DIORAMA CLERVAUX
the final part

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Because of the space issues I encountered towards the end of the Villa Prüm module I was forced to widen it by about 20 centimeters (8"). In order to have a nice and square overall diorama I was therefore coerced into building a supplementary module of 180 x 20 cm (6ft x 8") to complete that square.
The book was almost finish then and I did not want to delay the publishing in order to include this build. Therefore I am pleased to show you the conclusion of Diorama Clervaux throughout these pages.

After having mentally completed Diorama Clervaux and after the complicated Villa Prüm build, this was not really something I looked forward with enthusiasm.

Enthusiastic or not, I could not really mess up the whole diorama because of this little extra, isn't it? I gathered all what was left from my energy and started it with the goal to have it finished for SMC 2014 in Veldhoven. It would be the sole appearance of the completed Diorama Clervaux outside Luxembourg.

Staying true to what I did before, I looked for historic references to base my work on.
I found it in what is called in Clervaux the borough "op der Hoh". It is situated exactly opposite the castle, on the hill I simulated already near the river. I regularly found old postcards of the street featuring very old houses, old already at the time of those ancient pictures. That street is in fact also ending very near the bridge, making it the natural choice for this module.

In the end, after some careful planning, and also considering my reluctance to build another house, I limited the scene to some continuation of the hill and a simulation of the gardens you recognize to the left of this picture.

Just doing a meadow slope to get that hill quickly done was beneath my pride. I modeled instead a cliff loosely remembering the Müllerthal area in Luxembourg, not very far away from Clervaux. It features very scenic rock formations and is a tourist attraction by itself in the Grand-Duchy.

The hills are cut out of Styrodur who is then covered with plaster. As usual, the plaster is carved and formed when it has not yet set.

At some point I had to concede that in a depth of 20 cm the layout possibilities are very limited.

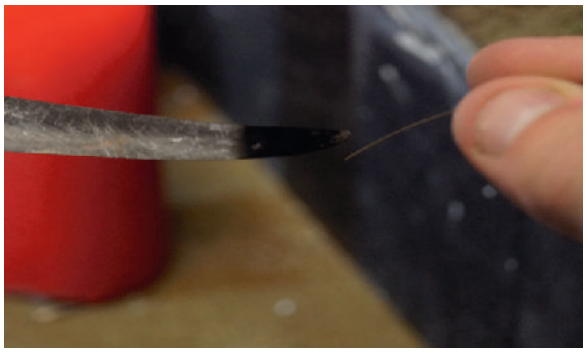
In the picture to the left, you recognize what I settled for. In the foreground is the extension of the Villa Prüm grounds. The street coming from the village and the bridge is next with the cobblestones already fitted exactly to the last ones on the bridge side.

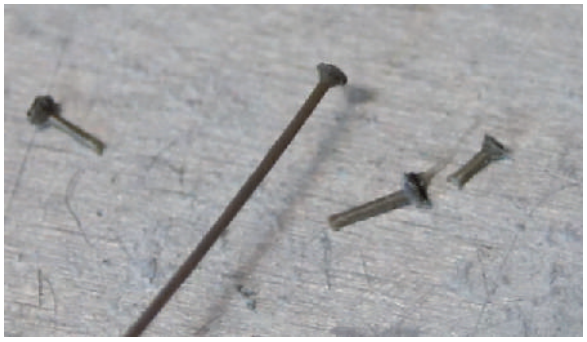
On the right side you recognize the little stretch of street coming down the hill. The gardens are already surrounded by slate stones. In the rear you see a shack and those rock formations.
The milky liquid standing on the table is a glue and water mix and is used to fix loose earth and stones.

The biggest challenge up to this point was to find a nice scene worthy of the whole diorama and also to fit it exactly to the neighbouring modules.

This old and half destroyed shack is the only homage to old houses on the historic reference picture. I build it separately from the scene. That is well recognazible because of the thin plasticcard I used as a base. I could easily fix the shack later and hide the base under just a minimum amount of earth and grass.

A little mention here for yet another method to make a rough road. I used very small limestones, generously glued on with wood glue and pressed them down with the paint pot to make them lying as flat as possible. It looks indeed different and not to bad, that was the goal, but scalewise the stones are very limit.



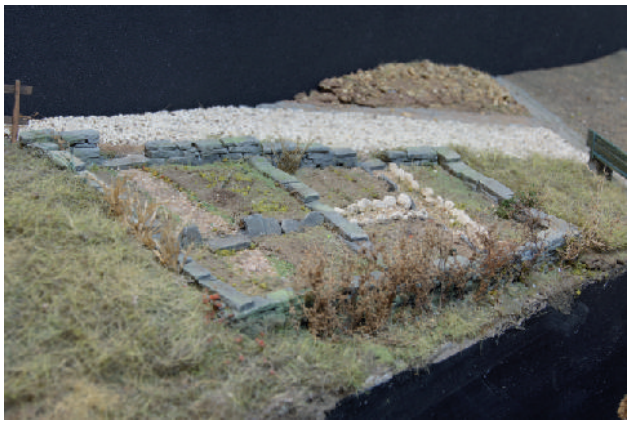


When I needed some nails for the planks of the shack I remembered that the last time around I did not take pictures of the nailmaking method using stretched sprue. I am catching up with that now .

Over a candle heat up the tip of an old knife. Immediately take your piece of stretched sprue and slightly touch the hot knife. Of course the plastic is melting and forming a flat head. You just need some trial and error to get the right force and length of pressure do get exactly the size of head you need. The photo below is taken from the book.

The main components build and set, all what was left to do was the routine work of painting rocks and stones and planting enough green stuff to make everything look as natural as possible.

I used only natural materials for the plants like moss and roots. Simulation of the finer moss on the rocks is done with pigments, as is all the dusty stuff.



The gardens, complete with stairs, paths and a bordering hedge. Under the grass of the meadow is a groundcover of a mix made from straight earth, wood dust and sand, hold together with a wood glue and water mix.

The stream needed an extension too. It's again made with Liquitex Gel, applied in a few coats until a sufficent depth was reached.

I struggled a bit to get those two modules fit exactly together near the rock part and of course near the small stream. It was bad luck that some years ago I modeled a few roots near the stream, coming down from some imaginary tree higher up. Now that I had to build that higher up scene, I had to follow through with a tree belonging to the roots.

A complete tree did not really fit in here. Anyway, as you will see soon, my patience in tree making was already seriously tested at this point, so I choose to add a rotten trunk to my repertoire. This is easily made with a round bit of Balsa wood just carved out to anything looking like a rotten tree. Nature allows for a lot of freedom here, you should use it. With some iivy and moss, and of course the roots leading to the counterpart on the other module, the final stump is nice addition to the diorama.

Because I did not want to obstruct the view to the village I choose to render a few smaller evergreen trees giving the impression of a new planting. After having build until now most of the smaller firs with Asparagus fern, I have in the meantime some doubts about the look.

While the asparagus needles are indeed very fine and probably very close to scale, the overall look is in my opinion to translucent and not full and green enough. It's not a bad tree, but something is missing.

Thuidium tamariscinum

This time I choose to manufacture the fir branches with very small and fine branches from a moss whose latin name is Thuidium tamariscinum.

The trunk is a toothpick sanded down to size, a size I decided to do even thinner than my previous trials. Looking at those previous attempts, it occurred to me that despite all efforts, the trunks mostly still looked too thick.

Every trunk got a pin to push it in the ground later. I drilled holes in the trunk to stick the branches in for the lower part. For the top half I could only count on the sticking qualities of superglue to get the branches to hold. I airbrushed them a dark green colour after attaching.

I do really think that the look of these trees is a lot more convincing than those done with Asparagus. I consequently threw away my two remaining pots of the Asparagus plant, my stock of branches is plenty for any need I may have for them in the future. The dried needles already filling the bottom of the box are a great ground cover.

Building a big fir with moss

This is the Villa Prüm in Clervaux. I build the scale version of the Villa for the diorama and explained it all in the book.

Because of space issues, I could not get any of these high trees near the Villa but as I know from all the pictures I saw, there really should be one near it to make the look complete.

I could not set it on the empty ground before the Villa because that surface is supposed to be the alley leading to it but I was now able to place a big tree right on the border of the last river module with the branches overreaching to this new one and will then be exactly as in the original reference picture.

With a height of over 30 cm (1 ft) it will be another prominent feature of the diorama. Positioned near the border it will also be in the foreground in a lot of photos so I had better to scrape together my last energy and motivation and do it as good as I can.

The big question was, true to my line of thinking throughout the whole diorama:
How could I model a fir in a way nobody did it before and get it to look as real as possible?

I have a fir in my garden standing right in front front of my hobby desk at a mere 5 meter distance with the branches nearly scratching my back.

It was nice to have the reference right there instead of the usuel photo, but looking so close at all the details and the sheer number of branches and twigs to model made it clear that I never would be able to completely copy the orignal.

The first compromise I made was regarding the detailing of the trunk. As I would later try to fit the branches with as much of green stuff as possible, the trunk will hardly be seen from a distance and so I made the absolut minimum here. I applied a coat of Vallejo Stone paste and painted it some red brown colour without going into any other detailing.

Now comes the hard part.

A tree of this size has branches up to 3 meters (10 ft). When I did the small trees, I was able to do a whole branch with one single piece of moss. Unfortunately, no suitable single piece of moss is available for such a size. I used long pieces for the fallen tree, but that worked only because the foliage was shown from the underside and the bend was neutralized because of the position.

A branch of a fir consists of one long central piece with more or less smaller twigs branching out from it. Those twigs are longer near the trunk and are eventually even drying out. I would need to piece together the whole branch.

Using a suitable thin branch as centerpiece I will add sideways to it the same pieces of moss used before as a whole branch by themself. The nearer I get to the front, the smaller my twigs get to the point of using only the samllest part of the moss.

The moss, freshly collected (above left). Depending on the look of every single piece I either leave a piece together (above) or cut away all the individual side arms ot the piece to use at the front of the branches.(left)

I found very interesting branches on another plant I collected years ago. I barely remember now where it is and am not able to point you to a specific species, sorry for that. It has thin and slightly bended twigs who are perfect to use as branches for bigger firs.

Another big advantage of those twigs are the naturally pointed ends.

I used a lump of plasticine to hold the branches while I glued them on, one by one, first one side then the opposite.

Small branches are outfitted exclusively with the little pieces of moss, bigger branches get, at least at the lower part, those pieces partly left together.

It does not matter if you use fresh or already dryed moss. They are airbrushed anyway a dark green before attaching them in the prepared holes in the trunk of the tree.

I prepared a lot of branches first before even thinking to start the tree. On the picture tothe right you even recognize three very small trees I made also. I planted them along the river to fill in a few empty spots.

When I finally started the first rows, I quickly realized what I really was up to. This whole already tiresome preparation work brought me only one or two rows higher!

Even so, as I mentioned already elsewhere in the book, you can't get a really good feeling about the outcome until you are very far into the work. So I went on, eventually running out of those nice curbed twigs, replacing them with other suitable twigs gathered from roots or plants from my stash.

On the lower part of the bigger branches I am attaching some hair roots to simulate the dryed twigs and try to avoid them later during the airbrushing process.

After each row I sprinkled a very fine earth over the branches on top of a water/glue mix I had applied with an old brush. I did that also for the underside where the moss did not obstruct it.

What is the saying again? What you can't reach, you can't see.

During the build I did regularly check if the length of the branches did still fit in the mandatory triangle shape.

Progress for the last third of the build was of course quicker because one tour was done with fewer and shorter pieces. In the meantime, I considered the work a success and this contributed to a renewed motivation to finish it in beauty.

I did not count the pieces, but asserting that I glued thousands of pieces of moss and tiny roots on to those twigs is certainly not an exaggeration. Fortunately I started early with the tree, allowing me to alternate that task with other activities for the last module.

I was not yet finished with the tree. It was still missing the cones!

To get them done I used self-hardening clay. It is best to use Terracotta coloured clay but an earth coloured version worked also. I am turning bits of clay between my fingers trying to point only one side. The cones are to scale with only 2-3 mm length! They got the final colour in a bath of Raw Umber or Raw Sienna oil colours, or a mix of both, depending on the clay colour I started with. The light shine on the cones from the oil colour suits them very well and looks more or less like the original.

Observing my fir in the garden and others in the wood, it was clear that the cones are only present on the upper part of the tree, with a concentration on the last meters. Thanks for that!

While there are cones all around my tree, I put some more on the side it will be viewed on the module.

I have no idea how long this all natural tree will hold. I have a small vignette with a tree featuring moss as foliage, albeit in another form. It was the first or second I ever made some 15 years ago and today, except for some dust, it is still in the same shape as before.

I am confident that once the diorama is exhibited under a glass cover in the museum, I am optimistic that this tree will stay intact for a very long time.

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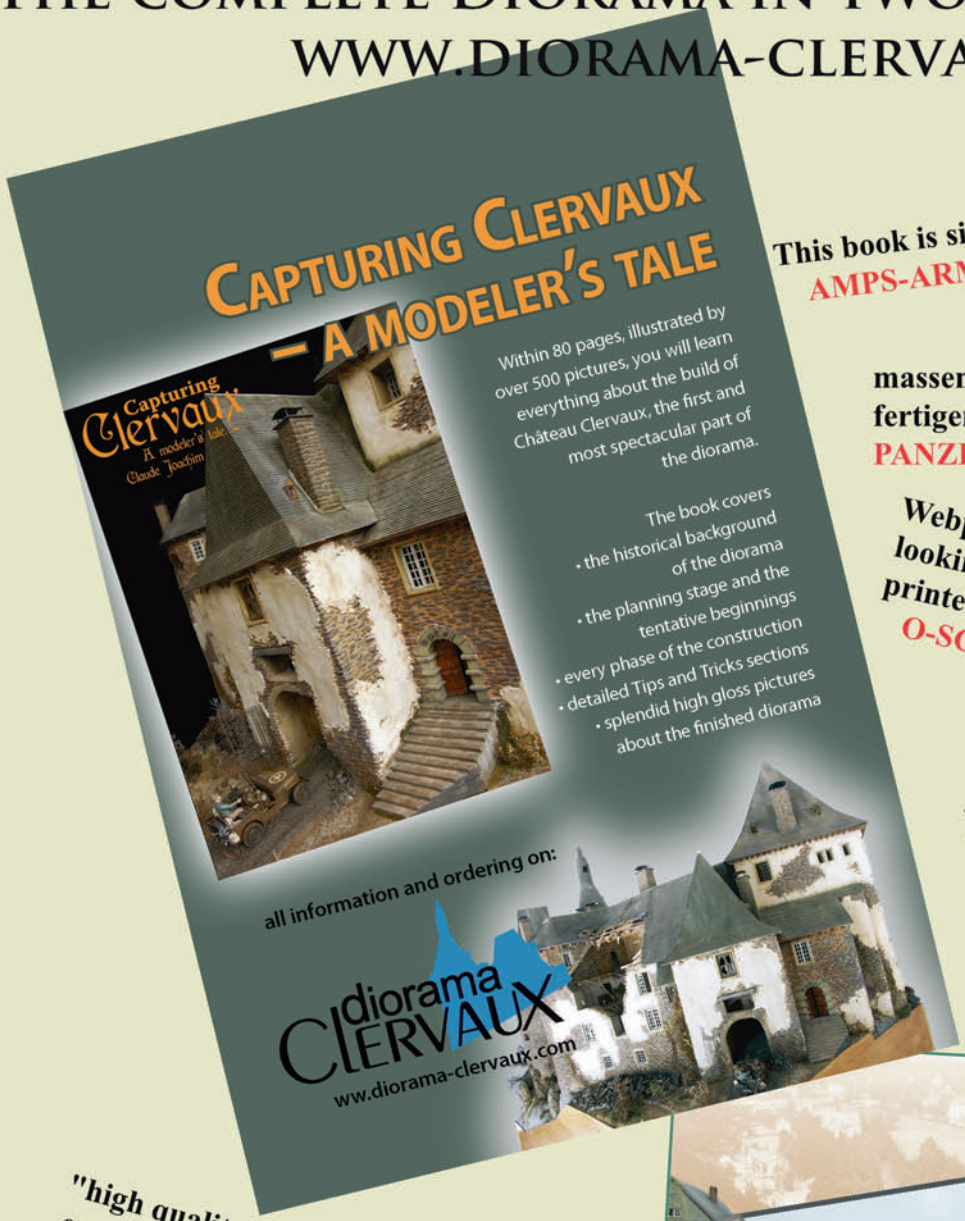

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