Priming flats and cloths

What should you prime and why?

Priming seals the weave of cloth so that succeeding layers of paint sit on the surface of the cloth rather than sinking in. It also lays down the nap, (the fluff on the surface of the cloth). Priming provides a flat even base layer, the foundations for a piece of scenic artwork. Like all foundations it's important to get it right. Badly primed scenery will look patchy and a bit of a mess. Most cloth cover flats and backcloths need priming, but there are some exceptions.

What shouldn't you prime?

There are occasions when the item of scenery should not be primed. A backlit cloth made from calico or sheeting, a sky cloth for instance, relies on the fact that light will pass through it. If you put a prime coat on a back lit cloth then it will obscure the light coming from behind.

What should you prime with?

Priming a cloth should be done with either size or a scenic paint such as rosco white base. Flats can be done with size or emulsion paint. Emulsion paint shouldn't be used on cloths really as it will make them stiff and crease more heavily.

Mixing size the proper way.

Size is a powdered animal based glue that used to be an essential part of every scene painters materials cupboard. It was used to prime but also formed the binder in all powder based scenic paints. Before PVA, then emulsion paint and specialist paints like Rosco, size was a mainstay.

This is how you mix enough to prime a cloth.

1. Take a 750 ml pot and fill it with size powder. (All the supermarkets sell soup in this size pot in the UK)
2. Empty the powder into a metal bucket and pour on five soup pots of water. Give it a stir and leave it for an hour. You'll find that the mixture forms a jelly. You can leave it overnight if you like. Then take another metal bucket and put a couple of inches of water in the bottom. Put the first bucket, (with the size in it) into the second bucket and put the two buckets onto a hot plate. (A camping stove will do the job nicely but make sure its stable.) The second bucket forms a water jacket around the first preventing the size from burning. As the size jelly heats up it melts. At this point add more water and warm up the whole mixture.

Now here's the quick way!

1. Create your size jelly as above.
2. Pour a kettle of hot water over the jelly and stir until all the jelly has dissolved. (The danger of doing it like this is that you don't get all of the jelly to dissolve. You don't want globby bits in your prime.) Make sure that you don't splash your hands with hot size. Thick rubber gloves are a good idea.
3. Once its all dissolved add more kettles of hot water until you have a bucket full. 750 ml of powder should be enough for ten ltrs of water. this should be enough for a cloth about 5m x 9m but it will depend on the material used to make the cloth.

Size sounds like a lot of hassle but it has some great advantages as a priming material.

1. Its cheap. Much cheaper than priming a cloth in Rosco white base for example.
2. It can be reactivated. If you prime a canvased flat with size then each time it is repainted the size will be dampened and will be reactivated. The result is a taught canvas flat. Emulsion paint on its own will not do this.

How do you prime

Whether you are using rosco or emulsion paint it should be diluted so that its easy to brush into the weave of the cloth. Use a five or six inch wall brush to work the paint into the weave. As you work you'll notice that the nap, or fluff has been flattened against the cloth creating a smooth surface. Two things to concentrate on when priming.

1. **No holidays!** Holidays are misses in the prime layer, tiny holes and patches in the priming where the paint isn't worked into the weave properly. Holidays result in patches which show up in subsequent layers of paint and can ruin the finished result.
2. **No tea breaks!** Prime a whole cloth or flat in one go. Keep a "wet edge" to the primed section and move the wet edge across the cloth or flat, methodically working the paint into the weave. If you wander off half way through the job for whatever reason and the unfinished edge to the primed area dries, it becomes impossible to seamlessly pick up where you left off. The point where you stopped will appear like a latent image though subsequent paint layer.

What about surfaces other than cloth?

Wood ply and mdf

Scenic items made from ply, mdf and timber need to be sealed to. Shellac is a useful material for this job as it dries quickly, it seals the fibres of the scenic material and evens

out the rate of absorbency of each different type of material. Button Polish or white knotting are the forms of shellac commonly used. Of course you can go straight in with emulsion paint but shellac, as well s drying quicker, has the added advantage of sealing in fireproofing salts and the grading stamps found of fireproofed plywood. There's nothing more annoying than painting an item of scenery black, only to have white blotches (fireproofing salt marks) appear all over it.

Vac Form and other plastics

Vac form will not take emulsion paint happily. You might get it on with a couple of goes but it will flake off again. You'll need to add Covent Garden Primer or Aqualak (made by Bristol) to your paint to make it stick on. Do a test to make sure you've put enough in.

Please have a look at the suppliers section of the Scenic Painters website www.scenicpainters.com for information about where to buy materials mentioned in this article.