

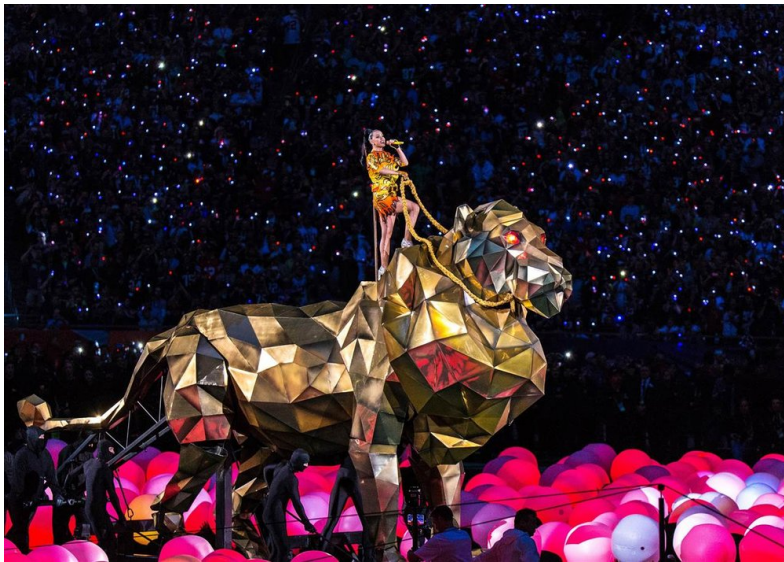
Michael Curry BFA'81 takes success to new heights

by Linda Lenhoff, February 27, 2023

[ALL PACIFIC NORTHWEST COLLEGE OF ART NEWS &.../CATEGORIES/PACIFIC-NORTHWEST-COLLEGE-OF-ART/INDEX.HTML](#)

Designer. Puppet master. Self-taught engineer. Many terms describe Michael Curry BFA'81, the master storyteller and theatrical wizard, but some of his creations nearly defy description.

Slender, swaying, magical giraffes from *The Lion King*, fearsome raptors at Universal Studios, lovably creepy critters in the *Cirque Du Soleil*, even Katy Perry's golden lion from Super Bowl XLIX. How does the [Pacific Northwest College of Art \(https://pnca.willamette.edu\)](https://pnca.willamette.edu) grad dream these things up?



KATY PERRY'S SUPER BOWL HALFTIME SHOW, 2015

"Everything I do is based on composition, color theory, story — it's all storytelling," says Curry. If the assignment is music based, "The first thing I do — I always call it my golden minute — I listen to the music without any preconceptions," Curry says.

When Curry first graduated from PNCA, then the Museum Art School, there was no Internet to check for references and ideas — and he still doesn't start his dreamwork by glancing at the web: "To this day I start without any reference other than the essentials. If it's a script, if it's music, I start with the essential idea."

"Then you let your subconscious engine go to work and do what it does really well when you practice being a creative person," he says. "Ideas just start going."

Curry gets to the point where he feels he's scrolling through his subconscious feelings about that music. "Or, you know, if it's a story I'm telling, I read it, and I get to imagine that place."

Curry notices the details as he's envisioning. "The smell of it. What it is. Is it a room? Is it outside? Is there light? Is it cold? And then the

visual stories come forward in front of me,” he says.

The road to becoming a world-famous designer began right here in Oregon, with a memorable meandering path through art school in Portland, and it began because Curry loved to draw. “I was just a geek about drawing. I love drawing, and I love the way that you could make things look like an illusion. In Grants Pass, Oregon, it was just a great hobby for me,” he says.

His wrestling coach’s wife took note of Curry’s talents and filled out an application for him to the Museum Art School. Curry earned a full-ride scholarship, which turned out to be just what he most wanted.

“I wanted fundamentals, and now I’m so glad to have had those: composition, 3D design theory, critical reviews,” Curry says. He still drops by the school to lend his experienced voice to students’ discussions of their thesis, but he says critiques were “far more brutal” back in his day. “Unless somebody left the room crying, you really hadn’t dug very deep into a critique,” he jokes.

Curry also got to study with remarkable professional artists teaching at the school, including Lucinda Parker and Jay Backstrand. “The teachers were amazing, just as they are today,” he says. “It was a very classical education not found anywhere else on the West Coast.” In 2009, PNCA conferred Curry an honorary doctorate degree.

Curry has reached a level of success that’s rare. Michael Curry Design employs 40 plus designers and creators who work across a span of projects for theater, entertainment venues, environmental attractions, and large scale events, like the recent FIFA World Cup opening ceremonies in Qatar. He’s producing "Awakening" for Wynn Las Vegas, and "The Lion King" is celebrating its 25th anniversary. His success and dedication — and originality — is inspiring. As he considers all this, his advice to young designers (and the rest of us) becomes clear.

“The challenge is finding your own voice,” he says. “And when you do, it’s usually recognized as a stronger voice than the other one you were using before. So, my advice to students is, Figure out how to be original.”

Curry advises students to start small, and with their gut. “You already have it inside,” Curry says. “Spend less time looking on the Internet and more time with your sketchbook. In the bathtub and the sauna, and by the Creek.”

The answer isn’t AI, Curry insists. “The answer is much simpler than that, and it’s like your best friend because it’s always with you: your creativity.”

Good advice indeed, from the man who brought you the spindly legged giraffes, Transformers, majestic creatures from the Disney’s stage production Frozen, and more. And he’s just warming up.



PNCA GRADUATE STUDENTS PRESENT MIXED MEDIA WORK ILLUSTRATING L'APPEL DU VIDE (“THE CALL OF THE VOID”)

03.15.2023 | LINDA LENHOFF

PNCA graduate students present mixed media work illustrating l'appel du vide (“the call of the void”)



HOW I GOT THE JOB: A Q&A WITH PERRIN CRESPI BA'22

03.01.2023

Find out how Crespi is using her degree in civic communication and media at a bioindustrial manufacturing company.



SPOTLIGHT ON TESS FALCONE BA'10: RUNNING THE LIGHTS FOR SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN MUSIC

02.14.2023 | JENNIFER JOHNSON

Falcone has toured with St. Vincent, Ben Folds and Weezer. In September, she helped cover the lighting at the Taylor Hawkins tribute concert.



WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY

Marketing and Communications

Address

WALLER HALL, FOURTH FLOOR
WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY
900 STATE STREET
SALEM OREGON 97301 U.S.A.

Phone

503-370-6667

Email

COMM-INFO@WILLAMETTE.EDU ([MAILTO:COMM-INFO@WILLAMETTE.EDU](mailto:COMM-INFO@WILLAMETTE.EDU)).

[f](http://www.facebook.com/Willamette/) (<http://www.facebook.com/Willamette/>).

[t](http://twitter.com/willamette_u) (http://twitter.com/willamette_u).

[i](http://instagram.com/willamette_u) (http://instagram.com/willamette_u).

[in](https://www.linkedin.com/edu/school?trk=tyah&trkInfo=tas%3Awillamette&id=19215) ([https://www.linkedin.com/edu/school?
trk=tyah&trkInfo=tas%3Awillamette&id=19215](https://www.linkedin.com/edu/school?trk=tyah&trkInfo=tas%3Awillamette&id=19215)).

[SUBMIT FEEDBACK](https://www.willamette.edu/submit-feedback) ([HTTPS://SI](https://www.willamette.edu/submit-feedback))

©2023 WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY | ALL RIGHTS RESERVED