

The Invisible Case

By Diane Langhorst, Chicago Scenic Studios Inc.

To the uninitiated, a museum exhibit designer and a scenic builder may not appear to have much in common. Yet surprisingly, they approach their work in much the same way and it's the result of that approach that often spawns the most compelling museum exhibits.

When Richard Weiglin, exhibit designer at the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, was working on the museum's new 19,000 sq. foot exhibit, The Ancient Americas, he told co-workers about a local shop, Chicago Scenic Studios. "I found myself convincing people that Chicago Scenic could do this job," he said. "I knew their scenic background would work on our museum projects."

One of the reasons that the relationship worked is because of the inherent transparency in the finished product when it's done well – whether that finished product is a museum exhibit or a theatre set. "The last thing I want to hear when someone walks out of an exhibit is, "That was a really beautiful exhibit, the cases were wonderful, the woodwork and joinery were great," Weiglin said. "Then I would know that I failed. What I do (when designing an exhibit) is secondary to a visitor's ability to view an object."

Ken Zommer, a senior project manager at Chicago Scenic and a technical theatre graduate, uses a similar example to judge the effectiveness of a theatre set. "You never want to leave a theatre and hear someone say, 'Wow, the set was really great.' You want the story to come through. All the things that make a set – or an exhibit – good are also what make them unobtrusive," Zommer explains.

Chicago Scenic Studios, Inc. was established 29 years ago and grew out of founder and company president Bob Doepel's concept of a company that would design and build theatrical scenery in Chicago's growing off-Loop theatre community. While the company's roots remain in theatre, it has developed into an organization that reaches far beyond the stage. Today its client list ranges from advertising agencies to broadcast T.V. stations, from Fortune 500 corporations to national event organizers.

Because the museum exhibit designer and the scenic house share a common goal – that their work complements rather than stars, accompanies rather than stands out - the result of Chicago Scenic's collaboration with its partners is powerful.





The series of circular cases in the Ancient Americas exhibit that the Field Museum designed, and Chicago Scenic built, are an example of that successful collaboration. "I wanted floating decks (in the cases) so there wasn't any distraction and the case decks were so subtle that visitors would only notice the artifacts," Weiglein said. The cases illustrate a blending of form and function that is unobtrusive to the viewer's appreciation of the encased artifacts but is also reminiscent of round ceremonial rooms (kivas) used by ancient peoples of the Americas.

Museums and scenic shops take a similar approach to their style of working together as well. "We work in a completely collaborative environment," Weiglein said. "It's all about the team. I like working in that environment personally - there's so much available talent. I wouldn't want to design in a vacuum. We work in a free environment to say anything, visualize anything. Some people call it brainstorming but I call it just thinking."

The ability to thrive in a collaborative environment is what has enabled Chicago Scenic to successfully address a wide variety of projects and markets, said Doepel. "It's our ability to insert ourselves into the team process that helps us succeed. We would not have been as successful as if we had been 'just a fabricator.'"

Weiglein adds, "The key to a good relationship is communication, and we instantly had that with Chicago Scenic."

When the communication focuses on progress, the client rests easier as well. "On Ancient Americas, Ken set up a schedule of deliverables and then continued to communicate about his status against the schedule. There are other shops that do not do that and it always makes me nervous," Weiglein said.

An ongoing collaborative effort is what helped unit manager Ross Hamilton and design manager Tom Ryan succeed on a project that Chicago Scenic recently completed for the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT). The CBOT wanted to create a corporate visitor center. Hamilton and Ryan spent many hours with the client sifting through photos and historical material in order to help define what needed to be in the space. "We narrowed the focus down to about half a dozen areas, and worked on ways to establish different identities for each of the aspects," Hamilton said.

He also agrees that the technical theatre education and experience that so many Chicago Scenic employees have enables them to work effectively with a wide variety of clients on a wide variety of projects. "A theatre program is based on quick-turn projects and a manic need to get finished. This process becomes ingrained in students - a group of people come together to work on a play or project and there's a set number of days or weeks to complete it. You learn a 'whatever it takes' mentality that translates well to the work we do at Chicago Scenic," Hamilton says.

"We have the empathy to help clients realize their vision," Doepel adds. "Some customers bring fully conceived ideas to us, others bring a drawing sketched on the back of a cocktail napkin. Through the process of throwing ideas back and forth - the collaboration - we perform our best."

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Perhaps part of the reason that museums and scenic houses are working together so effectively today is due to the trend of museums moving toward a more immersive, theatrical presentation of their exhibits," Weiglein says. "Certainly, they face increased competition from other forms of entertainment. Families have limited budgets and many leisure options to choose from," Weiglein says.

In response, museums are increasingly using interactive stations, sound, and audiovisual elements to enhance the senses, and therefore, the exhibits. The Ancient Americas exhibit, for example, features a widescreen canvas on which is projected a lifelike forest panorama. In the dark hall, visitors hear the call of birds overhead and see caribou passing slowly through the forest, which begin to run as a thunderous herd of mammoths moves into the scene.

What visitors won't notice about the darkened theatre and projected forest is that it is so effective in part because of a specialized product, Screen Goo, expertly applied by Chicago Scenic's crew. The special paint contains bits of reflective plastic that enhance the projected image and make it brighter and more crisp. The projection wall was then painted black, fading at the top and bottom of the wall to soften the edges so there is no discernible separation from where projected images begin and end.

"What we were able to do is create an environment that couldn't possibly exist indoors but is realized to the point that it enables visitors to suspend disbelief - much as they would in a theatre setting," Zommer said. That suspension of disbelief allows them to explore the exhibits with receptive, interested minds - which is possibly the greatest tribute to what a museum and scenic house can do when they work together. **ipm**

Diane Langhorst is Director of Marketing at Chicago Scenic Studios, Inc., a design, build, and management company located in Chicago. Diane began her career in trade show management with Reed Exhibition Companies where she was vice president of marketing and created successful campaigns for a wide variety of shows, including four Trade Show 200 properties. Diane started the trade show management firm Cornerstone Expositions which was purchased in 2004 by Cygnus Business Media.

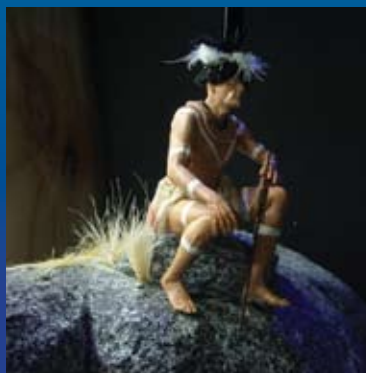
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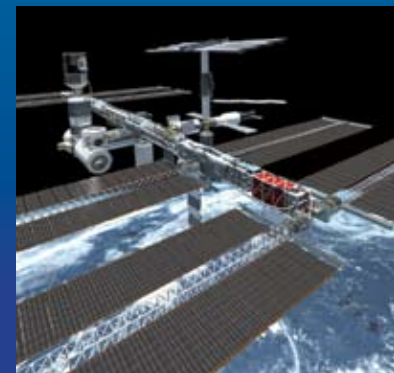
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