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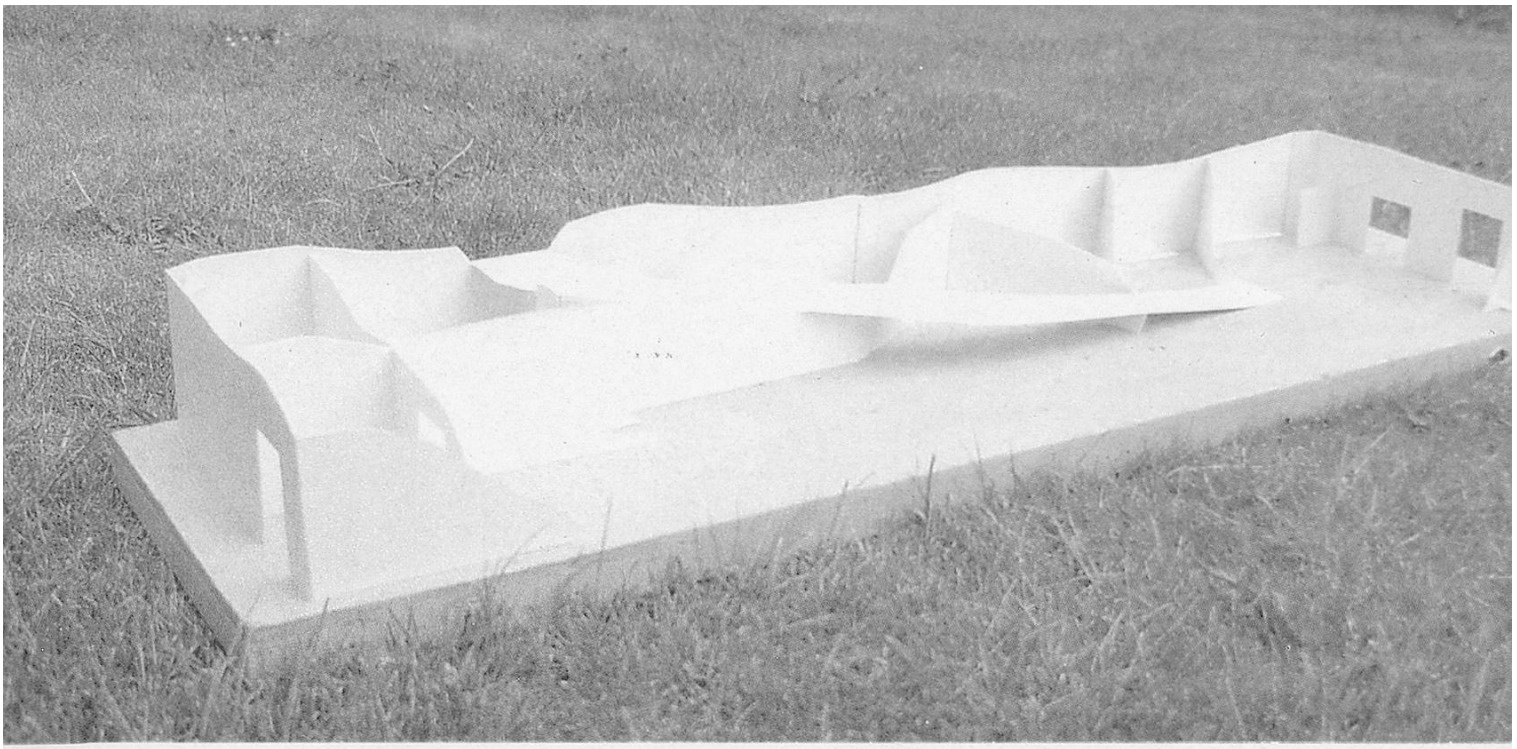


Modelling Swiss Railways; Basic Scenery Construction

by Peter Marriott. Photos by author

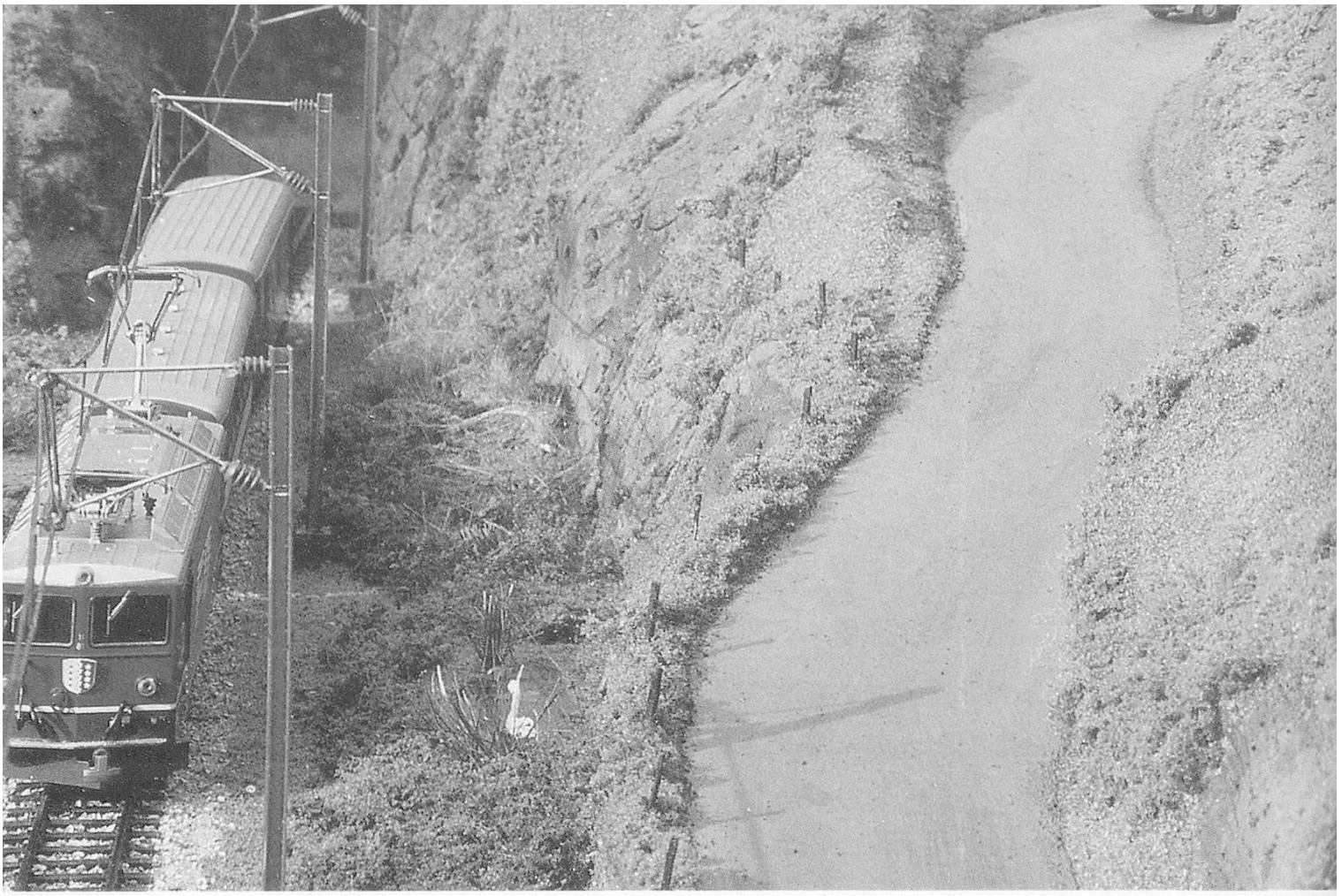
Above: Cardboard scenery formers for cutting, roadway and tunnel entrance for Alpmatten 1 - see page 35 of Swiss Express, June 1995.

At the 1995 AGM your new editor asked if I could supply a few words and pictures about modelling Swiss railways. The article in the June 1995 issue of Swiss Express was intended to outline how I began Swiss modelling and it is my wish that it has encouraged a few SRS members to consider the building of a layout or diorama if only as somewhere to display their rolling stock which is currently safely packed away in boxes!

Unfortunately the published article contained a rather arrogant typographical error (my fault not that of your new editor!) saying "I do profess to be a proficient Swiss Modeller."! That sentence should, of course, contained the word NOT somewhere in there!

These articles are slanted towards the beginner rather than those of you who have already built Via Mala, Maloja, Oberfreidhof and the like. If you consider the articles do not follow a logical sequence - you are quite right. This part should cover track design, and maybe baseboard construction but there are reasons for this "out of order" appearance of basic scenery construction. Firstly I am just about to start a new Swiss modelling project and that will hopefully supply various bare boards photographs to illustrate the words on those topics and secondly I already have various photos appertaining to scenery construction which may be of some interest to members.

Whether a flat base board, or open frame system is used the banks, cuttings, embankments and rock faces all need foundations upon which to affix grass, trees, rocks, etc. While there are various proprietary products available (for example Set Scenes retail a mesh for using as the basis for embankments or similar) in my experience plaster impregnated cloth still seams to stand the test of time well. It is available at most model shops under the name Mod-Roc amongst others. Once the plywood or thick card supports are in place crumpled newspaper can form the basis of hillsides etc. with wet plaster impregnated cloth laid, in strips, across the top. The cloth will stay workable for a few minutes and its worth taking the time to remove any creases or ripples. Fingers or a damp thick old household paintbrush can be used for this (messy!) smoothing down process. It is worthwhile tipping any excess powder in the bag onto the laid damp cloth because it will fill in any minor unevenness in the surface. This type of cloth can be used on most angles and once dry



Above: The finished result of the diorama Alpmatten 1 . Sommerfeldt caternary, Wiking VW Golf car, Bemo rolling stock and a Set Scenes swan in the small pond!

(generally the next day) the result is quite rigid although it is preferable to use newsprint, chicken wire or thick polystyrene as a support for the Mod-Roc or equivalent to give strength to the finished scenery - otherwise when holes are made for trees etc. the "topsoil" plaster impregnated cloth will suddenly seem rather fragile !

My layouts and dioramas to date have been relitively small in dimensions hence the cost of the plaster impregnated cloth has not been prohibitive. For large layouts the cost of Mod-Roc or its equivalent may mean visits to the local builders merchants, the family`s throw away clothes basket (old shirts to be covered in plaster of paris or similar) or a variety of sources will reveal a choice of other materials.

Once the cloth is dry I paint the entire surface so that none of the white will show through if the subsequent layers of scenic materials wear a little thin. The cheapest paint you can find will usually be suitable - preferably non-gloss brown, black or green. To date I've used acrylics, poster colours, and household water based emulsion paints. Once this is dry the first layer of scatter material can be affixed with slightly watered down woodworking PVA adhesive (white glue sold in plastic bottles of various sizes by all DIY shops, etc.)

I use two layers of scatter material because this gives depth to the ground cover. In time some of the material will wear away and there is a lot less chance of the scenery foundation showing through where more than one layer has been used. If however the area being treated will eventually form a forest floor, or similar area that will not be too obvious or be damaged by handling one layer may be adequate. for the initial layer it is cost effective to use the cheapest scatter material you can find - alternativel dried tea leaves are a superb source of aromatic earth coloured scatter material! This layer needs to be dry and all excess material removed: then recoat the area with adhesive using Woodlands Scenics, Heki, Set Scenes better quality materials for the top surface. It is good to mix the colour because the ground is rarely a consistent

Above: The tunnel entrance on Alpmatten 3. Three mm. card used as scenery formers, crumpled newspapers and Mod-Roc are evident to the left of this picture. Another view of this layout is in the Swiss Express, June 1995 issue, page 37.

green, brown or whatever. Again remove the excess (once dry) saving it for the next section to be treated.

Where rock faces are to be made either proprietary products (e.g. Heki landscape modelling clay) or more familiar products (e.g. Polyfilla) can be used. I have experimented with the latter (and other brands) using several thin layers to build up the surface and I am pleased with the results. It is worthwhile mixing some PVA adhesive with the first layer to ensure a good join is made to the Mod-Roc or whatever. An old kitchen knife or obsolete modelling knife can be used to shape the plaster whilst damp and a few photographs of prototype rock faces alongside the modelling area will give a few ideas how rockfaces "grow". A variety of paints can be used to finish the rocks once dry, and dry brushing a few darker and lighter shades gives the finished rockface a little depth.

To add further texture to the completed grass banks, rockfaces etc., it is benficial to dab a few spots of glue, at random, to take some of the foam groundcover pieces also available from Woodlands Scenes, Heki and others. Where rockfaces and grass banks join particularly seems to need a little attention - undergrowth here certainly adds to the visual image. Taller grasses (available from Wodlands Scenics, Set Scenes and others) placed near water and finished with dabs of scatter material give the scenery a little more height.

Alternatively for the quickest ground cover, sheets of "grass mat" are available from various European manufacturers. If these are laid free of creases and tucks and toned down with spasmodic planting of tufts and bushes they can look quite good at the rear of a layout.

Good building?

Peter Marriott

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