



BRICK WORK

BUILDING A WALL WITH PAINT

BY SEAN O'SKEA

IN THE LAST ISSUE of *Teaching Theatre*, I offered an overview of basic scene-art painting techniques and the tools you need to get started. This time I'm going to explain how you and your students can apply several of those techniques to a specific project. I call it the brick project for obvious reasons: you're going to learn, in a series of steps, how to create a faux brick wall. Whether you have tried out the techniques I previously discussed or not, it would be good idea to re-read the first article before you dive into this project. And here's a tip to bear in mind before you begin the brick job with your students: By preparing the stencils and base-coating ahead of time, you should be able to complete it in one or two class periods. Make sure the surface is dry before moving on to the next step. Fans will help speed the process.

Step 1: Lay a base coat

Start with a grey base coat on your surface. You can paint on masonite, lauan, stretched muslin, or in a pinch, large pieces of cardboard. For use as a class project, a 2'x4' area will be about right. If you are using a cardboard surface, the base coat will warp the paper. After it dries, paint the back and much of the warp should relax and flatten out.

Step 2: Scumble the background

Start with two colors—any suitable mortar colors will do. In my example, I'm using warm gray and



PHOTOS: SEAN O'SKEA



dark brown. Dip the tips of the brush into one of the colors and randomly drop a few small patches of paint onto the surface. Do the same with the other color in different areas (figure A).

Be careful not to make a pattern of equally spaced dots. Use just a little paint to keep from having a soupy mess; you can always add more. Use your brush to “wet blend” the colors by briskly cross-hatching the two colors toward each other. The trick is not to blend so much that you completely mix all of the two colors into a third color. You should still be able to see patches of the original colors in the finished product.

After a few minutes, you should achieve a cloudy, soft, two-tone grey background. If there are parts you don't like you can always add a little more paint and blend it smooth with vigorous cross-hatching.

Step 3: Spatter a fine spray of dots

To enhance the mortar look of the scumbled background, spatter a fine spray of light and dark black and

white dots onto the surface (figure B). To spatter, thin the paint with about twenty-five percent water and dip the bristles in. Shake off the excess and then shake the brush over the canvas. You can achieve many different results by varying the viscosities of paint, distance from the canvas, and striking techniques. Practice on scrap until you can spatter an even pattern of small dots. To get finer dots, after you thin the paint, shake off most of the paint before moving on to the work surface.

Step 4: Make the stencil

While your base coat is drying, cut out your stencil. Trace out a pattern of bricks (perhaps 2 1/2" high by 8" long, with 3/8" mortar) onto paper. Look at patterns in real brick walls to help you decide how you want your pattern to look. Here I simply used two sheets of 11"×17" card stock paper.

Once you have drawn the pattern, tape over both sides of the paper with clear packing tape. Make sure there are no gaps. Alternately, you could paint both sides with shellac or oil-based

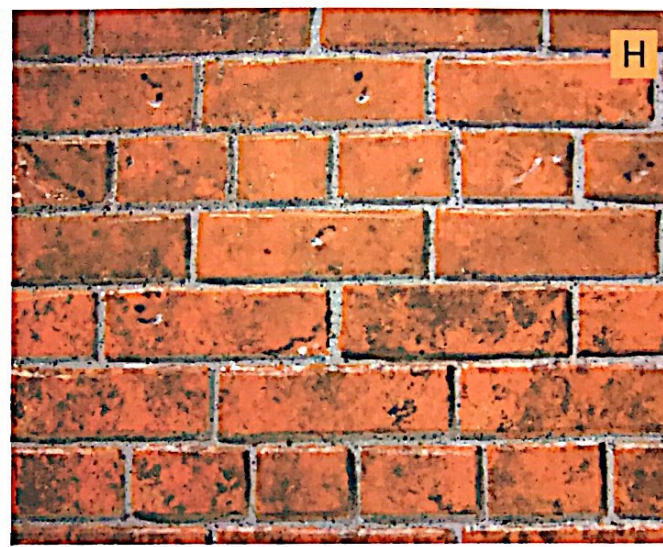
paint. Cutting on a soft surface (such as scrap cardboard or foam), use a craft-knife and a straightedge to cut out the bricks. If you accidentally cut where you shouldn't, just use packing tape to bandage the mistake. If you're careful, you might be able to cut two or even three stencils out at a time.

Step 5: Start stenciling bricks

After the “mortar” stencil is completely dry, use masking tape to attach the stencil to your surface. If you are covering a large area, you might want to use a chalk line to snap guides to keep your bricks level over long distances. Use a sponge, rag, or stencil brush to pat on the basic brick color (figure C). Notice the verb “pat”—if you brush on the paint, you will sweep it under the stencil.

Step 6: Add more color to your bricks

After you have applied the brick base, but before you move the stencil, add a little more color (figure D). Here I'm just using a little brown to give the bricks some texture. Quickly and



randomly daub the color onto the bricks, making sure not to make create patterns. If you want, you can daub a little white on as well to suggest salts leaching out of old brick.

Step 7: Lift the stencil and move on

After you have completed all the steps, gently lift up the stencil and move it to the next area of the surface (figure E). Before taping down the stencil, make sure it is properly aligned and straight. The half bricks on the right side of the photo have a purpose: by patting a little paint into those half-brick areas, I have created a registration mark I can use to line up the bottom row of bricks in the new stencil area. Once you get in a rhythm, you and your students should be able to do large areas fairly quickly. Be careful that you stagger the position of your stencil so you don't create straight vertical lines of mortar up your wall.

Step 8: Create shadows and highlights

You could simply stencil on the pattern and be done, but if you want your

bricks to pop and look real, take the time for these additional steps. Thin some dark paint (I've added a little black to my dark brown) down to about a one-to-one paint/water ratio. It should have almost a watercolor viscosity. With a soft bristled brush (I'm using a 1" watercolor sash brush) to paint L-shaped shadows onto the mortar under and to one side of the bricks (figure F). Remember to shadow the mortar, *not* the bricks. You can also daub some holes or cracks on the surface as well.

Next, add a little highlight with a thin pale color. Paint an inverted L (figure G) on the top and side you didn't shadow. The highlight is typically a little finer line than the shadow. That's it. You're done!

Step 9: Find a show that features a brick wall

The finished wall (figure H) is ready for your next production. For review, the brick project featured wet blend, spattering, stencils, sponging, stippling, and highlight and shadow—all tech-

niques we covered in the first painting article.

This is just one of dozens of great ways to create the illusion of brick or other masonry. For example, in the wall shown on the opening page, the brick wall is embellished by painting on some crumbling plaster.

After your students complete their first wall, encourage them to try variations on the process with different colors and tools. For instance, let them apply the brick paint with a roller or a sprayer if you have one, or try different colors of highlight and shadow. There are endless variations to what you can do. What happens when a violet color is used for a shadow? What about a pink highlight? Can they apply glazes on top to alter the tones? You can change the color, shape and size of the "bricks" to create countless variations.

Sean O'Skea is an associate professor of design in Southern Oregon University's Department of Theatre.