

JULY: THIS MONTH IN THE HISTORY OF RMPBN

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A BEHIND-THE-SCENES PEEK

Viewers sometimes don't realize the enormous amount of work that goes on behind the scenes of a television program long before it goes on the air -- especially when it comes to the creative artwork. This was particularly true in the early years of educational television long before the advent of computer-generated images.

In the early days of KRMA-TV (now Rocky Mountain PBS), all graphics were original artwork created by talented artists working in the KRMA Art Department. The Art Department oversaw all art related to the station which meant that the Art Department was basically entrusted with the entire visual image of KRMA. Their responsibilities included design of the monthly printed program guide, the design of the annual report, all station-related photography, the design of all on air slides, design of marketing materials promoting KRMA, design of station logos, creation of program props and the complete design and construction of entire sets designed for hundreds of locally-produced programs.



Howard T. Hansen 1964 August program guide

This month, I want to introduce you to one of the most gifted artists, **HOWARD T. HANSEN**, that worked in KRMA's Art Department since its first day of black and white broadcasting in 1956. At the onset of his educational television career, Howard was paid a whopping \$1.25 per hour.

Howard studied at the Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs and the University of Denver. He began his career at KRMA in January 1956 as the Art and Scene Technician. On June 17, 1964, he was promoted to Studio Art Supervisor. His talents ranged from creating hand-crafted puppets, costumes, schoolrooms, trees, backdrops, houses, floors and much more. As an example, an old Spanish home was generated from cardboard tubes found in paper rolls that were cut in two and painted red.

Hansen was responsible for designing and building all the scenery for the National Educational Television (NET) series produced by Channel 6 including such memorable productions as "Turn of the Century," "Ragtime Era," and "Cowboys West." Additionally, he oversaw building the sets used on "The Boettcher School of the Air" and was responsible for the design

of all sets used for local evening programs on KRMA.

Several staff members from the 1950s, when interviewed by Station's Archived Memories (SAM), commented that Hansen's remarkable skills made an indelible impact on the early success of KRMA. In 1962, the *Rocky Mountain News* complimented Hansen saying, "Pieces of wire, cardboard and string . . . paint, nails and canvas . . . plus the color sense and creative touch of Howard T. Hansen combine to bring viewers some of the most beautiful scenery in the Denver television industry."

When designing a set, Hansen would meet with KRMA's production staff to find out what was needed.



Hansen's sketch for "Turn of the Century" 1962

From there, he would sketch the scenery including lighting, camera shots and even placement of furniture. Once his sketch was approved by the director, construction began.

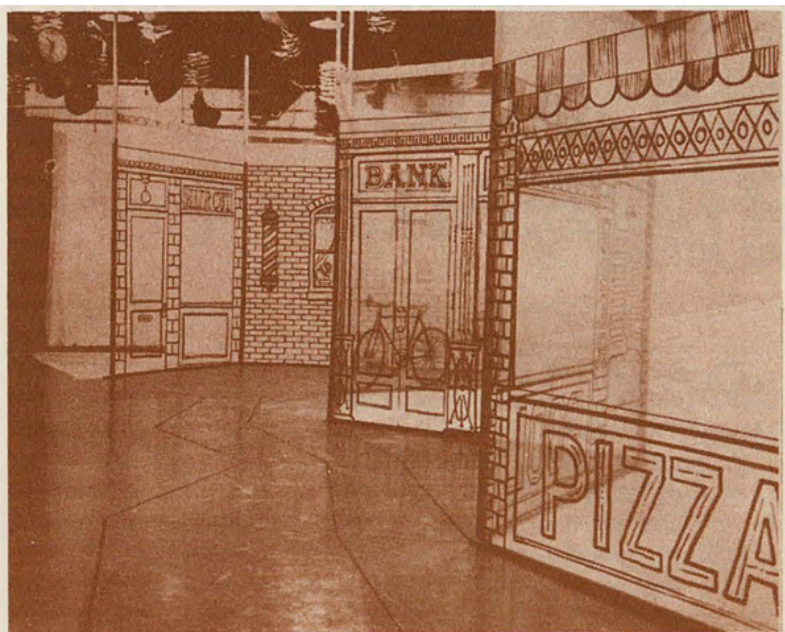


Finished set, "Turn of the Century" 1962

One particularly spectacular set designed by Hansen was created for a segment of a half hour KRMA series for NET with music, dance and story. Premiering on **July 22, 1964**, the complete series traced the influence of jazz music on contemporary American ballet, tracing jazz from its origins in African rhythms through American ballroom and dance hall performance to current days where jazz was a prominent element on the ballet stage.

For the final segment of the production, an ingenious set of paper thin plastic sheeting was created by Howard Hansen to give an illusion of large store windows. The set had to create an illusion of windows for a dance performed between two dancers and their reflections. The reflections were actually two other dancers, so both groups had to watch the other in order to coordinate movement. Therefore, the set had to have a feeling of transparency.

KRMA's July 1964 *Program Hilites* presented a noteworthy description of the concept, design and execution of Hansen's set. The article stated:



Sketched set by Howard Hansen for July 1964, ALL THAT JAZZ

A standard scrim (it looks like surgical dressing) could not be used because it became too opaque when lit from both sides at the same time. So, Howard settled upon the plastic because it appeared to have the qualities he was striving for. To our knowledge, this had never been done.

Mounting the plastic was a tough job, since it had to be mounted as one continuous piece. Howard built a seven-planed frame – seventy-two feet long and ten feet high – and covered it with the plastic, which proved to be unstable and very hard to handle. He painted the store fronts directly onto the plastic, using black tempera. The floors behind the set were painted white for better contrast. The set design adds much to this particular sequence and makes it the high point of the production.

Fortunately for us, there was a fulltime photographer on staff in July 1964 who captured images of the final studio set. These photographs are now digitized by the volunteers of Station's Archived Memories (SAM) and are included in the Rocky Mountain Public Media archives.

