Building your own diorama

In the latest of the ‘Making Dioramas’ series James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, gives you advice on building a diorama from scratch.

First, let’s get over some mental obstacles to making your own diorama.

“Dioramas are complicated and involve countless hours of work.” False. You can spend as much or as little time as you like and still have a fine product.

“Paints and glues are messy and smell bad and cleanup is a problem.” Not any more. Water-based products eliminate those concerns.

“Topographical materials are expensive and hard to come by.” All are readily available at model railroad shops and some you’ll even find for free in your own backyard.

Next, you need to agree that you will give it a try – the biggest obstacle to making your figures look terrific in a diorama is being intimidated by the prospect of not creating an award-winning masterpiece the first time.

So, what we are going to do is to create a simple yet effective diorama in less than one hour (not counting drying time for the surface treatments)

Select a set or sets from your collection and visualize a scene – German infantry attacking a US infantry stronghold, or Confederates charging a Union encampment, for example. Measure out a display area – for your first effort do not make it too big, no more than 20 inches by 20 inches.

From your local craft store, get a one-inch thick piece of Styrofoam/Polystyrene, which you can cut to your chosen dimensions with any kitchen knife. Styrofoam/Polystyrene is inexpensive, lightweight and easy to work with. The only downside is that it’s full of air holes, which of course is why it is so lightweight.

Using a small rasp, contour the Styrofoam/Polystyrene for sunken roadways and streams. A tip: try to compose the diorama so that it isn’t straight-on, but rather at an angle. Or introduce a curve or an asymmetrical element. This makes the diorama more interesting and true to life.

For outcroppings and hills, do the reverse – glue on additional Styrofoam using a water-soluble white glue. After the glue sets, contour the hills with your rasp.

Next, from your local paint store, get a gallon (or outside the US this is more likely to be one or two litres) of white latex sand-textured ceiling
3. Topographical materials are applied with white glue to the base.

4. Various W. Britain scenic accessory pieces are put in place.

Paint. In the US it only comes in gallons (about $15), but will keep for years. Paint the Styrofoam/Poly styrene base with it to seal the air pores and leave a slightly textured surface. Allow a drying time of about two hours at this stage.

Using water-based latex paint—oil-based paints will ‘eat’ into the Styrofoam—paint the grass areas green and the road bed brown. This is an essential step. Even though you will apply topographical materials, having this colored base will camouflage any gaps or imperfections.

After about two hours to allow the paint to dry, brush the surface with white glue and sprinkle on an appropriate color/texture topographical material, available from model railroad shops.

To roughen the terrain, use twigs, pebbles and stones from your garden—vermiculite from the potting shed is ideal. Miniature trees, also available from model shops, will add to the diorama, and a scenic background—old calendars are one source—finishes off the display. Add the figures, sit back and enjoy what you have created.

Congratulations! You’ve done it!

5. The figures are positioned and a scenic background completes the diorama ‘Virginians to the Front’ (Background courtesy of JC Miniatures)

NOTE FOR US READERS:
For the base of your display, you can also use pink or blue Styrofoam insulation board, available at various building supply stores. This has no air holes, so you can eliminate the need to seal it with white latex sand paint. Be sure not to mistakenly purchase white foam or ‘beadboard,’ which is a problem to cut unless you use a hot wire foam cutter.