

SCENE PAINTING BRUSH TECHNIQUES

Preparing the Surface

All component parts of a setting must be prepared in the same way so as to match when fitted together after painting. For this reason, an undercoat called priming is the first thing painted on any scenery. It has two effects:

- all subsequent colours are applied over a uniform undercoat
- the porous surface of the wood or canvas is filled in, ensuring that further paint does not sink into the materials.

The usual paint used for priming is cheap white emulsion. It can be quite thin, diluted with two parts of water. Some materials may need priming with different thicknesses of paint for instance a backcloth for touring needs a very thin undercoat so that it can be folded without creasing.

If you paint with aniline dyes you need not prime the surface. They can be put directly on to the cloth.

Your priming has to be forced into the pores of the material. Apply vigorously, moving your brush in all directions. Start at the top of the flat and work down so that accidental dribbles will be neither wasteful nor uncorrected. Priming must be completely dry before the next coat of paint can be applied.

Drawing Up the Design

Enlarging a drawing from a small sketch or model piece is quite simple. Fix a grid of squares, drawn on a transparent film, over the design. If you are working in the 1:24 scale half-inch squares will probably be appropriate. Where detail is very fine you may need a smaller pattern.

A matching grid of one-foot squares can be marked on the scenery as a guide. A few marks located on the small grid and copied on to the large one will provide you with a key. Complete the drawing using these as starting points. Try to be bold and draw freely. A tentative fine looks constricted and unconvincing.

Taking care of your brushes

Brushes are expensive so you should take care of them, washing them out thoroughly after each use. Make sure that you get all the paint out of the 'heel' of the brush, where the bristles join the handle, by running water down into them. Keep a bucket of clean water by you when painting, and rinse brushes out and store these to prevent them drying hard.

A brush can be used to cover large areas and also to paint lines. Large areas are filled in with the multi-directional technique described for priming. Draw a narrow straight line by resting the brush against a straight edge and drawing it towards you with a single smooth stroke.

Wet blend

A plain first coat of colour is often made more interesting by blending together two or more shades. Using separate brushes and buckets of colour, paint fairly large adjacent areas and blend them together where they meet. You can merge them into each other while they are still wet but you may need a bucket of clean water as a supplement.

Dry brush

A useful textured effect can be had with 'dry brush' technique. It is very effective as shading or for adding painted metallic highlights. After being dipped in the paint the brush is emptied of most of the colour by shaking or wiping out. When it is dragged lightly over the scenery a hatched dry effect is produced.

Stippling

An interesting texture is made by dabbing paint on from the tips of the bristles with a fierce stabbing movement. Stippling can be used to break up a uniform surface and to force paint through a stencil.

Splatter

A painted surface can be made more interesting by flicking or shaking a patina of paint blobs over it from a full brush. It can be done with surprising control. Several different colours applied like this give a shimmering effect to a plain or wet blended area. Splattering white paint will soften and distance detailed painting. If a hue is splattered on its complementary it brightens the original colour by contrast.

PATTERNS AND TEXTURES

Stencils

You may want to repeat a pattern on a setting — a wallpaper, a pillar capital, a fancy border. Stencilling is the best way of painting the same thing many times over.

A cut stencil

Cut your pattern with a very sharp knife from a strong and fairly waterproof material. Lampshade fabric is suitable: it can be cut into a fine pattern and its waxy surface means that it will not easily curl or disintegrate when wet.

Your design should be arranged so that it remains in one piece. If this is not possible the stencil can be stuck on to vision gauze to keep it together, though this material can make paint run under the pattern's edge unless you stipple very carefully.

Staple your stencil on to a wooden frame to keep the material stretched flat as you use it. Marks on the edge of the frame will help you to position it properly for repetition. With a good paintbrush stipple the paint through the cut pattern, holding the brush as vertically as you can. Some paint may bleed under the stencil, smudging your pattern, so keep checking and wiping off any excess.

A pounced pattern

To reproduce a drawing many times you can use a pounced pattern as a guide. Draw the design on strong brown paper and pierce holes through it along the lines, then 'pounce' powdered charcoal or graphite through the holes from a fine muslin bag on to the surface to be decorated.

A printing stencil

You can cut foam rubber into shapes to make printing stencils. Use a firm kind about two inches thick and glue the shape on to a stiff board. You can dip the stencil into a tray of paint or apply colour to the foam with a brush. This method is particularly useful for stencilling brickwork as the paint is some-times unevenly applied.

Cut rollers

Foam rubber rollers can be cut with a knife or burned with a cigarette to make simple repetitive designs that are especially useful for linear or textured patterns. Remember to cut only halfway through the roller.

Combs

These can be used in various ways to make grained patterns on a painted surface. String wrapped round the heel of a brush will separate the bristles to give a woodgrain effect.

Wooden or metal combs of various designs can be scraped through wet paint. A small wooden roller with a carved surface can be used. Twist and turn it as you run it over the wet paint.

SPECIAL EFFECTS

APPLIED EFFECTS

Paper rope

This material can give very good decorative effects to scenery and properties. It may be had in several thicknesses from a half inch to three inches, and you can twist it into shapes on cornices, picture frames or furniture. Glue it in place with a hot-glue gun or any strong adhesive. To harden the rope saturate it in a stiffener such as PVA or glue size. It is bound in a fine net and will retain its shape, so it can be used even for relief sculpture.

Mirrors

Mirrors on stage can reflect glaring light into the audience's eyes. Spray them with a dulling substance like lacquer to overcome this. If your design demands a large mirror surface calculate its effect carefully.

You can use one of the special plastic mirror sheetings that are available. These must be stretched over a frame, glued or stapled into place and heated gently with a hair dryer to produce tension. Some mirror sheeting is thick enough to be stuck to a hardboard flat with contact adhesive. Use a very soft cloth to smooth or clean the mirrors as they are easily scratched.

Metallics

There is a wide choice of imitation metallic finishes. Fancy disco patterns, golds, silvers and anodized colours can all be bought in sheets and stuck on your scenery. They can be obtained from specialist suppliers like those listed in the glossary — and are quite expensive.

It can be hard to apply one of these to a flat that does not have a solid smooth face. Look for a flexible material, which will be easier to smooth — and remember to check that it conforms with fire safety standards.

Vacuum-formed scenery

A thin plastic sheeting can be formed by a vacuum-suction process into any decorative detail. Architectural decoration, beak patterns, columns, rows of book spines and many other useful pieces can be picked out of suppliers' catalogues and sent to you already shaped and ready for stapling on to your set. By grouping them skilfully you can get very ornate effects. They can be painted so as to be completely integrated into one surface. It is a time-saving — but fairly expensive

— way of achieving an illusion of solidity. The forms are not strong, so they are not suitable for multiple scene changes or touring shows.

ULTRAVIOLET LIGHT

Ultraviolet light, often called 'black light', gives little illumination but will make special paint and fabrics glow dramatically in the dark. It works particularly well if over your ordinary scene painting you put a special transparent paint that is invisible until it is shown up in the dark by the ultraviolet light. With UV you could, for example, design an underwater sequence in which glowing images lit by it seem to float unsupported. The operators, in black costumes, are invisible against a dark surround.

PAINTED METAL EFFECTS

Gold, copper and silver paints are made from powders mixed with emulsion. Be sure to get the proportions right as too much emulsion makes the paint dull. Use an undercoat colour as a base. Dark brown or yellow ochre is best for gold or copper, grey for silver. These preparatory coats will determine the effect of your metallic paint so choose them with care.

You can paint a shadow over the gold or silver finish with a thin emulsion glaze. Put a very small amount of base colour into a good quantity of dilute emulsion and paint it on top of the dried metallic surface. It will dry almost clear and leave the ochre or brown as a subtle shadow.

FRENCH ENAMEL VARNISH

FEV is a special varnish for painting on metal and other shiny surfaces. It is a mixture of shellac and dye and is diluted with methylated spirits. It is used for glazing shadows on pottery, armour, swords and so on.

GLITTER

Glitter dust gives an object a sparkling surface. It comes in gold, silver and other colours in varying grades of coarseness. Paint a clear emulsion glue over the area you want to sparkle, then sprinkle the glitter dust on top. Put paper under the work to collect any excess. The best results with this effect on a backcloth are got by lighting it from below by footlights. Be careful to apply glitter so that it cannot flake off and get on to actors' skins. It may cause irritating rashes or symptoms of hay fever.