

5 BASIC MODEL RAILROADING

SCENERY AND STRUCTURES

“A layout without scenery is a mere exercise in running trains.” (Charles Cooper)

Scenery may be defined as everything around the railway itself that creates an illusion of miniature reality. There is no one way of “doing scenery”. In fact there are likely as many techniques as there are modellers, but there are basic materials and methods that are described in full in the many “how-to” books, and articles available from libraries, book and hobby stores, the internet and the model press.

Scenery encompasses the creation of landscape, mountains, valleys, tunnels, rivers, lakes and ponds, buildings, structures, back drops and the detail – little people, animals and vehicles that populate the layout. At one time, serious modellers, (as opposed to toy train enthusiasts) were required to build their scenery from “scratch”, using common household materials and taking advantage of whatever limited materials they might be able to find in building centres and art supply stores.

Today, many modellers still prefer to build what they can from scratch, but there is now an abundance of kits and scenic materials available, so that the only hurdle a modeller has to overcome is his own limitations in creating. The good news is that with a little patience, everyone has the ability to take reasonable shot at “doing scenery”. The further good news is that it’s fun and that there is a lot of built-in forgiveness, because if it doesn’t look right the first time, it is almost always possible to go over one’s effort and do it again.

Two cautions about colour. First, except perhaps for water, Nature does not do “gloss”. Most modellers today work with acrylic or tempera powder paints. However, Nature doesn’t do solid colours either. It is in the treatment of colour and texture that model railroad scenery comes close to an art form, so don’t hesitate to experiment with brushes, paints, dilution with water and the many texture scenic aids ranging from bushes, grasses, earth to substitute water that are now available at modest cost.

The most significant single component of “scenery” is in the creation of the terrain (“the landscape”) itself, and it is here that there is a wide array or approaches. Traditionally, this has been created with hydrocal™ or plaster of Paris, either of which require shaping with chicken wire, fly screen or a framework of cardboard strips. In recent years plaster cloth (e.g., by Woodland Scenics™) has become popular, especially for medium and smaller-sized layouts. This is easier to shape using cardboard strips and/or crumpled paper toweling (better than old newspaper), and has the advantage of being lighter for modules that require transportation. A good “how-to” source is recommended here.

As for buildings and structures, there is a choice of ready-made, built from a kit, “kitbashed” (built from more than one kit, often from a combination of different kits to create a unique structure not to be seen anywhere else), or “scratchbuilt” from card, paper, styrene, celluloid, balsa and bass wood, and so forth. Most modellers start with ready-made structures or kits, and then graduate to scratch-building as their construction skills improve. However, an understanding of perspective (see leaflet No. 6 in this series – *Prototype and the Model*) is an important dimension. Too many layouts feature buildings everywhere on the layout in the same scale as the railway, with the result that this essential violation of perspective gives the whole layout a toy-land appearance.

Final scenic touches are the addition of people, animals, vehicles as the context requires, and this is where many modellers inject a note of whimsy and imagination. And not to forget trees. In the past, modellers have scratchbuilt these with varying degrees of success, but today an array of all kinds of realistic-looking trees is available commercially. Again, a good “how-to” source is recommended.

As all model railway layouts have boundaries, and usually face the viewer in one direction, most modellers provide a vertical backdrop that is intended to continue the scene into the distance. Likely the most popular materials for this are masonite board or styroboard. There are ready-made printed scenes available, but many modellers paint their own – sometimes just a plain light blue to represent sky, and/or make up scenes from collages. There are many approaches to creating backdrops, and the best approach is in the eye of the beholder. However, as with all aspects of creating a model railway, visits to other layouts and to shows are good for stimulating ideas.