

Vertical vs. Horizontal Drop Painting: 8 Considerations

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When I first began painting, I usually preferred to paint horizontally, because that was what I was used to. While attending grad school I had access to a paint frame that descended into a well. Entire drops could be painted vertically from floor level. During this time I had the opportunity to learn vertical techniques, and learned that while these techniques are different than horizontal, some work better for certain projects.

1. Access Most places do not have a paint frame as I mentioned above. As a result, most places painting vertically results in a need to climb ladders or scaffolding. Painting on a ladder can be grueling. You have to climb up and down all the time and move the ladder around, twist to get access to the surface you are painting, and stand with your feet hanging off sides of a step, which causes extra stress on your body. Painting horizontally provides different access difficulty, however, as you must either be proficient at painting with your brush on a stick, or bend over a lot. Also, you generally must be able to walk on the surface you are painting to gain access to the whole surface.
2. Wash techniques A smooth wet wash is simply not possible on a vertical surface. It will drip. Wet blends are very possible and the same effect can be achieved with a wet blend between the color and a clear coat, but you need the thickness of the paint to prevent dripping. Translucent techniques, then, are much better painted horizontally.
3. Spray techniques The pneumatic sprayer is one of my favorite painting tools. It can achieve wash-like effects on a vertical surface. I prefer to use this tool on a vertical surface, because it is less likely to spit as I lean it over. I find it's wash-like effects to be more visually interesting than a wash, as it actually obtains the same color effect by tiny specks of paint. When more than one color is blended, it is more a pointillism kind of blend than a wash kind of blend. There is a more gradual kind of control, and lights can play more games with the end product. If I had to climb a ladder to do these spray techniques, I may prefer to do them horizontally.
4. Spatter Spatter is a fantastic texture and very easy on a horizontal surface. Spatter is possible to attain on a vertical surface, but it's much more risky. As long as the spatter is light enough, muslin will soak it in before it has a chance to drip. Spatter on a vertical drop needs to be highly controlled, and light layers need to dry before another layer is added.
5. Marking straight lines This is different on the different surfaces. It is much easier to lay down a straight edge and draw a line on a horizontal surface. A vertical surface can present more difficulty with this task, although newer laser technology has helped me to the point that I'm not sure it's that much of a difference any more.
6. Perspective The biggest thing I don't like about painting horizontally is how hard it is to gain perspective of the big picture. If you want to see what it's going to look like from the audience, you need to climb a ladder or find a perch to look down from. When painting a drop vertically, you simply step back to gain that kind of perspective.
7. Space In a shop, vertical space is usually easier to secure than horizontal space. Also, once that space is secured, if you share the space with carpenters, sawdust and other carpentry mess will cause problems with horizontal painting. People also have issues not walking across horizontal drops.
8. Paint-thru When painting vertically, usually your drop is attached to a frame. While the drop may stick a little to the frame, because it is hanging vertically, it's really only the edges that are stapled down that are likely to really stick. As long as you are careful when taking the drop down, you shouldn't have issues. When painting on the floor, however, you have danger of your entire drop sticking to the floor surface. Prepping your floor with bogus paper will help, because at least if it does stick the paper won't hurt much on a front lit drop. While waiting for steps, especially sizing and priming steps, to dry, you need to run moving air under the drop to help it dry away from the floor. There is a "tool" that you build out of wood for this task. It is an arch that allows you to point a fan under the drop but keep the edge of the drop stapled down. Using these arches, however, limits your ability to walk on the drop and also warps your perspective further as it curves the drop surface. I often use these only through the prime coat, and after that I remove them and deal with whatever minimal sticking still happens, because it's so much easier to work on a flat surface.