



9 paint tips for plastic buildings

Make your structures look even better

story and photos by Jene Hughes

FOR ANYONE BUILDING a toy train layout, today's richly detailed plastic buildings provide an opportunity unmatched even in the booming post-war days of the Lionel Corp.

In the 1990s alone, Lionel brought back some classics while joining MTH, K-Line, and other toy train manufacturers in creating whole new kits and fully assembled structures.

But this opportunity isn't simply about the broad range of buildings available. It's also about making the most of these buildings, which are often molded in bland plastic colors that camouflage nicely rendered details. When properly painted with an equally impressive array of hobby paints, these buildings can stand proudly next to the best craftsman kits and scratchbuilt structures.

From my experiences painting, I put together nine tips to keep in mind as you're getting ready to paint.

1 Keep structures clean

Through most of railroad history the sad truth about trackside buildings is that they were ugly. The cavernous interior of a 14-stall Minneapolis & St. Louis roundhouse, where my dad was a foreman in the steam/diesel transition era, was grimy black – as was the surrounding environment outside. It was as though the entire scene, so colorful and romantic in memory, was actually bound together by dirt, grease, coal dust, cinders, and ash.

While I admire aged and weathered structures on scale model layouts, I prefer putting my nice clean O gauge trains in a nice clean environment. When I talk about freshly painted structures looking *realistic*, what I really mean is that they look *believable*.

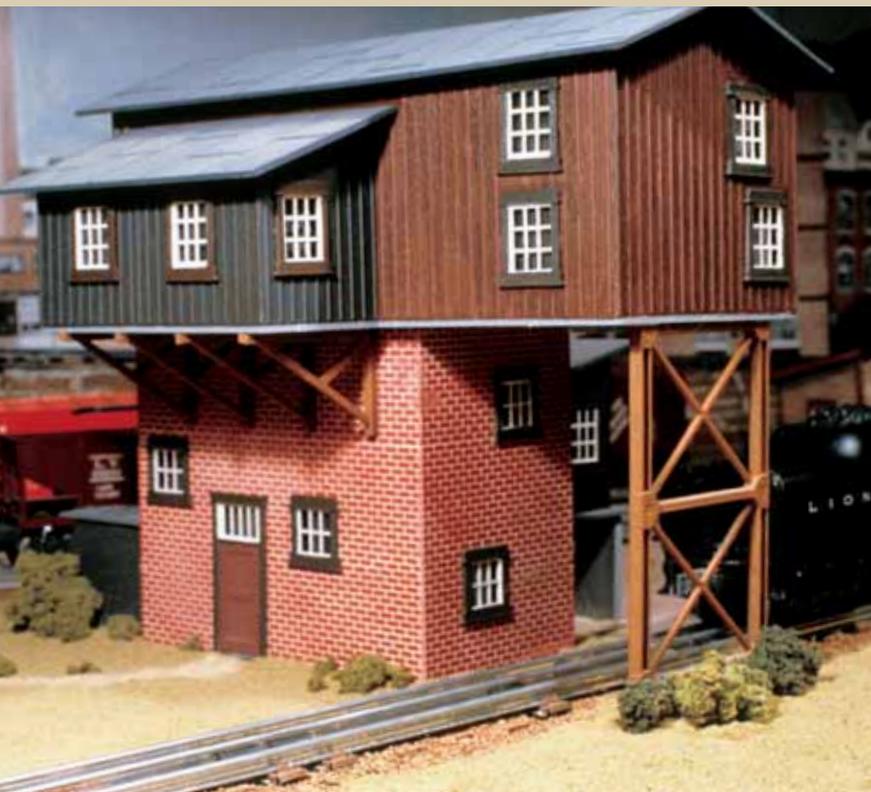
For a sense of what I'm talking about, look at **photos 1, 2, and 3**. While clearly

looking more realistic than bare plastic buildings, they are not over the top when it comes to dingy ultra-realism.

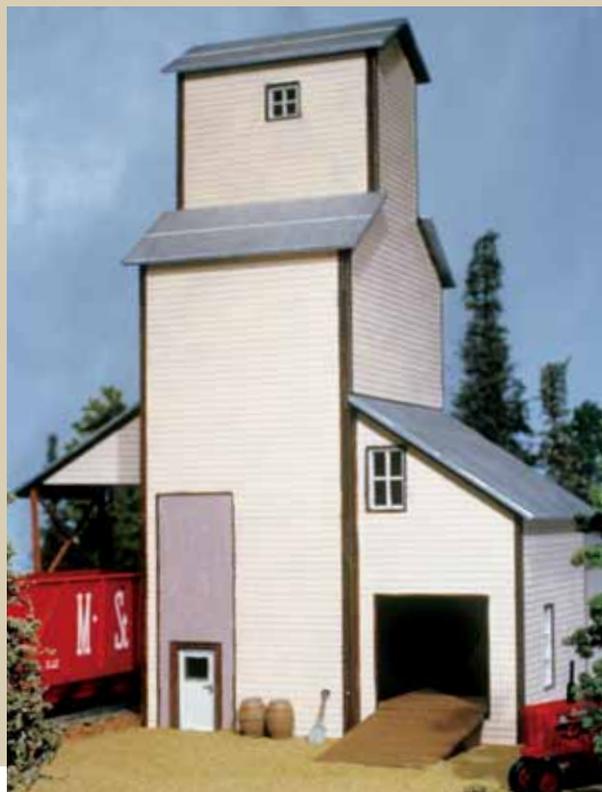
2 Distance darkens

When workers painted railroad buildings, their priority was preservation, not presentation. So they quickly applied typically dark coats of boxcar paint, such as Tuscan red, to protect buildings.

The drawback to modeling such dark buildings is that they tend to vanish when placed on the far side of a layout. I repainted a Lionel passenger/freight station on my layout from Tuscan to medium brown and, finally, to off-white as I struggled to make it visible in its remote location. Meanwhile, my Lionel grain elevator (**photo 3**) worked anywhere on the layout in its initial coat of sand color. In its lighter shades, gray is also a good color for wooden structures.



◀ Photo 1 – Earth-tone paint colors like Red Earth, Yellow Sand, and Dirt make this Lionel freight platform believable without obscuring its cast-in details.



▲ Photo 2 – Brick mortar, highlighted board-and-batten siding, and flip-flopped brown and dark green colors enhance this Lionel coaling station.

▲ Photo 3 – This sand-colored Lionel grain elevator, with white window frames and doors surrounded by brown trim, stands out anywhere on a layout.

3 Highlight doors, windows, & trim

Another problem with excessively dark colors is that they swallow the details, large and small.

Before painting, study the plastic pieces and identify interesting areas. Choose colors darker than the walls (but not too dark) for trim parts that would typically be trimmed on a house.

Doors and windows provide much of the interest in buildings, and time spent painting them a different color pays high dividends in realism. Paint the dividers between the window panes with your lightest color, and paint the rest with one of your darker trim colors.

4 Lighter colors draw attention

A common composition rule used by artists and photographers is: “The eye follows light.” As you look at layouts and photographs of layouts, notice where your attention falls. A strong scene will lead your eye to the subject not only with strong lines, like the curve of the track, but also with the use of light.

Notice too that some “bright” colors (like red) are actually dark, while a small white shed can draw attention from any larger, darker buildings around it.

Thinking along these lines will help you balance large scenes and focus attention on structural features.

5 Shades of color

When location and other factors do warrant using dark colors on a building, you can emphasize the details by using two different, but equally dark colors, or by using slightly lighter and darker shades of one color.

The photo of the coaling station (photo 2) shows one of my favorite tricks. The “wood” construction of the upper story is “board-and-batten” siding, in which narrow battens are nailed over the joints where vertical siding boards meet. To highlight this area, I painted the main section with Milwaukee Road Brown (a railroad color) and went back with a smaller brush to add Tuscan “stripes” down the raised battens. The contrast is just enough to emphasize the three-dimensional character of the nearly flat wall. I didn’t try to paint the battens precisely; I simply attempted to keep the lines reasonably straight.

Photo 4 shows this technique being applied to the parts of a Lionel freight platform using Red Earth for the walls and Yellow Sand for the battens.

6 Flip-flopped colors

Also on the upper story of the coaling station is a related trick I like: using the wall color from one section as trim on an adjacent section, and vice versa.

In the photo you can see that I painted the smaller room (extending outward over the building’s door) in Great Northern Green with Milwaukee Road Brown window trim, while the main room uses the brown for walls and the green for window trim. The resulting contrast accentuates the presence of two distinct rooms, yet there is coherence from using the same two colors.

You can see, too, that the battens on the green section were highlighted in the same brown as the larger section’s walls. This degree of contrast would be overly conspicuous were the colors not so dark.

7 Mortar is a must

Many of the buildings have brick foundations or are made entirely of brick. The red color of the plastic is acceptable, but without mortar it is impossible to see the individual bricks from more than a foot away (photo 5).

Mortar is easy. Many modelers just

A primer on painting

IF YOU ARE A LITTLE UNSURE when it comes to applying paint to buildings, here's a quick summary and some suggestions. You'll need some brushes, paint, and a few common household items before you begin any project.

For most painting, I use round-point brushes (or "rounds") in sizes 1, 2, and 3. For smaller details, such as hinges and door knobs, I use sizes 0 and 1/0 or even smaller brushes, all available in hobby and art supply shops.

Paints are available in water-based and lacquer formulas. The advantage of water-based paints is that they can be thinned with water or alcohol, and you can clean the brushes with soap and water. Also, water-based paints are safer than their petroleum-distillate counterparts.

When you're in a hobby shop, study various color combinations. Shake the paint bottles thoroughly to mix the paint, and remember that the color will look slightly darker when it's dry. For brush-painting, the paint in a freshly opened bottle is usually the right consistency, but you may need to thin it with water as it thickens during use.

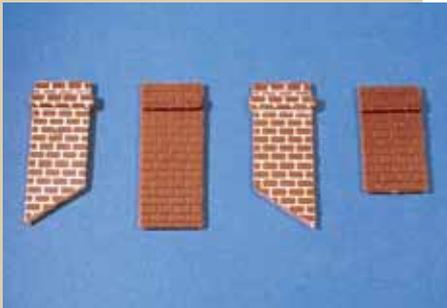
For unassembled kits, the painting process takes place before you glue together the buildings. Instruction sheets enclosed in each kit seldom reference painting at all. One important step before you start painting is to wash the pieces with a little soapy water, rinse them, and then allow them to dry. This process removes any residual chemical that is typically used to allow the plastic pieces to be properly ejected from their molds. This chemical can affect your paint finish.

To preserve the details molded into the parts, apply the least amount of paint that will cover the plastic smoothly. You can use short, quick strokes with a relatively "dry" brush, or begin with a "loaded" brush and spread the paint as far as it will go. Work under good light to be sure you aren't filling in cracks or smothering hinges and hardware. You can also use a pin to clean paint out of cracks between boards.

I usually paint large, lighter areas first and paint trim afterward, but there are no set rules.



▲ Photo 4 – Pieces from a Lionel freight platform, with walls painted Red Earth and battens painted a Yellow Sand, look much better than the original brown plastic wall shown on the top left.



▲ Photo 5 – Inexpensive spackling compound can be used to highlight mortar lines on brick surfaces.



▲ Photo 6 – A dirt-color paint on the cross braces and the metal plates on the front doors of this Lionel freight building really brings out the cast-in details.



▲ Photo 7 – Grimy Black-colored paint gives a dirty and faded look to roof panels.

brush on white paint and then wipe it off, leaving as much as possible between the bricks. Others use thick acrylic paint straight from the paint tube.

But thanks to the advice of a friend at a hobby shop, I've found that the easiest and cheapest mortar material is spackling compound from a hardware store. Buy it premixed in a little tub; the "lightweight" type costs more and is no better. Smear on a little with your index finger, and wipe it off with a soft rag.

And keep in mind that not all brick walls are red with white mortar. Real bricks come in countless colors, and tan bricks with a brown mortar make an attractive and believable variation.

8 Metal and concrete

Note where metal and concrete are implied and paint accordingly. You'll readily find hobby paints labeled "rust" and "concrete." However, if the concrete color is so light it draws attention where you don't want it, try colors called "grimy black" or "dark gray."

Use your own judgment on smaller metal parts, such as the guide and cross braces on sliding doors. On the freight platform (photo 6), I used dirt color on

the cross braces and the metal plates on the front doors. The closer the structure is to the viewer, the more benefit you get out of painting small details.

9 Up on the roof

Roofs are highly visible. Painting them dark colors can help direct attention to the rest of the building.

Notice whether the roofing material is supposed to represent shingles, rolled roofing, or the wavy sheet metal we think of as a "tin" roof. Aside from sheet-metal roofs, such as on the Lionel grain elevator (for which I used a silver-color paint), I use a dark color like Grimy Black for roofs (photo 7). Dark red and dark green are also legitimate colors for shingles or rolled roofing.

It might help your layout to coordinate roof paints. Two small groups of buildings could be identified as two different, distinct villages by painting the roofs different colors.

Accentuate roof detail. On the rolled roofing on the coaling station (photo 2), I used two brands of Grimy Black, painting the roof with the lighter shade and immediately going back over the raised seams with the darker shade. **CTD**