

**UN ROLL 'EM!**  
**PRESERVING ANIMATION ART AT**  
**DISNEY'S ANIMATION RESEARCH LIBRARY**

By Tim Campbell and Diane Pullano

**HISTORY**

The Walt Disney Company has been creating animated films since the 1920's, an activity which has generated a collection of artwork numbering in the tens of millions of pieces. The collection spans all of the different creative and technical elements that go into producing an animated film: concept art, character models, story sketches, layouts, rough animation, clean-up animation, backgrounds, color keys, overlays, underlays, cels, and other parts that go into making up the whole of an animated film. The bulk of the artwork consists of pencil, watercolor, and gouache on acidic paper and the illustration board which was common to the era; another major component to the collection is in the form of inked and painted sheets of celluloid acetate or celluloid nitrate.

In recent years, animation art has become highly collectible, and has achieved some recognition for artistic merit. Artists from early eras, who worked in relative anonymity, are now celebrated for their artistic styles and individual contributions to the films. Prior to the 1970's, however, huge numbers of drawings and cels from animation studios were given away at amusement parks, dumped into landfills, and occasionally just burned as refuse; cels were pragmatically washed and reused, the old images swirling away down the drain to make room for the next film. The artwork that remained after a production was finished might be kept for possible reuse, or for reference, and treated as a hands-on resource. Disney art fared better than art from most studios, with millions of pieces relegated to a basement storage area on the studio lot known affectionately as the "Morgue."

Today, these diverse materials are all carefully kept together by film and in chronological order by year of release at the Animation Research Library (ARL), a department of Walt Disney Feature Animation. The ARL, along with the Studio Archives (devoted to historical company documents, memorabilia, and the live-action films), grew up out of the Morgue, as the realization struck home that these materials, and other artwork created during the making of a film, had value.

**THE ANIMATION RESEARCH LIBRARY**

The mission of the ARL is to protect and conserve art from The Walt Disney Company's animated feature films and shorts. Among its primary activities, the ARL provides access to the art for Feature Animation artists, and is a resource for artist training and research projects; access is also provided for other Disney divisions to obtain reproductions in the form of color scans or copies for commercial or decorative use.

*continued on page 3*

**PARAGON**  
**RESEARCH ASSOCIATES**  
*Museum Professionals*

---

**Paula Johnson, M.A., R.P.A.**  
**COLLECTIONS SPECIALIST**

7352 20th Avenue NW • Seattle, WA • 98117  
(206) 706-1659 FAX (206) 297-9630  
PJParagon@aol.com

**CALL US TO FIND OUT HOW WE**  
**CAN WORK WITH YOU ON YOUR**  
**NEXT PROJECT.**

*Un Roll 'Em, continued from page 2*

As the ARL became an official entity in the 1980's, efforts were made to organize, label, and box the art. Individual pieces found to be in bad condition were sent, when possible, to Victoria Blyth-Hill of LACMA's Conservation Center for treatment. In more recent years, the process of replacing poor storage materials (rubber bands, staples, paper clips, cardboard, etc.) with museum quality archival materials was undertaken. This was a daunting task as the collection was already huge and rapidly growing due to the resurgence in popularity of Disney animation. Under Lella Smith (Director of the ARL) - with the help of Tim Campbell (now Archivist at the ARL), Jill Quinn (now a consultant to Walt Disney Studio Archives), and an excellent staff - the collection has been evaluated from a preservation standpoint, and much of it has been properly archived. Recently, the collection was moved into a 34,000 square foot, newly refurbished facility with state of the art temperature and humidity controls, compact shelving, and fire suppression systems. The necessity of handling and moving the art was turned into an opportunity for further addressing conservation needs.

#### THE PAINTED BACKGROUNDS

With assessment of the collection complete and archiving well under way, attention was turned to the next most pressing problem: the painted backgrounds. These paintings are the stationary counterparts to the elements on screen that carry out actions and move; while there are far fewer backgrounds than cels for a single scene, there are sometimes hundreds of backgrounds for an animated feature. Backgrounds are currently being stored in sleeves made with Mylar covers on acid-free boards and kept, where possible, grouped in the order in which they appear in the film. Large locking cabinets, designed specifically to house these materials, are fitted with dividers to separate groups of backgrounds and prevent undue pressure from being placed on painted surfaces.

Backgrounds were painted onto either illustration board or a heavy paper stock. During certain periods in the company's history, the painted surface layers of backgrounds on illustration board were peeled off so that they (along with various cels and overlays) would fit under the camera platen. For ease of storage many backgrounds were rolled into tight coils and placed in large, institutional ice cream buckets (or so legend has it). The final injury was their banishment to the Morgue, where some would remain for up to 40 years at risk from leaks and unstable conditions. In this rolled state the backgrounds were essentially inaccessible.

The backgrounds have had the benefit of climate controlled storage since the 1980's and have survived in remarkably good condition. Overall, paint layers are stable and the colors have retained their vibrancy. Most problematic to the collection are the following:

- Large quantities of tape (black, electrical, cellophane, masking).
- Rubber bands, which have become encrusted onto painted surfaces.
- Occasional embrittlement of paper.

*continued on page 5*

# Just Whistle,

HANDS ON ART MOVERS  
CLIMATE CONTROL STORAGE  
375 OYSTER POINT BOULEVARD, UNIT 3  
SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080  
FAX 650 624-8437  
PHONE 650 624-9882



LAWRENCE  
FINE ARTS

### ASSESSING TREATMENT

A decision was made to flatten the rolled backgrounds in order to better preserve them, ensure their safety during handling by researchers, and aid in their accessibility. Due to the severe memory curl, heavy paper stock and large glue-hardened sections, humidification was deemed necessary before it would be possible to safely place them into Mylar sleeves. Information on methods and materials was taken from references including Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler's Archives & Manuscripts: Conservation, Janet Ruggles at the Balboa Art Conservation Center, Victoria Blyth-Hill at LACMA, Jim Druzik at the Getty Conservation Institute, and Linda Witkowski at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

In 1998, Diane Pullano was hired on as conservation technician to carry out the project. Her main challenge was to find a safe, timely method to unroll approximately 7,000 backgrounds which generally measure from 2 1/2 to 10 feet in length. Once an effective course of action was determined, the relative uniformity of paper supports and paint medium used within the Feature Animation department allowed humidification and drying to be carried out on a large scale with relatively few surprises.

### THE HUMIDIFICATION PROCESS

A framework of shelving 6 feet high by 30 feet long is located inside a tent of 4-mil polyethylene plastic, with room to safely load and unload the shelves. A polyethylene mesh running the full length of the chamber makes up the shelves, allowing backgrounds full exposure to humidity on both sides. Two ultrasonic humidifiers raise the humidity from the building standard 50% to a level of 80-90%. The backgrounds remain rolled up inside the humidity chamber for approximately one hour at which point they can be safely unrolled to their full length and weighted down around all sides. After 3-4 hours the backgrounds are fully relaxed and can be transferred to drying shelves.

On the drying shelves, the artwork is sandwiched between Remay, several layers of blotting paper and finally 1/4" Teflon sheets, which are then weighted down at intervals along their entire length. The Teflon was a material already on hand and of the proper size. Given the length of the backgrounds and the high number (20 or

more) that are put through the process each day, the flexible, lighter weight Teflon has proven to be more practical than glass. Though timing of the entire process varies slightly, the moist blotters are generally removed after an hour and the drying process can be completed within 24 hours.

### THE RESULTS

To date, 1500 backgrounds have been unrolled since the start of the project in May of 1998. Careful monitoring has revealed no subsequent problems as a result of humidification. The basic methods have worked well, and continue to produce excellent results. Backgrounds stored in their Mylar sleeves are no longer at risk during handling and occupy a smaller area of valuable shelf space. Literally thousands of paintings that were inaccessible and stored out of context from the film with which they were associated have now been filed in a way that makes it possible to find and utilize them. Storage conditions in general are much improved, and the staff of the Animation Research Library continues their daily mission to archive, research and exhibit examples of this rich and diverse collection.

*Tim Campbell is Archivist and Diane Pullano is a Conservation Technician at the Animation Research Library, Walt Disney Feature Animation, Burbank, California.*

# Great Moves.

HANDS ON ART MOVERS  
CLIMATE CONTROL STORAGE  
375 OYSTER POINT BOULEVARD, UNIT 3  
SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94080  
FAX 650 624 8437  
PHONE 650 624-9887



LAWRENCE  
FINE ARTS