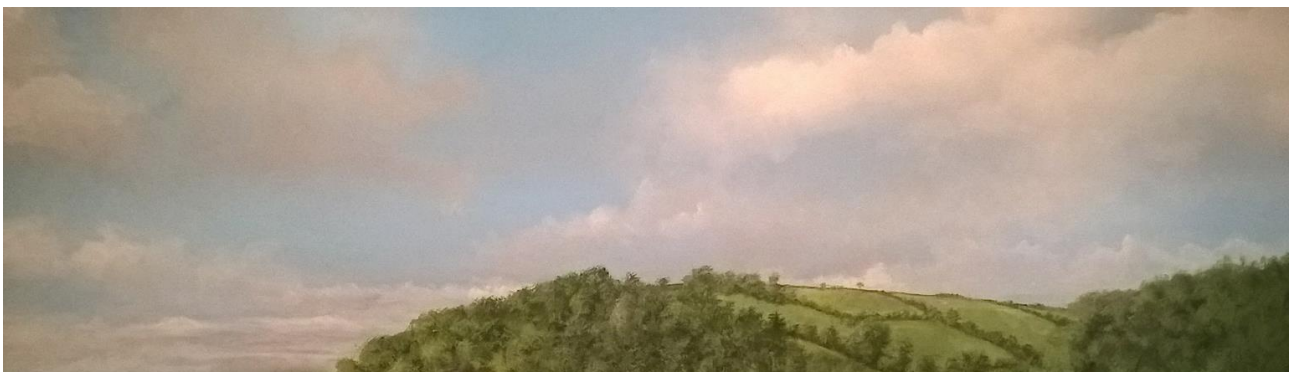


PAINT A SKY

There's no need to shy away from painting a sky for your layout, and you certainly don't have to be 'artistic' to make a good job of it. Copying one by hand instead of using a printed overlay does take a bit longer of course, but it does allow an unlimited choice and size. As a sky can often occupy a large part of the background with a scenic layout, let's see if we can get it to contribute something to the scene. This can be done by just studying and recording a suitable example, and you can always re-do an existing sky panel that you're no longer happy with. It's the same method we rightly adopt for most aspects of modelling, where the reference is the vital key, and the closer the observation, the more realism finds its way into the job.

PANEL HEIGHT



Allow as much height as possible, because it helps to extend the scene vertically. The real sky doesn't have any upper limit when you are viewing the full size railway, so have a look at the surprising amount of visible sky in railway reference photos. The usual restrictions when it comes to determining panel height are; a requirement to reach over the panel, a slightly less restrictive need for an operative to see over the panel, or a physical constraint like wooden joists in a loft or the height of a ceiling.

.....

RESEARCH AND REFERENCE

Very few paintings are done directly from life, because changing light conditions, wind and weather problems, paint drying time and constantly changing clouds all conspire against a landscape painter, so, like them, we must record the information using other methods. At this stage, the only concern is to find a sky that will complement your scene, so start by looking up images from internet picture libraries and published photographs that typify the look you are after.

PHOTO RECORD

Alternatively, you can capture your own reference by just waiting for the kind of sky you would like to see above your railway landscape. One of the drawbacks of using framed photo formats for reference is that you run out of information to copy due to their composition. A great idea is just to take your own set of overlapping portrait format sky photos, as a panorama. This is a stylish method of doing a backscene, because it becomes your own choice. Remember to keep a few notes about the position of the sun, the time of day and most importantly include the horizon and any particular lighting effects on the surrounding landscape features as part of the record.

REFERENCE EXAMPLES





Here are some sky samples that have a bit of character, and in comparing the differences, we can start to examine what is going to add the right appearance to your layout. They are all completely different to one another, each has its own composition and colouring. The exercise of painting one of these is just a sequence of subtle colour matching, and copying cloud configurations over a base colour. Landscape painters do a different sky for each study, but as we only have one to do, it might as well be a good one!

.....

It's important never to just think up your sky as you go along, because that means you have stopped looking at the subject matter, and we wouldn't do that with any other parts of the model. As it will eventually occupy a good percentage of the overall layout view, let's apply some of that famous modellers eye for realism, and by the way, if you want to prove the merit of this, try doing a section of backscene panel without referring to anything, and then do another one from reference!

No two skies are ever alike, each one changes as clouds, colours and sunlight constantly alter their appearance, and this allows us to select one particular outlook. Your choice of sky could easily occupy a quarter or more of the whole layout viewing experience, so with that, let's stay with the quest to add a bit of atmosphere to the layout, reproducing it is a step we can take later on.

EXAMPLES

There's no need to make your choice any kind of obvious cliché or cartoon. A Cornish Riviera model doesn't 'need' a summer holiday sky, any more than a Manchester depot 'needs' winter rainclouds. As long as the character suits you, that's fine, you can be quite conservative about your sky, but on the other hand, if you'd rather make a bold statement that's fine as well. The flat landscapes of East Anglia for instance might just as often be seen under a cloudless blue as a pose to huge turbulent cloud formations dwarfing the landscape below. Avoid 'generic' images then, particularly if they don't represent the conditions you would like to see, and tend not to copy other peoples' painted examples.

SET UP FOR BASE COLOUR

The best surface for a sky panel is a smooth white primer, and it's always best to do the sky before any land surface work. Mark the horizon datum line on lightly with a hard pencil, (not a pen), so it matches the mockup, and mask the layout up if you happen to be redoing an existing backscene to make a change. Run the tape at least an inch below the skyline so you can apply the paint over it. To establish these lines correctly please refer to the 'Setting up' and 'Generate a Panorama' articles.

Now in the same way that there is no such thing as tree green, there is no such thing as sky blue either, and because backscenes have a lot of sky, it's something that is important. This is where a bit of extra effort now will pay you back later when the railway's environment starts to build into something individual.

Most skies feature a smooth base colour, and that has to be applied before the cloud configurations go on. This blue colour is slightly different for each example, so it's important to get an accurate base colour mix for your chosen sky, and it's very easy to do by finding the reference and get the upper, more saturated shade matched in a paint shop or DIY shed. Only use a full MATT Valspar type interior paint for this job. If the right sky for you has an overall opaque cloud cover then you can skip this stage.

You might need two colours if there is a graduation, with what often appears to be a lighter hue as it meets the far horizon. If this is so, then pour some of it into a separate container, and add pure matt white until you have a good match for the horizon colour. This is best done in stages, trying the colour with a mask window and letting it dry before the next go.



This is a bit of an extreme example, but it shows you can sometimes need more than one blue graduated horizontally above the skyline before you can apply a cloud layer. Once you start to put the clouds on, especially with sparse cover like this, you can't blend the graduations anymore. The base colour has to go on first, and go on well, so get the top one mixed and then de-saturate some of it with white for the horizon.

.....

Set up the rear panels into a convenient position, joined up and ideally lying flat. Any joining panels must be rolled either all fixed together in a row, or done in pairs, quickly changed while the base colours are still wet. Resting all the panels clamped together on wallpaper tables in the garage is a good way to do it. Quite a few backscene jobs do need to be done 'across a join', but the blending of the sky base is the only one that requires complete continuity across the whole set of panels.

Mini gloss rollers work very well for applying base colours and they are fine for graduating the colours together, so with each colour mixed ready in a resealable tub,

Try some test panels first if you like, to get the feel for moving the rollers between the paint shades for a smooth graduation. White A2 mounting card is ideal for this, load one roller evenly with the lighter, skyline colour and go along the skyline, then quickly go to another roller with the darker colour, and run along the top. Then work and blend the two together with slightly overlapping strokes. Let the tests dry, check the colours and keep them for practicing cloud painting later on.

Finally, make sure there is enough base colour to cover the full length of the layout before you run out half way along the last panel!

.....

TRACE THE CLOUDS

We need to come up with a good method of copying the forms, colours, lighting and appearance, so let's get the reference pictures out, and get them photocopied to the full height of the rear panel. Have a look at the images and configurations with a view to copying them, and hold the photocopies up to the window facing out.

Where you can see a cloud layer, rub the back of the copy with a B pencil, and then take the worst of the graphite off with a sheet of kitchen roll. Align the sky to the horizon datum of your backscene (not the top edge) and tape the copy in place. It's best to keep the paper folded over the top of the panel, and stick the tape on at the back, so it's an overlay. Fold it over the back when you are painting, and check it from time to time.



Trace the outlines of the clouds onto your sky base colour and push the graphite guidelines onto the panel with a 2H pencil, lifting the copy every so often to see how it's going. You should be building a set of feint guidelines to start the cloud painting.

.....

CLOUD PAINTS

There are choices of paint type to use, and these include Artists Gouache or Acrylics, so by all means research or experiment to find your preference.

Gouache is delightful but is only suitable for absorbent surfaces, and it is risky for exhibition layouts or garden shed layouts due to potential water damage.

Acrylics dry quickly to a water resistant film. It can therefore be safely used for exhibition layouts, easily putting up with the odd drop of rain onto the surface when being transported in and out of venues. Practically speaking then, acrylics are a good choice for backscene work.

It does have a lot of advantages, so I have to use it quite a bit. It goes on nicely and mixes well on the palette, either applied thinned with a drying retarder added in, or going over areas with a thicker opaque layer. Unlike oils, acrylic whites don't yellow with age so the colours stay fast, but the drawback is that it dries out pretty quickly and you have to keep refreshing the palette.

.....

BRUSHES



Pick a brush that fits the outlines and forms of the cloud you want to reproduce. When it comes to applying the highlights, and describing the shapes and shadows, the size and roundness of the brush is going to affect the way the paint goes on to the rear panel. Pointy brushes are no good for cloud painting.



The shape of the brush matches the cloud edges, which helps to naturally follow the shape.

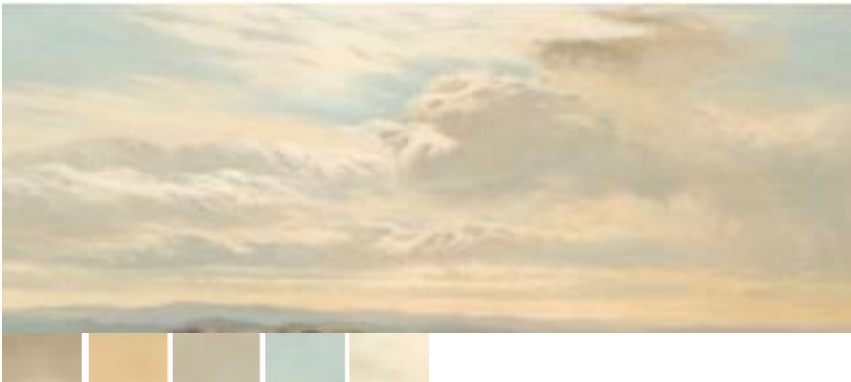
.....

TRIAL PANEL

Once you have some guidelines traced onto a trial panel with base colour applied, we can mix up some colours to match your reference. Sky shades are very tricky and subtle, so try to focus on just the colour mixing without getting distracted by the whole image. Use a 10mm square mask window cut from thin white card, and add tiny amounts of pthalo blue and black to white for cooler greys, or burnt umber and black for warmer greys. Cloud shadow greys can be so very light, that they are sometimes hardly detectable on a palette.

Be really fussy when you are matching, and always use a mask window if unsure, because skies really are subtle, and a very small discrepancy in a shade can make a dramatic difference. The rule for checking up on matches is to take a little from the latest mix, try a speck onto the reference colour and let it dry. If you can see the speck, it's still not right, so take your time with this.

Take one of the base colour test pieces, and try copying the configurations, for the lighter areas, using the china white, and blend the colours together, using short curving strokes to describe the form of the cloud, while keeping an eye on the reference images as you go. In areas where the edges of a cloud thin out and start to dissipate, wipe the brush clean, and while it's still wet, gently graduate the cloud body paint away in a transparent wash approximating the appearance of the reference image.



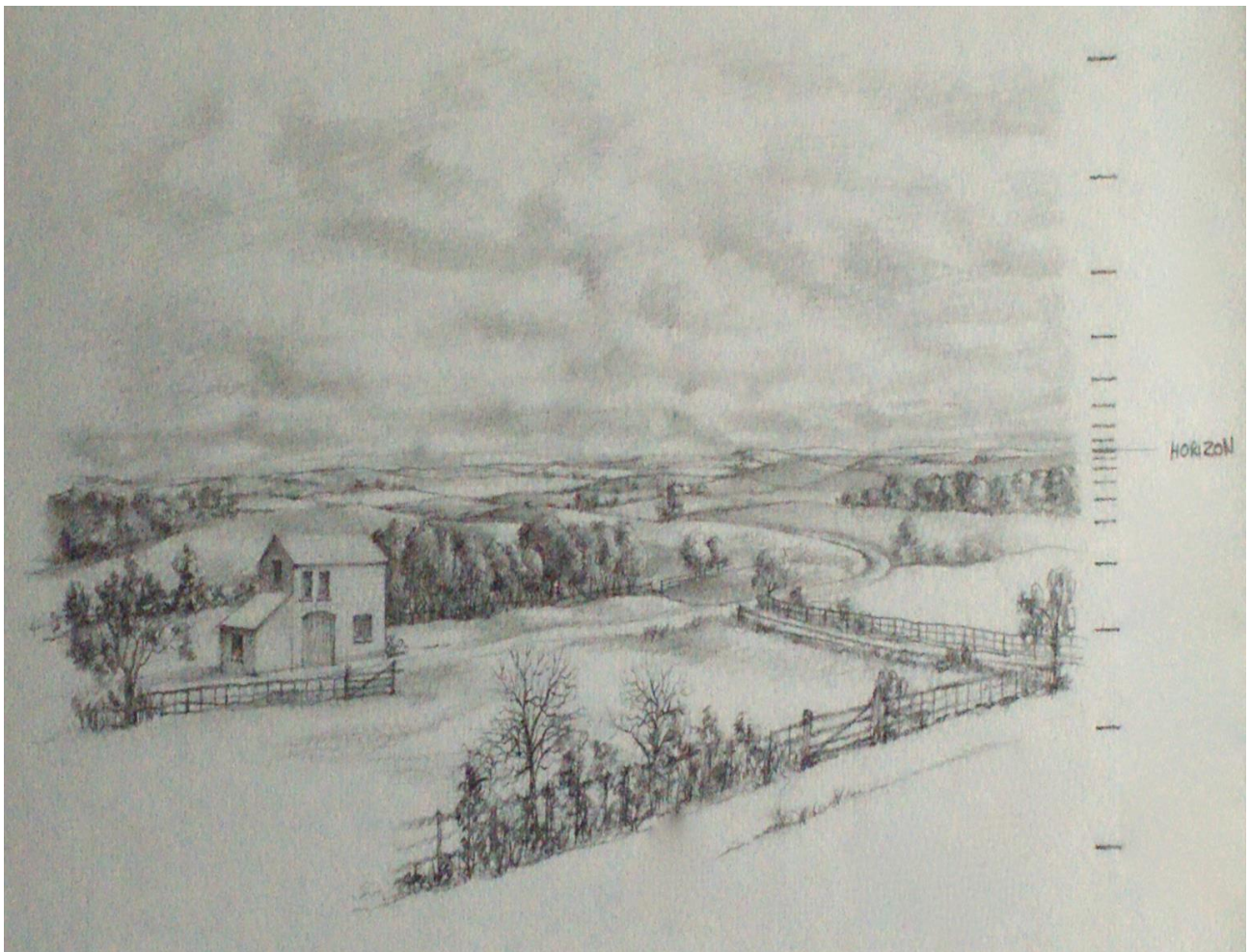
All the colours in this romantic evening view are warm, and despite a strong, low light source, there are no intense white highlights. Hovering the mask window over the various colours will ensure a great palette of about five or six basic colours, including a yellow ochre and white mix allowing you to work in and blend the highlights into the other colours. A bit of retarder in the colours will help if you are using acrylics.

.....



There is no requirement for a base coat on this sky, as a dense cloud layer totally obscures any higher layers or blue. With a job like this large panel, you need quite a bit of paint, and different colour greys mixed in paper cups all ready done would allow good progress because a flat palette will actually be too small, and will keep running out and drying, especially with acrylics. Be confident and work china white highlights into the wet grey layer to give form to the layers as you go. A rain sky can really set a mood for a layout, and as long as we have some good reference, then it's all about colour matching. This sky panel might look good above a bleak and wintry panorama.

.....



s As we look at the underside of an evenly layered sky, it's handy to be aware that distant clouds sometimes appear to diminish in size in the same way that surface features do. It's the same effect, only upside down! Cloud layer recession appears in reference photos, and it's really easy to depict this by just painting smaller scale versions of the same clouds. Using smaller brushes and progressively smaller strokes as you approach the horizon line, (not the skyline) and it will bring your cloud layer into perspective along with everything else.

.....



EXIT AND FRAMING

The sky will present cloud configurations from the horizon to directly above us, so we must allow the reference images to lead the eye off the page so to speak, and never be tempted to neatly arrange and frame the clouds within the rear panel boundaries. The guide for clouds and sky is the opposite to the one for features, so any basically any landscape models are best comfortably within the frame, whereas the cloud depiction must always deliberately exit the frame.

.....

AVOID TIDYING UP

When I started doing landscapes, I found that there was always this inclination to tidy up, and neatly organise the images and compositions in the pictures, and as you start to paint yours, you might well encounter the same thing. Modellers really suffer from this because they have trained themselves to be accurate. Careful alignment and perfect uniformity are the goals of the model engineer, and so it's actually quite difficult to switch this tendency off completely. Controlling the paint when copying a cloud layer is a knack that comes quite quickly, but resisting the urge to tidy it all up is nowhere near as easy to overcome. What I really don't want to see is a disappointed backscene painter, standing back to see that this has got the better of them. Once you've over done the cloud cover on a graduated base blue, there's no easy going back, and it will have spoiled the fun. One way to tell if you are inclined this way is to see if you started to do it on the test panels

If so, then do a few more trial pieces purely to exorcise that nasty little 'tidying up' gremlin. Only ever reproduce the reference, and if there are two clouds together and then a big gap with just base blue, then grit your teeth and leave it alone! The same applies to a good many aspects of landscape painting because it's real observation of the sky reference that will give you a better result. If your organised mind is persuading you to neatly paint uniform edges, or get all the clouds at the same height and size for instance, then train yourself to disobey that instinct.



The top left of this test piece shows no clouds at all, and clear areas such as this are commonly seen, remembering we are only really looking at a tiny area of sky compared to the entire vista. If it's a clear summer sky with just the odd small formation here and there, then put the brakes on and stop dead. Wash your brushes and go on to the next job!

.....

HIGHLIGHTS AND LIGHT AWARENESS



Clouds respond to light in much the same way as a solid object might, so with every brush stroke, remember the light source, Like trees, clouds are not solid objects, but they do respond to light direction and colour as a solid object might. and the tops of these clouds are lit from the top right, matching the landscape below. Early morning and late evening clouds are illuminated from below as the sun approaches horizon.

.....

EXAMPLES



You can often see a good way with flat Fenland scenes, and they contrast well with big layered cloud layers. The underside of the cloud layers recede for miles without a contoured landscape to obstruct the view to far distance

.....



Wiltshire scene in progress, with a squall of cumulus clouds to the north, leaving clear summer skies above.

.....



Layered sky over the south coast, with very warm colour mix.

.....

At Missenden Abbey Modellers, we always try to include some sky work, and there's every reason to have a critical look at the contribution that it can make to your model. I hope this quick tour inspires you to have a go and try a few test sections.