

# PAINTING A SIMPLE BACKDROP

By Jim Martin

**This clinic demonstrates how to paint a simple row of trees...a subject that, with the exception of desert scenes, has almost universal applications. This is not art...it's a process, and mastery of these simple techniques should encourage you to explore more ambitious themes. JM**

**Backdrop Material:** This can be as simple as painting the drywall or plaster behind your layout. Other popular materials are sheet linoleum or hardboard. A little-used material you may wish to experiment with, is sheet aluminum...my preference. It is lightweight, rigid, self-supporting in corners, available in long lengths, and with the help of a friend, quite easy to install. A 24-inch wide sheet costs about two and a half dollars a running foot. If you choose aluminum, get a roll that is painted white on one side. Lightly sand the painted surface before painting the sky colour.

**Sky Colour:** This is very subjective, so pick what looks right to you. Try to select a colour under lighting similar to your layout room. If in doubt, go lighter, rather than darker. My preference is for a soft blue that duplicates the hazy conditions that often pass for sunny skies in southern Ontario. The softer blue also makes it less necessary to lighten the colour toward the horizon. Painting clouds near the horizon seems to lend the same effect. If you live at higher elevations, in more pristine environments, a more vibrant blue may look better to you. Use a good quality acrylic latex primer as your tint base. Here are a couple of colour suggestions:

**Soft:** I use "Clear Blue Sky" - Para Paint 777(B863-1)

**Vibrant:** My friend Fred Headon of Winnipeg uses three shades of Benjamin Moore Regal Aqua velvet on his Assiniboia Central... BM 789 for the top third...BM787 for the center third... and BM 785 for the horizon level.

## **Landscape Colours (Décor Art acrylic craft paints):**

Black	DCA47	
White	DCA1	
Antique white	DCA3	
Yellow	DCA4	
Leaf Green	DCA36	
Deep Forest Green	DCA38 -or- Dark Jade Green	DCA40 (bluer tint)
Forest Green	DCA39 -or- Hunter Green	DCA41 (bluer tint)
Medium Grey	(optional...can be mixed using above colours.)	

These water-based colours are widely available in craft and dollar stores. They dry quickly and can be thinned with water if they start to stiffen in the tray.

## Painting the Backdrop:

1. On the sky colour, gently dry-brush streaks of white to simulate cirrus clouds. The brush should be so dry that several strokes are needed before the colour starts to turn opaque. This white can then be shaded by dry-brushing even lesser amounts of antique white or gray. Be sure to get some clouds down low on the horizon.
2. Set a line about one or two inches (2.5 – 5 cm) above the back of the layout. Dip a half-inch brush into the two forest greens and the yellow. Apply the multiple colours in swift, horizontal strokes. Do not work the brush or the colours will blend. The streaking helps the illusion of undulations and changes in vegetation in the foreground fields.
3. Apply the dark forest green above the previously painted grass line, to the approximate height you want your thicket of trees to be. Stipple some of the same colour at the top to simulate branches protruding from the top of the tree line. This is important because it allows some of the sky colour to show through the treetops.
4. Stipple the same area with forest green.
5. Make a light gray by adding a drop of black to some antique white. Add a drop of yellow to warm the colour slightly. Using a fine-tipped artist's brush, paint in a suggestion of tree trunks and branches...just bits here and there to suggest full trees behind the foliage.
6. This is where it all comes together! Use a half-inch brush, an artist's fan brush or a chunk of sea sponge to stipple the leaf green colour on top of the darker green tree areas. Go lightly and work in circular patterns to suggest tree structures and clumps of foliage. Try to keep your previously painted trunks and limbs exposed for a 3-D effect. Stipple more lightly down low, to suggest bushes on the forest floor or between the field and trees

**Remember:** Few things in nature are just one colour, so try to work in two or three colours in any given area. Greens often have more yellow in them than we realize...yellow-greens will blend better with most colours of ground foam. Paint your scenery from back to front...shaded areas first...sun-lit areas last. Avoid perspective painting if possible...highways, rivers and power lines vanishing toward the horizon are difficult for most people to portray, and only look correct from narrow viewing angles. Buildings on a backdrop are best pictured at a distance in full-on rather than  $\frac{3}{4}$  views. Framing buildings with trees can disguise any flat appearance.

**Congratulations! You are now an official starving artist!**

## BACKDROP CLINIC ADDITIONAL NOTES:

Colours to use for autumn scenes:

Referring to original clinic handout, use the following for the forest interior colours:

Substitute burnt umber for the dark forest green, and burnt sienna for the forest green colours.

Then use varying applications of red, orange, yellow and leaf green for the final leaf overlay.