

By Kate Cline

# disappearing act

*Storage tanks may be necessary, but their industrial, imposing looks can make them eyesores, especially when they are located in residential areas. Brothers Rolf and Peter Goetzinger have the solution—murals that help the tanks disappear into the landscape. Working with water districts, they create designs for tanks of all shapes and sizes that incorporate local trees and plants to make them more aesthetically pleasing.*

The brothers' tank-painting endeavor began almost 15 years ago with a project in Kalama, Wash. The town's population was increasing, so to accommodate its water supply needs, the water district replaced an older tank with a newer, larger one.

"The new tank seemed more imposing upon the adjacent homeowners and they, along with the water district, requested to hide it and make it look more 'friendly,'" Rolf said. "So I painted a local landscape surrounded by trees going to the top of the 40-ft-high tank all the way around."

Rolf and Peter have a lifelong commitment to their art. They both graduated from Utah State University with degrees in illustration, and Rolf also studied architecture in college for four years. After graduation, the brothers went their separate ways—Rolf to the Pacific Northwest and Peter to California—but both worked in advertising, graphic design and illustration. They eventually joined one another in Seattle, creating murals for hospitals, museums and other commercial and private applications. Today, both brothers live in the inland Pacific Northwest, allowing them to collaborate on murals for water and wastewater storage tanks around the country.

### True to Nature

The primary goal of each tank mural the Goetzingers create is to help the tank blend in with its landscape. "Each tank mural is unique to its surroundings, with the foliage matching the landscape," Rolf said. "It may be the live oaks of California, as the tanks near Sacramento are. The Hollywood [Calif.] tank in Griffith Park includes the eucalyptus and other indigenous brush. In the Pacific Northwest, the Seattle-area tanks include tall firs and maples. Whether the water tanks are in arid deserts or in lush green woods, they exhibit murals with the natural setting that surrounds them."

A study of the tank's setting helps the artists determine which types of foliage to include in the mural. "It has always been a priority to make sure the foliage and trees are true to scale and natural looking," Rolf said. To ensure that the murals look as realistic as possible, they often include elements such as fallen trees or standing dead snags. If any surrounding buildings are taller than the tank, the brothers also paint its top to resemble treetops.

### Added Challenges

According to Rolf, painting murals on water tanks can be challenging compared to many of the brothers' indoor mural projects.

Careful planning is key, so they stay in good communication with the tank owner throughout the project. Before painting begins, they study the foliage surrounding the tank, then create a rendering of what it will look like for the owner to approve. After the owner signs off on the design, the brothers dive right into painting—none of the designs are drawn onto the tank ahead of time.

Because the tanks are outdoors and subject to damage from weather and ultraviolet rays, the Goetzingers usually use durable epoxy paint that fits the project specifications. Although the paint gives the mural staying power, it is not the best for creating detailed designs.

"[The paint] often makes it more difficult to do detail, such as wildlife, because the paint does not apply as easily with a brush. For the most part the tanks are created totally with a 9-in. roller," Rolf said. "We've learned to use the roller any way to our advantage to get the desired end result—that is, to make the foliage as natural looking as possible."

Weather creates a further obstacle for any tank-painting project. According to Rolf, he and Peter often have a short window of time to apply the design before the base paint cures in order to achieve good adhesion. They try to look for a string of precipitation-free days, but Rolf said they sometimes work up to 12 hours a day when the weather is nice in order to complete a project on time.

"We can work with a little rain, but if the tank has a round bull-nose at the top, the rain continues to run down the side and we have to make sure we are not running it with wet paint," he added. "Sometimes we need to have towels and a squeegee to keep on schedule."

The average tank takes five days to complete, depending on its size. Up to 14 days of work may be needed to complete the largest tank projects, like a 10-million-gal-capacity tank Rolf completed by himself in Anchorage, Alaska.

### Creative Solutions

The Gwinnett County (Ga.) Department of Water Resources found that a tank mural was the ideal solution to community concerns over a new 4-million-gal tank it installed in 2008 for emergency wastewater storage in the town of Loganville.

"In Gwinnett County, they always have public meetings for large projects. During public meetings, there was a lot of concern on the part of the constituents of having a large tank sitting there in their rural area," said Daniel Shaw, project manager with the county's Department of Water Resources. "So the

county went out and solicited information about tank murals."

The department asked the Goetzingers to create a design that would make the tank disappear into the background, sending them photographs of the trees and brush surrounding the tank. The resulting mural functions just as the department envisioned, and staff has considered adding murals to other tanks in the county.

"When they came out, they basically painted the landscape that was behind the tank," Shaw said. "The county is very pleased. Everybody in Water Resources that has seen it, they think it's fantastic."

The brothers have completed approximately two dozen projects in the last 15 years, and they are ready

for more. "We try to make it economically worthwhile for the water districts and let them know that it is also a worthwhile cause for the satisfaction of their community," Rolf said. "The tank art is a different approach than other mural projects, but the outcome is always the same—that is, to offer a meaningful aesthetic, enriching people's lives."

To see more photos of tank mural projects by the Goetzingers, visit their website at [www.artistbrothers.com](http://www.artistbrothers.com).

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The artists' favorite project, at the Northwest Washington Fairgrounds in Lynden, Wash., features Mt. Baker and scenery of local farmland.

True-to-life murals improve the aesthetics of water and wastewater storage tanks



The scenery on each tank, like this one in Sacramento, Calif., is carefully designed to match local foliage.



The Goetzingers use a boom lift to reach all parts of a tank. They paint the top if nearby buildings are taller than the tank.

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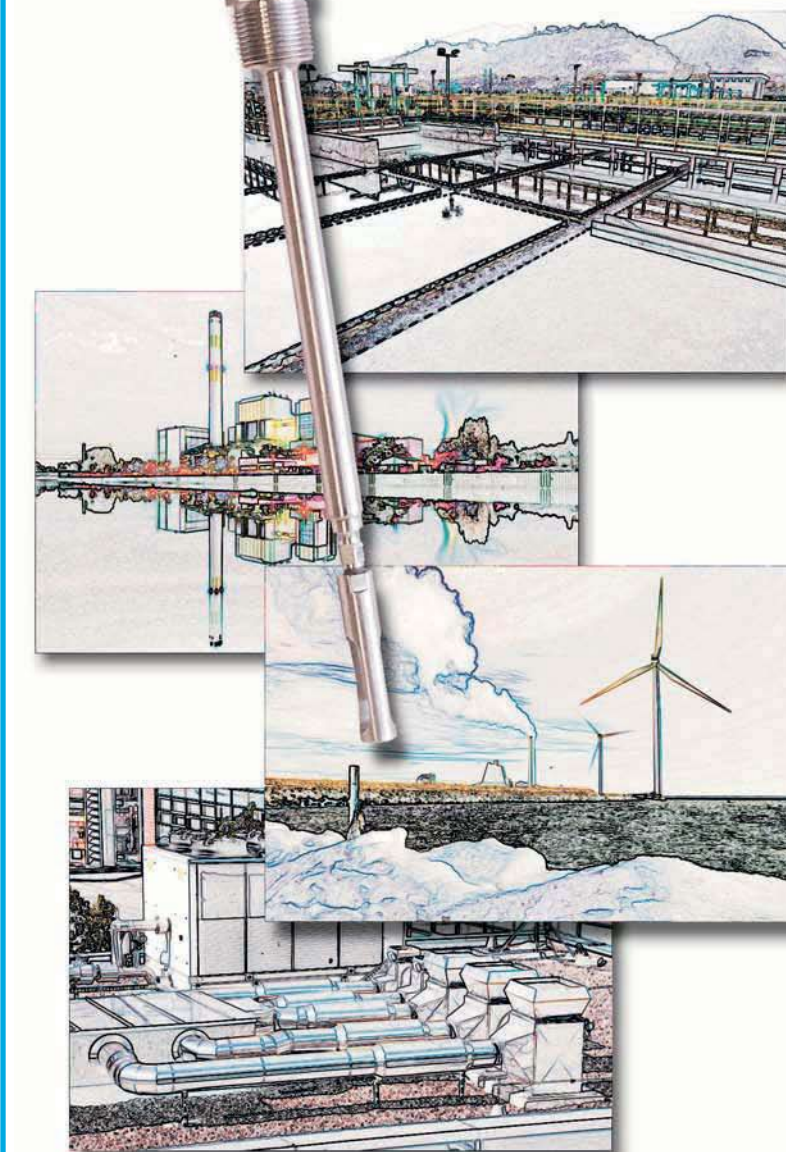
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