

MAKING ROCKS AND GEODES

by Larry Goldman

I DON'T KNOW OF ANYONE WHO WOULDN'T WANT to improve his work, especially if he could do it quickly and with little time and expense. When it comes to habitat, realism is the name of the game. The more realistic you can make it, the more impressive and desirable it becomes, and the price you get for it should be commensurate with the quality of the work. The better it is, the more you should charge. Some of you have already learned that you can make more money with habitats than you can with the taxidermy work, and do so with the expenditure of a lot less time, effort and materials. The addition of some veining and perhaps a geode to artificial rocks can increase their realism significantly.

Before getting into how to do this, let me give you a brief summary of veins and geodes, just in case you were absent from school on the day the subject was covered or you happened to be dozing off at the time. A geode is a nodule of stone, having a cavity lined with crystals or mineral matter, and a vein is a narrow strip of mineral matter. Veins and geodes are usually formed when minerals, dissolved in water and/or gas, are forced into crevices, cracks and fissures in existing rocks. These minerals are left behind when the water and/or gas that carried them evaporates or is forced out.

You can add veins and geodes to just about any kind of artificial rock, such as those made from plaster over burlap on a wire frame, carved or shaped out of foam, molded out of fiberglass or similar materials, or carved out of wood, to name just a few. Whenever possible, I prefer to use Art.Rocks, the fairly new, ready made artificial rocks that are now available. They are lightweight, strong, easy to carve, shape, cut and drill, come in a variety of sizes, and they're inexpensive. In case you didn't know it, Art.Rocks are made from recycled glass, so by using them, you're also helping the environment.

1. Regardless of the material your artificial rocks are made of, I recommend that the first thing you do is give them a light colored base coat, if they are not a light color to start with. Gesso, or any type of light colored water based paint, including house paint, will do the job. I



personally prefer white. The light colored surface will allow you to see the marks you will be making as well as provide you with a uniform surface on which you will apply the rock colors and texture. For this particular project, I used large Art.Rocks that are approximately six inches in diameter and come to you already white.



2. I generally use a common lead pencil to draw the shape and contours of the veins I want on the surface of my rocks. For this article, I drew the veins with a black marker and filled in the space between them



for photographic purposes.

3. Using a Freedom flexible shaft machine and a few cutting bits of different sizes and shapes, I cut a shallow trench using the marks as a guide.



4. Except for the cavity for the geode, the trench doesn't have to be deep; 1/8 to 3/16 inch is adequate.



5-6. The rock shown in Photo 5 was coated with an aerosol stone texturing paint, while the surface coloring on the rock shown in Photo 6 was done using black, brown and green water-based paint applied with a small sponge, one color over the other while all were still wet. There is no need to mask the sides or bottoms of the trenches.

After the paint jobs have dried thoroughly, the next step is to add veining material, which is nothing more than medium and coarse common salt (sodium chloride). The granules of the medium salt shouldn't be larger than 1/8 inch in diameter. It's the type and size salt you should be able to find in a supermarket or grocery store. Just ask for coarse salt. I don't recommend using table salt because it's too fine to give the appearance you want to achieve.



Since a geode usually contains larger size mineral crystals, I used a coarser salt, (granules of 3/16 to 1/4 inch diameter) for this purpose. These size granules are usually the size found in salt used for water softeners.

Using an artist paintbrush, apply a thick coat of clear-drying water-based glue to the trenches in the artificial rocks. Fill the glue coated trenches with the medium grade salt, the geode cavity with the coarser grade salt, and press it in with your fingers. You don't have to do all the trenches in one operation. Do what's comfortable and appropriate.

When the glue has dried, shake off any salt that didn't adhere, and if necessary, repeat the process with more glue and salt. Mineral veins generally appear flush with the rock that surrounds them, but not always, so the appearance is completely up to you. If the salt veins look too white, you can mute them by misting on a transparent paint with an airbrush. I generally prefer to use either Candy Paynes Gray or Gold Toner for this purpose.



7. For this project I wanted the geode to look as if the crystals growing in it were amethyst, so I misted on some purple paint. The last step is to give your artificial rocks a clear satin or flat topcoat, or if you want them to appear wet, a clear gloss coat. ■

Larry Goldman owns Hide & Beak Taxidermy Supply in Saginaw, MN, and writes our Q&A feature in every issue. See the next page for an interesting story from Larry. →

