

# 3-D Backdrops (almost)

*Simple Technique = Impressive Results*

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One could literally write an entire book describing the various options and techniques available to create a good-looking backdrop for a model railroad. As in many of life's endeavors, "The Way" doesn't exist! Here then is an idea for creating a backdrop that is a bit better than ordinary.

My goal in amalgamating this technique (I've borrowed everything from previously published works) is to create a backdrop that:

- Enhances the scene without overpowering it;
- Provides a realistic background for layout photos;
- Can be assembled with commercially available materials and tools.

Since I'm no artist, I am going to stick with a commercially available backdrop. Faller and Vollmer both make several photographic backdrops, available in the U.S. through Walthers. You might also want to look at [www.backdropwarehouse.com](http://www.backdropwarehouse.com); their scenes are primarily North American, but there are several Rocky Mountain backdrops that could double for the Alps.

Another school of thought suggests that photographic backdrops are distracting because they usually contain more detail than the foreground models on the layout. To better understand this viewpoint, consider if your on-layout models are detail-for-detail miniatures of real life or merely 'artistic' representations of the same. If you agree with the latter view, you may want to check out the line of products by Walthers, MZZ, and others. These backdrop elements feature nice artistic representations of buildings and scenery without the photographic realism.

As with any how-to article, read this one two or three times before beginning any work! These techniques will work with any type of pre-printed backdrop.

## **Preparing the Printed Backdrop**

My technique includes discarding the sky portion of the backdrop (it's darned near impossible to satisfactorily explain those seam lines in the sky!) and painting the wall a convincing shade of sky blue. So begin by cutting the sky away from the rest of the printed sheet. You don't have to do this with great precision at this point, just get it close enough. (Note: Save the discarded sky to use as a mask when applying spray adhesive to the wall later in the process.)

Look at your backdrop in relation to your layout and decide if all of the background elements are reasonably placed. Later you will discover places where you can cut apart and rearrange your backdrop to better fit the layout.

Now, evaluate the relative distances in the backdrop scene. Typically, you can classify the various elements into three ranges; foreground, middle ground, and background. Determine the 'lines' that separate these three regions and carefully cut along those lines (be very precise with these cuts).

Get enough all black (black through and through) poster board so that you can glue each piece of your cut apart backdrop to it; you'll have to go to a good art supply store; you won't find this in WalMart's school supply aisle. While you're there, pick up some quality spray adhesive (like Scotch 77), too.

### **Assembling the Background Layer, . . .**

Glue each background element on a piece of the poster board and allow it to dry. Make sure that you do this without trapping any air bubbles between the poster board and the backdrop. If you miss a bubble, carefully prick it with a pin and work the air out.

What follows is the most tedious part of the process, but the care exercised here will make or break the entire effort. Cut away the excess poster board above the glued on elements (including any remaining bits of the sky) using a sharp hobby knife. Do not remove the poster board below the glued on elements (in the foreground).

### **. . . the Middle-ground Layer, . . .**

Glue the middle-ground elements onto pieces of the poster board in much the same way as was done with the background elements. Again, cut away the poster board (and any unwanted bits) above the print's edge, but leave the bottom edge straight.

### **. . . and the Foreground Layer**

Same as before.

### **“The Devil's in the Details”**

Examine each cut and touch up any visible white paper edges with a permanent marker. Do this only where a dark area of the backdrop exhibits a white edge; where the backdrop is light, the white edge of the paper is not noticeable, and attempting to darken it may result in the ink bleeding into the paper and ruining the scene.

Apply a coat or two of matte medium (lightly with a foam brush) to seal the surface and edges – this also allows you to lightly clean it from time to time with a damp cloth without too much danger of damaging the paper. Using the black through and through poster board hides the edges and enhances the visual effect by suggesting shadows.

### **Composing the Backdrop**

The complete background scene is reassembled as a 'sandwich' which will give it some additional depth. This can be done at the workbench, but it will probably come out better if done directly on the sky background, especially if there are any curves to consider. Temporarily set the pieces in place to see if it will all go together in a pleasing fashion before you commit.

You can even rearrange some of the elements by cutting them apart and shuffling them around to obtain the best visual effect. Don't overlook the possibility of swapping similarly-shaped foreground elements to create a scene that is substantially different from the original print. In this case be sure that each foreground element completely covers the 'near' edge of the background scene (the line where scene gives way to bare poster board).

When you're ready to commit, glue the background layer to the sky. If the background is theoretically quite far from the viewer, you probably will want to attach this layer directly onto the sky. If the elements are supposed to be closer (buildings or near hills, etc.) you can space this layer away from the sky by sandwiching pieces of scrap poster board between the two layers. If you do use spacers here you will need to pay special attention to lighting so as to avoid casting unrealistic shadows on the sky.

Add the middle-ground and foreground layers using the same techniques.

### **Variations**

- **Overlaps** – It is an easy matter to overlap separate elements of the same layer without creating an unnatural look or too much relief. For example, to represent a series of middle-distance hillocks receding diagonally through the scene, glue the first one to the previous layer with a spacer near its 'far' edge. Then, glue the next one with the 'far' edge overlapping the first one in a 'shingle' fashion.

- **Combine Multiple Backdrops** – With this method it is easy to combine elements from two or more backdrops. Before doing this, make sure that the scenes are visually compatible. This is not too much of a problem with 'art' backdrops, but with photographic backdrops you need to make sure that the sun angle is the same for all elements to be combined. Almost without exception, don't combine photographic and 'art' backdrops.
- **Sky Lighting** – If you have the room, some striking visual effects can be had by spacing your distant layer 1" or more from the sky. This allows you to illuminate the sky from behind and below the distant background layer while casting a different light on the layout itself. Can you imagine a moonlit village under the cobalt blue dome of the sky as the last red rays of sunset fade behind distant mountain peaks?
- **More Layers** – If there are foreground buildings or other near details, cut them away before gluing that part of the sheet and mount them with another layer of poster board.

That's about all there is to it!