

Painted Backdrops for Non-Artists

The use of painted backdrops can greatly enhance your scenery. They can add great depth to scenes and fill in the odd spaces like the streets that come at the end of each block. To be most effective, it is assumed that all the walls of your layout room are painted sky blue.

My favorite material for backdrops is artist's illustration board in the standard thickness (about 3/32") or for very large panels, in double thickness. Paint on the white-surfaced side. Some people also use masonite hardboard.

Combine magazine cutouts and model flats with your painted scenes. Acrylic polymer paints are ideal for this work as they are very forgiving, since mistakes can be painted over as soon as they are dry. Details, such as window mullions, can be emphasized with black India ink in a ruling pen or any of the other drafting pens or with any of the permanent ink pens now on the market. Ruling pens can be used with paints also if a color other than black is desired. Of course, if you are an artist and adept with oil paints or water colors, use them, but as the title says, this is for non-artists.

It is best to sketch out your backdrop on a cardboard the actual size of your finished product. This will allow you to try several variations and see how it fits and how it will be viewed before you commit to finished paints.

The perspective of backdrop scenes that are viewed straight on, such as streets going off the layout, are best done in a way that avoids the traditional one point perspective which will look distorted when seen from side viewing angles. One can overcome this problem by turning the scene as it goes off the layout. A street scene that curves as it fades away is much easier to plot and will look correct from almost any viewing angle. Since very little property is dead flat, adding some up and down grades will also make the backdrop more realistic. Use painted trees and shrubs to cover areas that might call for skilled art work.

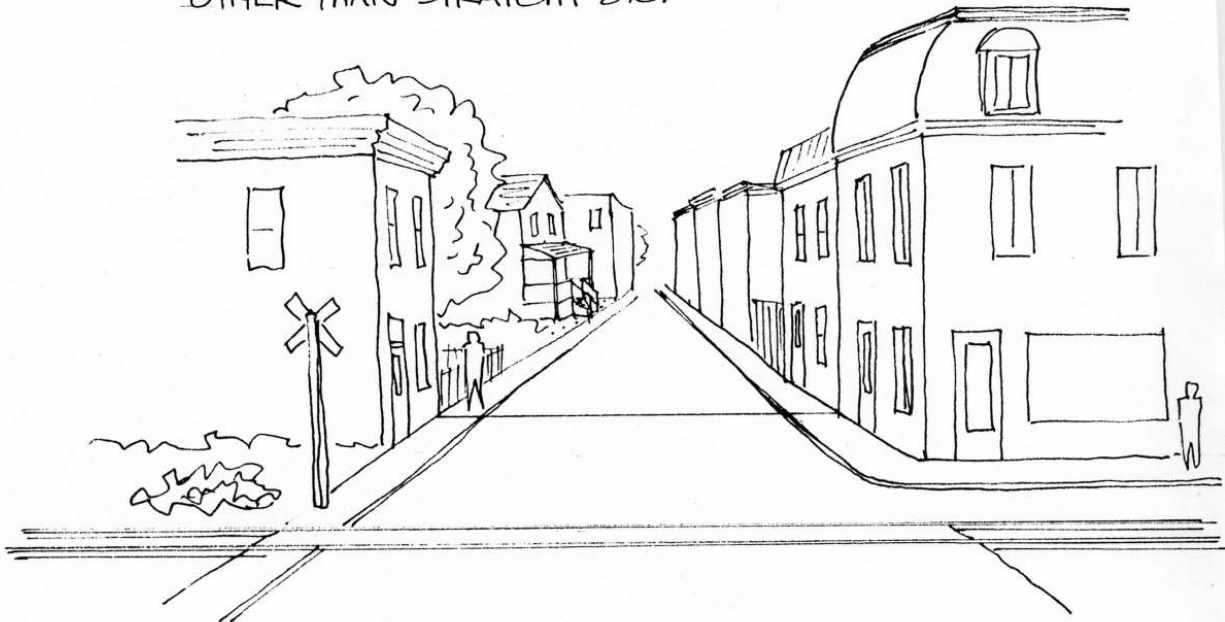
Another good technique is layering, that is, adding building flats, fences, vehicle flats and textured landscaping materials, such as ground foam, to add depth and interest to your backdrops. Painted backdrops can also be used very effectively with actual landscaping to finish scenes, and several painted backdrops can overlap each other to create a vista of greater distance with the far ones painted in hazy faded manner.

Manny Reider

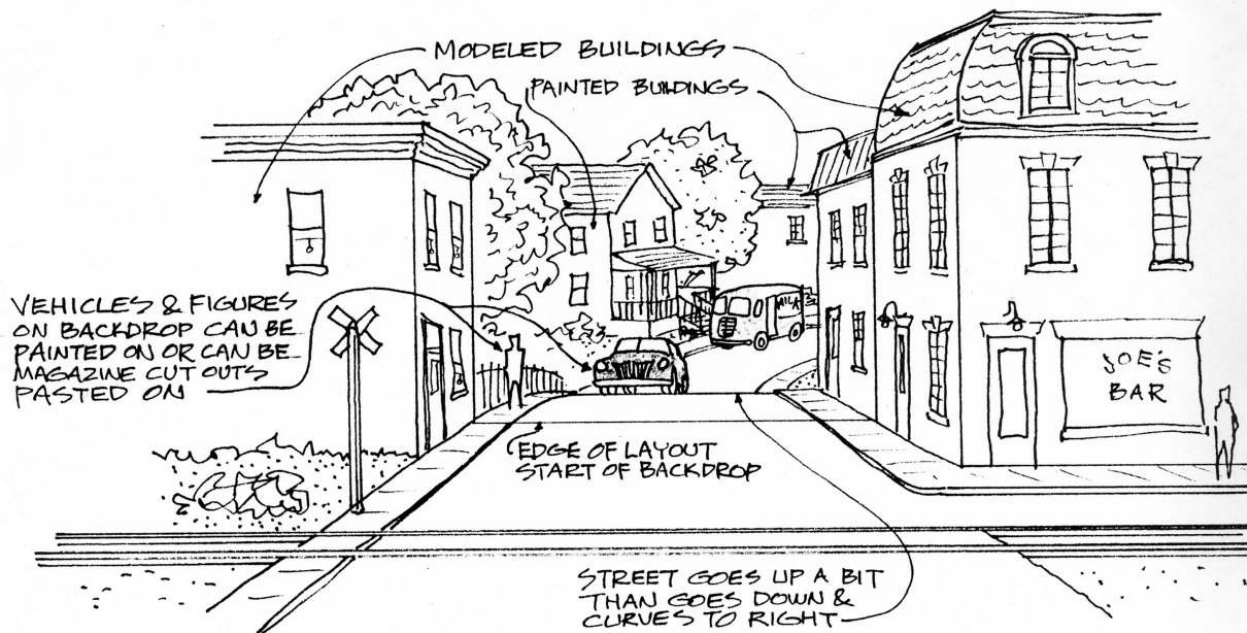
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(All photos by Frank Bender)

AVOID STRAIGHT ON PERSPECTIVES (ONE POINT)
THEY ARE DIFFICULT TO TERMINATE AND DO NOT
LOOK GOOD WHEN VIEWED FROM ANY POINT
OTHER THAN STRAIGHT ON.



A BETTER SOLUTION IS TO INTRODUCE
CURVES & GRADES INTO THE SCENE SO AS TO
CREATE SEVERAL VIEWING ANGLES





Overall view showing how curving road blends with existing scenery and disappears behind buildings. (Foreground scenery removed to best show backdrops in all these photos.)



Close up view of area in the previous photo.



One point perspective - avoid if possible but if absolutely necessary try to end street with building on wall.



Overall view showing it's hard to tell where real buildings end. The fish store with bay window is last real building.



Close up of backdrop in the previous photo.



A rural scene of Pennsylvania hills and mountains. It's about 3" behind tracks. Lightly overspray distant peaks with white to emphasize haze and distance. This backdrop is 12' long. Joints in 42" long illustration boards are covered with mountain forms cut from gatorfoam covered with Woodland Scenics coarse turf foam.

Reference Materials

Scenic Backdrops

MR(Model Railroader)

RMC (Railroad Model Craftsman)

MRP (Model Railroad Planning)

GMR (Great Model Railroads)

MR Realistic Scenery 3rd Ed

MR Realistic Scenery 1st Ed

MR 2/82

MR 10/89 Foam on BP

RMC 11/81 Steep Slope Trees & Foam

RMS 4/83 Steep Slope Trees & Foam

MR 3/00 P 21

GMR '98 P.31,98

MRP '05 P.43 PT

MR 11/82 PT

MR 6/95 PT

GMR '05 PT

MR 3/99 PT

MR 10/02 PT

MR 6/06 PT P100 & 72

GMR '04 PT

MR 1/96 Henderson Coal Belt Planted Hill

GMR '99

MR 3/88 Urban BD

MR 1/08 Distant Mountains