

Mithril Modelling Guides

Michael A Bunn 2006

Tutorial 3

Bases and scenic effects part 1

Display Bases and Materials

Introduction

Much has been written about preparing and mounting figures onto a scenic base to display a finished piece, yet as I attend exhibitions and competitions I still get the feeling that some modellers and painters seem to look upon a base as an afterthought. This is a bit disappointing because a well-prepared base and groundwork are as important to a figure as a frame is to an artist's picture. As we discussed in tutorial 2 (Planning a Project) the theory of composition and balance is essential if we are to produce a finished piece that is pleasing to the eye. The same has to be said of the base or plinth on which the finished model is to be displayed. I suppose it can be argued that when working in smaller scales we have to be careful not to overpower the figures with elaborate groundwork or perhaps there is a reluctance to spend too much time with the finishing touches. I have over the years worked with all scales of figures and I have reached a point now where I feel that the much-maligned base should be viewed as an integral part of the whole.

As this is a hefty subject I have divided this tutorial it into 3 parts to be published one by one as follows:

Part 1 Display Bases and Materials:

- 1.1 Planning.
- 1.2 Types of display bases.
- 1.3 Sizing.
- 1.4 Modeling Clay and Epoxy putty.
- 1.5 Manufactured Materials.
- 1.6 Natural Materials.
- 1.7 Other useful materials.
- 1.8 Introduction to part 2

Part 2 Methods and Techniques:

- 2.1 Layering Technique
- 2.2 The Foundation base and hard landscaping.
- 2.3 Painting the foundation base:
- 2.4 Lime stone effect.
- 2.5 Light sand stone effect.
- 2.6 Marrying the two bases.
- 2.7 Adding the undergrowth and plant life.
- 2.8 Painting the Foliage and vegetation.
- 2.9 Monochromatic colour schemes.
- 2.10 The nameplate.
- 2.11 Example of plinth type base ready for a figure of Aragorn.
- 2.12 Making the Aragorn nameplate.
- 2.13 Images of my work.

- 2.14 Conclusion.
- 2.15 Introduction to part 3.

Part 3 Making Name and Title Plates.

- 1.1 Introduction.
- 1.2 Using a computer for title plates.
- 1.3 Dry transfer lettering.
- 1.4 Engraved nameplates.
- 1.5 White on black.
- 1.6 Coloured backgrounds.
- 1.7 Old weathered parchment types.
- 1.8 Fitting the nameplate to the base.
- 1.9 Examples of computer generated title and nameplates.
- 1.10 Completed base for Aragorn figure
- 1.11 Making the Aragorn figure nameplate.
- 1.12 Examples.

Part 4 Building Natural Scenes and Structures:

- 3.1 Clear casting resins.
- 3.2 Water effects.
- 3.3 Preparing the foundation base for water effects.
- 3.4 Mixing and pouring the resin.
- 3.5 Running water.
- 3.6 Painting techniques for water effects.
- 3.7 Natural environments. Materials, techniques and procedures.
- 3.8 Buildings and structures. Materials, techniques and procedures
- 3.9 Observations on scale
- 3.10 Conclusion.

I have to say that making a scenic base is one aspect of our hobby that I really enjoy and in some cases my bases and ground work become projects in there own right and can take considerably longer that the figures themselves. In this tutorial I will try to outline the components, methods and techniques I use to achieve good finishing and presentation.

Note: The words **Display Base** refers to the actual wooden base.
The words **Foundation Base** refers to the area where the groundwork will be constructed.

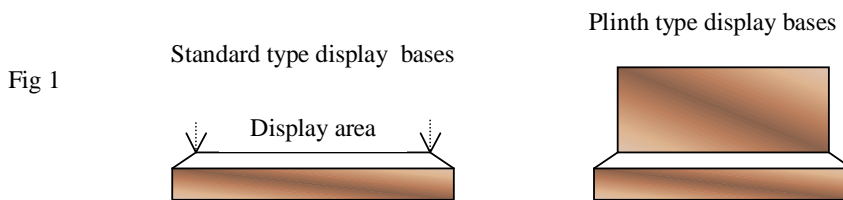
Planning:

I have always found that choosing and preparing the base and ground work for figures is best done right at the very beginning of a project and be should be the final factor in your planning procedures. (Tutorial 2) By completing the base and test fitting all the elements of a piece prior to painting eliminates the need to position freshly painted figures and avoids any accidental damage. Once this is done we can forget all the theory and get down to some practical model making. **Hooray!!!** The last lot was enough to put Melkor to sleep, chained or unchained.

The kind of display base to use and its size:

Deciding on the size of your display base will become apparent in the latter part of your planning (tutorial 2) but you will need to make a decision on what type of display base you are going to use. If you have some basic woodworking skills the option of making your own is available and it is a relatively easy process. However with the availability of good quality commercially produced bases at a reasonable price makes this option is by far the best. The company I use makes a wide variety of bases and plinths in a range of standard sizes that will suit all but the very largest diorama type models. The woods used for these products are best quality hardwoods such as Mahogany, Rosewood and Yew; they have a polished finish and green baize to the underside. The dimensions of bases are quoted as the height and the surface display area.

Display bases for figures are sold in a variety of shapes and as 'standard' or 'plinth' type. A standard base is square, round, rectangular or oval and the thickness is usually in proportion to the display dimensions. A plinth style base is distinguished by its height, these have a distinct 'plinth' or column on which the figure is displayed. Fig 1



Custom made bases can be made to order but these can be expensive in relation to the standard sizes, but on the positive side they display irregular shaped models better and give added interest to the viewer. Positioning of nameplates is another factor to consider if you are contemplating a made to order base. A selection of bases is shown in Fig 2.



A selection of display bases both commercial and home made. The large rectangular base at the back of the photograph is a plinth type base. The woods used are Yew, Mahogany & Walnut. Selecting the colour of the wood can provide an interesting contrast to the colours of the model.

Fig 2

Sizing your display base:

It is important that the size of your display base is correct, too large and the base will overpower the model, too small and the model will look cramped and cluttered. There are no hard and fast rules that governing the size of base to use it is just a matter of judgment and style. Sizing a base for single figures is relatively easy it is just a case of 'if it fits use it', for dioramas and vignettes what is needed is a reasonably accurate guess based on the plan drawing you made of the final position of your figures. One point you must consider carefully is centring your figures or model on its base because if your vignette is even slightly out of centre all your hard work done at the planning stage will be wasted. I will come back to this later in part 2 of this tutorial.

Ground Work Materials:

The materials I use for making the groundwork and scenic effects can be found in all good model shops especially those that cater to the model railway enthusiast. In addition to shops we have the countryside and your garden as many types of natural materials can be used for groundwork. Here is a list of materials that can be used to make effective groundwork, scenic effects and structures.

Das Modelling Clay: This is a cold cure modelling clay. Das is invaluable when making the base on which your groundwork will be constructed e.g.: Indoor floors, areas of outdoor land etc, also it makes an excellent material with which to construct buildings and structures.

Epoxy Putty: Epoxy Putty such as Miliput and Druo are two part-modelling clays that can be worked to very fine tolerances. Equal parts of the material are worked together and will remain soft for about 20 minutes after which it starts to harden and will be rock hard within a couple of hours. These putties are very versatile and can be used to create fine detail such as bricks, stone blocks, tiled floors etc. Druo can be rolled wafer thin using a piece of dowel and talcum powder to prevent sticking. I will discuss these materials further in tutorial 4 (Converting Figures)

Model Railway Scenic Materials:

The scenic products manufactured for use in building model railways are excellent for use in modelling groundwork and foliage:

Static Grass: This material is made of tiny nylon flock fibres and comes in a range of colours to simulate spring, summer and winter shades. These colours can be mixed in various quantities to make a shade suitable to your requirements.

Field Grass: Is made of the same nylon material as static grass but comes in long fibres about 6cm long. This material is used to make tall grasses and reeds.

Natural Cork Bark: Cork bark makes excellent rock formations and can be bought in model shops, select a large piece that is rough and well textured. Cork bark can also be bought broken into small pieces about the size of a pea; these make good rocks and boulders.

Lichen: The lichen that are bought in model shops is dyed in a range of colours, whilst this can be useful in dose tend to look unnatural.

Flock Powders: These are very similar to static grass fibres.

Embossed Plastic Card: These plastic cards are moulded to simulate various types of building materials such as: Paved slabs, brick, stone walls, cobbled roads etc. unfortunately they are slightly under scale for 32mm figures but well worth trying, the paved slabs are particularly useful.

Aggregates: Used extensively by model railway enthusiasts to cover large areas on the layout. This material is useful but comes in graded sizes, which can look artificial. Aggregates are best used as a mixture of 3-4 sizes.

Natural Materials:

Materials found in the garden or out in the countryside are good for bases, the only problem is they will lose their natural colour over time, unless you borrow Samwise Gamgee's tiny watering can and feed with Galadriel's plant food regularly. Painting natural materials is of course the answer and I will discuss this later.

Moss: Various types of moss are a good source of foliage; try to collect a good bag full of differing types. You will need to sort through what you have collected and retain what you feel will be useful the remainder can be disposed of. It will be necessary to wash and clean out any soil and possibly make any inhabitants homeless. Gently rinse the moss under a slow stream of water and place on newspaper to dry. This cleaning will bring out the natural colour of the plant and give you an idea of its uses.

Lichens: Natural lichens make excellent foliage and other sorts of plant life. You will find them growing on stones and the bark of trees, once again collect a large bag full then sort and wash as above.

Twigs and Roots: Before we go any further **please, please** don't dig up your mother's favourite rose bush, 'she will not be a happy bunny' and will very likely insert it into somewhere uncomfortable. However, roots of plants can make good trees the leaves are added using flock powders or lichen, heather stalks are particularly good. Small twigs can be made to look like very convincing fallen logs and branches, look for the ones with plenty of raised detail and colour. In some cases all that is needed is a dry brush with a light colour to bring out the natural detail and coat of matt varnish will protect the finish.

Dried ferns and flowers: Dried flowers used for flower arrangements are sold in florists and make good foliage and plants fern is useful for making fern type foliage. Be careful not to use products that are brightly coloured these will not look natural on your model.

Sand: Whilst ordinary sand is useful it tends to be uniform in size and colour. The best sand for our purpose is beach sand which has a mixture of grain sizes, so the next

time you go for a paddle in the sea bring home a bag of sand. Another good source of this type of grit can be found outside your house simply sweep the path or drive and you will have instant groundwork material.

Stones: Stones for your creation will have to be small and a rummage in the garden will soon yield a sufficient supply, broken brick is a good source of sharp rough stone, however taking a hammer of sufficient poundage to remove some from the side of the house is not recommended.

Sawdust: This is useful for making rough ground and low foliage. Sawdust paints up well and with a couple of dry brushed coats look very convincing.

Tea: Yes you read it right 'Tea' not the wet type your dear lady, Hobbits and Rosie Cotton slurps in copious quantities, but the stuff out of a tea bag or better still from a packet. It makes really good rough low growing foliage and paints up well in dark colours then dry brushed with a lighter tone.

Other types of useful materials:

Etched Brass Frets: These are very thin brass sheets that have been photo etched to create a wide range of intricately detailed frets and meshes that can be cut out to form complete models, Foliage, Trees, Fencing etc. Etched brass is not the easiest modelling accessory to use but it can produce some very realistic trees and plants, which are miniature models in their own right.

Sisal string: Often used by gardeners to tie up plants. When the string is teased out it makes excellent bush like foliage.

Miliput and Druo putties: I use these to simulate climbing ivy growing over structures and rocks.

Clear casting resins: these are an epoxy type resin that cure crystal clear and if used correctly can make very realistic water effects. These resins are not the easiest products to use and a number of factors need to be observed if a reasonable job is to be made. I will explain the procedures and techniques of using casting resins in part 3 advanced Techniques.

Introduction to part 2

The methods and techniques involved in creating the ground work for your figures will be discussed in detail in part 2 of this tutorial. If you would like to make base following my suggestions, I would suggest that you make a start by collecting some of the materials listed above. It is not necessary to have everything in the list just the basics for now which are:

Das modelling clay.

White PVA glue.

Epoxy putty

Static Grass.

Sand and grit.

Small stones.

Paint.

A Bag of natural moss.

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