



PHOTOS BY SEAN O'SKEA

Patterns

Stencils, stamps, and pounce work
add rich detail to scenic designs

BY SEAN O'SKEA

AS DESIGNERS, we want our sets to be detailed and interesting. But that can take time, skill, and money, and all three of those are usually finite resources. As educators, we also want to find ways our students can become involved and take ownership of the set. That can sometimes be difficult when there is a lot of unskilled labor requiring direct instruction and supervision.

Paint techniques like stencils, stamps, and pounce patterns can help you and your students add richness to your sets. These methods are fast and inexpensive, and easily mastered by even inexperienced hands. The three techniques are related: each uses simple tools to replicate a pattern in paint. They require some readily available materials and a little preparation,

but once your students have been instructed on their use, you should be able to turn them loose on the set.

Stencils

Probably the most useful of all, stencils can be used to paint whole walls like the brick stencil described in my article "Brick Work: Building a Wall with Paint" (*Teaching Theatre*, Winter 2010), or they can be used to add a detail here and there. For example, you might want to add some fancy decoration to the doors of *Harmonia Gardens* in your production of *Hello, Dolly!*

Give ordinary slab doors a handsome faux wood treatment and then use a stylized rose stencil and some gold paint on each to evoke that Gilded Age look for almost no money

and minimal effort. How about a nice lattice and vine pattern across the tops of your flats to create a painted frieze? Now you've got elegance! If you plan on repeating a pattern over some distance (like a frieze) you'll want to employ tape measures and levels and perhaps even snap-lines to ensure your stencils are level and evenly spaced.

There are plenty of stencils available in craft stores but typically they are either small or expensive. They also tend to be limited to floral or child's-room designs. You're usually better off creating your own stencil, and you don't have to buy the plastic stencil blanks in the craft store to do it. You can make a long-lasting plastic stencil from an inexpensive plastic kitchen cutting mat found in discount stores

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for far less. The white or clear mats are best, as you can draw your pattern on a separate piece of paper then lay the clear mat on top and trace over your art. Although not clear, plastic "For Sale" signs found in any hardware store also make perfect stencil blanks. These can be a bit more difficult to cut with a craft knife, so you might invest in a hot-knife stencil cutter. This is a tool that is similar to an electric soldering iron, with either a craft knife blade or a small pointed cutting tip that lets you score the plastic and pop out the negative spaces. You can often find one for less than \$20 in a craft store.

My favorite way to make a short-term stencil (one that might be used for a dozen or fewer repeats) is simply to print or draw onto a sheet of card stock paper, then cut out the negative space with a craft knife and paint the paper with shellac, oil paint, or spray paint. The shellac or paint will seal the stencil and prevent the water-based paint from soaking the paper. Of course, paper stencils won't last forever but to repeat an ornament six or eight times on a set it will be fine. You can also cover both sides of a paper stencil with clear packing tape before you cut out the negative spaces. The clear tape lets you see your drawing underneath so you can cut it out. These are a little more effort but tend to be a bit stronger, especially if there are delicate bridges in your design.

If the design has floating islands in it, you can construct a small frame and attach bobbinet or some other fine net material to the frame. Lay out the pattern (hold loose pieces in place with poster tack if you need to), place the mesh and frame on top, and hot glue from the top. This way your stencil pattern will lay flat on the painting surface without lumps of glue under the stencil creating gaps that will allow paint to leak under it. Use the cool setting on your glue gun so you don't melt the plastic mesh.

Don't forget stencil's inverse, the mask, a cut-out shape that protects areas of a painted surface where you don't want paint. Masks work best with an air brush or sprayer, but careful sponging or stippling work well too.

Stamps

Stamps used by scenic painters work just like the rubber ink ones used to mark documents. Simply cut out a shape from some semi-absorbent material, mount it to a board (you can add a handle if you like), and start stamping. Stamps are excellent ways to repeat a shape that doesn't need to be precise. Leaves, flowers, cobblestones, and other organic shapes are perfect for stamps. We've made stunning mosaic tile floors from stamps as well.

The dense gray foam found in computer product packing is perfect for making stamps. Small stamps can be made from kitchen sponges, upholstery foam, industrial felt, or any material that will hold its shape when cut into a pattern and absorb some paint. I like to use a scrap of dowel as a handle. I screw a piece of ¼" plywood to one end of the dowel and then use construction adhesive caulk to glue the stamp material to the plywood. Make the handle as long as it needs to be. That way if you're painting on the floor you can stand and use the stamp. Of course, just like a stencil you can use multiple stamps on top of each other for layered effects.

Pounce patterns

You may want to reproduce a pattern larger than it would be practical to make a stencil for, or you may simply want to reproduce a sketch you have drawn on paper. Pounce patterns make that easy. They are especially useful for symmetrical ornamentation.

Say you'd like to add a four-foot wide symmetrical art nouveau ornament over your Harmonia Garden's doors. Cut a piece of kraft paper large enough to hold your full pattern and fold it in half along the design's center axis. Then draw half the pattern on one folded half of the paper. Once you're finished lay the still-folded paper on a sheet of Styrofoam or cardboard and use a pounce wheel to trace out the pattern, perforating both sides of the paper. A pounce wheel is a bit of a specialty item but you should be able to find one in a good

fabric store or online. You must get the kind with the sharp spikes, not the gear-like teeth.

When you unfold the paper you will have a perfect mirror image of your pattern and both halves of your design ready to transfer to the painting surface. It's usually a good idea to lightly rub the back side of the holes with sandpaper to open the holes. Secure the pattern in place with masking tape to prevent it from moving around while you transfer the pattern. Rub a stick of charcoal over the perforations; charcoal dust will pass through the holes and onto your flat. Once you've gone over the whole pattern, remove the masking tape and gently lift the paper. You should have rows of black dots outlining your pattern. (You can use chalk or pastels on darker surfaces, although they may not transfer as easily as charcoal.) Now you can use the charcoal dots as a guide for your painting. You can usually reuse a pounce pattern many times before it starts to show wear.

These techniques take some preparation but they will save a great deal of time when you and your students are painting the set. As long as care is taken, all of these techniques can be used by even the most novice of scene painters.

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Facing page, top left: The floating shapes of this stencil are supported by bobbinet attached to a light frame.

Top right: Stamps make foliage quick and easy. The sample in the right half of this picture was made with the three stamps at center, starting with dark paint for the large leaves, then the mid-size leaves in a medium color, and finally a few small leaves in a bright color at the tips of the branches.

Middle left, middle right, bottom: A pounce wheel is a great way to transfer a large symmetrical design. First, half of the design is drawn on a folded sheet of kraft paper. Then, with the paper still folded, the pattern is traced with a pounce wheel. After transferring the design to the painting surface by rubbing charcoal through the perforations, the design is painted with highlight and shadow, et voilà!

