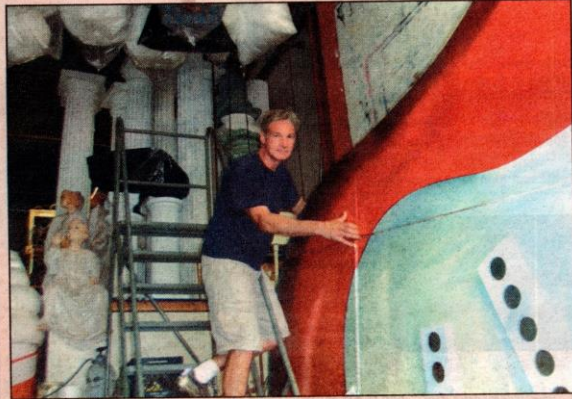


# Ashburn Artist Tells Of Unusual Lifelong Journey

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Tim Grant with one of his larger projects—a huge red guitar that he is in the process of restoring for a client.

in college. He said he was one of those people that couldn't get enough of school. Not only did he receive his degree in visual arts and painting from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, but he also received his degree in design from Point Park University and his master's degree in art history from the University of Pittsburgh.

"You're not in the rat race," Grant said. "I mean it's hard work, you have to study and write papers, but just to be in that forum where people are batting ideas around, you're not forced to pursue money all the time, which is something that is the bane of my existence."

Although he describes not having a real job as scary, Grant loves the freedom that it brings. He believes that the freedom is worth more to him than money.

His career began in West Germany while he was finishing his master's degree.

"While I was there, kind of on a lark, I was asked to paint a theatrical backdrop," Grant said. "That changed my life."

Grant continued to paint theatrical backdrops as a freelance scenic artist and mural painter. Gradually, the work evolved into a

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business. Over a period of more than 20 years he has created approximately 2,000 to 3,000 projects.

His work is separated into two categories: creating pieces from scratch and reusing pieces for new sets. Grant said creating brand-new pieces is the more fun category, whereas the other category fills the day-in and day-out work. Customers can peruse his catalogue filled with inventory of pre-made pieces that have been used on past projects that are already priced à la carte. These pieces are refurbished before being used for another project.

Grant can create almost anything that a

client asks of him including scenic backdrops, décor, props and architectural pieces. Currently, he is restoring a giant, vibrant red guitar that is going to be used for an event next month.

His favorite job was a series of projects for Fairfax County. At the Spring Hill Recreation Center, Grant painted a mural by the Jacuzzi and at the bottom of the pool. The mural on the bottom of the pool is a beach scene with aquatic life.

"It was designed with the swimming instructors," Grant said. "We painted different kinds of fish throughout the pool, and the instructors will tell the kids to swim across and follow the sand bar, or swim across and see if they can find the angelfish. It has an instructive component."

Grant also painted a mural at the bottom of the South Run Recreation Center pool. He painted groupings of fish in numbers from one to 10. "It is fun for the kids because they are on a hunt, but without realizing it they are putting their heads under water, and they're learning to be comfortable in that environment," he said.

His first breakthrough job was at the Wakefield Recreation Center where he painted murals on two 24-foot-by-110-foot walls. Before Grant painted the walls, they were raw cinderblock. Since the facility didn't have enough money to renovate, officials decided to have a mural painted. However, the facility could only close for 10 days for the job to be completed. Companies were saying it would cost approximately \$40,000 to \$50,000 to complete the job.

"I came up to them, and said, 'I'll do it,'" Grant said. "I gave them a really good price—like \$10,000—which is kind of nothing. They didn't think I could do it, but I did it. I actually got it done in eight days."

Grant painted both walls with a regular-sized paintbrush. Jogging out of his office, he retrieved the old brush that he used on that project. The brush's bristles were worn down incredibly low. "I literally brushed the daylight's out of that wall."

Frantically searching through one of his portfolios, Grant said, "This was a blast," referring to Marriott's international conference in Atlanta for which he created futuristic set designs.

Although Grant works on similar projects, like murals of different scenes, he has never done the exact same thing twice, which he finds the most exciting about his job. He continues to keep his art fresh by maintaining a particular mindset. "It is always art to me," Grant said. "It doesn't matter whether the shape is a penguin, or an orca, or if it is going to be a city skyline of New York. It is still a composition, and the challenge is about arranging a composition in an interesting way regardless of what the content is."

Grant is passionate about every project he works on, but there are projects where things go terribly wrong. His trucks have broken down in the loading docks many times, and he even left the keys to a truck in the vehicle.

"This is a business that takes Murphy's

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Law to the extreme. You can't imagine the things that can go wrong, and they do go wrong," he said, "but we always get the job done, we always get it up, and we always get it out the door."

When Grant refers to "we," he is referring to the people that help him transport and install his projects. Throughout the years he has had help completing projects; however he is currently working on his own.

The biggest challenge Grant faces is money, which he admits without hesitation.

"If you are in an art-related thing, then the demand isn't there," Grant said. "You have to be as creative at creating a demand for what you do as you are with your product itself."

However, throughout all the challenges, Grant has found a reward. His daughter will be attending Virginia Commonwealth University in the fall to study art.

"In a funny way, that means I did good," he said. "To me, it makes me feel like I did something that influenced her."

Grant admires those that pursue careers in the arts and humanities because many people, he said, choose to go after money. However, he does not fault them for that.

His experience in the art industry has been a whirlwind, and the paint-splattered floors and cluttered shelves are mere representations of the lifelong journey Grant is on.

"I'm in this business, and I'm doing it on my own. I've learned to do things I never thought I'd do," Grant said. "I've developed a skill set that I never thought I would have." ■