

Mikes Modelling Guides

Tutorial 3

Planning a project:

How to plan a project focusing on layout and composition related to single figures, vignettes and small dioramas

Introduction:

During the course of this tutorial we will be examining the theory of design and composition related to figure modeling, and the procedures explained apply to figures of any scale. I have included some images of Mithrils set piece vignettes to illustrate how this theory is put into practice and incorporated into finished models. I would also suggest you set your alarm clock as you will probably fall 'fast asleep, into the land of nod' whilst trying to digest this lot.

Of all the steps in any type of modeling planning is most important and most frequently overlooked. Most projects that miss the mark usually do so because of critical planning errors before construction is even begun. Creative thinking is another factor that is not fully appreciated and can also lead to poor results. The first factor we need decide upon is what are we going to build and what are the options. There are four types of model we can choose from and the basic idea you have in mind will fit into one or the other.

Single figures:

These are the most common of the four types, it simply means a single foot or a single mounted figure. This can be a straightforward 'stock item' or a 'converted figure' painted and mounted on a scenic base. Although this is figure modelling in its simplest form there is still ample room for creative thinking.

Vignette:

These are the small 'set piece' models which is usually made up of two or three figures. In this type of model not a great deal in the way of structural detail would be incorporated into the piece, maybe just a small wall, gateway or natural scenic feature, would be enough to set off the model. If possible try to tell a story, or capture a moment in time. There is however a very thin dividing line between a vignette and a diorama and it is not uncommon to see more than 3 figures and some additional components featuring in this category. The base area of this type of model should not really exceed 150 x 100mm, otherwise the overall effect will be lost if the figures are too spread out.

Plaquette:

This word is rarely used these days, but about 3000 years ago when I was just 15 and the best looking guy at Rivendell it was used as dividing line between a vignette and a diorama. A Plaquette usually contains between three and six figures, affixed to a

single base. It could depict a group of Ork's discussing the days slaughter and pillaging strategy, or a group of Hobbit lads having a good time with Rosie Cotton. In addition this type of model would be much improved by the inclusion of some scenic structure.

Diorama:

Now we come onto the bigger piece, the larger diorama with anything up to twenty figures and even more in some cases. This could be the courtyard of the Green Dragon with Rosie and the lads, or the inside or outside of a structure at Rivendell with Gandalf, Elrond, Strider and others. If you are to make a large diorama the 32mm scale of Mithril Figures is ideal simply as the finished piece will not be too big. Designing in a structure or building into a diorama opens up a whole new level of model making.

The planning Process:

Single figures more or less plan themselves but it does no harm giving a little thought on how you intend to display the figure on its base. If you intend to make or add elements such as structures or equipment these notes will be useful. You can also plan ahead with regard to the ground work for your figure and the name plate.

If we are looking towards building a diorama or vignette then process of planning is important. so for the remainder of this tutorial we will concentrate on these types of projects to illustrate some methods and techniques. With these type of models you must make sure that the basic concept of your piece is well thought out and that the way you intend to carry it through is practical and sound. Effective planning is the foundation on which your model will be built and whatever time you devote to ensuring the strength of that foundation is time well spent.

All vignettes and dioramas begin with an idea. How do you find an idea? Well, the simple answer to this question is 'you think of one'. If you have read the books or seen the films there really is no shortage of subject matter on which to base a project. The descriptions of scenarios in the books are well written and it only takes a little imagination to build up an idea. Tolkien calendars are published each year and can provide you with a wealth of pictorial renderings. When the movies were released a number of books were published at the same time, these contain many superb colour photographs and are another source for ideas. After the final movie came to the big screen a trio of books were published under the collective title of 'The Art of the Lord of the Rings'. Each book covers one of the three movies and contains everything you could possibly want for this sort of work, original drawings and paintings including, costumes, sets, buildings, weapons, armour characters and monsters, are all there. These books are not cheap but a 'must have' to all Tolkien fans, and of course there is your own built in main frame computer under your trendy haircut. So, if you are remotely like me a 'Tolkien Freak' there should be little trouble coming up with ideas. Finally, When searching for ideas, try to come up with something that shows your subject "doing its thing," performing a task, talking, fighting or some activity that will convey a story to the viewer. But, if at the end of the day there is still a big black void in you brain instead of even a tiny wisp of an idea, then I

would recommend you cease perusing this hobby forthwith and try your hand at the Mordor scrabble championships!!!!

Choosing Figures:

The figures that you will use for your model will be by a process of either 'you choosing the figures', or the 'figures choosing you', and very likely a bit of both. Some Mithril figures go together naturally and others will need a little alteration to fit into your theme or scenario. It has to be said that the more complex a project the more work you will have to do in order to get the figures to fit. For your first project I would certainly advise 'keep it simple'. There are no hard and fast rules in choosing figures for vignettes it's really down to you and a bit of common sense. Selecting stock figures that will display well together is the easiest option and some very pleasing models can be made this way. The next step is 'conversion work' Altering the stock figure to meet you requirements is not as difficult as it may seem because even the slightest alteration will most likely give you the result needed for your composition. 'Conversion Work' is a subject in it's on right and I would refer you to Tutorial 4 for information on this topic.

Layout and Composition:

Once you have decided what you intend to create the next step is working out how and where to position your figures and what will they look like in a three-dimensional format. The placement of figures and other elements in a diorama or vignette has to be right otherwise the overall composition will not work. We therefore need to understand the basic theory of design related to what we are going to build.

Layout and composition involve recognizing the important features of the subject and arranging the elements of the diorama in a way that sets them off best. They are the process by which we translate our abstract idea into physical reality.

Composition is determining the overall design of the diorama, while layout is arranging various parts to fit that design. In practice, all this means nothing more than shuffling the pieces around until things look right. There are, however, ways which will help and simplify these steps. The purpose of composition is to arrange the elements of the diorama so that they direct the viewer's eye smoothly from one part of the design to the next, ensuring that he/she sees everything and sees the important things first. If your diorama is accurately designed, this first glance should be enough to tell him/her what is going on. If you study Mithril's vignette 'The Ringwraith' we can see at a glance that the Hobbits are hiding from the Ringwraith. This is a very simple use of composition. Another example is in the piece 'Bilbo Surrenders he Ring' here the viewer can see immediately that the smaller figure is giving or showing something to the larger figure. As Tolkien Freaks we will know immediately what is going on but the casual observer will need to relate the wizard to the small figure and the whole scene to the name plate before realizing what is going on. This again is simple but good composition. If there is a larger number of figures and elements then the composition becomes more difficult but the process is the same.

The layout of a group of figures and elements is the actual positioning of items on the base. Here again amongst all the theory it's a case of 'if it looks right then it is right'. However a basic understanding of layout certainly is helpful otherwise you could end

up in a situation resembling putting a jigsaw together without a complete picture as a guide. Your first concern when laying out your pieces for a group or diorama is to think your idea through, item by item. Make sure every figure and accessory fits comfortably without conflicting with the central theme. There should be a logical reason for everything in the model being where it is and doing what it is doing. Another factor to consider is the 'natural look' regimented figures placed here and there bare no resemblance to real life. Our group of Hobbits having a good time with Rosie Cotton would look stupid all standing in a nice neat row. Placing and posing figures are your strongest allies in achieving your aim. Pay close attention to where your figures are looking, pointing, or moving. Here again these Hobbit lads will not be standing motionless they will be moving, pointing, talking discussing how fit Rosie looks in her new dress. Viewers will instinctively glance in the same directions as the figures and you can use this to great effect. If you arrange the figures in your scene properly you can direct a viewer's eye from one point to the other, especially to Rosie Cotton in her new dress.

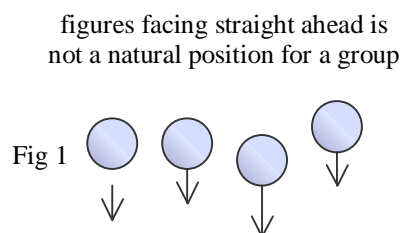
Balance and Symmetry

Another consideration in laying out your figures is balance and symmetry which has a lot to do with visual appeal. What balance means in a nutshell is this: every diorama has a right side, a left side, and a center, and there should be something to engage the viewer's attention in each part. If you look upon your diorama as a set of weighing scales, the weight of visual attractions on one side should be about equal to the weight on the other. If you have a big event on one side, you need a couple of smaller events on the other side to balance it out. It is important to understand that balance does not mean symmetry. In fact, you should go out of your way to avoid symmetry except where it occurs in real life. (see Fig 2 below) Finally, try to avoid any element in your diorama positioned parallel to the edge of the base, all this will do is add another unnatural factor to your model.

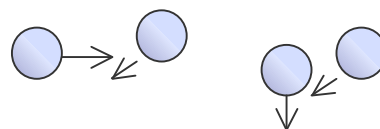
Positioning:

- 1 I would advise that all figures should be positioned on the base either facing or side on to the viewer.

I appreciate that in some scenarios this will be very difficult, but we must keep in mind that the viewer would prefer to see the front of a figure rather than the back. This does not mean that figures should all be standing in a row with eyes front, which will present a totally unnatural stance. Turning the figure so that it is at an angle to the viewer is one way to keep within the rule, a sideways profile is another option. Fig.1



Only one figure in this group is facing forward, the others are at angle to the viewer. Both groups here could be presented as being in conversation even though they are not fully facing each other.



An example of a sideways profile can be seen in Mithril's vignette 'Bilbo Surrenders the Ring' here both figures are roughly sideways on to the viewer. Also it will be noticed that the tall figure of Gandalf is balanced out by a short Bilbo standing by a small table. The table gives added weight to the right hand side of the composition.

2 A group of figures and components should present a balanced composition:

Here we need to address the difference between 'Balance and Symmetry'. A symmetrical composition means a repetition of two exactly similar parts facing each other either side of central point. Balance on the other hand means two different components either side of a central point. fig 2

A symmetrical composition in a group looks artificial and contrived as it rarely occurs in real life

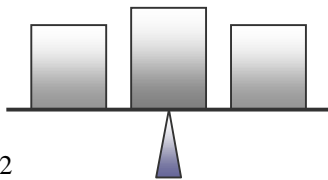
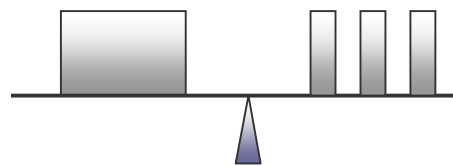


Fig 2

A balanced is desirable in a group as it presents a more natural composition and conveys to the viewer a better sense of reality

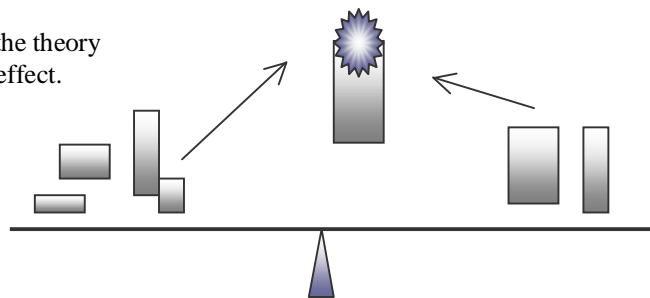


3 A group of figures and components that has a central prominent character should have an element of focus:

The groups to the right and left draw the eye onto the central prominent figure. Also the central figure is not exactly in the middle of the scene but slightly to the right giving the smaller of the side groups a little more prominence. Fig 3

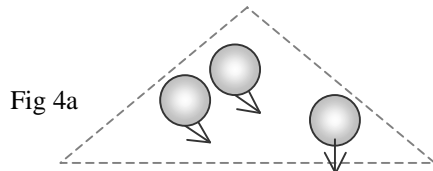
This composition draws together the theory of balance and focus to good effect.

Fig 3

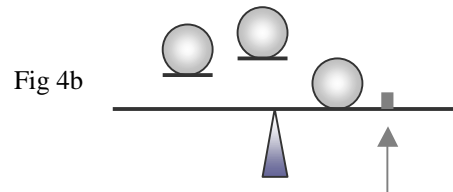


- 4 A vignette that has 3 figures with one being a prominent central character could use a layout in a triangular shape. Fig 4a The central character could also be placed in an elevated position to give figure extra weight. Fig 4b These are probably the nearest symmetrical layout examples you are likely to see.

This layout has been given added interest by suggesting that the group is looking at something off to the right



This layout places the characters at different heights. The higher the figure the greater the weight.



A small item here will help to address the balance of the composition

One final point, it is always good practice when planning the positioning of your model on the base, is never to have any element of your model parallel with the edges. You want to maintain an illusion of a natural look to give the impression the groundwork extends beyond the confines of your base. If any element in your diorama is parallel to the edge, it convinces the viewer that the scene was constructed to fit the base, rather than the base made to fit around the scene.

Bits and Pieces:

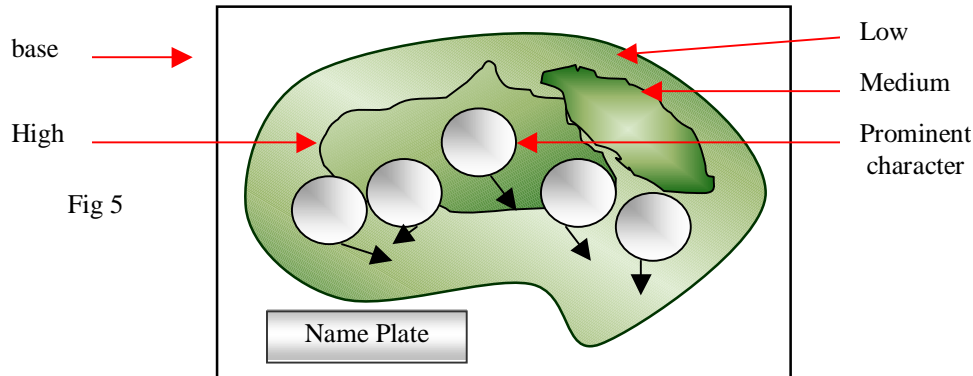
Another visual consideration when laying out your diorama is what to do with 'dead space' open ground with nothing on it. You don't want to leave it empty, but don't overfill it, either. Put in just enough to keep your viewer's eye moving smoothly over the scene from one detail to the next. It doesn't take much to fill dead space; leaves on the ground or vegetation are often enough. Other convenient devices are small shrubs, branches and twigs, irregularities in the ground. And small animals can also be useful. When laying out these minor details, be careful that their arrangement does not appear arranged. Make sure your and fallen branches, stones etc are strewn about in a careless manner. Avoid even spacing and parallel alignments. This is harder than it sounds as it often requires a conscious effort to be random.

Bringing it all together:

Now that the theory lessons are over how do we bring it all together ready to start. Assuming that all your figures are bought and your idea is now clear in your mind it is a case of deciding what ground work is needed, where your figures will be positioned, and the size of the base.

This is the point where I can no longer give you any more advice other than place your figures on a piece of paper or card and fiddle about until you are happy with the composition. If you want to have your figures at different levels then use 'Blue Tack'

to give them the required elevation. Once all the fiddling is done **fix the composition in your mind** mark the positions on the paper and draw around the figures to establish the size of your ground work and the base. Fig 5



Bases and Name Plates:

There is a lot we can do to bases and name plates to make them look different and contribute to the overall effect of your model. I don't want to go in to detail here as this subject is discussed fully in Tutorial 3.

The following pages of this tutorial will show you how all this theory is put into practice:

Examples of design and composition:

The following pages illustrate some of the fine set piece vignettes produced by the Mithril team of artists. I am sure that by now you will have realized that planning a model is not a science but more of an artistic license guided by a few do's and don'ts. Here I will try to illustrate some of the theory as applied to these beautiful set pieces.

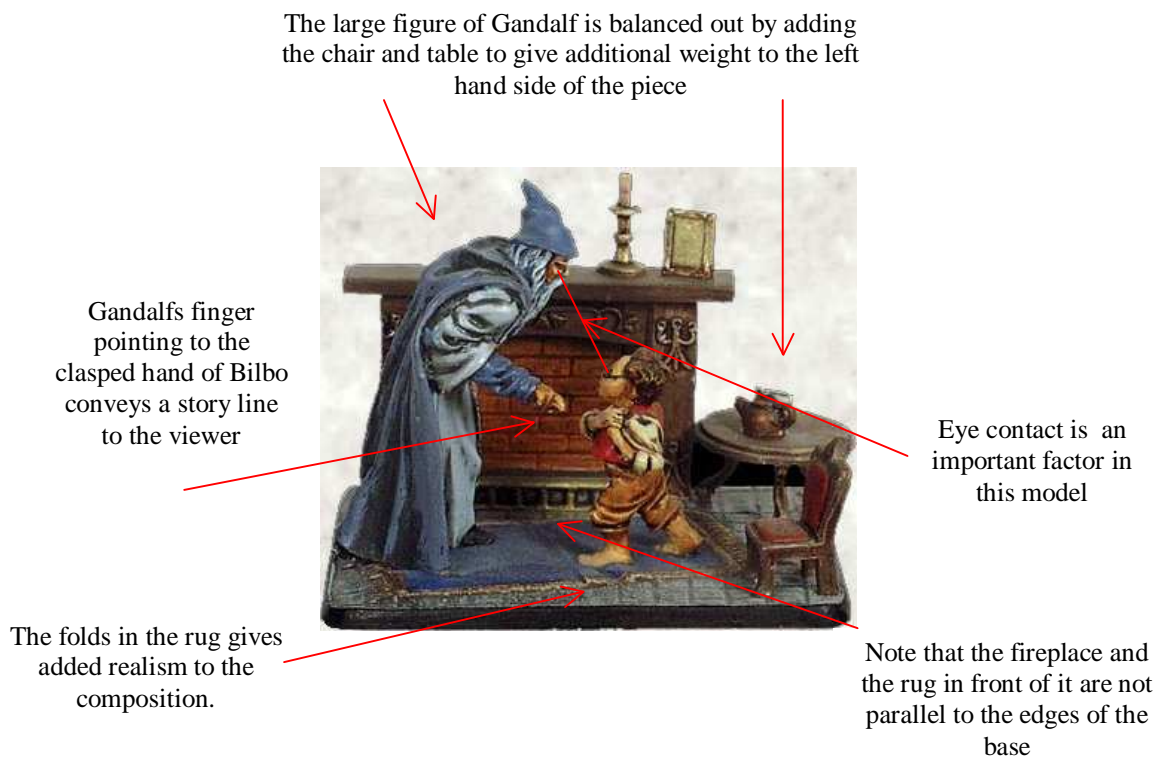
The Swan Knights:

A fine example of Triangular composition as illustrated in Fig 4a



Bilbo Surrenders the Ring:

In this piece we see an example of a well balanced composition as illustrated in Fig 3.



Gildor Inglorion:

This is a good idea for a vignette but the Layout and Composition could be improved by rotating the whole scene round to the right. This would solve the problem of the Hobbit characters having their backs to the viewer.

**Tom Bombadil and Goldberry**

This composition is slightly over weighted to the left but it still works because the lighter colours of Goldberry and her white dress draws the eye to the left, also the bowls on the floor tie the whole scene together.



Bilbos Birthday Party:

Here are a selection of Mithril Hobbit figures that could be combined to make a diorama of Bilbo's Eleventy first birthday party. The more figures you have for a project the better the final piece will be. We could double the number by making some slight alterations to a second set of figures and a different paint scheme. A figure of Gandalf could be added along with extra items such as barrels, stools, tables, animals, food items, shrubs and trees etc would all contribute to the overall effect of the finished piece. Most of these extra bits can be bought from any good war game's suppliers but be aware of the scale of these items compared to the height of the Hobbits. 15mm scale would be best suited to this project.

So now it is over to you to put the theory into practice:

Think > Plan > Compose > layout > Draw > Fix > Start Work.



Conclusion

After all this theory you might just want to give up the idea, but don't despair because by just 'fiddling around with the pieces', rearranging them is in fact putting into practice the basic theory. Many of the ideas we've discussed here may well be things you have been doing all along without being aware of them. If you are just starting out, you can use this tutorial as a checklist, but as you gain experience, let your instinct and your eye be the ultimate judge. Then, if something doesn't look quite right, the principles outlined here may help you correct it.

Above all, be patient you must have your idea thoroughly worked out, especially if you are planning a large set piece diorama. Moving on to construction with out some very basic planning will only lead to disappointment. When the base size, design and dimensions, figure location, poses and positioning are all firmly established in your mind, Then you are ready to start building.

If you are still awake at this point you will be able to decide if this advice is interesting and helpful or the ratings and ravings of Golum having a bad day. For my part I hope this tutorial will enhance your knowledge and skills and give you encouragement to make the most of Mithril Miniatures.

If you want to expand on what has been written here I would get hold of a copy of 'How to Build Dioramas' by Sheperd Paine. Published by Klambach this book contains a wealth of information by one of the worlds leading modelers.

And finally, if your decision is less than positive then I would suggest that you get your self down to the Green Dragon and have a drink or two with the Hobbit lads and Rosie Cotton.

If you have any comments or questions related to the contents of this tutorial you can e-mail at mike@bunn955.wanado.co.uk and I will do my best to answer your queries and provide further guidance.

Michael A Bunn 2006