

Part One

The Professional Scenic Artist



Mural detail from the Cabot Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, designed by David Birn, painted at Cobalt Studios by David Zinn and Rachel Keebler.

## Chapter 1

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# Training and Working as a Scenic Artist

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Being a scenic artist is an unusual and highly rewarding career. One thing that makes scenic artistry unusual is the physical scale of the work. Stage paintings are often enormous relative to an artist's canvas. One-thousand-square-foot canvases knocked out in one, two or three days (or even hours) are not the stuff of everyday life, except for the scenic artist. Another thing that makes scenic artistry unusual is the apparent anonymity of the artist to the public. The fact that the apparent "credit" for the canvas goes first to the scenic designer may seem odd. Imagine Michelangelo allowing his staff to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel from his sketches—it's unfathomable. Yet the value of the artist these days is less emphatically on the skill of the artist than the creative idea. It is the norm in theatre that the scenic designer has the public face as the creator when it comes to stage scenery. However, those of us who work in theatre know well that scenic artists are as much a part of the creative process as designers. Just as Broadway producers insist on such gifted designers as Tony Walton, John Napier, and Heidi Landesman (to name but a few), it is inconceivable that any of these great designers would venture into a "painted" design without being assured that only top scenic artists would be available. Great painters like Joe Forbes, Rachel Keebler, Doug Lebrecht, Nancy Orr, Jane Snow, and Mary Heilman are equally in demand for high-venture stage productions as are the better-known scenic designers.

Scenic artistry is profoundly rewarding, too. How many young artists dream of living off their painting? This is what the scenic artist does, for it is a career of painting, plain and simple. That scenic art is also hard labor becomes apparent all too quickly to the young (and old) practitioner. And sometimes this reality is the thing we find hard to overlook. Yet who can deny the rich pleasure of the act of painting? When the canvas is primed and fresh, when the cartoon is ready and the colors mixed, it is exciting to lay down the first color on a drop. There is an immediate reward of a brush pulling on canvas and the proper stroke of paint. Does this not reward us in some profound way?

Most fundamentally, a scenic artist is a highly specialized painter who works on very large-scale and often realistic paintings. Yet this sort of painting is by no means all that scenic artists do. In fact, it is difficult to state exactly what type of painting a scenic artist will be required to do during the course of any given day. All scenic artists are certainly expected to be capable of painting large-scale backdrops, once the principal output of the trade. Contemporary scenic artists are also expected to adeptly paint two- and three-dimensional scenery by employing a wide array of painting techniques. Faux finish techniques on three-dimensional surfaces are as common now as the traditional trompe l'oeil painting that is the foundation of scenic art.

Scenic artists paint on canvas, linen, wood, plastic, foam, and metal as a matter of course. They paint



**Figure 1.1** 19th-century painting techniques. From the Lyric Opera of Chicago/Northern Illinois University Historical Scenic Collection (Courtesy of The School of Theatre and Dance, Northern Illinois University, Alexander Aducci, Curator).

vertically in front of them and horizontally below them using hundreds of colors, a variety of mediums, and various finishing products, and they are expected to be experts in the use of these materials. They paint with brooms, sprayers, rollers, pumps, sponges, rags, and, of course, brushes. Sculpture and carving are skills expected of many scenic artists, especially in regional theatres (though at the top levels of the craft there are sculptors who do exclusively that). Thus, knowledge of assembling and carving wood, foam, fabric, metal, and other materials is also essential knowledge for the scenic artist, although not the focus of this text.

Scenic artists must be able to not just reproduce what is given them, but to transform it. Usually, scenic artists are interpreting the work of a scenic designer from a very small scale into a large size appropriate for the theatre. The key to the craft is the ability to interpret. Most anyone can learn to trace or mechanically reproduce an image. Scenic artists must

interpret visual information received from the designer, not just by surface appearance but also by how that information relates to the overall stage picture. Thus, scenic artists must understand the scenic designer's artistic intentions. This ability to interpret cannot be understated. This is increasingly true as scenic designers who provide the information from which scenic artists must work are themselves working less and less by painting and more and more by digital collage. The bottom line is that scenic artists have to paint scenery with a brush—or something like a brush—and make the image happen no matter what form the information comes in. Good scenic artists must also be able to remain neutral in their own painting style in order to absorb the style of the art they are expected to interpret.

Thousands of people around the world have careers as scenic artists, and the profession has existed since the Italian Renaissance. In fact, scenic painting existed as early as Classical Greece, but it is in the last 500 years that it has flourished and been refined, and practitioners have prospered. The fact that scenic art is a career has two profound implications: one is that a person can make a very good living at it, the other is that it is a business as well as an art form.

It is undeniable that more job opportunities exist in professional scenic painting now than ever before. This is certainly true if one includes scenic artists who work in television, film, and decorative arts. It is also true that there are many more paths by which one enters the profession now than there were in the past, even the recent past. This is most true in North America, where a sprawling private and public university system provides good exposure and, in some cases, excellent training in theatre practice. The traditional training format was an apprentice system, one in which women were rarely admitted. This has changed significantly in the last 100 years, in part as a result of the universities mentioned earlier and the appearance of very specialized private schools and studio training. The American union for theatrical artists, United Scenic Artists (USA), also has recently instituted an apprenticeship program for scenic artists.

No matter how one begins to develop scenic painting skills, it takes time—often a lot of time—to become an accomplished, independent artist. Even after advanced training at a university, it may take years of experience to attain the skills required to proficiently paint one challenging and diverse project after another. Almost every successful scenic artist can point to one or two people in their career who



**Figure 1.2**  
The scenic shop at Cobalt Studios.

took them under their wing and trained them. Though apprenticeship is no longer the only way in to the profession, it is almost always a critical part of a scenic artist's development. There are always extremely gifted painters who seem to understand exactly how scenic painting works even after minimal exposure to the art form. However, the rest of us must keep in mind that being a *good* scenic artist takes time. There is much to learn artistically, managerially, and practically. Another important aphorism to keep in mind is that scenic artists never stop learning. Every encounter with the physical world is another opportunity for the scenic artist to better understand the practice, techniques, and art of the profession.

## TRAINING TO BE A SCENIC ARTIST

It takes an enormous amount of experience to become proficient at theatrical painting. This chapter is meant to help beginning scenic artists understand how and where to get this experience as well as why it is so important.

### What a Scenic Artist Should Know

Successful scenic artists, like many artists of the theatre, need a wide array of skills and knowledge to serve them in their profession. Of course, good scenic

artists must draw and paint very well. Scenic artists also must know their tools—paint and brushes—as well as the surfaces they are called on to paint and the hundreds of products used in painting, staining, dying, sealing, texturing, thinning, extending, or chemically drying paint. Scenic artists also must possess knowledge in the areas of scenic design, drafting, calligraphy, and sign painting. In this profession, where visual images are reproduced on a large scale, such expertise is the foundational skill set.

In addition to these skills, exceptional scenic artists will have acquired a wide base of knowledge to support the visual images and effects that they are asked to create. Knowledge in the areas of art and art history, architecture, architectural and theatrical history, photography, printing, mechanical image reproduction, and geometry and the natural sciences are all part of the body of knowledge that contributes to the day-to-day work of the scenic artist. A keen curiosity and good powers of observation will help put this acquired knowledge to work. Travel and experience certainly contribute to the ability to synthesize one's knowledge of the physical world.

*Drawing and drafting* are the tools scenic artists use when beginning a scenic image. All convincing images, particularly *trompe l'oeil*, begin with a sound drawing. The drawing of architecture relies on the rules of *geometry* and *perspective* to guide it. Geometry is essential because it provides a rational,



mathematical basis for the visual arts. Most artists need comprehensive drawing and drafting skills as well as a sound understanding of perspective to reproduce a complex image like a perspective street scene. This is especially true when laying out a full-stage drop. Scenic artists painting a drop must be in command of the overall perspective while drawing it out in small manageable pieces. But, beyond drawing, even the simplest wet blend of one color to another must have correct proportion to look balanced. Classical Greek ideals of proportion and form are based on geometric rationality. These aesthetics of proper proportion and ideal form are the core of many of the visual images we see today.

More specialized forms of drawing include *calligraphy*, *lettering*, and *sign painting*, which shape letters and words, perhaps the most precise set of graphic images in the world. These images are familiar to all viewers, who instinctively recognize good or poor lettering. Scenic artists should thus have a working knowledge of the construction of common serif and sans serif style lettering as well as an understanding of calligraphy and sign painting. Calligraphy and sign painting rely on brush techniques as well as the form of the letters themselves and are specialized skills that scenic artists must at least comprehend.

As noted earlier, scenic artists are dependent first and foremost on their skills as painters. These skills

must be based in the fundamentals of *painting* and *color theory* and a variety of *painting techniques*. Sound understanding of color is critical for scenic artists, as they will mix paint colors based on their understanding of how colors interact to achieve their target color. Manipulating the application of color on a painted surface so it appears to be one hue at a distance even though close up it might be a combination of hues is a skill based on understanding color and human optical perception.

Scenic artists also must be well versed in how painting techniques have evolved. Scenic artistry is a profession in which artists might be called on to recapture the soul and substance of art from all eras in history. In one production, a scenic artist may be called on to recreate in a very large scale Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, whereas in the next production, the challenge might be to create wallpaper in the style of Andy Warhol. Scenic artists must understand the methods whereby these works were originally created to recreate them on stage. Furthermore, they must be able to recreate these images very quickly. Scenic artists cannot reproduce *The Night Watch* with the thickly applied oil-based pigment that Rembrandt used or turn to silk screening as Warhol did. Instead, they must rely on their knowledge of modern mediums and alternative techniques to recreate the same effects quickly while fulfilling the vision of the scenic designer.



**Figure 1.3** A scenic artist must know art history and style. *Chaucer*, Scenic Art Studios.

Knowledge and understanding of the *histories of art, architecture, and theatre* also are essential to understanding what scenic artists are called on to paint. Scenic artists need to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the scenic designer's artistic intent behind the use of classic and artistic references in a design so that the intent comes through clearly in the contemporary execution of it. Theatre is tremendously reliant on history and historical references. We work with 400-year-old plays as a matter of course. Although the statement a production makes is obviously contemporary, the elements of

expression often are drawn from history. Many scenic designers describe their work in terms of other artists or artistic movements, even if no direct imitation is involved. Because designers often rely on phrases to evoke a scenic vision, such as “the cool controlled world of Vermeer” or “the dark quality of Romanesque architecture,” all the while describing a design for *The Life and Death of King John*, scenic artists had better know what these coded words mean. These references are a way of describing the intangibles of design. Sometimes, the best way to put words to an image is to bring to mind the memory of



**Figure 1.4**

Scenic artists will be asked to emulate many different painting techniques and styles. *Enchanted April*, Scenic Art Studios.

a well-known image as a vehicle to convey style and intention.

*Photography* is a useful means to observe the world because it asks the careful photographer to consider light, both natural and artificial, in an objective way. Light reveals all visual images. Understanding and reproducing how surface, form, and atmosphere respond to light is the mark of a proficient painter. The very act of photography helps anyone retain the memory of a place. A stock of photographs can serve as a fabulous personal resource for scenic artists. For example, an album of cloud and sky photos will come in handy for scenic artists painting sky drops and landscapes. This is evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of Judy Juracek's marvelous publications *Surfaces*, *Natural Surfaces*, and *Soft Surfaces* in scenic studios and on scenic designers' shelves. These three publications are rich collections of high-quality photographs of common and uncommon objects and surfaces that designers and artists use in the theatre.

Knowledge in the *technology* of related crafts has direct application to scenic art, particularly with computers and mechanical image reproduction. Copy machines and the computer are now irreplaceable tools for most scenic designers and scenic artists. Complex signage is easily cartooned or actually cut into many commonly used materials with the aid of a computer-guided router, commonly called a CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine. Stencils of any type can be made in the same way, and a computer will help in the registration process. Digital image manipulation can aid a scenic artist in adapting paint elevations to odd sizes or in creating more mechanical printing "looks" like dot screening. Scenic designers use photocopying and digital imaging extensively to make paint elevations. Large-format copy machines and printers provide a source to scenic artists for finished, or nearly finished, color images for stage use. Ultra-large-format painting machines are widely used for full-stage drops or large painted surfaces. The very presence of these machines forces a debate as to the relevance of the scenic artist versus a machine that paints. One cannot expect that the simple and marvelous human gesture of painting can ever be cost-effectively replaced, but it is a good idea for scenic artists to be fully aware of how such machines work and what sorts of binders, pigments, and application processes they employ.

Natural sciences such as *geology* and *geography* are a means of rationally defining our world. Geology and cartography certainly are removed from

the study of painting and theatre, but for an artist responsible for painting representations and aspects of the world we live in, there is no area of knowledge that will not at one time or another prove invaluable. For instance, scenic artists are often called on to realistically paint stone. Thus, the ability to paint marble, limestone, and fieldstone is needed in the scenic artist's repertory. Understanding the science of the structure of the earth will help artists in creating a faux drift marble finish as much as geometry will help them understand architectural shapes. The same can be said of taxonomy, the classification of all organisms; anthropology, the study of the cultural development of humankind; and geography, the study of the earth's features—all areas of knowledge that will be of great value to scenic artists.

The experience of *travel* certainly is an obvious asset for any scenic artist, as it is an important means for understanding the world one lives in. Travel has been, and still is, an important component of higher education for university students. It is revealing the first time one goes to Italy and sees the blue sky there contrasted with the red tile roofs. Once one has seen a vista with these elements in it, the aesthetic relationship of these colors to the Italian landscape makes sense. Add in the recognition one has at seeing umber and sienna in their native state. It is as much a part of their world as the "purple-mountained majesty" is a part of the Americas. So many aspects of the world



**Figure 1.5** An example of turn-of-the-century American scenic painting elevation, Twin Cities Scenic Collection (courtesy of the Performing Arts Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, St. Paul, Minnesota).



cannot be fully captured in a photograph, such as the diminutive size of an old European village or the massive quality of Manhattan building details. Travel is not just leisure time for scenic artists; observing the variety of the world builds integrity into their work. Time and time again, scenic artists are called on to fill in the blanks, make up a detail, or flesh out a piece of trim. Having a personal reserve of experience will make that work all the more interesting and authentic.

The qualities of a good chef are not unlike those of a good painter. Good cooks take individual ingredients and make a mixture that is better than the sum of the parts. In fact, relatively simple ingredients make magnificent dishes, like a cassoulet or a risotto. In the same light, a painting is, after all, just so much paint. Part of what makes painting and cooking similar is the craft behind them. Good cooking starts with solid technical skills: chopping items correctly, making a simple béchamel sauce, using ingredients at the right temperature, and so on. Then one actually cooks each element of a dish in the correct manner—not too long, not too quickly. Then one seasons with restraint to allow the inherent flavors to emerge. It is not magic, just good practice. The same is true of painting; if one takes all the correct steps in order and does them well, the result is sound. I was taught early on that every step of the painting process needs to look good, and that a poorly done step cannot be covered up by better work later. Best to correct things then and there. Good painters, like good cooks, know that painting too much—*overpainting*—can destroy good work just as too much salt can ruin a delicate dish. Part of learning to paint is learning process and practicing restraint when appropriate.

### **That Special Something that Makes You a Scenic Artist**

Ultimately, scenic artistry is basically a visual art. Besides the vast array of technical and organizational skills they must possess, scenic artists must be able to see and interpret the world. The word *seeing* here is distinguished from the word *looking*. Developing painting skills becomes part of every waking moment because these skills are directly related to the skills of observation. Scenic artists must learn how to see the world around them, constantly exercising their observational skills by breaking down every form or vista into the components necessary to translate them into two-dimensional images. How is the depth of

field described in line work? How would the line work be constructed to represent the foreshortening of forms? How can a texture be recreated? What base coat should be used? Which elements would be painted first? What painting techniques would be used? Where would the shades be located? What highlight color would complement the cast shadow and describe the quality of light? If this image were executed in an impressionistic style, what would the palette of colors be? Because scenic artists are first and foremost visual artists, these exercises are preformed numerous times each day—almost unconsciously—because the artists are always seeing and improving their paint skills, whether there is a brush in hand or not.

Scenic artists must be conversant and fluid in many different styles of art. These skills are also reflected in the scenic artist's ability to recognize and understand the skill and stylistic fluidity of other artists. Whether walking through a picture gallery, looking through a book, or observing the work of peers, scenic artists perfect their skills by scrutinizing how other artists have solved cartooning problems, applied color theory, and utilized painting techniques. When scenic artists are in the paint shop, these skills of observation are reflected in their accurate drafting ability, chroma and value consciousness, stylistic fluidity, and ability to recognize the accuracy of essential visual elements in the work on the shop floor.

### **Formal Training for Scenic Artists**

Until the 20th century, training in the art of scenic painting was available only to the sons of established scenic artists and young men willing to work under a long apprenticeship. Often, children began to learn the craft in scenic studios at the age of 12. This changed considerably in the 20th century, principally due to the power of labor unions that humanized working conditions, improved pay scales, and permitted the inclusion of women in the craft. Equally significant is the vast expansion of training opportunities in the theatre through the American university system. There are dozens of university programs in which terminal Master of Fine Arts degrees are available to performers, artists, and technicians of the theatre. Few offer degrees specifically for scenic artists, but many offer training in scenic art. Even more universities have undergraduate degree programs in theatre offering Bachelor of Fine Arts or Bachelor of Arts degree options. These programs prepare students for

advanced training or provide ambitious students with enough information to continue their own training as apprentices or full-fledged scenic artists.

### **University Programs**

The population boom in the United States during the 20th century created a large university network, making post-secondary schooling available to millions of students. As noted above, many universities in the United States have adopted practical training for theatre craft into their curricula. The growth of this system has taken place at roughly the same time as the growth of unions representing the theatrical trades. Some of the first influential American scenic designers established the first theatrical training programs at

American universities. Yale University established the first training program for scenic designers in the 1920s under the direction of Donald Oenslager.<sup>1</sup> Yale Drama School continues as one of the finest training programs in the country, particularly in the design fields. The basic format of that program has been widely imitated throughout the country, and now over 250 American universities, representing every state, offer advanced training in the theatrical arts. Many of these offer degrees specifically in theatrical production at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

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<sup>1</sup>Larson, 1989



**Figure 1.6**

The scenic shop at North Carolina School of the Arts. Daniel Thobias (left) and Adriane Donlet painting on *The Sleeping Beauty*, designed by Raber Umphenour.

The university setting may be the most logical place to begin training as a scenic artist. In these programs, classes are available in the many disciplines of theatre, such as acting, directing, design, stage management, and technical theatre, which help students understand the work performed by all contributors to a theatrical production. Most programs include theatrical history and critical studies courses, which help create an understanding of dramatic literature and production history. Students of scenic artistry will find that classes in design, technical drawing, and rendering will have a direct application to their craft.

The university also provides other classes that are equally important to the scenic artist. The topics of art, art history, architectural history, painting, photography, the natural sciences, and many other useful fields of study are available to students in this setting. As well as providing an excellent means to explore many topics related to scenic painting, university programs also give students the opportunity to gain practical experience while working on well-organized productions with a professional staff. Only comprehensive theatre programs offer classes specifically in scenic painting. Many university programs have only one class in scenic painting; some have two or more. Beyond these courses in the curriculum, students may enroll in independent studies to continue the study of scenic painting. Students with an interest in scenic artistry often obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in theatre or theatre production. Many students opt to go on and obtain a Master of Fine Arts degree in scenic design. As of the publication of this book, few institutions, such as North Carolina School for the Arts and Cal Arts, offer a degree that includes scenic artistry and properties painting.

A good university program is an excellent place to begin a career in the theatre. However, some programs may have the opposite effect of discouraging talented artists through overwork or in miserable working conditions. It is therefore important that students, their parents, and advisors know what to look for in a university program. Any student interested in studying scenic art should pay a visit to the college or university before choosing to attend classes there. They should look through the curriculum and inquire about scenic art classes and possible production experience, and meet with the professor teaching the scenic art classes and any staff scenic artists. Interested students should also talk to students already in the program and tour the facilities to determine whether the equipment and space available are

conducive to well-painted productions. The following are some points interested students should consider:

- What is your evaluation of the painting and overall production facilities? Are the working conditions comfortable and safe? Is there adequate light and ventilation? Is the shop reasonably neat and inviting?
- What sort of work are students in the program doing? Are they being challenged by their class and production work?
- Is the instructor truly a specialist in scenic painting?
- Is there a paint frame or wooden deck space large enough to handle a full-stage drop? (If not, chances are that drops are not done there very often.)
- Are materials handled and stored properly? (This will be an insight into the general working conditions and attitudes of the program.)
- Is there enough space to conduct a scene painting class?
- Is there enough time in the production schedule to allow for scene painting instruction, or is it taught only by working on productions?
- Are there opportunities to work on productions with professional supervision? Can you see photos of past productions where the design incorporated advanced scenic art techniques?

In addition to asking these questions, interested students should see a school production if they can, or at least look at the scenery in the shop and determine whether the painting looks professional. They should try to get a sense of the production schedule in terms of how the painting is considered in the construction period. If the scenic artist or technical director maintains that most of the painting for a production is done in a weekend, students should look elsewhere.

### ***Specialized Schools or Programs***

Serious students of scenic painting may seek to attend a specialized school or studio where theatrical painting is the emphasis of the training. This might be in addition to undergraduate training in theatre or might be undertaken during a career in order to elevate one's painting skills.

From the 1950s until 1988, the Studio and Forum of Stage Design, operated by Lester Polakov,

trained scores of scenic artists and designers. This famous studio taught painting, drawing, and design and served as an important meeting place for the New York City design world. But when the studio closed its doors in 1988, it left New York City—the traditional center of scenic production in North America—without a place to study scenic art.

However, this gap began to be filled in 1990, when Cobalt Studios opened in White Lake, New York. Cofounded by Rachel Keebler and Howard Jones, both leading professional American scenic artists and teachers. Cobalt Studios is now operated by Rachel Keebler and provides intensive instruction in scenic painting. It is one of few such studios in the world and is unique in the thoroughness of its program. Cobalt Studios maintains an ongoing offering of courses. Students can attend a concentrated two-year program in addition to the two- to four-day sessions, three-week short courses, and frequent weekend seminars. Cobalt also is a working scenic studio, which provides a unique opportunity for students to work on actual high-profile scenic productions with well-known professional designers. The studio also

serves the professional community as a hub for information about the profession, methods, materials, and techniques.

Scenic artist training also is available in the New York City area at the recently formed Studio and Forum of Scenic Arts. This private studio, owned and operated by Joseph Forbes and Janet Stapleman, offers a two-year training program in scenic painting. The location of the studio, as well as its prestigious faculty, makes it the obvious successor to Lester Polokov's famed studio.

In addition to these programs, the scenic artists' union, United Scenic Artists (USA), occasionally sponsors painting workshops featuring the "old masters" of New York. These are generally available only to union members. Meanwhile, the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) annual conference often includes some scenic art demonstrations of a very high caliber, although these tend to be no more than one or two days in length.

Many European countries have followed the system, begun during the 18th century, of establishing large centralized art academies such as



**Figure 1.7** The shop floor at Scenic Art Studios.



L'Académie des Beaux Arts in France or the English Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). These institutes offer extremely specialized training in either art (the French Beaux Arts) or theatre (RADA). They are very different from the United States university system in that they are highly specialized and extremely competitive. Both countries have other centers where theatre arts and scenic painting are instructed or where specialized decorative painting is taught. These schools, however, are few in number, competitive, and can be very expensive for foreign students.

### ***Apprenticeships and On-the-Job Training***

The experience and training students gain in a university situation does not fully prepare them to work in or run a professional shop. The skills and knowledge expected of a scenic artist are too vast; the confidence the scenic artist must have to perform the job with alacrity generally comes only with seasoned experience. Thus, some form of apprenticeship, either formal or informal, is essential to learning the profession of scenic artistry. Nearly every scenic artist has had a master-apprentice experience in his or her own training, one or two individuals who “showed the artist the ropes” (or buckets in this case). No better training can be obtained than the one-on-one instruction of working with a master scenic artist for an extended period of time. There is rarely a job where you don’t come away with something more than a paycheck. Every new project or partnership brings a new technique or a new way of doing things, even if only a new way to stir paint. Every scenic artist you encounter—whether they be fellow students or old pros—will have knowledge to share.

United Scenic Artists has an apprenticeship program for scenic artists in New York City. It is a three-year training program in which the apprentice has the possibility of working in a variety of venues, including network television, episodic television, cable television, scenic studios, and the Metropolitan Opera. The apprenticeship program takes applicants based on availability of work in the region. Entrance to the program is by a three-step process of an examination, portfolio review and interview, and practical skills test. Apprentices work with journeymen scenic artists at a ratio of one apprentice to five journeymen and they are paid at a fractional rate of journeymen scale that increases every four months. The apprentice is

made a full USA scenic artist member at the successful completion of the apprenticeship.

Cobalt Studios devotes approximately half of its curriculum for long-term students to work with actual productions in its studio. In this way, it can offer an apprenticeship in tandem with the scenic art coursework. Many professional scenic artists want to informally instruct assistants and are pleased to share what they know with a novice because they themselves got their start in much the same way. Compensation may be problematic, but as the scenic artist fresh to the professional world acquires and displays skill and confidence, the pay will improve.

The four types of training of a scenic artist listed here—university schooling, specialized training, apprenticeship, and on-the-job training—together form an excellent path toward becoming a scenic artist.

## **WORKING AS A SCENIC ARTIST**

Getting and keeping work as a scenic artist requires considerable time and effort, particularly at the beginning of a career. Very few regular full-time jobs are available in the profession. When starting a career, much of the work available is on a short-term freelance basis, which means that, at first, you cannot turn down many job offers. If your work is good, one job inevitably will lead to another. Most practitioners of the theatrical trades will know someone you may have worked with, and scenic artistry is no exception. Once you have worked well for one company, the word of your performance will precede you to the next job. Employers want to hire known quantities, so get known for the right reasons. If your work is good, on schedule, and within budget, producers, scenic designers, and other scenic artists will seek you out.

When you are contracted to do a job, to work a season, or to deliver a product, the company that employed you is your client. Before you work that first job, take a few moments to consider what a good scenic artist is and what an effective employee or contractor is. One of the best ways to do this is to imagine yourself in your client’s place. The client hires a scenic artist with the expectation that the artist will fulfill a function or perform a task. This means a high-quality job done on time with no unnecessary problems or holdups, performed by a person with a professional attitude. A professional



**Figure 1.8** Design for chandeliers, *Un Ballo in Maschera* at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City. Sketch drafted by Hal Tiné, painted by Peter Wexler. Photo by Peter Wexler, courtesy of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Peter Wexler Collection.

attitude is very important. “I have no complaints about the work that artist did but I don’t have time for the hassles,” paraphrases the reason clients often give for not rehiring talented artists. It is not enough to paint beautifully; you must manage the work well

and perform it professionally. If problems do arise, and they often do, scenic artists should always try to find a solution on their own before making demands on the client. If you need to bring the problem to the attention of the client, you should present it along with one or two suggested solutions. If your engagement has made the client’s job easier or has made the contract run more smoothly, there is a strong chance that you will be asked back.

The employer also must have a professional attitude. If you are working as an employee, it is the employer’s responsibility to provide you with a work space that is both adequate for the job at hand and safe. The workspace must be large enough to accommodate the project, have adequate lighting, a mixing area, a water source, and heat in the winter, and be safe and secure. If you are working in a bad part of town, you should not have to worry about your personal safety or the safety of your vehicle. If you are working in a warehouse, you should not have to be concerned about working in a toxic environment. Chapter 4 discusses the workspace at length.

The employer also must provide adequate materials to work with and a reasonable time frame for the painting to be completed. If time is short, the employer must provide a means to hire additional assistants.



**Figure 1.9** Opening scene with chandeliers, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City. Photo by Peter Wexler.

If one of these work conditions is constrained—not enough time, space, or assistants—the employer must be willing to compensate you for the extra effort you will have to make to get the project done on time. There is a saying in theatre, “We can do it fast, cheap, or good. Pick any two.” Obviously, if there is plenty of time and money, the product will be beautiful. If quality is important but there is very little time, then the product will be very costly. If the employer insists the product be done quickly and cheaply, then the quality will suffer.

Many scenic designers, when starting their careers, find that they also must fulfill the function of the scenic artist on the project. This is very common in educational, community, and small regional theatres. For this reason, many scene designers have discovered that scenic artistry is a useful skill in developing their careers. Scenic designers often find that any skills they gain or improve upon as a scenic artist benefit their design skills as well.

## Labor Unions

The United States has two large labor unions that establish working conditions and negotiate contracts and pay scale for artists and technicians in the film industry, television, the theatre, and related entertainment industries. These two unions are United Scenic Artists (USA) and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE). The USA was once allied with the much larger International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades (IBPAT). However, USA recently left that alliance in favor of a much more logical alliance with IATSE. In fact, USA is now a single local within IATSE known by its original local number 829. A scenic artist is more likely to become a member of USA, although there are IASTE locals that specialize in representing theatrical scenic painters. Some scenic artists are members of both USA as well as a local IASTE, usually in the area where they obtain most of their employment.

## United Scenic Artists

USA is a New York City-based organization that represents scenic artists, scenic designers, costume designers, lighting designers, properties artisans, industrial artists, computer artists, and muralists. USA began in 1896 as a union for scenic artists by separating from a labor organization that represented stagehands. In 1922, the union subdivided to



**Figure 1.10** The United Scenic Artists stamp.

recognize scenic artists and scenic designers separately. Since then, the union has branched out to represent the various categories mentioned above. USA also maintains offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and New England. Some of these offices were once separate autonomous locals, but the union merged into a single local in the 1990s, retaining the New York City local number of 829. USA has members in every state of the United States, the greatest density of which are in the New York City metropolitan area. Membership in the union is considered by many scenic artists to be one of the gateways into a successful career.

**How to Become a Member of United Scenic Artists.** Members are admitted to the USA union through one of three methods: Track A, the Open Examination (Track B), or the apprenticeship program. These means of entry into the USA are not available in all of the four regional offices. The New York City office is the only location where the examination and apprenticeship options are currently available.

*Track A* is a relatively new attempt to streamline the entry process for experienced scenic artists. Applicants' resumes are screened by a committee before they are accepted into the Track A examination. This examination consists of an extensive interview and portfolio review for which applicants must provide three letters of recommendation from current USA members. A panel of union members then evaluates the applicant's portfolio. Based on certain criteria, the panel decides which applicants should be recommended for entry into the union. Track A exams can be taken in New York City, Chicago, and Miami. Information concerning this examination is also available through the office in Los Angeles. Non-USA members employed in a union-represented scenic

studio or producing studio (network television, major opera, and so on) for over 30 days must submit an application for Track A entry.

The *Open Examination* (also known as the *Track B examination*) was the traditional path and once the only path of entry into the USA. This lengthy examination, offered only in New York City, consists of several parts: a general aptitude test, a home project, an interview, and a practical skills test. This famed and feared examination once included a two-day practical examination but the process has been streamlined considerably in recent years. The home project consists of a packet of one to five separate projects that are to be completed and brought to the exam site. These home projects are designed not only to test applicants' scenic art skills but to test their knowledge of art and architecture and their capacity to follow instructions.

The second part is the on-site practical exam, which, until recently, took place over the course of two seven-hour days. It now has been abbreviated to one seven-hour day. In this section of the examination, applicants are provided with instructions and a paint elevation to execute on a 5' × 5' flat or small muslin drop, paint, buckets, water, and a mixing area, nothing else. The applicants are responsible for bringing with them any tools that they will need during the examination. At the beginning of the day, the applicants are given instructions on what is to be painted on the flats or drops during the course of the day. The applicants' works are judged by a panel of union members on drawing accuracy, color accuracy, technique, rendering of light and shadow, and overall ability as a scenic artist.

Many applicants do not pass the examination the first time, but they may take the exam as many times as they wish. The exam requires a nonrefundable examination fee and a refundable deposit of one-half the initiation fee.

The *apprenticeship program*, described earlier, culminates the three years of training with automatic USA membership.

**The Benefits of Union Membership.** Once admitted, new members pay a one-time initiation fee (higher for Track A) and quarterly dues. In return, the union negotiates wage scales and terms with scenic studios and producers to standardize and maintain wage scales in the industry. The union also establishes basic working conditions and monitors

scenic studios and producers to ensure adherence to the union agreement. The union represents its members in cases of unfair labor practices and monitors the activities of nonunion studios and theatres that employ union scenic artists by individual letters of agreement. The USA also acts as a clearinghouse for employers seeking employees, normally for long- or short-term temporary work that is known in the business as *overhire*.

Because so many theatre artisans work on a freelance basis, the union also collects health and welfare contributions from employers hiring union members, which are invested in health insurance and pensions for the members. These benefits are available to union members who have made or have employers who have made contributions to the fund during the course of their careers. The union also provides a small death benefit to the member's survivors.

Gaining membership in the union is an accomplishment and an affirmation of one's talents and skills. Union membership allows scenic artists to demand good compensation for their work as well as good working conditions. The union's compensation rate is excellent and is constructed to benefit the scenic artist handsomely for overtime rates. Union membership also serves as a recommendation of your skills and professionalism to prospective employers and allows you to raise your standard of compensation for work. In addition, the USA maintains an availability list of scenic artists throughout the country. Thus, by reporting into the union office and keeping the union apprised of your whereabouts and work situation, you enable it to contact you regarding jobs in your area. In busy metropolitan areas, such as New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, union calls may be a main source of employment for members.

The primary disadvantage to union membership is the cost of joining. Initiation fees are currently \$3,500 for Track A and the Open Examination; however, members joining by exam are given a \$2,000 refund. Membership fees via the apprenticeship program are \$1,700. Additional fees are required upon entry into the union for the first six months of dues and processing fees. USA members also pay to the USA continuing quarterly membership dues and 2 percent of the gross wage earned on employment covered by union contracts.

Currently, there are 22 states considered "right-to-work" states. Employees in these states are not required to join a union or pay union dues to a union





**Figure 1.11** *The Tale of the White Snake*, elevation by Xuzheng He, Quan Dong Province Theatre, People's Republic of China.

representing their workplace. Both USA and USITT remain highly active in these states, and the wage rates negotiated by the unions serve as valid and, at times, binding agreements. All right-to-work states have different rules and guidelines that govern union representation and authority. These rules are constantly changing, so keep up-to-date on workers' rights issues where you work.

Union membership is not a guarantee of employment. Individual members must not expect the union to find them work. If you do not happen to live in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago but in a city where the union has no strong foothold, the union office may not be able to send you out on many work calls. It is also very difficult to find consistent over-hire work outside of the major metropolitan markets in the United States. You must be prepared to continue the task of finding and keeping work on your own.

### ***The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees***

The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) also represents scenic artists in some regions of North America for the film industry as well as theatre. IATSE's membership consists of dozens of entertainment industry professionals, including art directors, animators, camerapersons, costume design and craftspeople, film and video lab technicians, motion picture craftspeople, property craftspeople, press agents, projectionists, stage employees, and television craftspeople. Other trades commonly associated with scenic arts skills, such as sculpting, plastering, painting, designing, animation, and sign painting, also are represented by IATSE locals. Local 816, Painters and Scenic Artists, located in Sherman Oaks, California, specifically represents scenic artists in the theatre, broadcast, and film industries.

This local has jurisdiction in 13 states. In addition to scenic artists and painters, members in this local also include those in professions as varied as courtroom artists and computer graphic artists.

The initiation fees, dues, and requirements for membership vary from local to local. All IATSE locals are governed by the International IATSE office in New York City. The officials and board of the international office are elected from the membership throughout the United States and Canada. These officials are elected at the biennial conventions by delegates representative of all the locals.

### **Employment Options**

Several avenues of employment are available for scenic artists. It is not a career in which one would expect to find adequate amounts of work anywhere in the country. A scenic artist may need to choose between living in one of the two dominant metropolitan regions (New York and Los Angeles) where the highest volume of work is found, or to move elsewhere and plan to look for work in a different manner.

#### ***Freelance Work in a Major Market***

Freelance scenic artists comprise a significant portion of the professional artists working in the United States, and freelance work is the most common sort of work for scenic artists getting their start. So much freelance work exists because many theatres operate on a seasonal basis and are “dark” for several months of the year. These seasons may span the summer months, as in a summer festival or musical season, or the seven to eight months from fall to spring, as is common for many regional repertory companies or universities. Because of these split seasons, beginning scenic artists often have difficulty finding a year-round engagement. Many scenic artists fall into a pattern of dividing up their employment between the same set of companies season after season and having to move their households back and forth between the cities where the companies are based. Some scenic artists enjoy this “gypsy” lifestyle because it gives them the opportunity to see different parts of the country (at least on the trips in between) and to work with and learn from other professionals. Even some professional scenic artists with a permanent position at a scenic studio still work extensively on a freelance basis.

However, as a freelance scenic artist, you may instead want to be based in a major metropolitan

area where there is enough demand for scenic artists to keep you employed year-round. Freelance scenic artists work on call for production companies, shops, or individual projects for long or short periods of time. In New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, theatrical and movie production is an ongoing business (although there are other major metropolitan areas like Seattle and Miami that can keep scenic artists very busy). Once established in such an area, you will get work continually as your reputation as an efficient and talented painter spreads. If you have poor work habits or are unreliable, your reputation will precede you and keep you from getting calls.

While working as a freelance scenic artist, it is important to maintain a current résumé and portfolio, and to always keep your business card with you. Note that when you send your portfolio to a potential employer, *never* let your original portfolio images out of your hands. Many scenic artists maintain two portfolios: one contains the originals in an expensive case and is used only for personal interviews; the other contains color copies mounted on gray or black bristol board in an inexpensive but professional-looking case. This is the portfolio you send to potential employers on request. If this portfolio is not returned to you, all you have lost is the cost of the case and the time it took to put together. While a digital portfolio on a CD/DVD may be convenient, most digital portfolios do not communicate the skill of the artist as well as more traditional formats. When preparing for an interview, tailor your portfolio to the needs of the client. Have a stock of images to choose from and select those that are most appropriate, and then print a new table of contents as needed. Also remember that less is more. Ten or so stunning images will be more impressive than 10 stunning images plus 40 mediocre or unsuitable ones.

It deserves mention that scenic artists often are the most highly paid and sought-after of the skilled professionals in technical theatre. A huge amount of painting is done in theatre, television, movies, and industrials, not to mention commercial display, advertising, museum display, interior decoration, and so on. Scenic artists are in demand for many reasons. Painting is faster than building, and the results are spectacular. Producers find painting very cost effective. Certainly, advertisers and filmmakers find painting a background less expensive than going on location. Skilled painters have been a source for decorative work since the classic Greek theatre. It is unlikely that this demand will change in the near future.



**Figure 1.12**

Example of portraiture, painted by Xuzheng He for the film *The Quick and the Dead*.

### ***Freelance Work Outside of Major Markets***

New York and Los Angeles are the major markets in the United States for scenic artists. Chicago and Miami are secondary markets where one may find work fairly often. The other major American metropolitan markets of Philadelphia, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Seattle, Boston, Washington DC, Phoenix, and Atlanta may offer some work for a scenic artist at some time, but it may be difficult to get

into these markets and make a living. For these non-major markets, a scenic artist may look to developing relationships with regional theatres or regional opera companies that may need overhire. You may seek employment in the field of industrials—advertising, exhibitions, and corporate events—but it may be difficult to have a career as a true freelance scenic artist outside New York or Los Angeles. Be prepared to build connections and look for less traditional scenic painting outlets.



**Working at a Staff Position at a Scenic Studio or Theatre**

A far simpler life than freelancing is to get a permanent job at a scenic studio. One obvious advantage to this option is that you will have a steady paycheck and, in most cases, health insurance. Also, because you are in a consistent work environment, you can store your tools in the shop, drive or take public transportation on the same route to work every morning, and choose to live in a place convenient to the job site. The artistic advantage of working in a studio is that you will have more control over projects in development rather than being called in the last two weeks of a job in progress. The work site can be set up and maintained for the convenience of the people who work there. You can arrange and install your materials and tools in an orderly fashion rather than store them in cardboard boxes piled up around makeshift mixing tables. You can also maintain a stock of mediums, paints, and finishes rather than sending someone out to the store every time you need something or having to scrounge around in an unfamiliar shop.

The hard part is getting such a job. Perhaps 150 full-time theatrical scenic studios are operating in the United States today. More theatre companies than scenic studios exist; however, not all of these need a scenic artist on a year-round basis. Many such theatres use scenic artists only on a job-by-job basis. The large theatrical scenic studios, common in the early part of this century, staffed with dozens of scenic artists, are a thing of the past. Many modern-day scenic studios have only one to four full-time scenic artists on staff, and hire extra scenic artists as needed. The scenic studios that still maintain staffs of several scenic artists are the large scenic studios in the New York City region or the major television networks and film studios.

As your career takes off, you may find yourself being offered more work than you can handle. This may happen particularly if you have a full-time position with a scene shop and your first responsibility is to your permanent employer or because you have a steady flow of freelance work coming in. You may be able to squeeze in a weekend job here and there, but a call for a profitable two-month-long opera job would be out of reach to you because of your previous commitments. Another code of professionalism comes into play when you find yourself having to turn down work. If possible, you should assist the

client who contacted you in finding someone who is available for the job. There are two reasons for doing this. First, if you assist the client in locating a scenic artist, that client will be more inclined to call you for another project in the future. Second, once you have attained some measure of success, you should give a hand to other scenic artists just starting out in the business or in a dry spell. These scenic artists will then be more inclined to help you in the future when you are looking for assistance on a project.

**Contracting and Self-Employment Business Skills**

Regardless of what direction your career may take, you may find yourself in the position of working as a contractor. Many of the responsibilities of the employer to the freelance employee mentioned earlier are the duties of the contractor. A contractor is the person or company that has agreed to execute the work and take care of every aspect of the project from locating the working space and hiring the staff to delivering the finished work to the client. Some variations in the specifics of a contract may exist. For instance, as frequently happens in the case of scenic art contracts, the client may agree to deliver the raw materials, in this case the scenery or drops, to you. The space might be on site or it might be the space of the contractor who is building the scenery. The contract might be structured so that the scenic artist is a subcontractor and the primary contractor is building the set. However the contract is structured, you must be very clear regarding its terms.

The first step to working out a contract is to discuss the scope of work with the client. This discussion should be accompanied by information related to the project's blueprint plans, color copies of the paint elevations, and written descriptions from the client outlining what your responsibilities will be. You then need to submit a bid to the client, indicating what your price will be to do the job. When formulating a bid for a job, you must consider the following:

- *Space*—Who will provide the space in which the work will be done? If you provide the space, how much will the rent cost? If you are the owner of the space, what are your costs?
- *Materials*—What will the cost of your materials be? Who is responsible for purchasing and delivering these materials?



- *Labor*—Who will contract the labor? If you, what will you pay employees? Are you paying them on an IRS Form 1099-MISC, as contract labor? Or will you have to withhold and file payments for social security, state and federal income taxes, and Medicare, as well as make the employer's contribution for social security, workman's compensation insurance, and state and federal unemployment insurance? If your employees are union members and you have signed a contract with a union, what percentage of the labor cost do you have to pay to the union's health and welfare plan? Ethically, if your employees are long-term or permanent, you should set up a health care and pension plan if a union does not otherwise cover them.
- *Kit Fees*—What fee should you charge for the use of your tools on the job? If your crewmembers are bringing their own tools to the job, should you give them a kit fee? Do you have to rent or buy any tools or equipment for the job?
- *Samples*—Clients frequently need to see samples of paint finishes before they decide on a contractor. While this practice is more common in bidding on decorative painting and faux finish jobs, it may be requested when bidding on scenic artistry as well. Sometimes, the request for samples and reworking of samples can get out of hand and a scenic artist may feel that he or she is working harder to get the job than actually doing the job. It is common practice to place a limitation of three free samples on this attempt to satisfy the customer that you can do the job. After that, if they need to see more examples, it is customary to charge for the additional samples.
- *Out-of-Town Expenses*—If the work is out of town, look into what your expenses will be for housing, food per diems, and transportation for yourself and your crew. Do you have to ship or rent a truck to transport tools and materials?
- *Insurance*—If you contract work on a regular basis, you may need to start carrying general liability insurance. What will this cost?
- *Accounting*—If you do contract work on a regular basis, your tax returns can be very complex. What will it cost to hire a professional accountant?
- *Taxes*—If you are withholding taxes for your employees, you also have to file quarterly statements. What are these costs?

- *Extra Costs*—Just figuring out a bid can consume a great deal of time. It also takes time and is costly to compose and send faxes, talk on the telephone, handle the billing, and enter costs in a register. Time is involved in collecting the materials and supplies for the job. If the job is not at your regular work site, time is involved in packing up and transferring materials to the work site and bringing them back again. You must also consider the time needed for cleanup after the job has been completed.

If this all sounds a little overwhelming, keep in mind that when you first begin to contract work, it will probably be on a small scale. You and an associate may decide to contract a job that you can do in someone's garage or you might accept a small contract that you can do over the weekend. Working up to large-scale, lengthy contracts can and should be gradual so that you can learn the business. Some scenic artists find that they would rather be employed than be the employer, so that they have time to do the actual painting and do not get bogged down in business details. Contracting your own jobs will give you an appreciation for what your employers have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

### **Studio Ownership**

Some scenic artists prefer to be their own boss and enjoy the hustle and bustle of organizing the work. Some also find that the most difficult aspect of taking on work is finding the space in which to paint. If you develop an ongoing rapport with enough clients through contracting work, you may need to set up your own permanent shop space. The cost savings of not having to rent a space, move equipment in and out again at the completion of the job, clean it out, and store the supplies and materials may well offset the expense of having to pay rent or mortgage on an ongoing basis. But before taking this step, it's important to remember that the theatre profession can be one of feast or famine. It is essential that before you sign a lease—and most certainly before you sign mortgage papers—you objectively gauge the potential of future work. Certainly before making the decision to set up and operate a permanent shop it is very important to familiarize yourself with professional business practices. This does not mean getting an MBA, but getting some training in small business operations, arranging with the small business organization

in your area to meet with a mentor, and developing a business plan are all good ideas.

Many small scenic shops have been opened after two or three very successful months, only to close their doors a short while later. Many owners of scene and paint shops find that they have to diversify their businesses, taking on jobs in display and interior decoration to fill in the gaps in theatrical employment. They also find that they have to learn how to tap into business in other regions when there is not enough work locally. In the beginning, shop owners may find that they spend as much time trying to find contracts as they do fulfilling contracts. Many successful shops have an employee whose full-time position is dedicated to finding work for the shop and writing contracts.

In terms of the day-to-day business of a shop, all of the business items discussed to this point still apply. However, the expense column for the cost of space never goes away. The owner of a shop must always be thinking months and even a year or more ahead, cultivating new clients and matching jobs up with the employment pool. If the shop is successful enough, it will retain good employees on a permanent basis. But it is important to remember that making a commitment to an employee is a very serious responsibility. If you have to lay off someone with little or no notice, you have deprived that person of the chance to look ahead for the next job. Two days after I left a company in the Midwest for another commitment, my friends from there called me to tell me that they had come to work in the morning and the doors had been locked by the Internal Revenue Service. Since this was an area where there were few alternatives, it took some of those people many months and even years to recover the tempo of their profession.

On the other hand, when a shop is on its feet and there are several clients accustomed to relying on that shop for their scenic work, it can be satisfying to be your own boss and to provide employment and good working conditions for others. Scenic studio ownership means conducting a business as well as being a scenic artist. Inform yourself fully of the fiscal responsibilities and risks if you contemplate opening such an enterprise.

### **Working in the Film Industry**

Film work is one of the most lucrative options for scenic artists in the United States. The movie industry is based primarily in Los Angeles and New York City.

As in the theatre industry, employment is found through a scene shop (either on the studio lot or in an independent scene shop that caters to films) or on a freelance basis through film production companies. Work in the scene shops tends to be more steady, although many shops operate by laying off staff and then rehiring them on a recurring basis. The compensation in the shops is good, but working on a freelance basis directly for a film company or contractor to a film company usually pays better. Film production companies are formed for the production of a specific film. Once the film is completed, the company is dissolved. One reason the pay is so high in film work is that the workweek is predicated on overtime just to stay on schedule. A typical workweek in feature film runs 60 to 72 hours. After the initial 40 hours, the crew makes one and a half times their regular rate. The cost of performers, directors, production staff, and studio time is so high that it is less expensive for producers to pay overtime to the film crew or the extra expense to the scene shop rather than to keep the primary people on contract longer or rent the studio for an extended period of time.

The downside to working on films is that the jobs are not steady or predictable. Most films hire their crews very quickly and with little notice. If you happen to have taken a long weekend to go to a family function, you might miss a call that would have resulted in several weeks or even months of work. Frequently, there will be a call for another film in a week or so, but there might not be. Toward the completion of shooting, or the wrap of a film, layoffs begin, usually with little or no warning. The general rule of layoffs is that the last person hired is the first person laid off. So most painters are aware that their employment could be coming to an end, but other than networking with other painters on the job site, there is little or no time to look for the next job. Because of the lack of warning about when the next job will start, it is difficult to plan anything during time off.

Some painters have developed a reputation for working as a *charge painter* on films. The charge painter is the person responsible for organizing and managing the painting on the production. In most cases, the charge painter also rents a kit of tools back to the production company. The charge painter usually is contracted in advance of the production, so people in this position have the luxury of knowing where their next job is going to be at least a few

weeks before everyone else. Most charge painters call on a group of people who work with them on a fairly regular basis. Because of this alliance, such people also may have a few weeks notice on where their next job is going to be. If they are good, they can feel fairly confident they will have gainful employment for most of the year.

### ***Working in the Television Industry***

The major television networks also support permanent staffs of scenic artists. As with films, Los Angeles and New York City are the largest metropolitan bases for this industry. Television series and soap operas keep many scene designers and scenic artists employed. Soap operas rely on nearly round-the-clock calls to keep up the shooting schedule necessary to produce a new segment five days a week. Many weekly television series are budgeted for one new set per segment, in addition to maintaining the standard sets for the series. Each daytime drama and television series has a small army of set painters, set dressers, buyers, property artisans, grips, and designers to keep up with the shooting schedule.

The explosive growth of cable television has provided work for many designers and scenic artists. Scenic support for cable network feature films, dramas, talk shows, and comedy series has become as extensive as that for network television.

### ***Freelance Work Outside of Theatre and Film***

Good scenic artists will soon discover that their training and skill have in great measure prepared them for work in other fields. Beyond the world of entertainment lies a wealth of challenging work for scenic artists. Commercial display, interior decoration, museum display, and restoration all call for highly skilled painters. For some, scenic artistry may be a stepping stone into these professions, and for others these options present an interesting sideline.

Contemporary interior decoration utilizes faux finishes and decorative painting techniques to a large degree. Trained faux finish painters are in high demand in residential and commercial projects. Very skilled painters also may find work as muralists. This may be in addition to services that you can offer as a faux finish and decorative painter, or this profession may become your solid stock and trade. Because scenic artists have become accustomed to covering large



**Figure 1.13** Museum installation and aging techniques, Linberg Gun Shop, "Grand Rapids 1890s," painted contacted by Crabtree Scenic, Buffalo Bill banner painted by Mary Evers, Public Museum of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

surfaces with images and paint techniques, it is easy to make the transition into mural painting, decorative painting, and display work. Many skilled scenic artists have shifted to professions in these areas or bounce back and forth between these professions and scenic artistry. Also, because scenic artists are familiar with working quickly and efficiently, they are often successful in related painting professions.

To work in these professions, scenic artists may need to attain new skills or change their work habits. For instance, scenic artistry tends to be a very messy job since most of the work is done in a paint shop where the mess created from dripped paint and overspray is not an issue. But when working in someone's home or a business, it may be necessary to mask off all the adjacent areas as well as the foot paths to the





**Figure 1.14** Example of mural painting, picnic diorama, diorama backing contracted by Crabtree Scenic, Stone Mountain Museum, Stone Mountain Georgia. **(A)** The diorama mural partially completed in the shop. **(B)** The mural as it was completed in the diorama on site.

utility sink and the door to insure that no damage is done to the premises as the job progresses. It may also be necessary to establish the paint schedule with the client in advance to minimize inconvenience to people living or working there. It is important to determine whether anyone that might be present in the home or business has sensitivity to the chemical vapors from the paint and mediums being used and make adjustments in the schedule or the ventilation if this is the case.

A scenic artist also may have to become familiar with other lines of paint, mediums, and finishes that are more ultraviolet light-resistant than theatrical scenic paint. It may be necessary, as in the case of faux finishes, to become adept at techniques involving oil-based paints and mediums. It is not uncommon in all of the professions mentioned above for the

scenic artist to be working in a new construction or renovation site with other contractors in a variety of trades, from plumbers to carpet installers. Though an environment like this might be familiar to scenic artists, other tradespeople may not be accustomed to working with an artist in their midst. It is not unheard of to come back from lunch break only to discover that the dry wall installer has splattered mud all over a carefully prepped wall because the ceiling had to be taped. Be aware of what the other trades are doing, if there is a contractor on the site; ask how your work can best schedule in with the other trades.

Also very challenging are professions in restorative painting and museum display. In many ways, these professions cross over the two fields because restorers frequently find themselves working on an



object or in a building of such priceless beauty that it may as well be in a museum. They may find themselves having to recreate or touch up a surface originally created in antiquity. Museums often employ restorers with the proper expertise to clean and repair damaged or aged paintings. Scenic artists can obtain some of the best training to be had in this profession in Europe, where restoration studios accept apprentices. Once when visiting a small cathedral in Orvieto, Italy, I looked into the aisle where a canvas was under restoration. With elaborate care, a huge canvas had been taken off its frame and laid down on a deck where it was being restored by the artists who were walking on it, their feet wrapped in cotton booties, using bamboo extensions with their brushes just as scenic artists do when they paint a drop on a paint deck.

There are a great many varied challenges in the field of museum display. In the last few decades, museum displays have moved out of their display cases and into interactive, walkthrough exhibits. Diorama painting for displays has become even more challenging as museum audiences expect greater levels of realism. Scenic artists searching for a challenge may find that work in the profession of museum display, with its high standards of excellence and longevity, can be very satisfying.

In all of these professions, there are varying standards and levels of expertise. The artist may start out working on small jobs or as an assistant learning the trade. The profession of restoration is not something entered into without extremely specialized training. Work in all of these areas can be very fulfilling because of the high level of quality and skill required for work meant to be seen much more closely than stage painting. Many artists find it satisfying to work on a project that will last for years, decades, or centuries rather than the average run of a stage production.

## INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL KEEBLER, COFOUNDER AND HEAD OF COBALT STUDIOS

Rachel Keebler, a leading scenic artist in the United States, operates Cobalt Studios, one of the few teaching scenic studios in the world. Keebler cofounded Cobalt together with Howard Jones in 1988. She has a BFA from Boston University and has also taught at North Carolina School for the Arts, Temple University, and Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts.

**Susan Crabtree:** Why don't we start with you telling me about what you do at Cobalt Studios and what the focus of the studio is.

**Rachel Keebler:** I plan the students' experiences there, I plan (with my assistant) the execution of the shows, and I paint. The Studio's main purpose is as a school, and it is also a scenic studio that paints primarily backdrop work. Students come primarily from theatre programs. Some of them come from art schools but all of them have one thing in common: they want to learn how to paint. To be accepted at the school, students have an overnight interview and fill out an extensive application. During the interview, prospective students show their portfolio, question us, and we question them. I'm looking for students with the determination needed to be here, because ours is a long program. The days are long—basically seven hours a day, five days a week—and students are instructed most of that time, whether it is how to put down masking tape, use a brush, or how to size a drop. It's a long haul and to be a student you put yourself in an insecure position, admitting that you don't know certain things. So, students need determination. The two-year curriculum for the scenic artist training program takes students through all the skills an artist needs to do art—most specifically, how those skills are applied in large scale, to scenery. **SC:** What characteristics do you want students to have?

**RK:** I want them to have an artist's ability and an eye for detail. But almost as important may be to have a figurative toolbox of information and techniques that they can call upon to do the second most important thing, and that is to be a good problem solver—to be fast on their feet and be able to come up with new ways to do things on the fly. This also encompasses the concept of looking at every project with a fresh approach.

**SC:** Tell me a little bit about the student's lifestyle at Cobalt Studios.

**RK:** Students are encouraged to be and remain individuals, and that's what they do. They don't really do lots of things as a group. When we get up in the morning and have breakfast, everybody has a different breakfast at a different time; we're coming and going and sometimes we barely speak to each other. Everybody goes back to the studio at their own pace—we don't come down as a group. We first outline the schedule for the day and catch up on any information that we need to talk about. Then we split up and do what we need to do for the day.



**Figure 1.15** Paint cart to hold roller supplies while Cobalt Studio's Rachel Keebler rolls the paint through the backdrop-sized stencil of letters glued onto bobbINETTE.

Guest teachers and I don't team-teach; either they teach or I teach. We don't team charge [charge artist] shows; either they charge or I charge it. We have one brain on each item going on and in that way we can have seven major things going on at once, whether it's teaching at one end of the studio and working on a show at the other end or whatever. The students have the experience of having very individualized attention.

Certain class projects are handpicked for the students. Other times they can pick their own projects. For example, for an animal project, they pick three animals from the file and then the teacher picks one of those. If the teacher doesn't think any of the student's choices are appropriate, we'll come up with another. My criteria for projects? The project has to challenge students, it has to be able to be done within a reasonable amount of time, and it has to be direct to the point of what we are teaching. If it's a drapery project, I don't want a little tiny drape and a whole lot of other things around it. I just want drapery. This is one of the hallmark ways we do things and we get good feedback from the students about it.

**SC:** Tell me a little about the history of Cobalt Studios.

**RK:** It began with my turning 30. At that point I had already taught at North Carolina School of the Arts

and Temple University. I liked teaching but I never thought about doing it full time. At that point, my father called me and said, "Your mother has an idea. Start the Manhattan branch of the North Carolina School of the Arts." I said it was a good idea but that it shouldn't be in Manhattan, and I knew I couldn't do it by myself. That summer I worked with Howard Jones and I thought that he would be a good person to start the school with since we worked well together and saw eye to eye. I mentioned the idea of starting a school for scenic artists to him. Two weeks later, we had brunch about it, and that was the start of Cobalt Studios. We spent three years drafting a business plan; solidifying our dreams by correspondence (he was still teaching in North Carolina). We decided it should be within two hours of New York City and near the Hudson so it would be easier to get to from New York.

I moved out of the city and nearer the Hudson to put myself in a better position of finding a place for Cobalt Studios. While I was there, I picked up a paper about property in Sullivan County, New York, an area I had never been before. I talked to real estate agents, saw a couple of not very good places. Then we found this place. We had decided to buy the housing and either build or rent the studio in the course of creating the business plan and this place fit the bill.

In fact, the man who typed the business plan for me came and visited the studio four years after we started this place and said it was eerie because it was exactly what we had planned, down to having a greenhouse. A dream come true.

Howard designed a lot of the physical aspects of the Studio and we worked together on designing the curriculum. We decided on a format that included both work and classes—students could expect to spend about 50 percent of their time on class work and 50 percent on commission work. This has changed a bit. Today, students spend over half of their time on class work. Sometimes we have to hire painters so students have time for their class work. We need to make sure we stay on target with our curriculum because it all works in sequence. This is why we don't accept any students midway through the program.

**SC:** And students live in a farmhouse?

**RK:** They may live off campus but most of them choose to live in the farmhouse. It's more convenient and a lot cheaper than renting. Students sign up monthly for different chores that they are responsible for, like trash, fire chief, etc., and we have a system by which students and teachers rotate the cooking. One of the students supervises the food. The students stay at the house and we have a good time, but even before and after dinner people go their own way. They'll go to the gym or they'll go to their rooms or do whatever they want to do. It is really not a summer camp. People are responsible for their own happiness. When you have males and females and we're all living in the same house, it's like a family, and sometimes they act like brothers and sisters. Though it is often difficult, there are wonderful benefits of this living situation, both for us and for our students. Part of it is learning how to balance your life with your work. The Cobalt house is really a good "home after home" for them.

**SC:** How long have you been a scenic artist and what made you decide to get into the profession?

**RK:** It was a sequence of events, it was not a conscious decision. I'm the daughter of an artist—a potter, my mother—and my father is an engineer-type person who is also an editor of trade journals and went to sales meetings a lot. So I have a parent who has a mechanical mind, my father, and someone who has an artistic mind, my mother, and I'm a combination of these two. As the third of four children, I was left to my own devices in a lot of ways and I had done some scene painting as part of the theatre scene

in high school. When it came time to choose a college, I chose one that had my two loves: art and horseback riding—Skidmore College. While I was there I encountered James Leonard Joy teaching (the one year he taught), fresh out of Carnegie Mellon, and I got sucked into the theatre. I started spending all my time doing costumes, stage management, lights, and painting, and in time started painting with Jim Joy. He taught in a way that I will never forget: he got the brushes and the paint and stood in front of me and showed me how to paint. The first thing I remember was lining and how to make painted wood paneling. Painting the molding on wood grain he would show me what I needed to do and then would hand me the brush and say "OK now do what I did" and that was the style of his teaching. He always led the way. The training I received from him is the foundation of my professional life. Jim Joy proceeded to take me to many places around the country painting for and with him. I did summer stock, worked in Boston, worked in Kansas City with him, and because of the summer jobs I had while I was in college, after graduation I was hired to work at the Seattle Rep where he was one of the designers. By this time I was working with other people as well, such as John Ezell in Kansas City and with Peter Gould and Larry Opitz at Skidmore. By the end of the first year of college I said to myself "I'm spending all my spare time doing theatre, I should just go to a college that teaches it." So I asked Jim where I should go and he said to Boston University, where the best scenic artist on the East coast, Don Beaman, teaches.

So I packed up my portfolio, went there, interviewed, and got in. I didn't apply anywhere else. I was there for three years and learned a lot about painting from Don Beaman and hopefully absorbed some of the beautiful ways that he puts his paint down. I have learned the most, though, from Jim Joy, as I worked for him because he always asks for the next-to-impossible and always has faith that I will be able to *do* the next-to-impossible (or figure out how to do it). After working in Seattle I moved to New York City and taught in North Carolina and got into the Union. I taught the next fall at Temple University.

**SC:** So you've been a teacher more or less throughout your career?

**RK:** Yes, since 1981.

**SC:** Did you have any training as a designer?

**RK:** Yes, at Boston University. It's important to have design training as a scenic artist. Once, I was working



**Figure 1.16**

Detail of scrim painting by Don Beaman, *Camino Real*, Boston University.

on a production of *Carousel*. I didn't know the story of *Carousel*—I'd never seen it—but I was painting it for a repertory company in Albany and I was charging. They brought in plywood cutout profiles of trailers for me to work from—no renderings, just plywood cutouts—so I called the Russian designer and asked him what he wanted the trailers to look like. He said, "I want them to look like aluminum trailers in the dark." I then asked him if he could tell me a bit about the scene that they played in. He said, "Oh yes, she is running around in the dark, she's looking for someone in the trailer and she's not finding them and she's very distressed." I imagined it as a dreary set, so I painted it that way and the designer said it was painted just as he wanted. Actually, even Jim Joy has praised me for being able to take painters' elevations over the phone. So being able to figure out a scene would translate into a paint job. Being able to think like a designer can help you to help the designer realize their designs.

It's also good to have design training if you're a scenic artist for the same reasons it is good for a scene designer to take a directing course. You learn about how hard it is and so you realize that it's not easy to come up with the designs that they give you. It's difficult to coordinate the painting, the props,

and the building of the scenery; you have to know so much about constructing scenery and you have to negotiate so much. Design training gives the scenic artist the ability to step up and really help the designer. I get tired of scenic artists who say, "Well you didn't tell me that." I maintain that it is as much a scenic artist's responsibility to get the information (not to create it) as it is for the designer to provide it. We just can't sit back and wait! It is important to know about focus on stage as it relates to theatre—the whole concept that most of what designers do is designed to move the focus to the actors. And by extension, most scenic art is controlled to move the audience's focus toward the actors.

When you are in a theatre program you learn about how drops go up and down and how hard it is for floor surfaces to hold paint. You realize that scenery has a function and not just a look. One should always be curious what that function is and what a piece of scenery is required to do on stage. That helps you figure out how to paint it; to choose the right materials and techniques for the needs of the show.

**SC:** Because every production has a designer that is different, do you have a method of developing a dialog when you are working with a designer?





**Figure 1.17**  
Mastery of trompe l'oeil technique and painted marble in this work by Don Beaman.

**RK:** I start by keeping my mouth shut and thinking while I'm looking. Say a designer comes in and presents a design. Quietly study everything, concentrate on what you don't know about the whole project; what is unclear or hasn't been presented to you or what the scenery does. It's not necessarily apparent through drawings or renderings what a piece of scenery's functional or visual requirements are so you might need to ask about that. One thing I'm trying to do is to figure out whether what the designer is presenting to me is what they want because I've found that frequently it's not *quite* what they really want. They want this but they really kind of want to have a little more flavor of that or they want it to be the style of a particular artist. I need to find out if there is some intent or desire that is not apparent in the visual material that's given to me, and often times I'll be very direct about it. I'll have the rendering in my hand and I'll say, "Is there anything about this that you would like to have changed that you're not happy with?" This question needs to be asked in a certain way. You have to make sure that they know that you are asking not because you think there is something wrong, but because you want to know. You often get a positive response, with the designer saying, "Yes, actually, this part over here."

Speaking to the rendering in that way is a trick that I learned from Howard Jones about teaching, and that is when you go to look at a student's project

you don't say, "Look at what you did, you made the sky too dark." You say, "When I look at this rendering and I look at the painting, it looks as though the sky is too dark." You don't put it on the creator, you address the item, that you are looking at. It is all about making the paint job right. You should listen carefully and emote the fact that you're there to help the designer realize their art on stage.

**SC:** Besides Cobalt Studios, what type of training do you think a scenic artist ought to have?

**RK:** I believe a scenic artist must do summer stock because summer stock does several things. Summer stock is a great place for you to figure out if this is really what you want to do because everything is there. You have schedules, you have deadlines, you have pressure, you have fun, you have camaraderie, you make friends that you keep for the rest of your life, you make contacts that you keep for the rest of your life. A good session of summer stock will get you more jobs, good work, and if you don't like it, you probably won't be a scenic artist. It's trial by fire. Your experience will probably determine whether you continue in this profession or not.

Another thing is that even though there are many levels of scenic art and one can get work as successful scenic painter without it, I think art training is essential. If you don't know perspective, if your drawing is no good, if you can't use your eyes, you won't be asked to do the "art" part of scenic art.



**Figure 1.18** Rachel Keebler demonstrates foliage painting techniques at Cobalt Studios.

This may be OK because there are a lot of painters out there and a lot of scenic painting involves more technical skill than artistic skill. A well-trained house painter could have a great career as a scenic painter, you know, because they learn how to work fast and dirty too. So if you want to do the art part of scenic art, you really must have art training.

Cobalt Studios tries to teach, in two years, many people who have not had much art training. Most of our students come from theatre backgrounds and many of them haven't had much art training and it's because of this that Cobalt really gets heavy on the art training part, heavy on the drawing, heavy on the brush work, heavy on mixing colors and developing the ability to see completely. One thing I can point out about being a student here is that it is not an internship program where you just watch or wash buckets. You are expected to listen to the lectures and learn about these things and then you're asked to do them, you're asked to mix paint, you're asked to draw, you're asked to base-coat, and to finish paint, spray things, and to know your light and shadow. It's assumed that you will pay attention and learn every aspect of the business.

**SC:** What words of wisdom would you offer someone who is going into a career in scenic artistry?

**RK:** Keep drawing. Be humble but also be responsible for yourself and what you do. Clean up after yourself.

Always be thinking. I would suggest that a scenic artist would recognize their place. You are a part of the machine that puts on a play or puts on an event in the entertainment industry. The production is the machine and as a part of the machine you must have the skill and strength, physically and mentally, to do what this machine needs, or it can grind you up and spit you out.

I also think that a scenic artist needs to be able to admit when they are wrong, and it's best if you can laugh about it. Also admit when you don't know something. I learned another important thing from Mary Hielman. She came out to teach scene painting and stressed the importance of giving credit to others—don't be a prima donna. If the stage crew hadn't built it so beautifully, you couldn't have painted it so beautifully. Know your place and notice how to function in a new shop. When we are freelancers we travel around so much. We really are guests and need to find out who to get information from and who we are working with so we can function.

**SC:** Looking back over your career, what would you say are some of the most difficult or elusive skills to learn in the profession of scenic artistry; in the area of painting and outside the area of painting?

**RK:** Knowing what is important *when*. What is important changes from moment to moment and Cobalt Studios epitomizes that. A phone call can

change your next two days—is it more important to answer the phone call or to be teaching the lecture? What is the most important thing to attend to now? I’ve also found that writing skills, not only in setting up Cobalt Studios but also in preparing lectures, have been very good for me. Organizing one’s thoughts and being able to articulate and describe are essential.

**SC:** What are some of the most common misconceptions about the profession of scenic artistry?

**RK:** That it’s the same as designing. That we are totally responsible for how it looks. You say you’ve painted something and they say what a wonderful design. It’s almost as though we are getting credit for the design, instead of for the beautiful execution of the painting. There is a lack of realization that there are two different departments and one makes design decisions and the other one executes them. I think that’s the biggest misconception that the public has.

As to the biggest misconception within the business, it is that scenic art is physically easy to do. I know that some people think that the painting is easy to do because they stand around watching scenic artists, and a good scenic artist makes it look easy. But in reality it is very demanding, and there is a lot of brain work to it and often it is physically stressful because you do so many different things from day to day. You’re on a scaffolding for four days in a row and you get all stiff and then you’re sitting on the floor for two days or you have to work in a hot place for a long time then you have to work in a cold place, the noise level in the scene shop, the fumes, the welding fumes, the welding noises, incredibly high sound levels in those shops—our business requires strength and stamina, intelligence, and guts. (Not necessarily in that order!)

**SC:** In the last century there have been some significant changes in the way scenic artistry is done. Are there painting techniques or skills that you feel people new to the profession aren’t being exposed to anymore?

**RK:** Not very many because I feel that most people new to the profession are coming in to either community theatre situations or university situations in which lots of the basic, historic techniques are still being used. The major exception is the making of your own paint. I think that’s going by the wayside. I’m not sure if that is good or bad but if I were to run a summer stock operation I would still do it with [dry] pigment (see Chapter 6). All the components can be stored dry over the wintertime—you mix up

only what you use, the qualities of the paint force you to paint directly and not mess about, and at the end of the season you wash off the flats and store them and in the spring pull them out and start painting!

At Cobalt we teach the use of the appropriate paint for the job. We teach the spectrum of the types of paint including all canned paints, dyes, dye substitutes, and “pigment paint.” There are very few places that have the pigments and use them anymore. In order to really know about paint you do need to know what the basic components are.

**SC:** Let’s talk about digital renderings and what kind of impact you think they might have on scenic artistry.

**RK:** First of all, I’m happier to get a good computer-generated image from a designer than a sloppy hand-painted rendering. I would say that if anyone is not being taught something that they used to be taught, it’s designers not being taught how to paint. Because I believe that being able to draw and to paint enables you to see and remember what things actually look like, I think designers are being short-shifted. Also, because the reproduction of their designs will be accomplished with scenic artists and a paintbrush, it’s important that designers know about painting because they are asking others to do it for them. A student told me that the best thing about Cobalt Studios is that it trained her to be versatile. While other artists have a specific style, she is able to do whatever they ask her to. When she does a rendering, she sits down and she paints it as if she were painting a drop. If you can imagine getting that rendering from her as a painter, it has already been figured out in terms of opacity and layering of paint.

I think this has something to do with the importance of using a designer’s intent to interpret a rendering, to be able to make it up when it’s not there. If indeed the world would totally change and all images would be made full scale by computerized mechanisms instead of scenic artists, this wouldn’t be an issue. The shortcomings of the design would just be enlarged, not fixed by a knowledgeable scenic artist. When I talk to computer fine artists who were fine artists before they went into computers, they tell me that the drawing and painting skills they knew before they got into computers contribute incredibly to their ability to create and choose images, and that they find themselves head and shoulders above other computer artists that don’t have that art background. Many colleges and universities surely will continue to





**Figure 1.19** The road leading to Cobalt Studios

train people to paint. Certainly productions will always need painting. I just don't see the business ever dying. I think that computer generated art will eat into our business but I don't believe it will take over. In fact, it may just stimulate the appetite for scenic art the way videos have stimulated the movie industry.

**SC:** Over the next few decades, do you think that scenic artists will have to evolve their skills and abilities?

**RK:** They have already had to, starting in the 60s, when color images from books and magazines became more available for designers to use. At the turn of the century, everybody was painting and the painters had to evolve into being more the "goop and glaze" sort. But there was also a great deal of painting, especially in the 60s before metal and plexi, the dimensional scenery. As far as the art part of scenic art, in the 1960s and 1970s, scenic artists had to start being able to reproduce fine art on stage. It seemed as though designers were losing the ability to step back and say, "It's only theatre and it will look great under light." They haven't been trained that distance, lights, and the focus of a production that goes on in front of their scenery will cause an audience to not examine it as closely as they do. Their lack of familiarity with painting stops them from realizing that things don't really have to be dimensional. It is quite easy to paint a great deal of things to *appear*

dimensional, but they're actually not dimensional and the audience would never know. There is a tremendous amount of scenery that are over-done, and over-built, because many scenic designers don't know those theatrical painting tricks. To me, that is what has been lost or is being lost.

**SC:** Do you have any favorite scenic art-related stories you would like to share about productions you have worked on in the past?

**RK:** My most memorable story was my first Union touch-up call. When the union representative called, she asked whether I was afraid of heights. I said I wasn't so I showed up the following Monday morning to work on the job. It was the production of *K2* on Broadway! Another scenic artist that came to help touch up was a journeyman who had not been asked that question and was afraid of heights. He spent the time on top of a huge A-frame ladder that was sitting on the trap room floor. The top of the ladder was at stage level (most of the stage had been removed) so he didn't feel he was high up. I had the wonderful time of being the painter in the bosun's chair repairing the set of *K2*, up above the proscenium and down to stage level. I have to say the most wonderful thing was seeing Ming Cho Lee standing on the lip of the stage with his assistant standing behind him ready to catch him because he had his toes over the edge and he was gesturing toward which part to put more paint on. That was a wonderful experience. I felt very appreciated.

One of the most difficult experiences I had scene painting was working on the Broadway show *The Rink* in a Union scenic studio. The set for *The Rink* was a laminated plywood wall that curved from the front of the stage right proscenium all the way upstage and back to the stage left proscenium. It was a forced perspective view down a barrel vaulted skating rink. The top profile went up and down, and a great deal of the set was made up of the radiating beams of the ceiling. So they put scaffolding in front of it in a curve and they attached Styrofoam to the beams, which we carved, and then we painted it. We were painting with asphaltum up high on the scaffolding. Down below at the bottom of the wall was a scenic artist spraying FEV [French enamel varnish] on it, and in the corner the shop was someone doing rim spray (which is a roofing material in which the operator has to wear a whole body suit and the chemicals come out of a 55-gallon drum and are heated and sprayed on the scenery). We are up high in the scaffolding climbing around like monkeys





**Figure 1.20** A display of student work at Cobalt Studios.

trying to get done, and there are all these fumes in the air—it wasn't a good experience, but we got it done.

Another time, I was working at a Union scenic studio on the Broadway show *Doonesberry* together with Tommy Ford, an elderly scenic artist who has an attitude but is an excellent painter, very respected in the business. He's painting and I'm painting next to him on a piece of China silk that has been stretched over a metal frame in the shape of a Chinese dog. I'm painting orange dye and trying to make it beautiful, and Tommy picks up his paintbrush and make a drizzle line right across the middle of my painting. I said, "Tommy, what did you just do? How will I ever

fix this?" And he says, "Aww, it will be OK." I said "No it's not going to be OK." The piece ended up getting cut, so therein lies the lesson: when you have an opportunity to be the most upset about something is really when you should keep your cool.

**SC:** What do you enjoy most about scenic artistry?

**RK:** The challenges that come with making functional art on a large scale, while at the same time being a tool the designer's use to realize their art. I love making people happy. I love making the next-to-impossible a reality. I love seeing the light of understanding come on in someone's eyes. I love the variety brought to my life by each new student.