on edge.

Foreground trees are also created using the fan brush. Lift a little paint on the tip and paint the trunk in loosely with open gap areas and daub in on diagonal strokes with the branches either being up lifting or hanging down, depending on the species. Different trees have different characteristics. Try also using the corner edges of the brush on the short branches. **See Figure 7.**

Fig. 7
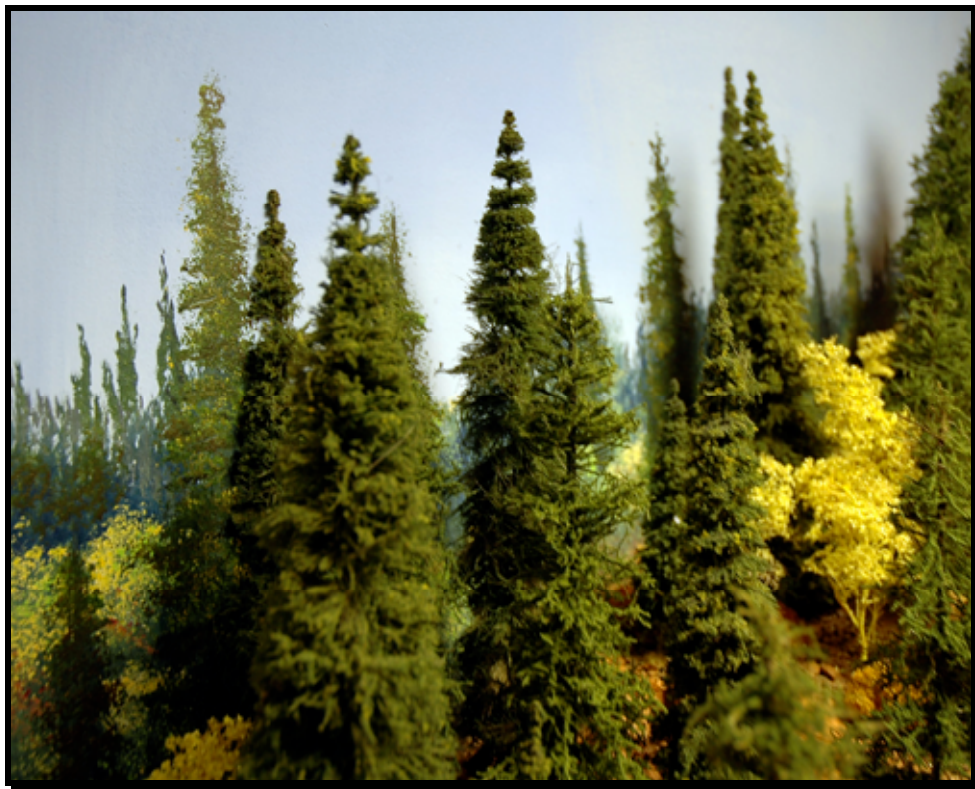
Note in the Figure above that the back trees are shaved in half to the trunk and glued against the wall. This eliminates shadows from it and makes it appear to meld into the wall. This placement partly covers the painted trees making a very believable scene. Try to paint your trees to appear like the ones being planted with a similar colour.

STEP 10.

Deciduous:

Mix up a little paint on the palette to the colour desired. The trick in all cases is not to completely mix the paint but to leave it marbleized. This adds automatic variety in colour. After scrubbing in a darker background, scrape in a few trunks with the tip of the knife. Closer, broader trunks can be done with the broader edge of the knife or the end of a paintbrush. **See Figure 8.**

Fig. 8

Now apply the leaves. To do this on distant trees, use the fine makeup sponge and the coarser natural sponge on closer trees. Daub the sponge lightly into the marbleized paint then daub it on the wall. Layer it over and over until enough leaves are created but leaving a lot of gaps from the sponge. Change the position of the sponge from time to time so that the same pattern is not repeated. Use darker tone on the shadowed side and brighter colours on the sunlit side. **See Figure 9.**

Fig. 9

Distant trees and trees with smaller leaves like those found on aspen can be done softly using a fine makeup sponge. Apply the light and dark in the same manner as described above. **See Figure 10.**

Fig. 10

STEP 11.

Shrubs:

These are created in the very same way as the trees but more densely and on a smaller scale compared to the trees. These are like mini trees flowing along the ground and among the trees. Here is an opportunity to use a variety of colours. First scrub in darker browns and olives. Then overlay the fine leaves using the sponges and basting brush. Dab the basting brush using the bristle ends for variety. Scribe in the branches between steps. **See Figure 11.**

Fig. 11

STEP 12.

Grasses:

Grass is applied using both the basting brush with light upsweeping strokes and also a fan brush. Also try some scraping with the tip of the knife for long blades of grass. **See Figure 12.**

Fig. 12

STEP 13.

Transition :

In some areas, it can be effective to slope the scenery up onto the backdrop and apply the grass and sgrub textures to the backdrop as well. This will help hide that sudden 90 degree change in planes and sften the joint between the wall and table top. **See Figure 13**.

Fig. 13

STEP 14.

Special :

One method to create mist/fog is to neutralize the colour of the paint with grays and white. Another is to scrub in the mist using a very light gray or white after the painted hills have dried. But the simplest is to paint each mountain layer separately; fog in the mist with an aerosol can of white paint (acrylic). Use it sparingly. You can add more but you cannot remove it. I recommend using a very light dove gray instead of white. Then paint the next mountain layer overlapping this last one and so on. **See Figure 4.**

Figure 4

Birds can be added… sparingly. Other structures like cabins in the distance with smoke, fence posts, telephone poles and so on, are also a nice touch.

Be creative. Have courage to try anything. Remember… if you don't like it, it can be painted over and started again.

Good Luck!