



## **JOSEPH J. MUSIL AND THE SALON OF THEATRES**

**By Dr. Ronald Naversen**

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Joseph J.

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THEATRES



by Ronald Naversen

photos by Kenneth Naversen

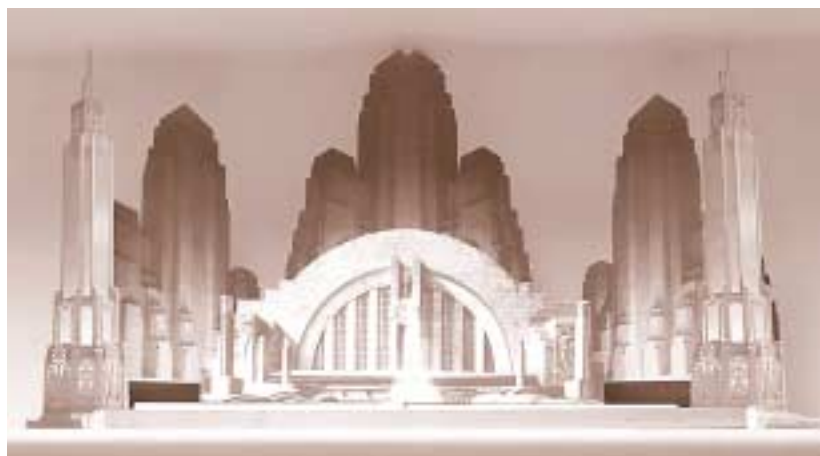
*The centerpiece of the Salon is a fourteen-foot art deco proscenium arch framing a copy of a 1922 drop from the J.D. Martin Studio, painted by Bill Anderson, head scenic artist for the Disney Scenic Studio in 1991.*

**On the main street of Santa Ana,** the financial and governmental center of Orange County, California, is the restored Spanish Churrigueresque style Santora Building. This building has been preserved by the city as studios for painters, sculptors, and media artists. On the top floor of this artist colony is the Salon of Theatres of Joseph J. Musil. Inside his salon, Musil has created a working design studio, a museum for his collection of miniature theatre models, and an intimate Vaudeville stage. The 15,000-square-foot studio is surrounded with shelves displaying dozens of miniature theatres recreated in their various architectural styles. Some are Victorian toy theatre lithographs like the Neoclassic Urania Theatre and the Chinoiserie Tivoli Theatre of Copenhagen. Others include Musil's own reproductions of Rapp & Rapp's French Rococo Rialto Theatre in Chicago and the Joseph Urban-inspired geometric art deco Ziegfeld Theatre in New York. Still other models, creations of Musil's own vivid imagination, are for unrealized theatre projects.

Visitors to the Salon are quickly whisked back to the dream era of Hollywood via the classic movie soundtracks and silent film organ music that continuously plays in the background. Accent lights salvaged from theatre sconces or brass incense burners play across Asian styled urns, velour drapery, and upholstered seats rescued from the demolished movie houses of southern California. Several models boast working fly systems with multiple backdrops while others are lit with miniature spot- and foot-lights. Behind the scenes Musil maintains his

drafting and model-making studio with an extensive library of theatre, architecture, and interior design. The centerpiece of the Salon is a fourteen-foot art deco proscenium arch adorned with a gilded mask of Bacchus, plumed ostrich fans, swagged drapery, glittery stars, and art deco wall sconces. This intimate yet lavish little stage is complete with a series of backdrops, drapery, and scrims on traveler tracks as well as a roll drop. These backgrounds frame Musil's flamboyant seasonal displays and Vaudeville shows on the first Saturday of each month.

**Like many a stage-stuck youth, Musil's love of theatre and film** began at an early age with his first visit to a movie theatre. On his fourth birthday, in 1941, his grandmother escorted him to the Strand Movie Palace on the Long Beach Pike amusement pier to see *Lassie Come Home*. Designed by William Lee Wollet



*Model of proposed art deco setting with Cincinnati Union Terminal graced by skyscrapers designed by Raymond Hood. (36 by 18 inches)*



*Model of proposed treatment for the RKO Roxy Theatre adjacent to Radio City Music Hall, 1931. (16 by 14 inches)*



*Victorian German toy theatre produced by J.F. Schreiber Co. (24 by 18 inches)*

At his work table, surrounded by his models in various stages of construction and amid stacks of research books and magazines,



this Assyrian styled theatre was extravagantly appointed with cobalt blue colored chandeliers, rainbow backlighted niches, dangling incense burners, and plaster phoenixes hiding the organ grill. The columned proscenium arch and its grand movie curtain were spotlighted with lights until the curtain opened for the live stage show and movie. Dazzled by this sumptuous theatricality, young Musil vividly recalls a voice telling him

## “Remember the magic, remember everything!”

Musil did remember and his first attempts at recreating the magic were with his building blocks at home. As a teenager, he sought work as an usher and later as a projectionist and manager at local movie theatres, including the Fox West Coast Theatre in Long Beach. His first formal training in theatre was under the direction of Ruth Burdick at Woodrow Wilson High School. This progressive theatre program boasted a 1,600-seat proscenium theatre and a professional staff. It was here that Musil learned that people with special training created the beautiful designs he first tried to imitate with his blocks.

Musil went on to study art at the Chouinard Art School—now Cal Arts—in Los Angeles and interior design and set design for grand opera at the 400-year-old Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, Italy. Living in Italy for two years, Musil soaked up the wealth of architecture around him and regularly attend performances at the Teatro Lyrico and the newly renovated La Scala, whose stage door was directly across the street from Brera.

Returning to America, Musil began work in the window display department of Barker Brothers Department Store in Los Angeles. Designing full interiors in the store’s thirty-six win-

dows gave Musil an education in contemporary furniture design styles. In 1960, Musil entered the army and was assigned to special services where, like many theatre practitioners before him, he helped produce shows to entertain the troops. Musil delightedly remembers designing sets and costumes for *Star Spangled Rhythm*, which he recalls, “blew the socks off the brass!” Released from the army, Musil returned to civilian life by designing displays for Sears, J.C. Penney, and other stores. Musil began freelancing full time in the 1970s, designing store and restaurant interiors and specialty shops like the art deco Pacesetter Pavilion and Victorian-themed Company’s Coming. In this era of the discothèque Musil also designed several dance clubs including the western-themed Diamond Horseshoe and Mine Shaft in San Francisco.

But the theatre is where it started for Musil and where he longed to return. He began building his toy theatres in 1965 as ongoing research into theatre design. “The toy theatres got larger and larger the older I got. My own designs became more and more extravagant as a consequence.” As his models took up more and more space, Musil realized he needed a larger space and this is where the Salon of Theatres was born. Moving into the Santora Building in 1995, he created a world that would remind him of his first inspiration and where he could concentrate on creating his own brand of flamboyantly eclectic environments.

Musil has become a much sought after consultant on all things theatrical. His expertise was tapped to restore the Long Beach Community Playhouse, the Alex Theatre in Glendale, and the Universal City Walk Theatre in Studio

Musil daily burns up his sketch pencils while drawing under the watchful eyes of Buddha and a cut-out theatre usher.



City. Disney then hired Musil to consult on the Crest Theatre in Westwood and the Hindu-styled El Capitan Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard. He supervised the restoration of these grand movie palaces using existing sections of original ornamentation, historic photographs, and his own impressive sense of Hollywood style. The El Capitan now serves as home to Disney's movie premieres and features live stage performances prior to each screening. In 1997, Musil was commissioned to conceive the new Tomorrowland mural for Disneyland. He then collaborated with computer artist Brian White of Santa Ana to design five faux movie billboards for the Hyperion Theatre in Disney's new California Adventure theme park. These advertisements are reminiscent of the advertising billboards found in the old studio back lots, except that these ads are parodies of musicals with, for instance, Donald and Daisy Duck dancing in "Moon Over Monrovia," and Mickey and Minnie Mouse starring in "Down Catalina Way." Musil also consulted on the Fantasia Theatre for Euro Disney and an Italian-styled opera house for the Tokyo DisneySea amusement park in Japan. He has also designed a number of ornate show curtains for private movie theatres in the Los Angeles area.

In between his many theatre assignments, Musil keeps busy designing and supervising the restoration of stores and restaurants for the nostalgia market of southern California. Otherwise, he is quite content to work quietly in his Salon, adjusting the lighting on his precious theatre models, drawing sketches, cutting out the details of his next model, or planning the next fanciful seasonal display for his stage.

Musil's designs have been exhibited at the Palos Verdes Art Center, the USITT Conference & Stage Expo (Long Beach, 1998), and the art gallery at California State University, Fullerton.

The Salon has recently been incorporated as the non-profit American Museum of Theatrical Design ([www.amtd.org](http://www.amtd.org)) and is open Saturdays by appointment—207 North Broadway, Santa Ana, CA, 92701. Salon tours are \$3.00 and the Vaudeville performances are \$6.00. Information on the Salon and Vaudeville performances is available by calling the Salon at 714-667-6959. ❖

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