

Tips & Tech #01

Backdrops 1

Installing backdrops can be frustrating at times! Getting the supports to hold the flexible backdrop against a drop ceiling is an almost impossible task. There is no way to attach the uprights to the ceiling grid easily and not damage the grids, or is there?

Try using the mounting clips that are used to mount ceiling fixtures to grids. These clips come in two varieties, spring loaded and 2-piece. To use these clips decide where the vertical wood supports need to go. Try and install the uprights close to the grid t-bars as possible so that the light clips can be installed with the 1/4" bolt in line with the support. Drill a slightly oversized 1/4" hole in the top of the upright. Then slip the upright over the 1/4" bolt and attach the bottom to the bench work, taking care to have the upright plumb in both directions. Now the backdrop material can be screwed to the upright.

One of the more common materials to use for backdrops themselves is 4x8 foot sheets of Masonite. It comes in two thicknesses 1/4" and 1/8". The 1/8" tempered Masonite is easier to use as it bends fairly easy, but this also makes handling it a bit more complicated. This is usually a two person job, two to get it standing upright and then one holding and one securing it.

Once you have the Masonite properly fitted, attaching it to your uprights is next. There are several ways. Screws recessed into the Masonite to provide a flat surface to paint is the most common. If the backdrop is being curved then the screws seem to hold the best. Gluing is an option. But if you ever have to remove the Masonite and plan on reusing it then give some thought to the use of the glue. For glue, Liquid nails in a tube seems to be the way to go. Although be sure that you give the glue a chance to dry, as it stays flexible for a number of days.

When using glue only and doing flat sections of backdrop having an air pin gun sure makes short work attaching the Masonite to the uprights. I have used the air pin gun with the 3/4" pins and the gun will sink the head of the pin below the surface of the Masonite so there is little filling of the holes.

To fill the holes, some use Drywall mud. As I have not gotten this far I cannot speak from experience on my layout but have used it at the Clarion Club and it is still holding up! I plan on covering the seams between sheets with drywall tape then covering the tape with drywall mud. I have painted the backdrop a gray color only because I had a lot of mismatched paint I picked up at the various home building centers. It was cheap enough and it makes a very good primer coat. The Masonite's one biggest drawback is the ability to soak up the paint. If you use a good primer then the paint usually does not soak into the sheet, but the key word is GOOD. This equates to high dollar. Now if do not have much backdrop to do, this is the way to go but when you have 15 plus sheets the mismatched paint might be better in the long run. Having the paint dry between coats also helps retard the paint soaking in. This means more than a couple of days!

Backdrops 2

Doing backdrops – what should I use?

When trying to make a decision about what material to use 1/8” tempered Masonite was high on the list. It is easy to bend (which is most important), it holds its shape well and when properly prepared holds paint well.

How to fasten the Masonite to the uprights and not have exposed fasteners was a problem. I used counter sunk flat head screws 3/4” in length. This made sure that they would not extend through the furring strip verticals but would hold the Masonite tightly.

I also used Projects glue as added insurance against the Masonite moving around/swelling/buckling once the surface was finished and painted.

The next problem was finishing the seams. This was the number one item that caused the most research in trying to produce a smooth surface and no cracking.

Most of the time when butting two sheets together I would place a furring strip backer behind it and glue/screw it. Now I could have just finished the seam with drywall mud but with the moisture in a basement I was leery that it would not crack. With over 10 sheets of Masonite backdrop there are quite a number of seams that I had to deal with!

I decided to use the drywall paper tape to cover the seams. Now how should I apply the tape to the Masonite? If doing drywall you just use the drywall mud, fill the seam and press the paper tape into the mud/seam. Then finish the seam as usual.

But I have had problems in the past with the seam cracking and the paper tape actually coming off the seam!

Now I usually pre paint the Masonite before I start to paint the backdrop colors on it. As we all know the Masonite soaks up the paint something terrible. Well I usually use some mismatched paint I have picked up from Lowes to prime coat the Masonite. While trying to decide on the best way to cover the seams I decided to try affixing the paper tape to the Masonite by painting it to the backdrop material.

The method I use is to cut the paper tape to length. Then I slap on a very thick coat of paint on the paper tape and also on the seam. I then take the paper tape and apply it over the seam. I then slop on the paint to the front side of the tape and use the paint brush to press the paper tape into the Masonite and smooth out any wrinkles.

I then let the tape dry for a couple of days. I wanted to be sure that the paint would be dry, as the next step would be applying the drywall mud over the seam. I did not want the water in the pre-mixed mud to affect the Masonite of the paper tape.

So far I have very good luck with the seams not showing any cracking or buckling

One spot I have the backdrop is being used double sided. This presented a problem with the seam, as there was no way to put a backer behind the seam to strengthen it. I decided to try the panel adhesive and just butt the ends together. I put a lot of glue on the seam and had a lot oozing out onto the surface of the backdrop. I let this glue dry for about a month or so to be sure that the glue was dry. I then used a single edge razor blade scraper to remove the hardened glue from the backdrop surface. I then painted the Masonite and applied the painted paper treatment to this seam. About a month later I added the painted paper treatment to the other side. I wanted to be sure that the one side was dry before doing the other. There was no way I wanted to do that over again. I then used the drywall mud to finish the surface.

When applying the drywall mud to the backdrop and trying to use the sponge method of smoothing out the mud, for me anyway, does not seem to work. I have to use the old sandpaper route. Yes it makes a mess but I can control the smoothness of the surface better.

I always, after the first coat of mud, paint the surface. This stops the needless applying of mud and then sanding it back off. The harder surface of the paint will allow you to see the imperfections as you sand off the mud as the paint begins to show through. Using your hand to test the surface for smoothness.