

PACIFIC NORTHWEST RAIL NEWS

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J. Craig Thorpe: Art To Make You Want To Ride Trains

BY BILL VIRGIN

Publisher and Editor

J. Craig Thorpe's lengthy resume includes ordination as a Presbyterian minister. It's not surprising, then, that when the conversation turns to his line of work for the last two decades – rail-themed art – he refers to what he does as “my particular calling.”

That calling goes beyond turning out art for clients such as Amtrak, a body of work that has made him one of the best-known rail artists in the Pacific Northwest, if not the country. It also involves a bit of proselytizing for trains, and for the power of original art to convey that message.

What Thorpe hopes his art does is motivate people to say, “We need that train. We want to ride that train.”

Thorpe, 61 and a resident of Bellevue, Wash., is best known for his work for Amtrak, which has commissioned multiple art works. Those include a painting for the centennial of Union Station in Washington, D.C.; another depicting an Amtrak business car; a third for the 2009 National Train Day showing the proposed electrification of the Chicago-St. Louis corridor; and a fourth, now being finished, to celebrate the centennial of Glacier National

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Top: Painting that will be featured on the 2010 White Pass & Yukon calendar; scene is just north of White Pass Summit, B.C. Above: J. Craig Thorpe in front of an enlargement of art commissioned by the Oregon Department of Transportation, of a scene along the Columbia River. On Page 2, a poster featuring Thorpe's art. All courtesy of J. Craig Thorpe.

Thorpe: Art Depicting Railroading As It Is — And Might Be

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Park.

Beyond that, Thorpe has done paintings and drawings that Amtrak has used on calendars, timetables, hats, T-shirts, wine glasses, posters, note cards, postcards and brochures.

Thorpe has also produced artwork for state departments of transportation (including New York, Washington and California), for excursion railroads and tourist sites (the Grand Canyon Railway, the Montana Rockies Daylight, the Izaak Walton Inn at Glacier and most recently the White Pass & Yukon Route) and rail equipment manufacturers (General Electric and Union Tank Car).

While many artists depict railroading's past, "Most of my art is contemporary," Thorpe says, "not because I have a disinterest in history. ... Most specialize in nostalgic themes. That's wonderful, that needs to happen."

Instead, he says, he concentrates on railroading today — and in some cases, railroading as it might be. For the Discovery Institute's Cascadia Center for Regional Development he did renderings of what the revitalized Eastside (of Lake Washington) rail line might look like.

His art isn't confined to the rail side of transportation. On the marine side, he's done work for Holland America and Alaska Marine Lines.

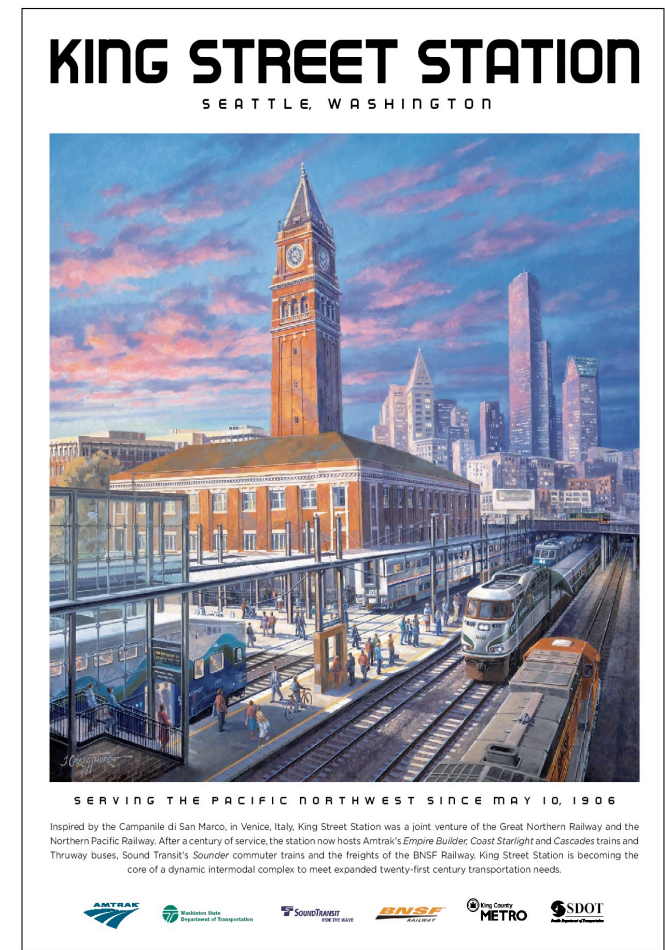
"I've always been interested in art, and I've always been interested in trains," Thorpe says. "From childhood I combined the two."

Thorpe grew up in Pittsburgh, where rail images such as the Baltimore & Ohio's Capitol Limited passing through town are "indelibly burned in my brain."

Thorpe attended art school and graduated from Carnegie-Mellon University. After a stint in the Army (where he served, fittingly enough, in the transportation corps), he worked as an artist for architects and landscape architects.

Then came another career shift: Ordination as a Presbyterian pastor. "That's how I got to Seattle," he says.

But even then he felt himself being drawn back to art. At first, he resumed his work in architectural draw-



ings. But in 1991, he was asked to do a painting of the proposed Olympia Amtrak station. Sales of prints of that painting raised \$8,000 for the station, and was used to bring in far more in donated labor and material. Most significantly, it launched Thorpe's career as a rail artist.

The following year, a friend in Amtrak's corporate office called to say that the artist who had a commission to produce the painting used in its annual calendar had fallen ill. The Olympia-station painting wound up as Amtrak's calendar art for 1993, and Thorpe went on to do paintings used for the 1995 and 1996 calendars.

While he's best known for his paintings, Thorpe works in ink and watercolor for architectural renderings. He'll do preliminary sketches at the site, then return to the studio to transform those ideas into a finished work.

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Thorpe: What Art Can Do That Photography Can't

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The advent of digital communications allows him to transmit sketches and pictures of paintings in progress to clients "so nobody is surprised."

But why, in a digital age, use oil paint or ink at all? Thorpe says it's an issue he has to contend with in an era of budget cuts and the lure of digital images' expediency. "I not only have to convince people that I'm the right man for the job but that the job even needs to be done."

The justification for original art, he says, is that paintings and drawings can convey soul and heart in a way photography can't. "There is an emotive quality that sucks people in."

He admires photography, particularly black and white. "It's so alive in its own way." But art, he adds, "has a different character that connects with people, that makes them want to ride the train" (a phrase he hears frequently from people who view his work. "I don't know if photography does that.")

The railroads themselves, even though they had excellent photographers through the decades, still relied on painting for advertising and promotional efforts. "Paintings were the medium of choice."

Thorpe does market his work through his own Web site, www.jcraigthorpe.com, but says "I don't have much of a market on my own. Most of what I do is on commission." He keeps very few originals around the studio. His paintings, he says, "need to be out there to speak."

And what is it they're saying? "I want people to see an

Editor's Note: Was there ever a more felicitous combination of medium and subject than art and railroads? For great painters such as Turner and Inness, rail artists and illustrators such as Howard Fogg and Ted Rose and photo artists like O. Winston Link, trains have proven irresistible.

This issue's profile of J. Craig Thorpe is the first in a series of stories that, in coming months, will feature artists and writers who live in the Pacific Northwest or depict railroading life here. If you have a candidate you'd like to see interviewed, please contact the editor.

alternative to asphalt," he says. "I want to excite people to what the possibilities are" with rail transportation.

His art includes messages "about trains in the landscape, trains in the community, trains in the environment, trains in the economy," and how they represent "one way to help us be better stewards" of the land and the environment. A Thorpe original was used for Alfred Runte's book, "Allies of the Earth: Railroads and the Soul of Preservation," that made that same argument.

Thorpe, summing up that philosophy with an entry on his Web site, hopes the public will "look beyond trains as mere nostalgia and see them as a necessary means of restoring balance to our transportation network and even civility to our daily lives."

That's a much bigger mission than the two-word summation of "rail artist" can do justice to. Says Thorpe, "I have one string in my violin, but I can play a number of tunes on it."

ON THE WIRE: THE LATEST RAIL NEWS FROM AROUND THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The former Burlington Northern Santa Fe line from Snohomish to Renton east of Lake Washington includes a spur into Redmond. The location of the spur line was incorrectly identified in some copies of the December issue.

An item in the November issue on RailAmerica Corp.'s initial public offering of stock listed one of its Pacific Northwest properties as the Central Oregon and Pacific, running from Eugene to Coos Bay and to Northern California. The Oregon International Port of Coos Bay purchased 111 miles of that line in March 2009 and is working to upgrade the line. It plans to find a short-line operator for what would be known as Coos Bay Rail Link.

WHITE ROCK, B.C.: The Royal Hudson steam locomotive will make a two-day round-trip excursion from Vancouver to White Rock, and tickets are being sold for those who want to ride along. The train will run from

Vancouver to White Rock on Feb. 8, as part of the town's Bite of the Rock festival, then return to Vancouver Feb. 9. Tickets for the trip are \$125 (Canadian) one way with a bus return, or \$250 roundtrip on the train. Tickets and information are available through West Coast Tours at www.wcra.org. Burlington Northern Santa Fe is participating in organization of the event.

ANCHORAGE: The Alaska Railroad canceled a holiday train to Seward in early December because of avalanche danger. The railroad said it had already experienced two track closures between Portage and Seward when it made the decision to cancel the excursion. The railroad also reported disruptions to service in that area Dec. 23.

SEATTLE: Burlington Northern Santa Fe has received \$2.5 million in grant money through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to rebuild three switch engines and reduce air emissions in the Puget Sound region.

TIMETABLE

Jan. 16-18	Seattle	36th annual train show, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. each day, Pacific Science Center. Sponsored by 4th Division, Pacific Northwest Region, National Model Railroad Association. Admission: Included in science center admission; adults (16-64) \$14, seniors \$12, youth (6-15) \$9, kids (3-5) \$7. Information: www.4dpnr.org/PSCshow .
Jan. 23	Portland	Railroad swap meet, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Holiday Inn Portland Airport Convention Center, 8439 NE Columbia Blvd. Sponsored by Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway Historical Society. Admission: Adults \$5, children under 12 free.
Feb. 6-7	Monroe, WA	19th annual train show and swap meet, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday, Building 100 (Arena), Evergreen State Fairgrounds, Monroe. Sponsored by United NorthWest Model Railroad Club. Admission: Adults \$7, juniors (10-18) and seniors \$5, children 9 and under free with paid adult Information: www.unwclub.org .
Feb. 13	Spokane	River City Modelers open house, 6-8:30 p.m., 1130 E. Sprague Ave., Spokane. Information: Shirley.sample@northwesternrailways.com .
Feb. 14	Spokane	River City Modelers model railroad train show, 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m., Spokane Community College, Lair Building, Mission and Green streets, Spokane. Admission: Adults \$5, children 11-16 \$3, 10 and under free when accompanied by adult.
Feb. 14	Vancouver, B.C.	Mt. Pleasant Lions Club model railroad show, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., Mt. Pleasant Elementary School, 2300 Guelph St., Vancouver, B.C. Admission by donation. Information: www.vanmtplions.com .
March 13	Clackamas, OR	25th annual railroad swap meet, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., New Hope Church, 11731 SE Stevens Road, Clackamas. Sponsored by Willamette Model Railroad Club. Admission: \$3, children under 12 free.
March 14	Burnaby, B.C.	Western Rails 2010, model railroad displays and show, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Cameron Recreation Center, 9523 Cameron St., Burnaby. Admission: Adults \$3, seniors \$2. Sponsored by West Coast Railway Association, www.wcra.org .

A New Operator For Eastside Line; Excursion Trains Too?

The former Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail line between Snohomish and Woodinville gets a new operator in January.

GNP Rly Inc., owned by veteran Canadian railroader Tom Payne, plans to launch freight service under a contract with the Port of Seattle, which acquired the line from BNSF. GNP (reporting mark GNPR) will do dispatching and car control and handle revenue from the service. Ballard Terminal Railway will market and operate the line's freight service.

Byron Cole, Ballard Terminal's general manager, said the 8.5-mile line will operate with a 1965 EMD SW 1200 purchased from Tacoma Rail.

Payne said the line has three regular shippers, mostly of building products and glass, and an intermittent fourth customer. Over the last few years the line has operated with 200 to 400 car moves a year, although with the recession the number has recently been at the bottom of that range. Payne believes freight volumes can be in-

creased. "It should be a nice little road," he said. "I think it can do OK." Cole said car moves will be handled on Tuesdays and Thursdays, provided there is sufficient business.

GNP's contract with the Port of Seattle also grants the company the right to operate a passenger excursion service over the route. Payne said he has been talking to wineries in the Woodinville area about the possibility of an excursion train, and is looking at station locations.

The Port of Seattle says its agreement with GNP gives the company six months from its Dec. 18 effective date to begin the excursion service.

Payne, an inductee in the Canadian Railway Hall of Fame, formed Central Western Railway Corp. in the mid-1980s to operate a former Canadian National branch line in Alberta. He built that into RaiLink Ltd. (The company was eventually sold to RailAmerica Inc.)

Payne was also involved with Golden Pacific, a short-lived excursion train that operated in Tacoma.