

Virtual or actual, a look at the options, applications, and practical details of backdrops, the *other* major element in your portraits

BY STAN SHOLIK

Part 1: Getting real

Background check

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The lighting sets the mood of a photograph, but the background sets the stage. Smooth or draped, warm-toned or cool, Old Masters or scenic, real or virtual, the background creates an environment that complements both subject and ambience.

For product shots or portraits, today's clients want unique images. Fortunately, the market today gives photographers myriad options—so many, in fact, that selecting among them can be daunting.

The first step is to choose between actual backdrops—seamless paper, muslin, canvas, Formica, wood and cyclorama (cyc) walls, for example—and digital (virtual) backgrounds. Virtual backgrounds comprise two broad categories, front- and rear-projected backgrounds used during the session, and background images added digitally in post-production. In the latter case, the subject is posed against a blue-screen or green-screen called a chromakey backdrop.

In Part 1 of this series, we'll look at what's available in actual backdrops. Perhaps the most often used backdrop, seamless paper, is available in an array of solid colors in 9- and 12-foot wide rolls, and with textured, stone and marble surfaces. Priced relatively low and widely available, seamless papers from Superior Specialties (www.superspec.com) and Savage Paper Products (www.savagepaper.com) are long-time standard backgrounds for commercial and portrait photographers.

With a hollow core for a mounting rod, seamless rolls are easy to mount, and with a motorized multi-roller system, can be changed out quickly. Take care with the paper; it wrinkles easily and must be stored on end to prevent rippling. Generally, these backdrops are good for

Gossamer, art papers and other translucent materials can add dimension to the setting.

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only one product shoot or full-length portrait.

For greater durability and with large objects or groups in-studio, photographers use a cyclorama, also called a “cyc” or “cove.” Curved with a radius of three to four feet, a cyc blends a wall with the floor, adjacent walls, or the ceiling. With proper construction and lighting, the effect is like having an infinite background behind the subject.

Calumet Photographic (www.calumet-photo.com) and Pro Cyc (www.procyc.com) sell the curved plastic and fiberglass pieces needed to build your own cyc. You can hire a contractor to do the work from scratch with simple wooden forms and thin plywood skin for the curved (coved) sections. Permanent eyes are painted in solid or textured colors, or you can hire a scene painter to create any kind of scene, from realistic to abstract. Besides the cost of installation, a big disadvantage of permanent cys is the amount of floor space they take up; they’re practical only for larger studios.

Solid colored cys and seamless paper work well enough for commercial, fashion and some portrait work, but most portrait clients expect something more. From new parents to high school seniors to upscale consumers, each buyer looks for an environment compatible with his or her taste. Philip Charis, world-renowned for his Old Masters-style portrait photography says, “While the background is only one element in the photograph, it is an integral part of the final look. Elegant customers picture themselves in an elegant environment, and the Old Masters background, along with the lighting and props, contribute significantly to this.”

In Charis’ first photos, the background was painted by an artist on a 6x8-foot window shade. People loved them because the photos “looked like a painting.” (Denny Manufacturing, www.dennymfg.com, offers



The heavy weight of canvas makes it ideal for scenic backdrops. Canvas backdrops unroll and hang smoothly without wrinkles or folds.

a line of window shade rollers for its canvas backdrops.) As his business progressed, the backdrops changed to paper, then canvas and now muslin, all painted under his exacting supervision. With 20 different low-key backgrounds, Charis can create the right look and color palette for any portrait subject.

Most photographers these days choose from the thousands of ready-made backgrounds painted on canvas or muslin, from such companies as Adorama, Backdrop Outlet, Denny Manufacturing and Studio Dynamics. (To view online catalogs, find the



Highly reflective subjects like cars and boats are too large for rolled seamless backdrops, yet need to be photographed with a seamless background to control reflections and eliminate hard lines. Large studios with a built-in cyclorama are ideal for this.

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companies' Web sites in the Bonus Content at www.ppmag.com).

Canvas predated muslin as a backdrop material. Older canvas *drops* are heavy and they need to be rolled up when not in use to prevent wrinkling. Often painted with scenes or skies, such canvases are available for rental from movie and photo supply houses.

The newer painted canvas backgrounds are somewhat lighter-weight, and they offer superior durability over muslin drops. It's more difficult to paint on canvas, but the colors have more richness and depth than most muslin drops. Canvas drops come painted in the Old Masters, abstract or scenic styles. They still need to be rolled for storage, but can be stored or used on a ceiling roller system or light stand.

Woven from 100-percent cotton or a blend

For model composites and business portraits, seamless paper is a low-cost backdrop that's quick to set up. Available in an array of colors and neutrals, there's a seamless paper for every mood.



Draped muslin backdrops aren't solely for portrait subjects. They can provide interesting tension and drama to commercial shots of boxy or bland electronic equipment.

of cotton and synthetic material, lightweight muslin backdrops can be stored folded or even stuffed in a bag. They are often dyed in a mottled pattern, but also take paint well; Old Masters painted muslins are very popular. Solid color muslins are also available.

Muslin drops are usually clamped to a crossbar between background stands, tightly stretched or draped in soft folds. The fabric creases easily, and needs to be steamed to remove the wrinkles after long-term storage. Unlike canvas, muslin drops can be washed in a sufficiently large washing machine. They're also much less costly than canvas. A 10x10-foot muslin backdrop that sells for \$77, for example, would likely cost \$340 in canvas with a comparable pattern.

Newer fabrics, such as nylon-blend velour, offer the advantages of both muslin and canvas. Photek Backgrounds-in-a-Bag (www.photekusa.com) made from this material feature a solid color on one side and a mottled blend of colors on the other. The price of these backdrops falls between muslin and canvas.

Other materials and manufacturing techniques lend variety to your background alternatives. Translucent, non-woven

gossamer fabrics can be hung in layers and lit for different effects from the front or back. These are available from Superior Specialties (www.superspec.com), Studio Productions (www.studio-productions-inc.com) and elsewhere. Owen's Originals (www.owens-originals.com) is the exclusive distributor of 3D muslin drops that are dyed, painted and sandblasted to achieve the look of crushed velvet. Blue River Digital (www.blueriverdigital.com) and other companies will even create custom computer-printed backdrops from your own original photo or artwork.

The wild backgrounds long favored by commercial and fashion photographers are finding a place with portrait photographers whose clients are demanding a different look. Reflective mylar in silver or colors, wallpaper, window blinds, textured concrete, roll-up industrial doors—no backdrop is outside of the realm of possibility. ■

Look in the Bonus Content section of www.ppmag.com for links to backdrop resources and descriptions of the background products available from each company.