

# Making a Scene

BRITTEN-GRANT EVENT DESIGN BUILDS A WORLD OF IMAGINATION FOR ANY OCCASION



**In his busiest season,** artist Tim Grant and his team build fantastic universes the old-school way—by hand, hard work and vivid imagination.

Walking into the Ashburn shop of Britten-Grant Event Design is like walking into an alternate world in which the landmarks of every country—and a few that exist only in our imaginations—have been pulled together in one place.

The first thing you notice is a large reproduction of the Eiffel Tower looming high above on a shelf. In another corner is a large snowman, sitting amid an assortment of giant nutcrackers and a monu-

mental entrance to Santa Land made of candy-cane columns.

Tiki gods share space with a full-size faux Egyptian sarcophagus and a statue of the jackal-headed Egyptian god Anubis. Overhead, huge dice hang from the ceiling, floating over a Pagoda and electrified torches with flaring cloth flames.

Almost every inch of space holds some fanciful object or the materials to construct new ones.

“Kids love the flames,” says Tim Grant, walking through the Britten-Grant “shop,” an approximately 24,000-square-foot warehouse tucked away in a convention-

al business park. Tagging along behind is his precocious 9-year-old son, Tyler, whose Cub Scout troop has previously used the flames as a campfire during meetings in a church hall.

“I’m always on the lookout for crazy stuff,” says Grant, 52, dressed for work in a casual shirt and jeans.

Most Britten-Grant jobs are far grander and more complicated than Cub Scout campfires. Formally founded 16 years ago, the design company is known for setting the scene for lavish galas and fundraisers, conferences and trade shows, and other special events with all kinds of themes. These “experiences” are limited only by the extent of Grant’s imagination and skills and the client’s budget.

Britten-Grant’s reputation also was augmented when the company painted a number of murals for Fairfax County. Among them is one on the bottom of the pool at the Spring Hill RECenter, depicting aquatic life. Another at the Providence RECenter, done in the style of Matisse, pictures a variety of athletes, and two at the Wakefield RECenter portray the “Lost World of Atlantis.”

“When the scene is set, I want the illusion to be complete. I don’t want people seeing the seams,” says Grant, who works with a loyal team of fellow artists and other event professionals.

“Tim knows how to do everything; that’s what he does ... no fuss, no muss ... nothing gets in the way of what he’s doing,” says longtime friend and fellow artist Diana Adams, 62, a Fairfax City photographer and colleague in an art group she and Grant founded eight years ago.

Adams, who regards Grant as a confidant and fellow traveler in the up-and-down world of art, also appreciates Grant’s personal style, saying “he’s thoroughly professional but not officious.”

Jan Davis, CEO of Jan Davis Entertainment and Events, based in Alexandria, has collaborated with Grant on projects for more than a decade.

“He has a passion for what he does and

COURTESY OF BRITTEN-GRANT EVENT DESIGN (GRANT)



love of his product. It comes across in the pieces he creates," says Davis.

Rejecting digitally produced art, at least for himself, Grant resolutely sticks to traditional methods. With the help of a team, he hand creates almost everything.

One of the few exceptions is an evolving website, [www.brittengrant.com](http://www.brittengrant.com). Relatively new, it consists primarily of slide shows that provide vivid, full-color examples of the Britten-Grant product.

Grant's career started in Germany, where he lived after completing his master's in art history at the University of Pittsburgh. Painting theatrical backdrops for some freelance commissions, it was there he discovered his affinity for large-scale painting.

"As an art student, I imagined myself standing at an easel, not painting such huge canvases. It was an epiphany," says Grant, who currently is working on a series of conceptual assemblages made from found objects for himself.

Returning home to the States, he founded Britten-Grant with partner Paul Britten, who departed the company after a year. Britten is now CEO of Michigan-based Britten Banners, a leading provider of the large-scale, digitally-printed banners that adorn places like stadium walls.

"I was the art guy; he was the business guy. ... I'm old school. I like the tactile experience of painting, the smell and being on a scaffold, the whole process," he says.

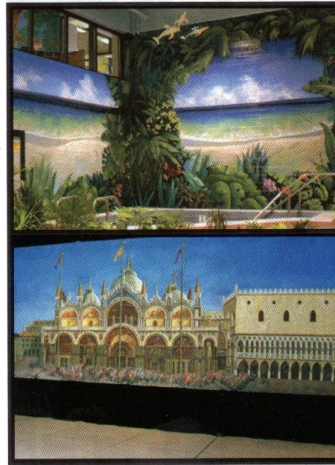
Grant's proposal process is similarly old school, sometimes consisting of just a sketch drawn on a yellow legal pad. He then "figures it all out with paint."

The centerpieces of his scenic environments are huge, hand-painted backdrops. Most are 10-by-24 feet; some are as large as 18-by-36 feet, and a triptych might be 100 feet wide.

A jack-of-all-creative trades, including carpentry and sculpting, Grant's environments are amalgams of backdrops surrounded by scene-specific constructions—like a "Lost in Space"-style robot made of junk and his son's old toys—as well as music and lighting and any other apropos contrivance his imagination and

skills can execute.

Earlier this year, Britten-Grant recreated Venice's Piazza San Marco for an event at the Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C. It was adapted from a previous use at Wolf Trap's annual ball. It's common,



Britten-Grant's mural at Spring Hill RECenter (top) is permanent, while the San Marco scene on display at the Italian Embassy earlier this year (bottom) can be rolled up and taken to different locations.

Grant says, for elements to be reused in whole new ways.

The design for Wolf Trap's "Carnevale di Venezia," which won a national award, involved six separate staging areas, including the Filene Center's stage and wings.

Grant recreated Versailles for another Wolf Trap ball and, a personal favorite, an intricate Indian environment, including the Taj Mahal, for an event at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

He says when working with clients he encourages "guidance." The process, however, is highly individual. "Some want to be spoon fed. Others are very specific."

Right now Britten-Grant is an incredibly bustling place. From the latter part of November to the end of December, it does about 70 percent of its business, sometimes 15 or more jobs, often juggling multiple events on the same day.

"We live in trucks and vans ... then I

collapse," Grant says.

Roger Fones, 49, a lighting technician from Bristow who has worked with Grant for about four years, describes him as a good boss and tireless worker. "He looks out for us," he says. "Ask any of the guys. There's no down side to working for him."

Mitzi Beneck, 47, who has known Grant for a dozen years and worked with him for a decade, is another devoted member of the Britten-Grant team. "When Tim calls, no matter what, it's going to be a blast," she says.

A painter, too, Beneck, from Sterling, credits Grant with being "an incredible mentor," who's helped her discover and hone her own abilities.

Among Britten-Grant's upcoming projects is another favorite, an end-of-year holiday celebration at Fort Myer for underprivileged children, sponsored by repeat client Health Net.

Health Net is an example of a client that knows exactly what it wants—a full-on North Pole motif, glittery, and with everything oversized. Previously used at a Sallie Mae function, the display includes giant nutcrackers and gingerbread people, jewel-toned gumdrop and lollipop backdrops, Santa's throne and that monumental candy-cane entrance, repainted and otherwise spiffed up.

The creative work is mostly done by the time Grant and his team arrive on scene. Though physically taxing, "at this stage, it's Tinker Toys," he says.

On a smaller scale, Grant also is busy preparing for a Sallie Mae party for employees in December with a penguin/Antarctic theme. And there's a February bar mitzvah at the Reston Regency Hyatt with a hockey motif that will include an arena backdrop, centerpieces made with hockey sticks and Stanley Cup sign-in board.

Fair Oaks resident Tom Gonzalez, 82, a longtime friend and member of Grant's art group, is another ardent Tim Grant fan. "It amazes me how much he accomplishes, no matter the time constraints," says Gonzalez, an abstract painter whom Grant regards as a surrogate father. "He always delivers the goods." ■