

LANCASTER

# A life in COLOR

Winn Morton marks more than three decades as Texas Rose Festival designer

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**M**ore than 30 costume sketches are wrapped around the baseboards in Winn Morton's studio.

The space — once a screened porch on a century-old house — sits on 150 acres of old corn and cotton farming land outside Lancaster city limits.

Morton, a University Park native, was preparing to ship the sketches the next day to East Texas. He'd worked since January to design the costumes.

Among them was a blowfish, a starfish, an octopus and a seahorse.

"It's sequin material ... but we'll enhance it with rhinestones," Morton said, pointing to the seahorse's fabric swatch. "You put rhinestones on sequins, and it makes them really sparkle."

Morton, 86, joked he'd spent a lifetime making rhinestones an endangered species. A costume designer, he's made a career of bringing his ideas to life.

For more than three decades, he's designed costumes and sets for the Texas Rose Festival — a three-day annual event in Tyler to celebrate the rose-growing industry. It in-

cludes a tea and parade, showcasing the queen and her court in elaborate themed costumes designed by Morton. This year's festival will be Oct. 15-18.

Now, it's his only project.

"It's not like doing a musical or play. You don't have a director who's telling you every minute what to do," he said. "You can have your own imagination."

Liz Ballard has attended the festival for about 20 years — all during Morton's tenure as its designer.

Now the executive director and curator of the Tyler Rose Museum, the festival's location, she credits Morton's career working alongside professional performers with the festival's growth.

"[Winn] is a ball of fire. Very energetic. Very enthusiastic. Age knows no bounds to his creativity," she said. "He's always been able to put that artistic touch on whatever it is."

Morton works along-



Sarah A. Miller/AP



**Winn Morton**, a University Park native, has been working since January on the costume designs for the Texas Rose Festival. For more than three decades, he's designed costumes for the three-day annual event in Tyler. **Below left:** Duchess of the 2014 Texas Rose Festival Kathleen Bertram practices her bow during the Queen's Coronation rehearsal wearing the circus-themed dress designed by Morton that includes an elaborate skirt that opens to reveal a circus tent with a show scene underneath.

side his friend Bob Cook, 76, a former clothing designer, to prepare the costumes.

The two travel together to New York each year to select fabric swatches. They'll return next month to purchase material.

Cook, who grew up in the Tyler area, has attended every rose festival since he was 9. He met Morton in 1982 — his first year as the festival's designer.

"It's changed a lot. It's a real production, like a Broadway show almost," Cook said.

In recent years, the costumes have become more elaborate. Cook points to photos of last year's show, a circus theme. There's a plate spinner and a tiger. One skirt opens to reveal a circus tent with a show scene underneath.

"It's a sea of color. It's just magical," Cook said.

For years, Morton designed costumes and sets for circuses such as Ringling Bros., Broadway and ice shows, balls and festivals, including a party for former first lady Lady Bird Johnson. He still has the White House Christmas card hanging in his home. Early in his career, he worked as a designer for CBS in New York. Television was transitioning to color, and it was a chance for him to experiment.

"We had real times up there," Morton said, his laugh echoing down a second-floor hallway.

Displayed down the dimly lit hallway are costume sketches from his circus days. There's one of Gunther Gebel-Williams, a former animal trainer for Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus. Another is of a showgirl. Farther down the hallway is one of Gebel-Williams' elephants.

But since 1977, he's worked off a country road in a sunlit studio — a wing of his grandparents' 102-year-old homestead.

It's a drive just outside the Lancaster city limits, past Edgewood Cemetery and over a bridge to the home with a wraparound porch named the Winniford House. A state historical marker sits at the driveway entrance.

"We came back and restored the house. It was pretty much a wreck," said Morton, who moved back to the Dallas area after about 25 years in New York. "They went broke in the Depression and not much had been done to this house in all those years. It had one coat of paint on the wood-work."

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Morton remembers spending holidays and weekends at the house while growing up in University Park. As a kid, he and his cousins draped sheets around the third-floor attic on Halloween and converted it into a haunted house, charging 5 cents for entry.

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He dipped a brush into a hot pink, water-based paint — a substitute for the egg paints — and blotted it on a piece of paper.

With a light touch, he traced the brush down one more sketch. It was titled gemstones.

More than 20 years old, the drawings have started to fade.

"I keep them up here because it's dark so they're not bleached by the sun. It's a milk-based paint, so it's fragile," Morton said.

"I love circuses. They're bold and bright and great color," he said.

His home's walls have become a scrapbook of past circuses and rose festivals.

He lamented that he can't work as many hours as he once did, now taking on only the rose festival project.

That afternoon he sat at his desk, cluttered with jars of egg-based paints. He opened a lid and took a whiff.

"They start to smell like rotten eggs when they get old," he said.

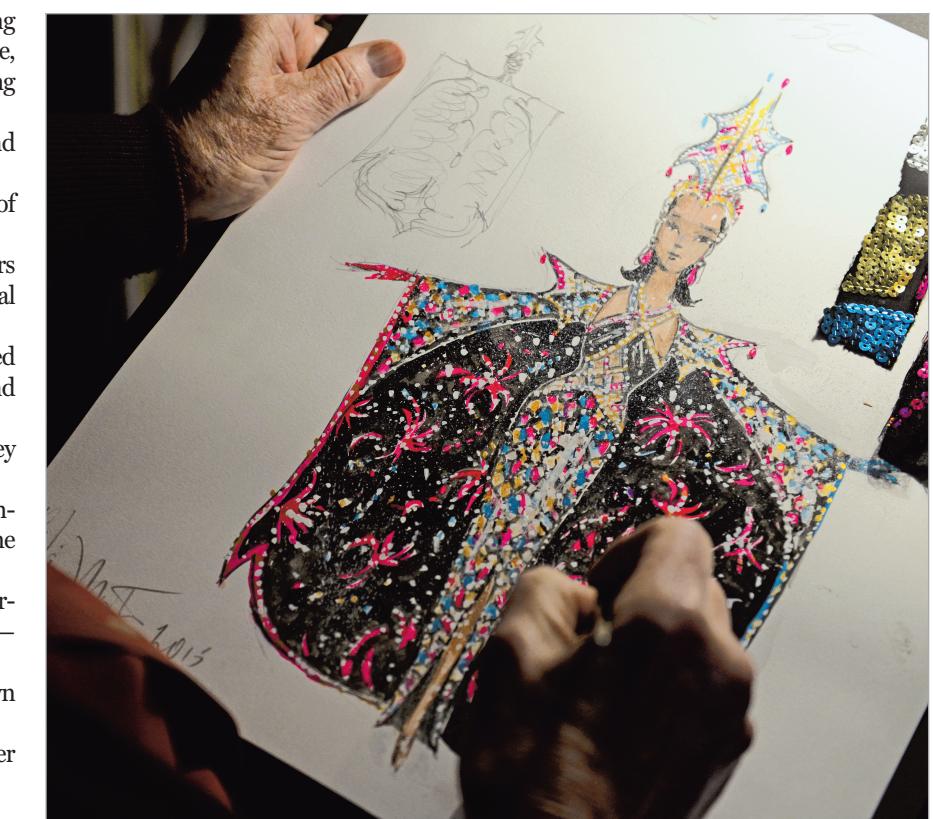
He's used the paint brand for about half a century. These are his last jars. He can't locate the brand anymore.

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With a light touch, he traced the brush down one more sketch. It was titled gemstones.

Eventually, rhinestones and sequins will cover the costume.

"They like sparkle," Morton said.



**Morton** uses hot pink, water-based acrylic paint on a sketch for the 2015 Texas Rose Festival at his 102-year-old homestead just outside of Lancaster.

Reporter Nanette Light can be reached at 214-977-8039.