

## Dean Loucks and the Many Arts of Design

For Airbrush Action magazine

By Pete Johnson

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Dean Loucks is a prolific, busy artist living in America's Midwest. Airbrush art is only one part of his work, albeit a large part. When you speak with Dean, it takes a while to grasp the enormity of his client base, the diversity of custom vehicles he works on, and even the size of his facilities. Elkhart, Indiana is the home of his company, The Art of Design (TAOD).

In this article, Dean describes how he got started, the amazing range of projects his company executes, and how to make it as a custom painter in a diversified economy.

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Dean Loucks often works Big: Big boats, big aircraft and helicopters, buses, and recreational vehicles. But The Art of Design also produces the smallest details on motorcycles, helmets, and even other options such as carpet design and metal fabrication.

The work takes place in a 15,000 square-foot facility consisting of an office, reception, and show area; a prep area, 100-by-60 feet; and a paint area, 100-by-60 feet. The facility is climate-controlled; Dean's crew produces consistent, quality paint work, whether in humid, sweltering summers, or during brutal Midwestern winters.

### Early Years — Skateboarding and Art Skills

Dean's preference for art came at a young age. As he reached his teen years, his interests expanded to skateboarding, taking him to California in the 1980s. Skateboard and beach culture of that era had lasting effects on American design; David Carson, who went on to be one of the next decade's most influential graphic designers, started his visual work as art director of Transworld Skateboarding magazine. During that time, Dean was skateboarding at the semi-pro level, soaking up the contemporary influences of the West Coast, and working as a commercial artist.

A leap in technology was the spark that pushed Dean forward.

“I was in Orange County, California, and went down to Venice Beach in 1989, working on ten-foot murals. Murals are hard work, and proportions are difficult to transfer and work out. But suddenly I realized I could do a sketch, and with a computer, resize it at will. I could do a design once, then use it over and over, large or small.”

That realization — the ability to enlarge or reduce artwork at will — became a cornerstone of Dean's methods.

Furthermore, “Back in high school art classes, I had been introduced to traditional Frisket film and the technical use of the airbrush. The airbrush could produce really magical effects, but cutting all that masking was time consuming, and that’s a downside. I figured out that thin vinyl, say four-mil thick, was solvent resistant. I started working out designs in vinyl, with a computer. The variations were infinite and could be output many times.” Now, Dean reasoned, large surfaces could be masked, painted, and remasked, quickly and efficiently.

### **Building a Custom Business**

Dean didn’t start out with a grand vision, but worked into it a step at a time. How did he make the break, flip a switch and say “I’m a full-time custom painter,” and walk away from another job or career?

Dean ruminates on that and begins, “I think that people are sometimes afraid to be successful. In the beginning, instead of 8-hour days, I worked 16-hour days, because if I did, I made twice the money. I produced twice the work. Of course, you have to start charging a practical rate.”

Continuing the topic with enthusiasm, Dean adds, “Take every opportunity that comes along. Get experience. Practice. Work, work, work, to make yourself better, and don’t turn down the next project just because you’ve been working eight hours. If you paint something, and it’s great – it’s your ad. If you paint something and it’s not great –the word gets around.”

### **“Can You Handle the Attention?”**

Into the 1990s, Dean gained more experience, continued to use technology to save time and improve quality, and built a portfolio. He also started painting a wild assortment of vehicles. It seems that if something moved, flew, or floated, Dean tried his hand at making it colorful and distinct. In the process, his own style of design emerged – broad, vibrant colors, geometric shapes, clean use of modern lettering, and striking mural work. Individuals and manufacturers began to seek him out. His work began appearing in print, a tribute that continues today in a number of boating, automotive, and other specialized publications. The painted vehicles became mobile portfolio pieces.

Dean remembers, “I painted a bus for [a customer named] Jim Bonde. He was up in Canada, driving the bus we painted for him. We have a slogan: ‘Can you handle the attention?’ Jim called us, laughing, saying ‘Nobody will leave us alone. Everyone stops and wants to know who did this paint.’”

### **Planes, Trains, Automobiles, Buses, Boats...**

Dean names other large jobs: “I painted three buses for Randy Travis, a bus for the Florida Marlins, a railroad car for BASF paint, three helicopters (and there are more

scheduled), and a G3 jet for Golden State Foods.” Each type of vehicle presents unique challenges regarding surface prep, protection of sensitive components, and transport to and from the paint facility.

If so much of The Art of Design’s work involves boats, isn’t it a disadvantage not being on a coast? “Well, I am on the Great Lakes,” Dean answers, laughing, then explains, “People ship their boats to us, we do our work, and we ship them back. We’re kind of in the center of the country, and we can handle business from anywhere.” This includes, of course, business from Canada and from overseas.

Dean has worked cooperatively with a number of marine manufacturers and sellers over the years, including Thunderbird Formula, Skater Douglas Marine, and MasterCraft. These companies, and others, asked Dean to design custom finishing options for watercraft. If a buyer selects a custom option, the firm ships the vessel to Dean for paint and other detailing as part of the sale. “One of these jobs, for example, is a ‘template’ of sorts, that’s twenty-two feet long, and three-and-a-half feet tall. If we can design standard masking for a known number of variations that fit that space, then we can forecast the amount of paint, time, and other materials necessary,” Dean explains.

With The Art of Design’s solid track record in exterior finishing, boating industry representatives approached Dean with more diversified work. The Art of Design collaborates on anything needing flair and a special look...even carpet. Dean elaborates, “We worked with custom carpet producers and ensured that our design was executed flawlessly; that it wore correctly and there were no uneven edges, no mismatches of the fabric or materials. It had to carry the same quality that we insist on with our paint.”

### **More Branching Out**

Dean’s automotive work is as diverse as his maritime projects. For example, he and his company made a foray into the niche auto market, working on Dodge Vipers.

“I got my first Viper in 1998. I bought another one in 2003. In the winter of 2004, we stripped that car and started to rebuild and paint it. We developed a special orange pearl. We wanted a design with an edge, so we made it two-tone. It was an experiment with flat black, some detailing, and then the orange.” What kind of reaction did that car get? “People went nuts. They couldn’t get enough of it.”

Then metal fabrication became a project too interesting to pass up. “We diversified into a parts line. As a case in point, we make the aluminum bezel for an exhaust. It’s structurally stronger and makes a more unified and better appearance.”

### **Techniques**

Whether it’s a helicopter, a bus, or a helmet, Dean’s procedures are pretty standard. “When your approach to painting is consistent – you use the same methods, the same

paint chemistry, the same application and drying tools and facilities – you minimize the mistakes. Mistakes are bad because they cost you time on a job.”

“For the big jobs, we use rolls of 48-inch vinyl. Some are cut to custom lengths for us. A race car trailer probably uses 600 to 700 feet of 48-inch material. Then add 50 gallons of paint. That doesn’t include clearcoat.”

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### **Sidebar: Dean’s General Checklist**

- Sand and scuff. Knock the shine and smoothness off the initial finish.
- Stencil and squeegee. We run the masking designs through our plotters and get a good idea of how it’s arranged on the paint surface. Then we carefully apply the material and squeegee it down, all the time checking for proper alignment and symmetry.
- Paint, mask, paint, remask, paint. This is the normal, “fun” part. Again, the exact method and sequence depends on the size of the surface.
- Shadow with the airbrush. This is the “more fun” part. Our artists can make the design really come to life by letting the airbrush do what it does the best.
- Clear, 6 coats. I am a stickler for deep, hard clears. Most of our paint surfaces end up out in the elements and need protection. Plus, a deep clearcoat enhances the artwork.
- Sand, 600 grit. Then we sand out any inconsistencies, and promote adhesion for our next steps.
- 6 more coats of clear. Again, this is necessary for protection and for the beauty of the paint. You just can’t cut corners here.
- Sand progressively to 2000 grit. This starts to finish off the surface. This stage is very labor-intensive. The larger the surface, the bigger the challenge here.
- Buff, normally with three buffing compounds. Our finishing experts use the appropriate buffing products and tools for the job. But I believe in our work leaving here with the finest finish and shine imaginable.

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### **Air**

The Art of Design’s facility in Indiana uses a Kaiser shop compressor as a main air source. “It’s a very good machine, and Kaiser has automatic service notifications and so on to head off maintenance costs. If that compressor goes down, there’s no paint, and no money coming in the door,” Dean emphasizes. The model is powered by a 35-horsepower motor, and has a holding tank and a standard dryer-and-filter arrangement. The shop building has dropdowns every 20 feet for air.

### **Guns**

Dean has an all-Iwata shop. When you ask for the models and numbers, Dean pauses and laughs. “We have a lot. We have a broad assortment of the large guns. There’s no requirement in Indiana for HVLP, and our mix is a variety of models and nozzle sizes. But bear in mind, some of the work we do is very large.”

Airbrush information is more specific. “Our Iwata airbrushes are beautiful. We use the Custom Microns, all models. They lay down a fine line, they’re easy to clean, and most importantly, they hold up well under a lot of use.”

## **Paint**

What’s Dean’s brand-of-choice? “I use all BASF primers, paint, and clears. Their candies, and the Carizzma line, are especially beautiful. They’re rock-solid, reliable. There’s no guesswork applying them,” he says. “BASF is a Detroit-based company, so it’s a short trip from our shop to talk with them in person. It took years to cultivate the current relationship with the company, and it’s paid off.”

“A manufacturer’s paint system of compatible prep products, paint, and finishing compounds saves time because there is no guesswork in application.” Dean decided a long time ago to leave the science of chemistry to other professionals. “Why worry about why one thing sticks, and about why one doesn’t? Paint systems eliminate guesswork and head off the resulting mistakes.”

There are other advantages to working with one manufacturer’s paint system. Vendors can provide service and support. Paint reps are sometimes available locally to check on problems with a paint job. Dean gives this example: “An air pocket appears under the clear. It’s not the paint, but rather a problem under the original surface of the boat. Your paint rep can diagnose things like that and propose solutions.” Dean continues, “If you have a good relationship with a manufacturer, you can sometimes test new products on small jobs as a trial. If you get success, you can expand the use of that product. And don’t forget, you can often get good telephone tech support, training, and constant product updates and improvements.”

“We do try other products, though. For metallic effects, we paint with Alsa between urethane clears. It’s worked fine, with no delamination problems.”

The Art of Design does some “all vinyl” jobs, but, Dean clarifies, “They are very limited, from a visual standpoint. I can print directly on vinyl, and apply the work to panels and limited areas, but I don’t do ‘wraps’ of, say, buses or other vehicles. My best work is in paint, and that’s what I like to stick to.”

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### **Sidebar: Dean Loucks’ Business Principles**

**Use time wisely.** “The flip side of being creative is following a schedule. Otherwise, the creativity doesn’t get focused. Cash flow is very important. Schedule the work to be done, and make sure you get paid on time.”

“Use technology to make reusable designs for concepts, masking, reference, or anything else you can speed up. Time equals money.”

**Diversification.** “We make our own carbon fiber accessories. Sometimes we paint them and sometimes just keep the surface untouched. Bottom line — don’t be afraid to try something new.”

**Be flexible.** “Long-term projects that run \$100,000, with large surfaces to work on, allow some flexibility. Still, be realistic in your time estimates. If you think it’s going to take you 100 hours, charge accordingly. Don’t get stuck estimating too low.”

**Quality.** “Deliver your absolute best work, even for something like a solid-color job.” Dean gets insistent, speaks on this point with tenacity.” “For example, I’m talking about a single color job for a vehicle with a client. I say, ‘For just factory quality, you can pay X dollars.’ The client says ‘OK, that’s fine...I can live with some orange peel’ and so on. But then I give this guy a glowing, smooth, polished finish.”

“I believe in delighting the client, I believe in exceeding expectations! People will usually agree to a fair price. Listen to the customer, be realistic, and exceed his expectations.”

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## **Pricing**

Dean speaks here with the authority of experience.

“I charge for everything. I don’t give anything away,” Dean begins. “Designs for a boat start at \$1500 up front. That also gets the project on the schedule for my facility. It then takes about three weeks to finalize the design.”

“It takes \$2000 to hold a paint slot once we’ve come to terms. For one thing, it’s just common courtesy and good business. If you hold a paint slot for this job, and forecast that income, and it doesn’t come through, you might not be able to work a substitute paying job in its place. Then you’re idle. You’re paying out for the shop floor space, for payrolls, and for pre-ordered materials. It’s like Jesse James’ tattoo: ‘Pay Up, Sucker’.”

Dean has put work on hold when customers suddenly asked for credit extensions in the middle of a job. His sixth-sense told him that the client was in financial trouble. Being paid on time is the sign of a healthy business relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Every July, The Art of Design hosts an annual party. Everything available that’s painted goes on display, including Vipers, Cigarette boats, motorcycles, and helicopters. There are various impromptu shenanigans, as you’d expect from a bunch of people who work as hard as they do. These guys clearly have as much fun as you think they’re having.

Check it out for yourself. The Art of Design is on the Web at [www.taod.org](http://www.taod.org).

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### **Tech Sidebar — Large-scale Plotters**

The Art of Design's output wizard, Don, gives Airbrush Action readers a peek into his world, and it's a cool one. For the huge, varied designs that TAOD paints, a lot of vinyl gets cut. The substrates vary from 2-mil sign vinyl to 1/16-inch-thick sandblasting mask, in rolls up to 48 inches wide.

To cut the designs, Don uses a 50-inch Graphtec CE 2000-120, which he usually drives with FlexiLETTER and FlexiSIGN software from a production PC. There's also a 30-inch Graphtec FC 5100-75. He explains, "The thickness of the material determines the blade angle and depth. For thick stuff, I use a 60-degree angle. For thinner material, I use the normal 45-degree setting. It's a matter of touch and experience."

TAOD also uses a Roland SolJet Pro II SC-540, a 4-foot photographic quality vinyl printer. Don says, "It prints at the same resolution as 35-mm film. We can print logos or other complex designs on glossy film, apply the film to a job, and clearcoat over it."

Does it fade, lift the clear, or otherwise mess up? "No," Don replies. "It's a solvent-free print process, and we let the prints dry for a couple of days before we apply them. We can also do color graphic mock-ups with this kind of film to envision a paint job before we commit to it. It prints 52 inches wide, on rolls with up to 75 feet of material."

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