

Mounting your printed background sheets on to MDF or plyboard and sealing with matt varnish

What you'll need –

- **MDF or plyboard cut to size** – the optimum size is 2-3mm bigger in length and width than your backdrop paper – so an extra 1mm ish all round. This means there is less chance of an overhang which puts your backdrop at risk of being lifted off the board while you work on it. I get my plyboard cut to 596mm x 843mm (2mm over standard A1 size). If the edges are rough give them a bit of a sand with some medium grade sandpaper and wipe away all the dust made with a damp cloth.
- **Your backdrop**, having been laid flat for long enough to be handled easily and clean of any dust,
- **paste-to-wall wallpaper paste**, ready mixed or sachets if you only need enough for one board, you don't need a lot!
- large CLEAN/BRAND NEW **paintbrush/pasting brush**,
- **plastic scrapers or a wallpaper smoothing brush**,
- **damp cloth**, (and warm water/tap to keep rinsing it)
- **matt water-based varnish**, Do not buy oil-based - it will tint your print yellow and take hours to dry while filling your home and lungs with smelly stuff. Water-based will say it dries within half an hour and won't have toxic chemical warnings on the label.
- **mini foam gloss roller**, brand new and super clean.
(Optional - wood batons, pin nails and PVA to back your board)

MDF and plyboard you can buy from B&Q, Buildbase etc and they will cut it down to the exact size for you (although you may be charged for a whole sheet).

Due to printing/cutting tolerances your background sheet size could vary by a few millimetres so if you want it to be perfect on all edges I would wait until you get the sheet in your hand and measure it before cutting the wood.

Or alternatively, if you're using a piece of board you already have, just line up to one corner of it so you get a short and long side against the edge of the board and you can butt up to things and get a clean join.

I prefer to work with plyboard over MDF. Plyboard is slightly more expensive but it is stronger and less prone to water damage. Just watch out for twisting - I recommend using at least 9mm thick ply, 12mm is best if you can get it - and also make sure the surface has no defects - they will look like tiny lines and could come through as a ripple on your background. Tell the merchant you need a super clean piece!

MDF does have a more reliably smooth surface BUT it is prone to bulging and swelling when it gets damp so I would recommend sealing all edges and the back of your MDF board if you go with that option. The corners will also be 'softer' and damage easily so be careful how you move and store it or consider running a small wood baton along the top and bottom to protect the edges when it stands or leans against a wall (just stick it with PVA and the odd nail).

Step by step instructions

1. Place your board on a completely clean, flat surface.

You must be in a clean, dust free room to do this - any small bits of dirt (or a greenfly as I once found) can ruin the smoothness of your surface and create bubbles. Give the board a wipe over with a very marginally – almost dry – damp cloth to remove any dust immediately before pasting.

2. Paste the board.

You need very little wallpaper paste - I use only two small brush loads for the entire A1 board, really working it across to get a very thin layer. Ensure the entire board is pasted by moving to view it in different light - it will absorb quickly so move fast but don't be tempted to add more as you will only spend more time pushing it out and risk ripping/stretching your paper due to it being too wet and becoming soft.

3. Apply your background sheet, lining up the left side and top corner to the edges of the board.

Smooth it over from left to right with your hands to try and push any air out to the right as you go. Feel for any air pockets or dust bumps and peel the paper back and remove them at this point.

Now working with your plastic scraper or wallpapering brush, drag and press (leading with your hand rather than pushing which would be leading with the scraper) from the centre of the board, pushing the excess paste and air out to get a tight fix. There is a sweet spot with the amount of pressure you apply - enough to get the paste out effectively but not too much that you scratch the surface design.

I work in a circular, clockwise order, starting from the centre to 12 o'clock, then centre to 1 o'clock etc to ensure I move across the whole board from the centre outwards systematically. You will notice the scraper slow down in areas with lots of paste - keep working over them firmly but steadily to remove the excess.

Wipe the paste off the board edges as you go. Any paste that gets on the printed backdrop surface can be wiped with a damp cloth.

Check for any bumps and ripples, have a look at it from different angles and smooth around any areas with excess paste still left or remove any specks of dirt if you have any by peeling back, removing and re-smoothing. You need to work efficiently as the board will absorb the paste and make your background stick on fairly quickly.

4. Once you have satisfactorily smoothed and removed the excess paste, go and put the kettle on.

In around 3 minutes any bubbles that are going to appear will and you should still have time to work over small areas of the surface with your scraper again. The smoothing process can take up to 10 minutes and feel arduous but it is worth it to keep going and get a flat surface before the paste dries.

5. When you're completely happy with the surface make one last clean up of the paste around the edges and on the surface itself with a clean damp cloth.

If you have a slight overhang on any edges I would give them a final press after wiping the excess away as you may have lifted it slightly with the cloth. Overhangs are best removed with a sharp craft knife once the board is completely dry and set.

6. Leave on a flat surface to dry for at least 4 hours before the next step.

Keep checking on it in the first half hour, if any imperfections appear you may still have a chance to rework the surface or place some heavy books on top of a problem area. That said some minor bumps aren't the end of the world, a few of my early attempts have some small imperfections I still shoot with them, the bumps never show in my images.

7. Seal with the water-based matt varnish.

Apply with a foam roller in neat rows - you will get lots of bubbles and lines - don't worry about those on your first pass - just get it across the entire board evenly and efficiently.

You will probably need 2 dips of your mini roller to cover the whole surface. Once it is all covered, go back to where you started and with the now almost empty roller, roll over the bubbles, smoothing them and merging any lines. The bubbles should get smaller and they will pop as they dry so don't worry too much - use a light hand to remove lines without creating more.

Check for any dust or hair that may have wafted onto it and remove before leaving to dry.

8. Allow to dry for an hour then apply a second coat in the same manner.

If using MDF seal the sides and back too to avoid water damage. You will of course need to do this after the main surface sealant has fully dried so it is protected while you lean on it to seal the rest of the MDF.

Now you have a beautiful mounted backdrop board, look after it by storing flat or leaning closely to a wall, out of direct sunlight and in an ambient environment – safe from damp and frost. If on MDF I would recommend adding some batons or standing on some scrap cardboard to protect the corners and bottom edge.

I hope these instructions have served you well – if you have any feedback or notes to add please do email me at hello@blackvelvetstyling.com.

Happy styling,

Sophie & co