

Theatre People: Scenic Artist

The scenic artists execute all the finishings on set pieces. This includes fabric drops, elements built out of wood or metal, and sometimes furniture and other props. They are responsible for applying texture and paint according to the set designer's vision, taking small-scale drawings or models and creating the look on a full-sized scale. Scenic artists may make materials look old or broken down; depict faux finishes, like marble, wood grain, stone, brick, and much more; or they might be responsible for pictorial painting, like portraying a field and trees or a cityscape on a backdrop. A scenic artist may be employed by a theatre for a full season, or brought in on a short-term contract for a particular show.

Tasks and activities in a typical day

No matter what the show is, physical labour is a big part of the scenic artist's job. They lift heavy buckets of paint, reach and stretch, climb ladders, and squeeze into tight spaces to get at all parts of the set.

A lot of things that go on in the paint shop aren't actually painting! Careful planning, and preparing pieces and your space for the job at hand is very important. Some of the things a scenic artist does are:

- Organization of equipment and products.
- Sanding, puttying, drywall, taping, and other techniques to prep set pieces.
- Reading technical drawings.
- Creating scale drawings from renderings, and reproducing those on a large scale.
- Cost estimates of labour and materials, including amounts of paint needed.
- Deciding which techniques might work for the desired effect, experimenting, and making samples.
- Communicating and coordinating with the set designer and other departments, including carpenters, props, technical director, and lighting designer.
- Adding texture to set pieces with drywall, clay mixes, and other paint additives.
- Applying paint to drops and hard sets: basecoats, faux finishes, highlights and shadows, stencils, and/or protective coats.
- Putting up wallpaper.
- Carving and sculpting materials, such as Styrofoam; and finishing them.
- Documenting your process, including making a Paint Bible: a book that shows each colour that goes onto a set, what pieces it's for, and which paints were mixed to create it.
- Finding the right tool for the job - and maybe making it yourself! Painters improvise with tools and materials, using them in different ways and sometimes inventing new ones.
- Clean-up and upkeep of the area, keeping it safe.

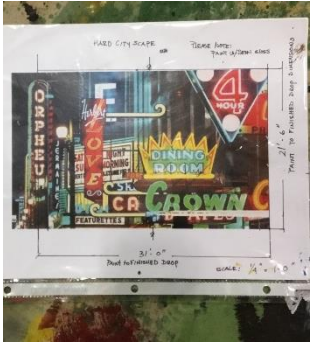


Scenic artists use brushes and sponges, like you'd expect, but also many specialty tools; woodgraining tools that roll on a pattern, lining sticks so that you can draw on a large piece laid out without bending over, broom brushes, sprayers, and of course, safety equipment.

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9 skills that a scenic artist uses:

- Stamina
- Adaptability
- Imagination and creativity
- Collaboration: to keep a look consistent, no painter “owns” part of a set. You switch around so that no distinct style overpowers the others.
- Colour mixing and matching
- Managing budget and resources
- Time management
- Seeing the big picture as well as the details
- Comfort with a variety of techniques, including unconventional ones!



For *As You Like It* at Royal MTC, the scenic artists were given a digital collage with measurements. They used a grid system to scale it up, drawing it all onto a huge, stage-filling backdrop. To get an idea of the size, look for the tiny scenic painter in the third image! (Set design by Pam Johnson)

Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you in a career in the paint department. Some of these are:

- Make and paint models, dollhouse furniture, or miniatures
- Create any kinds of arts and crafts. Papier-mache is especially close to a lot of the work you do in a paint shop!
- Experiment with materials and mediums. What can you add to paints to create interesting textures? (Sawdust? Sugar? Glue?) What does thinner or thicker paint look like? You don't have to use a brush - what can you apply paint with, and what impression does that make?
- Observation - notice shapes and shadows in the world around you. Keep a sketchbook, and/or take photos of interesting textures. Then think about and experiment with how you could recreate them.
- Practice reproducing an image. Which details are important, and which can be left out? Use a grid to “scale up” the image, redrawing it to make a bigger version.
- Play with faux finishes. Youtube is a great resource!
- Any work you do for home maintenance or on a job in the trades - housepainting, renovation, caulking, construction, filling in holes from hanging pictures....
- Colour mixing and matching - there are some great free apps to train your eye, like I Love Hue
- Use a kids' colouring book as a place to practice blending and other techniques
- Practice non-judgement and not being hard on yourself. You are gaining new skills every time you try something, even if you don't think it “works!”
- Take care of your body. Scenic artists ask a lot of their eyes and bodies, so knowing ways to rest and rejuvenate that work for you is important.

