



ISTOCK.COM

# Painting the scene

## A beginner's guide to tools and techniques

BY SEAN O'SKEA

IF THE THOUGHT OF painting your scenery makes you shudder, don't be ashamed. Many theatre educators have remarkably little training in scenic art. Most only get a few days of painting in an undergraduate stagecraft class. But scene painting is the final surface of your set. The paint is what the audience is actually going to see. Terrific carpentry and stagecraft can be made to look shabby under a clumsy paint job. The good news is, beginning scenic art has a gentle learning curve. It is an easy journey from "Which end of the brush do I hold?" to a competent paint job on your scenery or props. It's also nice to know that in our age of increasingly complicated and expensive

high-tech stagecraft, the tools and materials needed for good scenic art are within even the most limited budget.

If you are a beginner, this article will introduce you and your students to the basic information you need to greatly enhance your scenic art. With a few techniques at your command, you can stop the flat and boring "paint-by-numbers" approach and begin adding life and sparkle to your work. However, these tips will only be useful if you actually roll up your sleeves and try the techniques out for yourself. You can't expect your students to master painting fundamentals if you don't learn the skills yourself. And don't wait until a few days before opening night to get

started. Set aside some time to play and experiment with paint, when you have no pressure or worries about "messing it up," and you'll soon gain confidence and skills. Please visit my website, [www.oskea.com](http://www.oskea.com), for downloadable handouts that expand on the information in this article.

### The tools

#### ● PAINT

By far, professional scenic paint like that made by Rosco is the best choice for scene painting. Even Rosco's Off Broadway economy line outperforms house paint in texture, color saturation, and quality binders. If you can afford

it, get it. Unfortunately, at twenty to fifty dollars a gallon (depending on color), it can be out of the range of a lot of schools. If you do choose to use professional scene paint, find a distributor where you can pick up the paint yourself. Paint is heavy, and the shipping cost for a dozen gallons can be staggering. Some distributors may be willing to offer special rates for schools if you are buying in large quantities. Make sure you ask.

Don't worry if you can only afford hardware store house paint to start. The pigments in house paint will be of inferior quality, and you won't be able to get vividly saturated colors. Plus, you might have some unpleasant surprises if you start mixing colors. But you can still do a lot with an economy-brand house paint that often can be had for around fifteen dollars a gallon, usually regardless of color. Shop around: you may find a store that will offer you an educational discount. For class projects where the exact colors aren't important, you can use the paint most hardware stores sell (or give away!) when they have mismatched a color. These will typically be colors popular in house interiors, so you'll find a lot of off-whites and pastels, but these are fine to practice techniques.

When buying house paint it's best to buy flat-sheen paint. It's usually cheaper, shows pigment better, and it's a lot easier to make something glossy by adding a coat of shellac or polyurethane than trying to dull down a surface that should be flat.

You can also buy universal pigments in fluid form from a paint store and mix these into paint bases for your own colors. Quality scenic paint can also tint house paint. If you choose this route, be sure you understand the different levels of paint bases. Your store will have three or four bases (depending on the brand), starting with a white/pastel base. There will be a mid-tone base and then a deep or accent base. The white base has a lot of filler in it to give coverage to pastel colors. No amount of pigment poured into a pastel base is going to give you a rich, saturated color. Likewise, the lack of



These tools and brushes are all that you need to do most basic scenic painting techniques. Clockwise, from left: a hand-held garden sprayer; a sea sponge; a respirator; a few watercolor brushes; a one-inch Purdy sash-brush; a four-inch hardware-store brush; and a selection of china-bristle "chip brushes."

filler in the deep base won't allow for an opaque pastel color.

In short, the darker or more saturated the color, the deeper the base paint needs to be. Of course, no matter what paint brand you choose, be sure you are working with water-based latex acrylic paints. Oil paint is great for fine art, but its very long drying time, nasty clean-up, and strong fumes make it a bad choice for theatre sets.

### ● BRUSHES

A professional scene shop might have dozens of different types of brushes, but for a school shop, four or five basic brushes can accomplish a lot. All of these brushes can be found in hardware or paint stores.

China-bristle "chip brushes" are perfectly good for many basic scenic painting applications. They have the huge advantage of being very cheap, so you can afford a lot of brushes for a class full of students, and if (as happens with students) brushes are not cleaned properly, they can be discarded and replaced without breaking your budget. A one-inch chip brush will likely cost about fifty cents. Buying in bulk makes them even cheaper. Even two-inch and three-inch brushes will only cost a dollar or two.

It's a good idea to have a few better-quality brushes. Purdy makes a wide range of readily available brushes. Depending on the bristle and the width,

they range in price from a few dollars to around twenty or thirty dollars. A one-inch brush from Purdy holds a great deal of paint and discharges it very smoothly, making it an excellent, economical choice for lining, lettering, or any place where a sharp edge is desirable.

You will also need some big brushes to apply large quantities of paint fast. The best choice would be a three- or four-inch-wide Purdy or other quality nylon bristle brush. Unfortunately, these brushes can cost as much as sixty dollars. Luckily, the job of laying-in lots of paint doesn't require a high-quality brush. Many hardware store brands are acceptable for this job. You simply need a sturdy, wide brush that holds a lot of paint. It's a good idea to invest in several large brushes so you can have lots of painters working. The hardware store brand will be around twenty dollars.

### ● ROLLERS

Nothing beats a well maintained and properly employed roller for getting a lot of paint onto a lot of surface fast. Rollers have distinct pros and cons, but for base coating a floor or back painting scenery, it's hard to beat. You can also achieve a number of quick textures and effects with different covers.

### ● SPONGES

A few good softball-sized sea sponges are essential. The whole category of sponging techniques requires them.

They can also be used with stencils. Find natural sea-sponges, as synthetic sponges just don't give the same results. Sea-sponges have gotten pretty expensive recently (ten dollars or more for a good-sized sponge), but well maintained they can last for years.

### ● SPRAYERS

Most scene shops will have a number of paint sprayers. Pneumatic sprayers are actually fairly affordable if you already have a compressor. If not, you can get a lot out of garden sprayers like those originally made by the Hudson Company. These are air-tight canisters with a hand pump to pressurize the paint. You can achieve a number of quick and easy spray effects. Sprayers are perfect for painting objects with a lot of surface area—like louvered shutters, for example. Most have the ability to adjust the size of the droplets from a fine mist to a pattern resembling a spattering technique.

Excellent preparation and clean-up is essential for effective sprayer use. Paint destined for the sprayer must be very thin—no thicker than cream. The thinned paint must pass through a fine sieve to catch any bits that would clog the equipment. Finally the sprayer must be absolutely cleaned out every time. Any paint left in the hoses or nozzle will dry and clog the sprayer. Disassemble and wash thoroughly. Then run clean water through the sprayer until you see no trace of paint.

When spraying water-based paint from a garden sprayer, especially if the spray is not too fine, a paper dust-mask will offer some protection. But be aware, when using much more powerful pneumatic sprayers, or worst of all, aerosol-spray paint, you should always wear a respirator. Spray paint is fast and fun and your students are going to like using it, but it's also very toxic. Even with the respirator, use sprayers in a booth or outside, if possible. If your school has a rule against using respirators (and some do), get some N95 particulate masks from 3M. These are paper masks, but they have a respirator valve. Do not use plain dust masks when using spray-paint: they offer

no protection at all from vapors and fumes.

With the brushes and tools described thus far you can begin to apply nearly all the basic scene painting techniques. There are plenty of other tools even a shop with a tight budget can afford. For more information, check out the Brush Basics handout on my website.

### ● CLEANING BRUSHES AND ROLLERS

After making the investment in quality tools, you must learn to maintain them. For brushes and rollers that means carefully cleaning and storing after each use. To start, shake or comb off excess paint into your slop bucket. Run water over the brush while gently flexing the bristles in your hand. You may use a steel comb but do not use a wire brush on a brush you hope to use again. Once the water is running clear (if water the color of the paint is still running out of the brush, it still has paint in it), dip the brush in soapy water and swish it around a bit. Then rinse the brush again. Shake out excess water and gently shape the bristles back into order with your hand. Hang up the brush or lay it flat. Never rest a wet brush on its bristles.

To clean a roller, scrape off the excess paint into your slop bucket with a scraper (many have round notches in the blade perfect for this job). Submerge the roller in a bucket of water and vigorously shake. Run the roller under the sink until the water runs clear. A "bicycle pump"-style centrifugal roller cleaner is worth the investment. Use it to wring out excess water when you're done washing. Find a way to let them dry with no part of the fuzz touching anything. Hang them on a nail or on a string through the middle. Standing them on end will create a hard ridge on the end. Any place where the wet fuzz touches as it dries will dry matted in that spot and can leave unwanted patterns next time you use the roller.

### Basic techniques

If you decided to bake a cake and pulled down a cookbook, you would

never find a recipe that read: "Step one: bake cake." Instead there would be instructions on sifting flour, creaming butter, folding egg whites, etc. Scene painting is the same way. The most elaborate paint treatments are all sophisticated combinations of a few dozen or so basic techniques. The most useful are also some of the easiest to learn. Below are the first six you and your students should learn.

### ● APPLYING PAINT

I will frequently assign first-time paint crew students a base-coat project, a simple "Here, take this and paint that." I'll come back later and see the student halfway through the job they should have finished fifteen minutes earlier. Then I realize I hadn't taught the student how to paint yet.

A couple of simple things can make painting much more efficient. But like learning how to focus a light or drive a screw, even the basics must be taught. First of all, almost all paint can be thinned. Not only does thinner paint go on easier, it also stretches the paint. I once presented students with a new five-gallon bucket of black and asked them to paint the stage floor after strike. A bit later they came to find me. When I asked if they were finished, they said, no, they had run out of paint. I had intended that bucket to last the whole term.

By simply adding water to acrylic-based paint, not only do you stretch the paint considerably, but the paint flows better—like ink from a fountain pen—quickly filling wood grain and cracks, and significantly limiting the number of trips back to the bucket to recharge your brush. Furthermore, the wonderful world of glazing techniques (more on that soon) depends on thinned paint. High quality scenic paints can be diluted as much as a one-part-paint-to-three-parts-water ratio and still perform, but even house paint can be thinned significantly.

Next, make sure your students know to dip the brush in half-way to two-thirds up the bristles, knock the brush on the inside of the can (don't scrape across the rim) to shake off excess, and then start in the middle of the



Above and top right: Scumbling begins by painting a few patches of the colors you are blending and whisking them toward each other. At right, the blended colors soon produce a handsome, organic-looking blend of the two colors, with soft edges but both original colors still discernable. Lower right: An example of spattering with thin black and brown paints. By changing the size, color, opacity, and density of dots you can achieve countless variations.

object being painted, working outward towards the edge. When painting a flat for example, students might take a fully charged brush and plop it right on the edge of the flat and then squeegee off a whole load of runs down the side of the flat, making a mess and wasting paint and time.

Finally, painting is hard work. It takes vigorous brushstrokes to move a lot of paint efficiently. If your students are languorously dabbing the surface with the brush, it's going to take forever and the result will be streaky and lumpy.

Here are six specific techniques, most of which are illustrated in photographs on pages xx and xx.

### ● SCUMBLING

Scumbling is a good place to start practicing your painting skills. The terms scumble, wet blend, and color wash are often used interchangeably, though there are distinctions. Don't worry about differences now—just start with two (or more) colors of paint on a dry basecoat.

Use a wide, soft brush and daub blobs of each color in a random pattern over the surface. Work in small

batches to keep the paint wet. Then gently but vigorously work the paint on the surface in a “whisk-broom” cross-hatch fashion.

When two colors meet, blend them and soften their edges but do not overwork and mix the colors to a completely new color. Beginners often make the mistake of applying too much paint so that the blending just mixes to a third color and the cloudy, patchy bits of the original colors are overrun.

Scumbling takes a little practice but it is an easy technique that is the base for literally thousands of scenic art effects and faux finishes. Next time you need faux concrete or flagstone, try a scumble of black and white instead of flat gray. Encourage your students to see how many natural surfaces can be suggested with just a scumble. Have them try to recreate different kinds of stone, old plaster walls, hazy skies, and even simple marbles. Even a painted wall in a realistic interior can benefit from a scumble. Instead of a flat color, try scumbling one value higher and one shade lower than the target color. You'll get a richer, deeper, more dramatic effect.

### ● SPATTERING

Spattering (not splattering, although that happens) is an excellent way to quickly add tonality or texture over large areas. Like sponging, vastly different results can be achieved by varying viscosity, angle, and distance. Simply dip the tips of the bristles of a flat, wide brush into the paint, and snap your wrist so that the brush comes to a stop roughly parallel with the surface being painted.

A wet brush can be allowed to gently drip onto the surface or it can be slapped against your hand to violently fling paint at the surface. A dryer brush shaken vigorously near the surface typically results in finer dots.

On the other extreme, a wet brush with thin paint shaken from a distance can result in wild Jackson Pollock-like splats. Let your students experiment so they understand how to achieve different effects. Spattering is extremely useful for suggesting a variety of natural surfaces, from sand to granite.

Spattering a fine spray of contrasting or complementary colors to the basic field color is an excellent way to add richness and depth to scenery. Work



Top left: A sea sponge is used to apply black and green paint. Top right: the tips of the brush are used in an up and down daubing motion to stamp a controlled pattern of dots. The results are similar to spattering or sponging but are much more controlled. Lower right: The dark diagonal strip at the top of this image is an example of a glaze. Here a brush charged with thin black paint was pulled across the already dry brown paint, producing a translucent, water-color quality. The brown lines in the middle are an example of dry brushing. Lower left: A simple two-part paper stencil. Here the card stock was covered with clear packing tape before cutting out the pattern.

with the lighting designer to choose colors similar to the gel colors selected. When tinted light is directed onto a surface with a similar-colored spatter, the dots of paint will reflect the light and create a subtle shimmer effect that can make scenery pop beautifully.

A dirty water spatter is an excellent way to quickly “age” freshly painted scenery. Simply spatter the surface with an extremely diluted grey or brown. It will be hardly perceptible when it dries but the surface won’t have that freshly painted look.

### ● DRY BRUSHING

Dry brushing is another somewhat misleading term that can refer to more than one technique. Dry brushing can mean simply using a stiff-bristled brush with a small amount of thick paint to drag a pattern of parallel lines across a surface. But the term can also refer to the process of allowing a base coat to dry and then applying a glaze (a very watery coat) and dragging a clean, dry brush through the glaze, creating a grain and allowing portions of the base coat to show through.

Some amazingly vivid and fast wood grain effects can be created with the right colors and a good dragging or dry brushing technique. The dragging tool doesn’t have to be a brush. Try torn cardboard, burlap, sponges, even fingers and see what results you get.

### ● STENCILS

Everyone is familiar with stencils, but you may not know how wonderfully creative you can get with your own stencils. It’s a good idea to consider making a stencil anytime you need to paint a lot of one thing: a brick wall, a wallpaper pattern, paving stones, or simply a decorative motif you would like to repeat in multiple places on the set.

Stencils can be cut out of countless materials. The choice of material depends on the complexity of the design and how much use it will get. A simple embellishment that will only be repeated a few times can be made of just about anything, even plain card stock. Of course you can purchase pre-cut stencils at a craft store, but more often than not you’ll want to create your own.

When cutting out a stencil, place it on something soft such as a piece of Styrofoam. That way you can use the whole knife blade, not just the very tip. It’s so much easier. Use sprayers, stippling brushes, or sponges to apply paint through stencils.

Plastic “For Rent”-type signs make excellent stencil stock, as does overhead projection film. Kitchen cutting mats made of polyethylene are also inexpensive, easy to cut, and virtually indestructible. Some even have the advantage of being translucent enough to trace from an original placed under the mat.

Try generating an image in a computer drawing program and printing it on cardstock, then cut out the pattern with a craft knife and paint both sides of the paper with shellac. These paper stencils are surprisingly durable. They’re easy to make, and extra copies can be generated so multiple artists can work at one time. You can even use sturdy craft glue to fasten multiple sheets together before cutting and shellacking to make larger stencils. Detailed or fragile stencils or stencils with islands of negative

## Online scenic painting resources

There are a lot of online resources to help you refine your painting skills. My own website offers downloads of the handouts referred to in this article ([www.oskea.com/Downloads.html](http://www.oskea.com/Downloads.html)). I've found these four company websites particularly useful.

**Dick Blick** has a handy PDF chart on brush shapes, sizes, and materials. [www.dickblick.com/info/brushshape](http://www.dickblick.com/info/brushshape)

**Purdy Brushes** features a series of short videos demonstrating basic brush use and care. [www.purdycorp.com](http://www.purdycorp.com)

**Rosco Laboratories** "Scenic Products" includes a series of step-by-step projects on creating all kinds of faux surfaces. [www.rosco.com/technotes/index.asp](http://www.rosco.com/technotes/index.asp)

**Cobalt Studio's** page offers information on their Teachers Training Scene Painting course and other more advanced seminars and workshops. [www.cobaltstudios.net/training/programindex.html#edu/acts/](http://www.cobaltstudios.net/training/programindex.html#edu/acts/)

—S.O.

space can be glued to fine netting and then attached to a wood frame. I'll talk about stencils in more detail in a future article.

### ● GLAZING

Glazing has already been mentioned, but it's an important technique in its own right. Once you're comfortable working with glazes you'll wonder what you ever did without them. A glaze is any thin, translucent coat of paint applied to a dry undercoat so the undercoat is still perceptible under the glaze. Glazes are great for distressing. Your play is set in an old, run-down boarding house? Walk around the set with a bucket of very thin dark brown paint and sea-sponge and daub high-traffic surfaces: around doorknobs, switches, along baseboards, below windows, etc. Suddenly your fresh paint job looks twenty years old. During tech you realize your floor treatment is too bright? No worries—just go over it with a darker glaze to tone it down.

Glazes are also an essential part of other techniques like the dry-brush drag described above. Rag-rolling is a good glazing technique to start with. To do it, lay down a glaze and use a bunched-up dry, clean rag to lift off portions of the paint.

Another glazing technique, frottage, is a fancy name for pressing sheets of newspaper or fabric onto a wet glaze and then lifting it off to create a quick subtle patterned effect.

Finally, explore what you can do with highlight and shadow. You can create amazing 3-D effects with *trompe l'oeil* techniques, but even something

as simple as a cast shadow (something I'll explain in a future article) can add enormous depth to your sets.

Obviously, professional scenic artists have enormous skill, talent, and years of training. But there's no reason you and your students can't improve the scenic art on your very next set by beginning to master the simple techniques like those described here.

In the next issue of this journal we'll take on a classroom paint project that will use a number of these skills.

In the meantime, for more information on the tools and techniques we've reviewed, go to the Basic Techniques link on my website. If you're interested in more hands-on help, check to see if your local college or theatre offers any sort of scene painting workshops. EdTA and the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) sometime offer tech theatre training at their conferences. There are other options as well: Cobalt Studios in upstate New York, for example, has a week-long summer session designed specifically for teachers who want to improve their scenic art skills, no prior experience required.

But by far, the best thing you can do is to start playing with paint. See you in the winter issue. Happy painting.

*Sean O'Skea is an associate professor of design in Southern Oregon University's Department of Theatre. He teaches a course in scene painting for teachers at Cobalt Studios. Over fifteen years, he's created dozens of scenic and lighting designs at professional theatres throughout the country.*

Originally published in *Dramatics* magazine. More info: [Schooltheatre.org](http://Schooltheatre.org)