

My Year-Long Carousel Ride

David Palmer

It all started with a photograph I saw in a magazine, an old carousel horse in someone's living room. The paint was chipped, revealing underlying colors, and there were intricately carved decorations on the bridle and saddle. Captivated by that image, I found myself lost in a daydream, back on the merry-go-round I used to ride as a little kid at Eldridge Park in Elmira, New York. I remembered sitting on the brightly colored horses, hearing the ecstatic organ music and reaching for the elusive brass rings—and I knew this was something I had to paint.

I make my living as an artist, showing my work at galleries, museums and art fairs. My paintings combine the vocabulary of American Pop Art with an Italian Renaissance sensibility, and something about that horse seemed to bridge those worlds. I felt inspired, but I knew nothing about carousels. Where would I begin?

Acrylic painting of armored horse, PTC #62, Santa Monica Pier.

—David Palmer
(all images in this article)



I live in Los Angeles and play volleyball on the weekends in Santa Monica, just north of the pier. I knew there was a carousel there but had never seen it, so I grabbed my camera and went for a visit. A couple of hours later I had taken hundreds of photographs. I fell in love with the inventiveness and the artistry of the figures and the playful humor in the decorations. I found out that this merry-go-round was created in 1922 by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company, and that the building it lives in was erected in 1916 by Charles Looff, who built the first carousel at Coney Island in 1876. It felt like I had opened a door into a whole new world.

I went back to my studio and started painting. Wanting to be true to my subjects without simply documenting them, I embraced the spirit of improvisation I sensed in the original carvings, using them as points of departure to create something new. I visited other carousels—at Griffith Park, Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, and at Seaport Village

and Balboa Park in San Diego. I joined the National Carousel Association and began reading books, studying timelines and learning about the artists and inventors who collaborated to build these amazing rides. And I discovered that the merry-go-round I rode as a child was created by Charles Looff in the 1890s, installed at Eldridge Park in 1924, and is said to be the fastest carousel in the world, moving at 18 miles per hour.

(The vintage, mixed figures were sold and later replaced with new carvings.)

I've been working on my series of carousel paintings for over a year now, and there appears to be no end in sight. I've also created a coloring book (available on Amazon) featuring drawings of horses, menagerie figures and decorative motifs from four classic California merry-go-rounds.

My initiation into the world of carousels grew out of a vague feeling that there was something I had to explore. But as I continued painting and looking into the history of carousels, I discovered a rich American art form of which I'd not been aware. The carvers and painters who created them worked in studios similar to those of Renaissance masters like Raphael and Michelangelo, established artists who passed on their skills to apprentices and assistants, who in turn developed their own styles and opened their own studios. I also recognized a distinctly Pop aspect to the merry-go-rounds, which arrived on the scene a hundred years before Andy Warhol. Reflecting familiar themes from popular culture, the horses and menagerie animals are as American as Campbell's Soup. They provided decades of employment for skilled artisans, and entertainment for the working class. And they've provided me with a fascinating glimpse into a slice of American history, along with an ongoing source of inspiration.

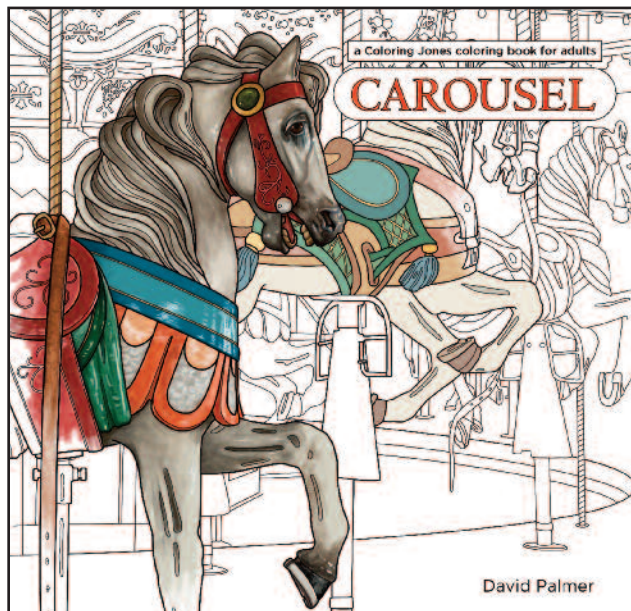
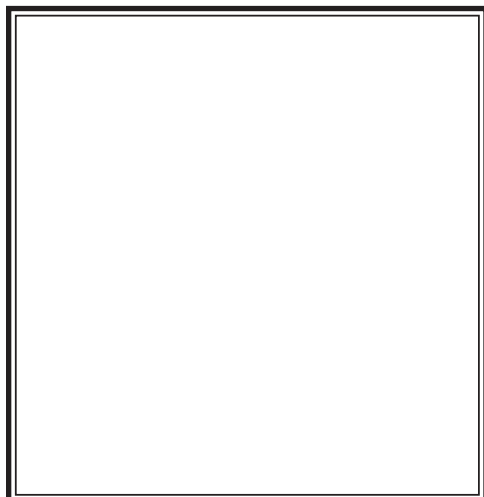
David Palmer's paintings have been exhibited in galleries and museums across the U.S. and appear in numerous public and private collections. He has also created digital effects for over a dozen feature films including "The Polar Express," "Spider-Man 3" and the first "Harry Potter." More of his work can be seen at davidpalmerstudio.com.



Drawing of Loeff (left) and Spillman Engineering horses, Griffith Park, Los Angeles.



Acrylic painting of Loeff horse, Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.



Coloring book cover, featuring PTC #62.