



The Legacy of Joe Grant

A tribute, by Jake Friedman

“Good design is something that matches that matrix in the back of your mind. You look at it, it all comes together, whether it’s music, or literature, the whole piece. I can’t define it, but I know that I’m very happy looking at it and I want to see it again. And want to know how it’s made. Before you know it, I’m examining it.”

Sure, east-coasters like us talk about design all the time, but these words were spoken by the late Disney “idea man” Joe Grant to historian John Canemaker. Grant died last May, at age 96, but not without personally touching the lives of hundreds of artists and indirectly affecting millions.

Grant, who was born in 1908, became a newspaper caricaturist for the Los Angeles Record when his work was spotted by Walt Disney in 1933. Disney hired the 25-year-old Grant to caricature Hollywood stars in the short Mickey’s Gala Premiere, and Grant was soon hired to work full-time at the Disney story department. After designing the wicked queen in Snow White, Disney put Grant at the head of his new team, the Character Model Department. As Grant explained in Canemaker’s, *Before the Animation Begins*, “The drawings I make are not storyboard drawings. They are inspirational drawings. I always like to have an idea in each drawing, so if they look at it they can say that’s a possibility, we can build on that. I think that’s my function, always has been.”

For more than ten years, Grant would contribute key elements to Disney features. He co-wrote *Dumbo* with Dick Huemer; he helped make music choices for *Fantasia* and designed the apprentice’s Sorcerer; his sketches of his spaniel, Lady, inspired a certain film about a tramp, and that’s not even mentioning his sketches and story ideas for *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, *Mr. Toad*, and films that had yet to be produced, like *Alice in Wonderland*.

In 1949, when the Character Model Department disbanded, Grant left the big studio environment to pursue other artistic endeavors. He created and designed a popular greeting card company called Castle, Ltd., and he and his wife Jennie opened a ceramic studio called Opechee Designs. In 1989, during pre-production of *Beauty and the Beast*, Grant was brought back to the studio by Charlie Fink, head of the development department, to end what Grant called his “forty years in the wilderness.” Among other concepts, it was Grant who created Mrs. Potts. In 1991, when his wife Jennie passed away, Grant committed his time to the Disney studio as creative director, and clocked into work every day, contributing key concepts to every Disney film since. Cri-kee the cricket from *Mulan* was all Grant, as was the design of the opening credits for Pixar’s *Monsters Inc.* The wind blowing colored leaves past Pocahontas? Joe Grant. The entire flamingo “Carnival of the Animals” scene from *Fantasia 2000*? Joe Grant again.

“It was the visual that was really the most striking,” says Eric Goldberg, a Disney staple who co-directed *Pocahontas* and directed the “Carnival of the Animals” sequence, before becoming an independent animator. I had the good fortune of talking with Goldberg, who has the unique position of being an indie animator who has worked closely with Joe Grant.

“Joe was a nonstop flood of creativity and imagination,” says Goldberg, “and that was really his technique more than anything else. He couldn’t stop himself, because it was all racing through his head, and he had to put it down on paper as fast as he could.”

When asked if there was anything he has taken with him from Grant to the realm of the small studio, Goldberg replied, "A thing that seems to be lacking in big studio projects is wit. You have a meal with Joe, and he's very witty. ... Another thing that they miss is charm. Joe was such a big advocate of charm, and it's a thing that feels lost in a lot of studio projects these days."

Possibly the most recent example of sharp wit and charm from the Disney studio can be seen in 2004's *Lorenzo*, the Oscar-nominated short conceived by Joe Grant. The film, about a cat with a luxurious, maniacal tail, was a technological milestone in its marriage of 2-D and 3-D animation, and all heralded by a man who was 95.

"He was always looking forward to the next project, to what was new and what was different," says Dave Bossert, visual effects supervisor for *Lorenzo*. "If you walked in his office, there was the desk he would draw on, and he would turn around and he had another work table that had a computer on it."

But it wasn't just his perspective on technology that struck people. Those who knew the wise, serene Grant cherished the time spent with him. Eric Goldberg recollects that "one thing that was always entertaining was Joe's B.S. detector. He did not suffer fools gladly." When irked by choices made by the administration, an artist could talk to Grant, who was able to draw on 70 years of memories of working with administrations, artists, and Walt himself.

The sharpness of Grant's mind and memory was a tremendous resource, particularly to people piecing together Disney history. Besides aiding the production of the Disney-World War II DVD, *On the Front Lines*, Grant shared his memories about the wartime studio in a taped interview with Leonard Maltin. A more casual *tete-a-tete*, though no less enlightening, can be seen on the upcoming *Lilo & Stitch* DVD between Grant and *Lilo* co-director Dean DeBlois, where Grant shares his secrets of story.

DeBlois was only one of many who was touched by Grant's presence. John Canemaker says that "to the young animators he worked with in his later years, [Grant] inspired awe as the embodiment of 'living history,' and the closest they would ever come to gauging what Walt might have thought about creative challenges. In many of these young folks that he mentored, mainly by example, he inspired feelings of love."

To this writer, who considers *Dumbo* the *Citizen Kane* of animated storytelling, Joe Grant was an inspiration. There's an almost tangible divide between the big studio mindset of Hollywood and the small-studio mentality here on the east coast, but Grant seemed to transcend that divide. He — dare I say it — took the inventiveness and underdog charm prevalent to small animation studios and boldly applied it to the Disney projects, perhaps even more so in the years before he died. Fortunately, Grant left behind not only a legacy in film but hundreds of unused ideas and inspirational drawings around the Disney studio. And it looks like his ideas will continue to influence animated projects for decades to come.

