5 steps to custom-painted engines

by Neil Besougloff | photos by Jim Forbes

ONCE UPON A time, painting and lettering your locomotives in fantasy railroad names required: a) The eye of an artist; b) the steady hand of a heart surgeon; c) the calligraphy skills of a Medieval monk; d) the free time of the residents of *Gilligan's Island*; e) all of the above.

Thankfully, times and technology have advanced, and the "custom" painted Jersey Central and CLASSIC TOY TRAINS locomotives you're looking at were created in five steps with nothing more than sandpaper, spray paint, decals or decal paper, a color computer printer, imagination, and patience. These paint jobs may not be up to master modeler standards, but for most toy train enthusiasts they meet the grade. Keep in mind that practice makes perfect, so start with a modest project and work your way up to more complicated jobs.

1 Choose your candidate carefully. I cheated with the CTT Weaver RSD-12 diesel – it began life as an undecorated shell. Weaver is one of the few companies that sells undecorated O gauge locomotives. The shell of the orange Lionel F3 started life as a bicentennial-era MPC No. 8568 Preamble Express locomotive.

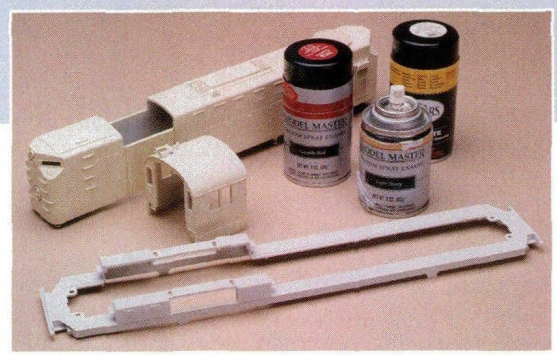
Because the locomotive lettering was printed instead of heat stamped, there are no indentations on the plastic shell from stamped lettering. If I used a postwar shell, the visible imprint "Santa Fe" or "New York Central" beneath the Jersey Central blue would make for a mediocre finished job.

Using the finest plastic model sandpaper I could find, I sanded off the F3's lettering and feathered the edges where the original colors met. This created a smooth and ungouged surface. With careful work, you won't see the outline of the old paint beneath your new paint.

2 Choose your colors wisely. I spent hours scrutinizing color-photo books of 1950s and '60s diesels to come up the CTT creme-and-red paint scheme. I wanted the locomotive to look plausible, as if a real railroad would have used those colors in a similar design. The Jersey Central F3 paint design came straight from a reference book. I painted both locomotives with Testors spray paint, but there are other brands to choose from.

The Jersey Central F3 is the wrong color orange — the real locomotive used tangerine. Unfortunately, I couldn't find tangerine paint, so, like Lionel in the postwar years, I used artistic license.

Plastic model spray paints come in dozens of gloss and flat colors today, so you'll find a many choices beyond a Crayola 8-pack. If you're skilled with an airbrush, you've got the entire spectrum of colors to choose from.



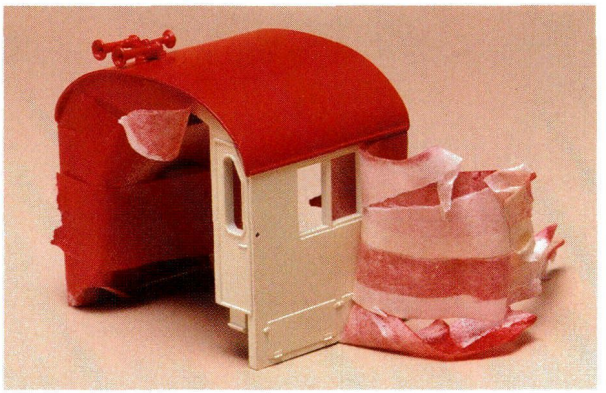
3 Disassemble as much as possible from the shells. On the F3, I removed the windows, headlight lens, and the horns. On the RSD-12, I removed wire railings, the windows, headlight lenses and also separated the cab and engine hood from the running-board assembly. I used a bent wire coat hanger to use as a paint stand. The hanger holds the shell snugly from within, a much better alternative to spray painting my hand.

Prime all the pieces with primer paint made specifically for plastic models. Use a light-colored primer for a light-colored final coat and dark for dark. I used medium gray primer on the F3 and white primer on the RSD-12. Follow the directions on the label and use in a well-ventilated room. Use multiple thin coats; a thick coat at best will fill in the shell's details, and at worst will drip or sag.

4 Wait overnight for the primer to dry and then paint the lightest color first. On the RSD-12, I used creme first; on the F3, orange. Again, use several thin coats. Let the paint dry for 2-3 days. Since you are sticking masking tape over the areas you want to keep that color, the paint absolutely, positively must be cured.

Use new masking tape to cover the areas of the shell you wish to keep the lighter color; old tape may have lost some adhesion. Masking is make-or-break time for your paint job, so make it easy on yourself and follow the natural body lines and molding lines of the locomotive shells. Use your fingernail or a burnishing tool to make sure the edge of the tape where one color meets the other is completely flat. If not, paint will bleed under the edge of the masking tape, ruining the nice line between colors. Experiment on a scrap piece of plastic if you've never masked before.

On the F3 I masked following the line beneath the grills and louvers and following mold lines on the roof. On the RSD-12 I followed the roofline above the doors and grills, and since the cab and running



boards were separate pieces, I painted them separately. The nose of the F3 was tough. I used ¼ inch-long pieces of masking tape fanning out in the shape of an arc. Another method is to cut the masking tape with scissors or a knife to the desired curve. I found the biggest challenge was getting both sides of the nose mask to have the same arc.

5 Buy the decals, stickers, and dry transfer lettering of your choice, or you can print your own decals on a color computer printer. Don't know which decals to use? Get a catalog from a decal or dry transfer manufacturer. The F3 uses a Statue of Liberty decal on the nose, Statue of Liberty stickers (postwar reproductions for an NW2 switcher) and dry transfer lettering (from a postwar Lionel Train Master sheet). The three mediums blended unexpectedly well on the F3, and most people can't tell which is which. If you've never used dry transfers, you'll need to practice first. Application is easy, but keeping the line of letters straight sometimes isn't. Unlike water-application decals, once a dry transfer is applied you can't move it.

Decals on the RSD-12 were designed on a computer. I used CTT's logo and a type style we regularly use in the pages of CTT for the locomotive's slogan. The road number – 1987 — is the first year CTT was published. I arranged the designs and type to fit onto a clear sheet of decal paper. After trial and error, I was happy with the size and shape of my lettering, and I printed it onto the decal paper, which was fed through the single-sheet feed tray of a color laser printer. If your decal design uses white you'll need to buy white decal paper, since very few color printers use white ink. The decal film is fragile, and the color printing is even more fragile. A stray fingernail swipe will scratch the ink. I sprayed Testors Dull Cote over the printed decal sheet to protect the lettering even before I cut out and applied the decals. The blue stripes separating the red and creme on the RS-12 also are decals, but they came from a left-over HO scale decal sheet. Decal stripes are an easy way to hide any paint-masking imperfections.

The computer-generated decals I used were tricky to apply. The decal film was much thinner than other decals I've used, and for every two pieces of decal I successfully applied I ruined one. To help get computer-printed decals and commercially made decals to lie flat and negotiate curved and raised surfaces, I strongly suggest you get a bottle decal setting solution. Use it according to the instructions on the bottle. Don't over use the setting solution or you'll dissolve the entire decal. Be patient and practice. Decal application is a skill learned through experience.

Once all of the decals were in place but before I reassembled the locomotives, I spray painted the shells with Testors Dull Cote. The clear flat finish, which both toned down the gloss of the creme-and-red and orange-and-blue paint and added a clear layer of protection to the decals.

Ta-dah! You're finished. Once reassembled, you'll have a unique engine and your friends will ask enviously ask, "How'd you do that?" CTT

Source info box

These are the supplies I used for the RSD-12 and F3, but there are numerous other suppliers of similar products. Catalogs are available from the dry transfer and decal companies.

- ❑ Testors plastic model spray paint
- ❑ Guards Red (Model Master series)
- ❑ Light Ivory (Model Master series)
- ❑ No. 1211 Gloss Dark Blue
- ❑ No. 1628 Gloss Orange
- ❑ White Primer (Model Master series)
- ❑ Gray Primer (Model Master series)
- ❑ Dull Cote clear lacquer
- ❑ Testors No. 8802 Hobby Sanding Films
- ❑ Railroad decals and decal setting solutions from Champion Decal Co., P.O. Box 1178, Minot, ND, 58702; 701-852-4938 minot.com/~champ/index.html; and MicroScale Industries, 18435 Bandilier Circle, Fountain Valley, CA 92708-7012; 714-593-1422; microscale.com
- ❑ Blank clear decal paper from Micro-Mark tool catalog, 340 Snyder Ave., Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922-1595; 800-225-1066; micromark.com