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Non-fiction Picture Book
1087 words

“PUSHING PETALS TO THE METAL: HOW ROSE PARADE
FLOATS ARE MADE”

By Pauline Ts'o

Today's the Day! (January 1)

It's New Year's Day and the Tournament of Roses Parade is on! The marching bands are juicing up joy with the blare of trumpets, the stomp of many feet, and the flash and blur of whirling batons. Massive horses clop clop clop down the boulevard with elegant riders sitting easy on their backs. And the floats – the floats!

Aglow in color, some flap wings, some belch steam, and many have people riding, smiling, and waving to the crowds. Down one street, around a tight corner, the floats seem to drive themselves for five and a half miles through the city of Pasadena in California. Hundreds of white-suited volunteers keep a watchful eye on the floats (and the backends of all those horses).

But just a few hours ago, things were quite different.

The Night Before (December 31)

In the dark hours before dawn, hundreds of tired volunteers place the last fresh flowers onto the floats, racing to finish before three judges come to inspect their work. The judges must make the difficult decision of which floats are the best of the best and this is their final round. They have already made two rounds to see the floats in their earlier stages.

Decorating Week (December 26-30)

The judges watch as first, the longer-lasting flowers, like carnations and chrysanthemums, are glued onto or poked into the floats. The delicate roses are placed last, as the final touch. Each rose is hand-stripped of thorns, stem cut to size, and placed into its own vial of water. Tens of millions of flowers ordered many months ago from all over the world reach their journey's end.

But how can even hundreds of volunteers cover such huge floats in just one week?

The Sturdy Stuff (Early December)

Well, it definitely takes more than a week.

Better-rested volunteers start first with dry materials. There are beans and seeds and leaves and bark. Perhaps orange lentils become the bumpy skin of a dinosaur or Silver Tree leaves become the outside of a rocket ship. Every inch of every float has to be covered by plants. Several bathtubs worth of glue can be used on one float, including special glues made just for float-building.

But before the volunteers place all those beans and bark on a float, can you think of something that might be a good idea to do first?

A Plan for Everything (June – November)

Test the floats to see if they work! If something needs to be fixed or changed, better to do it before millions of beans and flowers are glued on, right? So, about once a month during the summer and fall, the float builders move the partially built floats out of the warehouse and onto the road. Volunteers from one of the Tournament committees check if all moving parts are moving properly, if float riders have the space they need to sit, stand, and dance (or surf like dogs did in 2017!), and if all riders can get off the floats in less than 45 seconds in case of an emergency.

As the floats pass their tests and changes are okayed by the Tournament team, “skins” made of plastic foam are blown onto all of the floats and shaped. And because the floral director probably doesn’t want the bluebirds to turn out green or the polar bears to turn out pink, she makes certain every bit of these skins is painted and coded. Like a paint-by-number set, these codes tell the volunteers where to put what.

But what’s under these skins?

The Invisible Crew (April – November)

A skin is put on top of a superstructure of fine screen mesh, chicken wire, plywood, and a framework of steel. All spring and summer, the float builders work to build these superstructures.

While every float has a crew chief and an assistant crew chief, a float builder often does more than one job. A builder might be some combination of mechanic, painter, fabricator, carpenter, electrician, and welder because there are a lot of challenges to meet!

There has to be room for the engine that powers the float, but also for any special machines needed to control moving parts, pump water, or create other physical effects.

There needs to be equipment to play music and sounds. Chassis, engines, and parts from previous floats are used again whenever possible. There must be two sets of brakes to stop the float in case of emergencies. Some of the tires must be solid rubber to hold up a float that could weigh more than 50,000 pounds – that’s more than five elephants!

Because the floats don’t actually drive themselves, there must also be room for a driver in the back, underneath the float. A spotter who helps guide the driver sits in the front, also underneath. Once the driver and spotter enter the bottom of the float, they cannot come out until the very end of the parade. So, they are careful not to drink anything before the parade starts.

But how do the builders know what to build?

There Are Rules! (February – March)

Float designers draw detailed plans, working with the builders to make sure the designs can actually be built within parade rules. One rule is that tall floats must lower to no more than 16.5 feet tall to fit under a freeway bridge stretching over the parade route. After retracting, they must rise up again within one minute to keep the floats looking their finest.

But how does a design get picked?

Paper First (Early February)

The float designers create drawings upon drawings upon drawings. They show their concepts to float sponsors who have their suggestions as well. Hundreds of designs are created, but less than 50 are finally chosen by the Tournament of Roses committee that oversees the selection process. The committee wants to make sure that the designs selected are not too much alike.

But when a designer is staring at a blank piece of paper, the possibilities seem endless - where does one start?

Here We Go Again (Mid-January)

Fortunately, help is on the way. After the echoes of the previous parade wisp away, after the crowds disappear from the streets, after the builders take apart the award-winning floats they just spent a year building, and after the white-suited volunteers take well-deserved rests, a new Tournament president announces a new theme. This theme, this idea, will be inspiration for all the floats in the next parade. And the designers go to work.

Happy New Year!

Back Matter

In 1889, members of Pasadena's Valley Hunt Club talked among themselves about how much of the East Coast had been buried in a record-breaking blizzard the previous winter. They thought it would be grand to show the world what a Southern California winter was like. So, on New Year's Day in 1890, a line of flower-decorated carriages, riders on horseback, and packs of hounds made their merry way down the oak-lined dirt road which was Pasadena's main street at the time. With nary a snowflake to be seen, there were also picnics, footraces, tug-of-war matches, jousts, pony races, and an event where runners raced to be the first to put fifty oranges into a basket. In fact, this festival almost became known as the "Orange Tournament".

Today's Tournament of Roses® has changed quite a bit from the first one. Gone are the footraces and jousts. The horse-drawn carriages have made way for the motor-driven floats described in this book. The streets of Pasadena are all paved. The festivities now include marching bands, equestrian groups, a state-of-the-art military aircraft fly-by, a helium-filled blimp, and a major college football game. But what hasn't changed are the enthusiasm of the participants, the abundance of flowers, and nary a snowflake anywhere.

Teacher Activity

Here are some past Tournament of Roses themes:

- The Power of Hope
- Oh, the Places You'll Go!
- Celebrate Family
- Music Music Music
- Echoes of the Century

Can you think of a good theme for a parade?

Selected Bibliography

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