

# Hit parade

Floatmaker, signwriter and display builder Peter Taylor shares highlights from his extraordinary career.



In an increasingly digital world where 3D printing, laser cutting and artificial intelligence have become common tools for manufacturing physical objects, you'd be hard pressed to find many people quite like Peter Taylor. For more than 50 years, Peter has been responsible for creating hundreds of the fantastical floats that have brought joy to throngs of visitors at the annual Auckland Farmers Santa Parade and other celebratory festivities.

"Peter is a true legend," says Pam Glaser, General Manager for the Farmers Santa Parade. "His unique blend of creativity, artistry and building expertise results in the most breathtaking floats, bringing immense joy to everyone during the festive season."

But float building wasn't a path Peter expected to pursue. After leaving school, the lifelong Aucklander first joined the Farmers' Display Department where he developed a myriad of construction and decorative skills that are a rarity today, such as signwriting, ticket writing and display building. "Our department, at the time, was also responsible for the building of the Auckland Santa Parade," explains Peter. "This was done in a separate warehouse in Te Papapa, and I spent many hours there learning the ropes from other Display Department team members. In days gone by, I made floats with wooden frames that were covered in wire netting and then coated in papier-mâché before they were painted. These were very vulnerable to weather and susceptible to bumps, so they were rarely reused."

Though most of those early fragile floats were destroyed after each parade, a few exceptions survived, such as Santa, the Fairy Queen and the River Belle. With these creations, Peter says it was the Resene products they were coloured with that allowed for their longevity. Certain props were kept for future parades, such as the Easter Bunny, while other papier-mâché animals could be reused on future floats after being repainted. It wasn't until the early 80s that Peter was able to start using more robust building methods, when he began constructing floats from plywood, polystyrene, polyurethane and fibreglass – a combination he continues to use for contemporary floats today. "A couple of good coats of Resene Lumbersider helps to preserve them in case of inclement weather," says Peter.

"I started using Resene paints on the parade about 30 years ago," he continues. "I learnt a huge amount in those early years, mainly by trial and error. The floats need to be big and bold, as they pass by quickly and small details are lost. Bold colours are important – and that's where Resene paints come in, as they are essential to create impact. I think Resene paints are one of the most important ingredients for a successful float for Parade Day."

While the Auckland Farmers Santa Parade may be the most important annual event that Peter prepares for, he has also

constructed floats for a number of suburban Auckland parades, including the Birkenhead Chelsea Sugar Parade, Auckland Pride Parade, St Patrick's Day Parade and several America's Cup parades. Some of the floats Peter has built have even travelled to Hamilton.

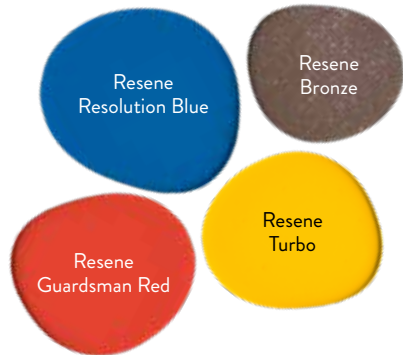
Today, Peter has a massive 1,400m<sup>2</sup> shop where his ideas are brought to life but his floats have been built in many different locations over the course of his career – ideally, as close to Queen Street as possible. "Being close to the parade route makes traffic control easier on the day," Peter explains. "Parade Day is always stressful, even after all these years. Waking up at 4am and seeing the stars shining in a clear sky always comes as a relief."

In total, Peter estimates he has probably made around 500 floats, but some are more memorable than others. "One float that stands out for me was made about 30 years ago, Gulliver's Travels. It was 10 metres long and constructed with wood, wire netting and papier-mâché and had a huge Gulliver lying the full length of the float."

Two more recent floats that he remembers fondly were a hippie van and a sizable dinosaur. "The hippie van used many different paint colours and using Resene FX Metallic paint on the huge dinosaur was also something I loved. The dinosaur has had many



left, facing page and previous page: Peter Taylor's fantastic floats march down Auckland's Queen Street during the annual Farmers Santa Parade. Peter has been building floats and displays since 1973 and Resene Lumbersider Low Sheen is his paint product of choice for its durability, brilliance and breadth of colour options. In recent years, Peter has also started to use a range of metallic colours in Resene FX Metallic paint. Images courtesy of Auckland Farmers Santa Parade.



colour changes over the years, from pink to green and now Resene FX Metallic Bronze. I've found Resene Lumbersider provides great coverage whenever I have to paint over a previous colour."

After so many builds, Peter has learned to seek out inspiration anywhere he can. Earlier in his career, most floats tended to be based on fairy tales, nursery rhymes and storybook characters. But as time has gone on, floats have become more commercialised and now tend to reflect pop-culture trends. "I am always looking at things with float ideas in mind but the official brainstorming for the parade floats starts in about February. I will catch up with Pam and the costume team, Ronelle, Marylin and Mana, and throw ideas out there. I will then do a few float sketches and we catch up again. Once there has been a decision, I make a scale model of the design. This is used to show sponsors what the float will look like and becomes the template for the full-sized build."

When not building floats for the parade, Peter has constructed plenty of other interesting creations and his portfolio is filled with commissions from all sorts of companies, organisations and causes. "There was the giant lamb chop trailer for Beef + Lamb New Zealand, a scale model of the Sky Tower for the Sky Tower Atrium and smaller models that were taken on tour, big sausages, bunches of grapes for vineyards and the Thomas faces for Glenbrook Vintage Railway, to name a few," Peter recalls. He also built the façade for the recently-retired pirate ship at Rainbow's End, along with the pirate that stood at its helm.

While Peter primarily works alone, he has had plenty of part-time helpers assist with various projects. "Over the years, I have had lots of outside help from younger people interested in art and display. My children, Jessica, Sarah and David – who is a builder now – have all helped at one time or another when things have come down to the wire. At present, a good old mate, Ian Gibson, helps me on float repairs. Ian is also the parade convoy controller on Parade Day."

For others who might be interested in getting into float building, Peter says that having a love of art and display and a strong imagination are essential. "The ability to look at something, be it a picture in a book or a child's toy, and imagine how that could be incorporated into a float is key."

Other skills can be taught on the job, the same way Peter learnt them. "You need to develop the building ability but in a way that will ensure safety for people on the floats and watching the parade. That is the top priority," he stresses. "My signwriting ability and early display work has certainly helped me over the years. Time management is also very important. When you have 10 or more floats to build, plus repairs to existing floats, the foot needs to be on the pedal for most of the year."



Peter says Resene has always been his paint brand of choice – not just for floats, but for other jobs he's done as well. "Block walls, when painting large signage on building fronts and display backgrounds, are some of the other areas I have used them. The Resene colour range, for what I am doing on the parade, is second to none. The colours are so bright and vivid, I have found none better. The staff at my Resene ColorShop are exceptional at going out of their way to accommodate my needs. I can't say enough."

Though he's partial to yellow, Peter's list of favourite Resene colours is lengthy. "The ones I probably use the most are Resene

Turbo, Resene Resolution Blue, Resene Guardsman Red and purples – I love them all! The Resene FX Metallic colours have given an extra dimension over the last few years, especially on the space-themed floats."

Of course, the best place to see more of Peter's work is on the parade route at the end of November, where dazzling displays, giant inflatables, musicians and entertainers take over Queen Street in Auckland in warm welcome of Santa Claus. For a peek at past parades, check out the Farmers Santa Parade photo gallery at [www.santaparade.co.nz/gallery](http://www.santaparade.co.nz/gallery). **BW**