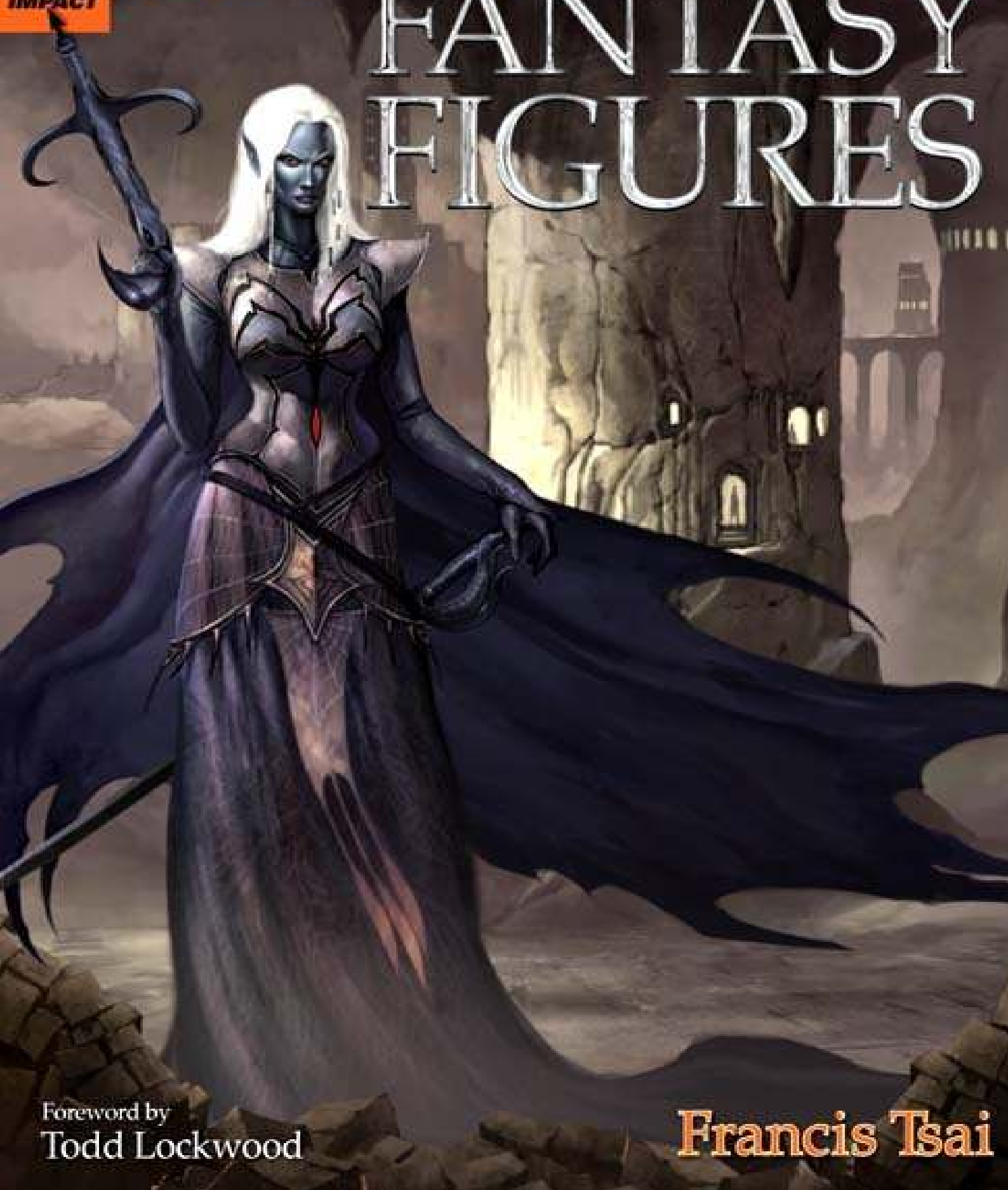




# *100 Ways to Create* FANTASY FIGURES

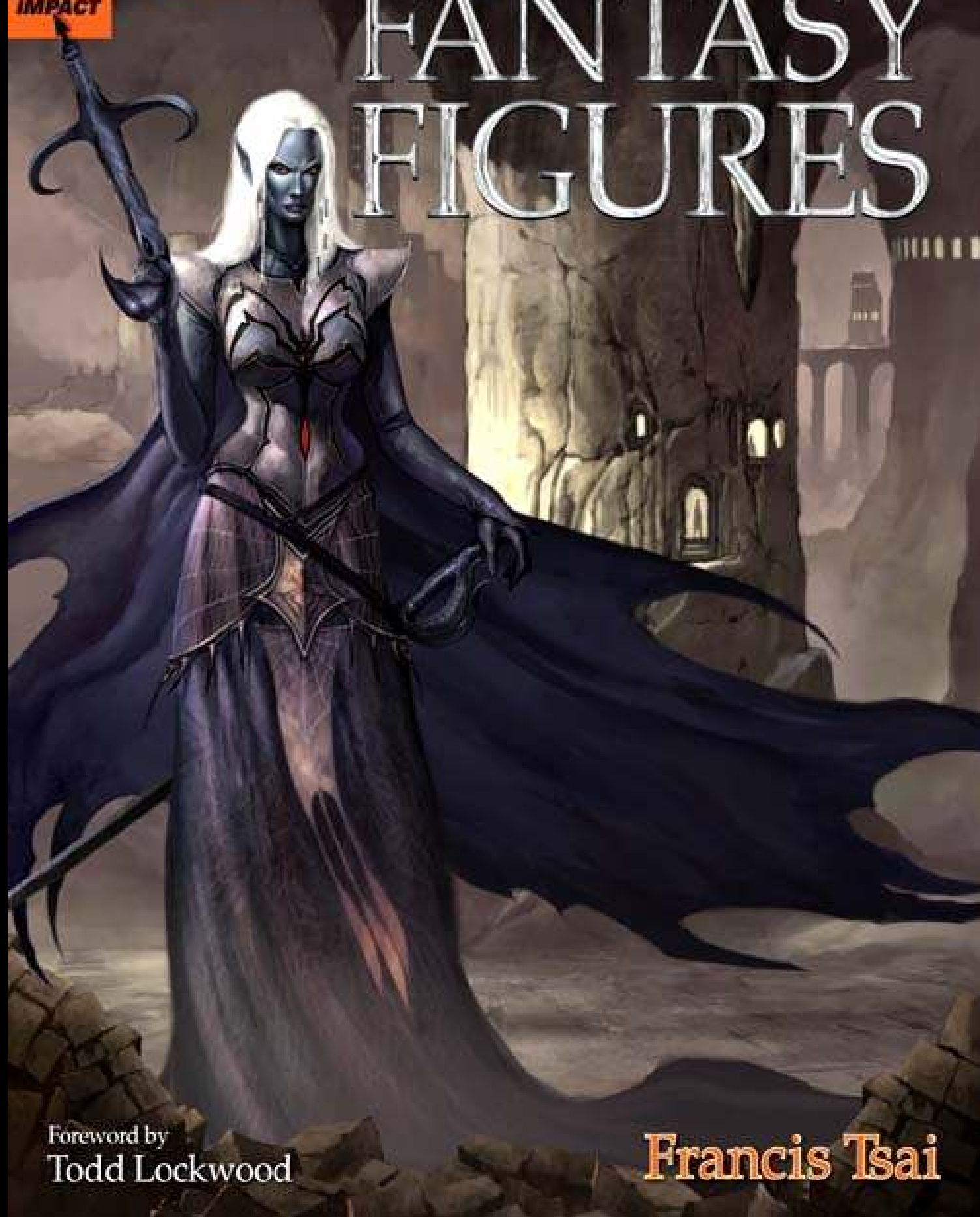


Foreword by  
Todd Lockwood

**Francis Tsai**



# *100 Ways to Create* FANTASY FIGURES



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# *100 Ways to Create*

## Fantasy Figures

Francis Tsai



**This book is dedicated to: my parents Sawako and Yung-mei, to whom I owe everything; my best friend, travelling companion and soulmate Linda; my sister Marice Atsumi; and all the friends and artists who have inspired me.**

A DAVID & CHARLES BOOK

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# Contents

Foreword  
Introduction  
Understanding the Basics  
Researching the Character  
Establishing a Process  
Developing the Character  
Communicating with the Viewer  
Acknowledgments  
About the Author  
Index



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# Foreword

A great many people think that art simply flows from an artist's hand like sparks from a wand; that because art is emotional and evocative, it must somehow happen magically. All by itself. We hear of the Art of Hitting, the Art of Cooking, the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, and are deluded into thinking that it is magic. That it is beyond the average man or woman.

In truth, art is the end result of knowing a craft so well that it becomes intuitive and spontaneous. It is the end result of years of growth, which, for most artists, begins the day their first crayon touches their first sheet of paper. A certain small amount of native talent is essential, but equally important is the desire to learn the rules, the inside knowledge, the tricks. Perhaps the heart and soul are the magic, but knowledge provides the incantation.

Francis Tsai is one of those magicians who knows the spells. You might almost think of this volume you hold in your hands as a spellbook, full of the newts' eyes and dragon's scales with which we artists ply our craft. Pore through this tome and you will see revealed the hidden parts of the trade: colour theory, perspective, anatomy, composition, value contrast, and all the rest of the ingredients that go into brewing up one in-your-face monster, invoking a demon from the nether-world, or imbuing a hero with the courage he needs to slay a dragon.

Francis is a high-level sorcerer, and he has generously divulged his secrets here for you to behold. Pay close attention, study the recitations, practice them daily, and you too can do magic.

Todd Lockwood



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# Introduction

If you're reading this book, you have probably had at least some interest in creating fantasy art, either professionally or just for pleasure in your spare time. I am fortunate enough to be able to make a living creating artwork for the entertainment industry, and because of this I often find myself being asked questions about it. How do you get a job as a fantasy artist? What kind of pens do you use? Is it OK to use reference material? How do you know what colours to use? And so on ... My path to my current career was fairly lengthy and roundabout; I didn't take the traditional art-school route, and in fact never really learned the fundamentals of illustration in any rigorous, orderly way. It was not the easiest or best way to become a working fantasy artist, and I had to study every day to 'fill in the gaps' in my art education. After a number of years working as a concept artist in the computer games industry and as a freelance illustrator for books, comics, films and television, I have assembled a few nuggets of knowledge and some workflow routines that seem to have a certain degree of success. It is these that I want to share with you in this book.

It has never been a better time to be a fantasy artist. As I look around my studio library, can see many examples of books and films that are fantasy related, or at least somehow influenced by this kind of imagery. Role-playing games have long been a primary source, but with all the recent advances in filmmaking technology, movies are now able to convincingly portray the kinds of worlds and beings familiar to fans of the fantasy genre. Successful films often spawn computer games and, increasingly, material can flow the other way too. This only benefits the traditional role-playing game and book markets, all of which results in more opportunities for skilled illustrators.

This book had a long genesis, which began back when I found that students and amateur artists (and even a few professionals) were asking me certain questions time and time again. I thought it might be useful to put together a list of 'Frequently Asked Questions' on my website. The more I worked on it the longer and more involved it became, because there was just so much material to cover. With some of the topics, it was hard to convey the information without an accompanying illustration to make the point, and it quickly grew beyond that of a simple FAQ. So I set it aside.

A few years ago, I started writing some short articles about different aspects of concept art and illustration for fantasy and science fiction art magazine *ImagineFX*. A few of the points I originally had in my FAQ showed up in these articles, but I was usually at the end of my allotted word count before I could convey enough information. It was an interesting dilemma – I could present my points in a fairly focused way that was limited in scope; or I could cover

a wide variety of topics in a somewhat superficial way. So, when I was presented with the opportunity to create this book, I thought it would be a great way to impart some of the tips from the original FAQ, hopefully in a manner that is both broad in scope but also specific enough to provide some useful, practical advice based on my experience.



*The preliminary sketch in most illustration jobs needs to show the art director your intentions as far as pose and composition go, and also give some idea of colour and tonal value without being too detailed or finished.*

## **TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

For an illustrator, tools consist of the actual equipment used to create the artwork. Until recently, these consisted solely of some variation of pencils, ink, paint and paper or canvas. However, in the past few years digital technology has advanced to the point where it can be difficult to tell the

**difference between art created traditionally and that made on the computer. In addition, peripheral equipment such as scanners and drawing tablets have continued to blur the boundaries between digital and traditional techniques and media.**

In my own work, I occasionally use colour media such as watercolours or marker pens, but there is definitely a sort of ‘analogue charm’ these methods have that digital media lacks. However, the advantages of using drawing and painting software, especially for revisions and experimentation, for me make it the obvious choice in my work.

The physical equipment is not the end of the story, though. The term ‘tools’ also refers to the skills, strategies and personal work habits that allow an artist to create successful art. These are less obvious but just as important as the tangible tools, if not more so. These factors have more to do with an artist’s workflow, problem-solving ability and general approach to conveying information through illustrations, and it is these that this book will explore, by looking at different ways of developing a sense of character in your images, as well as maximizing storytelling, creating mood to support an idea, and numerous other strategies.



*A modern illustrator’s studio should contain a combination of traditional and digital tools. In my own studio, I rely heavily on digital drawing and painting software, as well as peripheral devices such as graphics tablets and scanners to aid in the creative process.*

In addition, there are some other basic general practices that can be used to develop your personal toolset. Studying and sketching your surroundings – people as well as objects and environments – trains your eye and mind in observational skills. Exercises like this help to build up your mental ‘visual vocabulary’, as well as improve your ‘active observation skills’, which simply refers to your ability to analyse your surroundings. For example, rather than simply noticing that a column has bolts in it, you should study the structure to understand why the bolts are there.



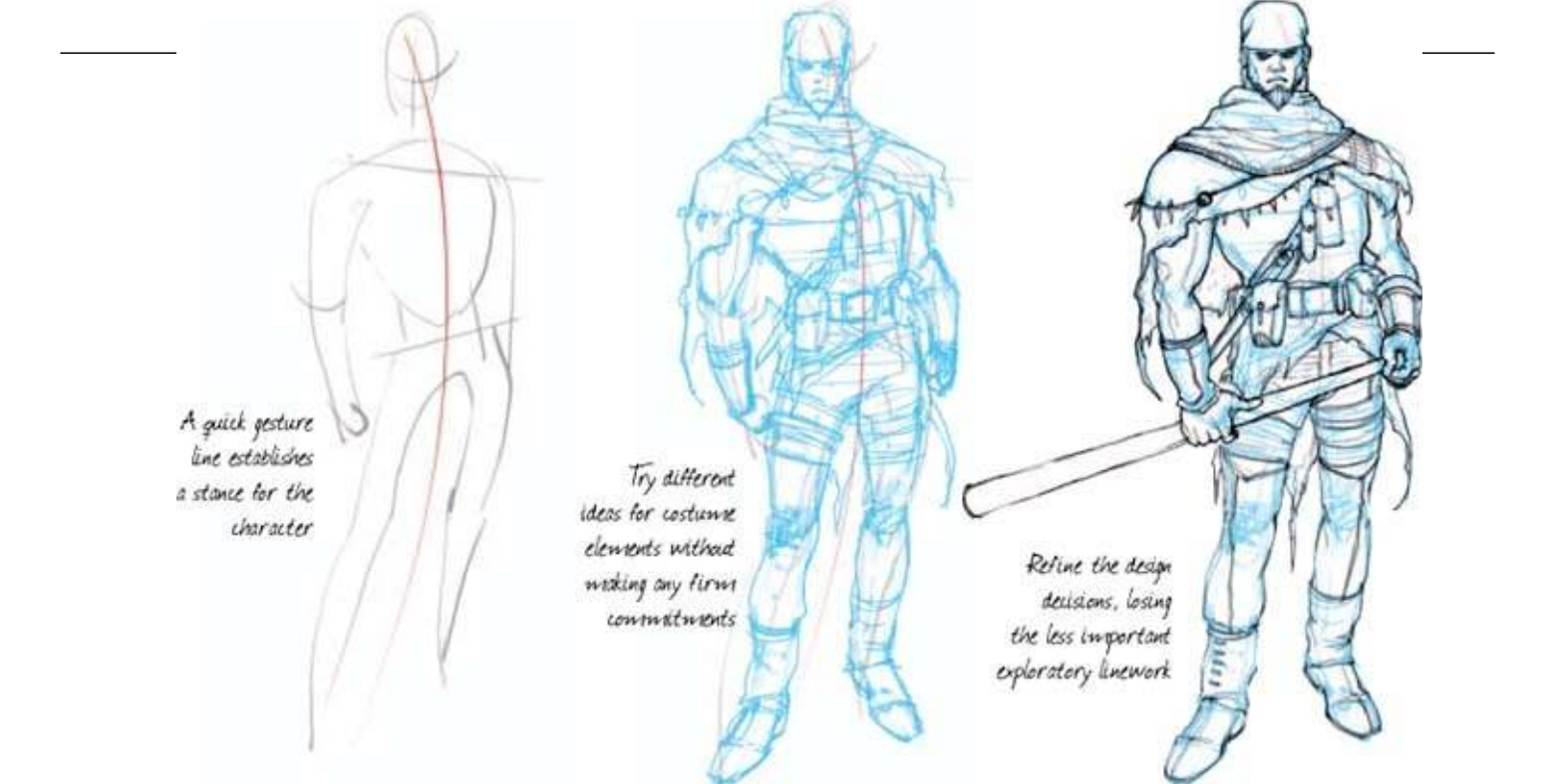
*In this collection of preliminary sketches, I've created various layouts that use some of the same elements in different combinations. This would have been difficult or impossible to do with traditional materials such as ink or paint.*

*This page from one of my travel sketchbooks shows some notes and observations about a Mayan site in Mexico that I visited several years ago. I sketched some of the structures as they appeared, but also drew cross-section views, close-up analysis of the stonework, and an overhead view of the entire location.*

Finally, creating and maintaining a reference library is essential. For real-world material, you rely on just your memory the best you can hope for is to get close; it is guaranteed that someone somewhere will know more about the object you're drawing than you do, and you know you haven't done your homework. Short of going to see something first hand, finding and using photographic references is therefore vitally important. In the past, illustrators created what were known as 'morgue files', which consisted of images clipped from newspapers and magazines that the illustrator might find useful for reference – clothing, costumes, locations, cars, whatever was needed for a particular assignment. These morgue files would occupy a lot of space, usually taking up several filing cabinets. So, yet another advantage of working with digital tools is that you are now able to find reference images on the Internet and store them on your computer, creating your own virtual morgue file.

## **FIGURE DRAWING FOR BEGINNERS**

**For those who have never attempted a figure drawing before, the 100 Ways presented in this book might appear slightly daunting at first. This quick step-by-step demonstration reveals the key processes you need to get you started on your way to creating amazing fantasy figures.**



A quick gesture line establishes a stance for the character

Try different ideas for costume elements without making any firm commitments

Refine the design decisions, losing the less important exploratory linework

## Step 1:

### *Begin with the Gesture*

The first mark you make when laying out a figure drawing should be a single line that captures the overall stance or movement of a character. Here, I've drawn a quick **gesture line** (in red) showing a simple standing posture; the character will lean slightly to the right, resting his weight on one leg. I've gone ahead and roughly blocked in the masses of the body, head and limbs. Notice the **counter pose** of the hips to the shoulders – this shows that the body is reacting to gravity.

## Step 2:

### *Develop the Sketch*

With the basic structure in place, I've started to lay in a more detailed drawing, **indicating design elements** such as clothing details, pouches, belts and various pieces of equipment. Don't get too detailed or finalized at this stage – it's better to keep moving around the drawing quickly, not making any firm commitments until you begin to get a sense of the overall image. This is a good time to **explore different options** with the lines of the character's clothing and gear.

## Step 3:

---

### *Finalize the Drawing*

Once all the major decisions have been made, I've gone back over the drawing with a darker, more definite line, cleaning up the sketch and making things a bit clearer. The cloak and other articles of clothing mask the character's stance somewhat, but having the **underlying structure** firmly placed in advance helps to make the drawing work, even with the **added complexity** of costume and props.

### Practice Makes Perfect

Practise is necessary in any art activity – be it dance, music or drawing. Taking the time to hone your skills will only add to your effectiveness as an illustrator and help improve the pathways between mind and hand.



#### *Keep a Sketchbook*

*Many artists carry around a notebook in which to record personal sketches, studies, experiments and random thoughts. The advantage of this habit is that it quickly becomes a catalogue of ideas and explorations that you can revisit in the future. It can often be tempting to make every image in a sketchbook as beautiful and finished as possible – in order to make it a nice object and a work of art in itself – but a good sketchbook should contain beautiful work and rough, scratchy drawings. All illustrators love looking at other artists' sketchbooks, but their main function isn't to be shown to other people – a sketchbook serves its purpose when it becomes a personal record of your thought processes and ideas, and can be used to help inspire you in your ongoing work.*



### **Documentation**

*Just like in school when you were asked to 'show your work', it is sometimes helpful to provide some documentation of your design processes. Notes and sketches like this can form a valuable part of your personal library – ideas can be reconfigured and reused in other situations as the need arises. I wouldn't recommend using finished designs this way, but preliminary and developmental sketches can often provide 'seeds' for new ideas in other projects.*



### **Figure Drawing**

*Even though much of fantasy art depicts imaginary and fantastical beings, it still needs to have a firm basis in reality in order to be convincing. Practising figure drawing with live models is a valuable exercise, and allows you to build up your artistic toolbox with strong drawing skills and knowledge of anatomy.*



*Travel Sketches Making travel sketches forces you to observe your surroundings in a more engaging way, and helps you learn about the way people interact with their environment. Being able to place your figures and creatures convincingly in*

## VISUAL COMMUNICATION

This is a concept that refers to the way in which an illustrator can convey an idea to the audience, and is one of the fundamental elements that this book will explore. The idea being communicated might be, for example, a mood, a character's personality, a sense of culture, an emotion, a conflict or an event. Once an idea for an illustration is clearly defined, the process by which the illustrator conveys and preserves the idea is known as 'visual communication'. Techniques of visual communication include the use of silhouette, proportion, scale, texture, lighting, hierarchy, level of detail and visual cues.







## Hierarchy

The primary purpose of your drawings is to **communicate an idea**. When your drawings are clear and concise, your message will come through strongly. Planning line work to **eliminate unnecessary noise and clutter**, and to provide visual cues, improves the clarity of your drawing, and hence the effectiveness of its visual communication. Heavy lines indicate important outlines and edges, and should be used sparingly. Light and medium lines indicate details and textures; these should make up the bulk of the sketch. The idea of hierarchy can also be extended to value, concentration of detail, and texture. Using all of these ideas in conjunction can result in a simple, clear sketch that fully conveys all your design ideas.

## Silhouette

Character design depends heavily on silhouette, which is also sometimes referred to as the **initial 'read'** of a character. The silhouette is the largest piece of visual information presented to a viewer, and as such is more important in terms of **first impressions** than things like textures, details and colours.

## Lighting and Materials

One of the basic visual communication skills is the ability to render different lighting

conditions and materials. The key to indicating materials lies in how they **react to light** – reflectivity, specularity, grain and texture are all traits that can be affected by lighting.

## Indication of Detail

There is a balance to be struck in terms of when and where to use detail. Creating focus is a game involving colour, lighting and detail. Implying detail often does the job as well as carefully rendering every bit of it. In some cases, it is actually preferable so that you **don't focus undue attention** on places that do not need it, or that won't help to convey your message.

## DESIGN

**It is important to make a distinction between visual communication – the transmission of the idea – and design – the process in which you analyse a problem and formulate a solution. In computer game and film design in particular, a very common misconception about concept art is that it begins and ends with being able to draw or paint well.**

Rendering skill is certainly extremely important to be able to clearly communicate your design, but that is only part of the equation. Keep in mind that the art you generate as a character designer is not **the end product** – it is simply the means to get to the end product, which is the film, game, television programme, music video, or whatever project it is that you are involved in.

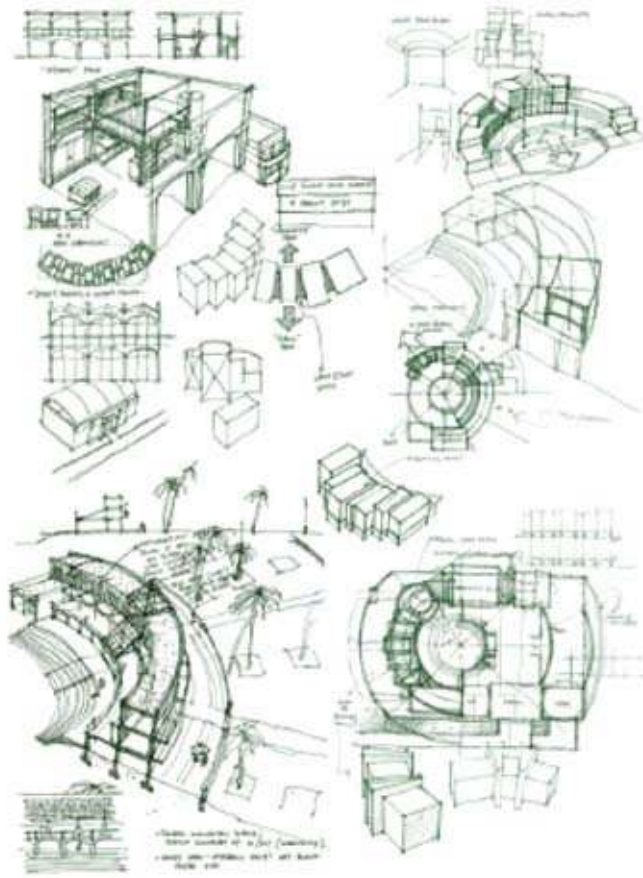
One approach to design is to break down the design task into **manageable chunks** – separate silhouette studies from pose studies and from texture and material studies. The odds are against you 'hitting a home run' on all those different aspects with one single drawing.

Another aspect of design philosophy to consider is the balance between 'synthesizing' and 'originating'. By originating I mean coming up with something **completely unique**, that no one has ever seen before. Besides being almost impossible to achieve, you run the risk of losing or alienating your audience. Synthesizing refers to the process of combining different **familiar elements** that are rarely used together. This provides a familiar link for your audience and at the same time presents them with something new.

### Artist's Tip

WHEN DOING DESIGN DRAWINGS SUCH AS THIS ONE SHOWN RIGHT, KEEP

YOUR ERASER WELL OUT OF REACH. IF YOU FIND THAT YOU'RE DOING A LOT OF RUBBING OUT AND REDRAWING, YOU HAVE ACTUALLY STRAYED AWAY FROM THE DESIGN ASPECT OF THIS TYPE OF SKETCHING.



## Design Drawing

This is a term that refers to the process of ‘hammering out’ and **refining a design** on paper. This process might involve drawing different views, ‘X-ray vision’ shots and handwritten notes. Typically this isn’t something you show your audience, and it will often end up looking messy and almost incomprehensible. The goal with this type of drawing is to **explore different options** and develop an initial design idea.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

One of the most common questions I hear is ‘how do I get a job as a fantasy artist?’ In truth there is no clear answer as many professional illustrators and concept artists found their

way to their occupation through varied and roundabout ways  
There are, however, some common elements in many artists' education and career paths that you could also benefit from.

### *Formal Learning*

Working as an illustrator or concept artist requires a command of basic art skills and concepts, which can be obtained in a good, well-rounded art education. The type of learning you undergo will have an influence on your chances of success. In my mind there are two basic educational paths available that provide a **solid foundation**. First is an illustration-based education, which is one that concentrates on traditional art skills such as drawing and painting, colour theory, anatomy and perspective. This tends to be an **observational and documentary approach**, where students learn the skills necessary to reproduce what they see in real life in a variety of media. The second consists of a design-based education, which would include areas such as industrial design, product design, graphic design and architecture. This typically trains students in certain aspects of **visual communication** common to each field of study, but usually not to the extent that would be found on an illustration course. However, in the last few years, some courses have begun to appear that blur the boundaries between the two. Computer game design and entertainment design are now available as options for those seeking higher education, which can lead directly into careers in fantasy and science fiction art. An education in studio art techniques and/or art history can also be a great help in pursuing this line of work.

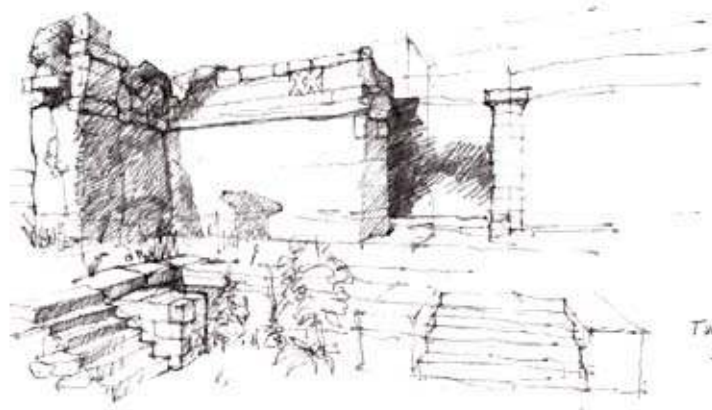
At first glance it might seem that an illustration-based education is much more useful for a career as a fantasy artist, but a design education can provide some very useful skills for a fledgling illustrator too. My own educational background is in architecture, and one of the most beneficial lessons I learned from it is knowing how to **formulate a design problem** so that I can then determine a **clear and effective solution**.

### *Developing Personal Strategies*

As a fantasy illustrator, you will often be called upon to visualize people, objects and creatures that don't exist, or that are fantastical amalgamations of real, existing things. Because of this, an education in traditional art skills will benefit greatly from exposure to other fields of study too. As an artist or designer, the more '**visual vocabulary**' you have to draw upon, the better. Exposure to influences outside your primary area of interest is necessary in order to build up this mental library. The best way to accomplish this (and it is a never-ending process) is to expose yourself to as many different ideas and visual stimuli as possible. All artists tend to draw what they know, so expanding the database of 'what you know' makes you more versatile as an artist, giving you a broader range of material to

draw from.

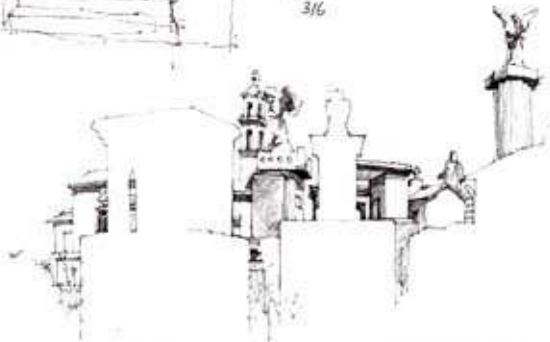
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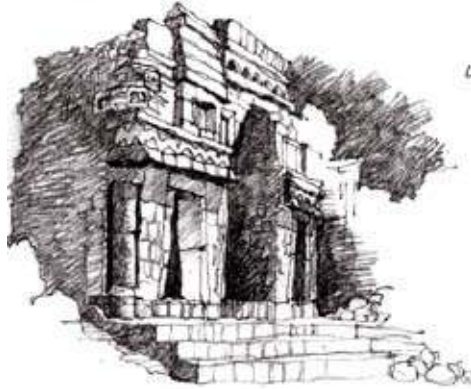
TURIN  
316



EL MIRADOR



CEMETERY AT ISMAIL  
344



EL ARCO  
THE ARCH, LARNA  
LATE CLASSIC  
214



MADRID  
CHURCH IN FRONT OF OUR HOTEL  
218

*Travelling is a great way of gathering new material for your visual vocabulary. Experiencing life, seeing different environments and observing human behaviour in a variety of situations, will all help stock your mind with reference data for your fantasy illustrations.*

## CHALLENGES FOR THE WORKING FANTASY ARTIST

One of the keys to success as an illustrator is being able to balance the familiar with the unusual. In other words, as a commercial artist part of the job is being able to create artwork that an audience can relate to. There is a certain level of expectation you have to meet in order to successfully sell your artwork. At the same time, in order to stand out among

**the many thousands of artists working in the same field, you have to be able to bring something new to the mix.**

It is very difficult to reliably come up with brand new, completely original ideas and concepts for every art job you happen to get. The strategy I have found some success with is to **introduce a new 'spin'** on an otherwise familiar subject. There are different ways to accomplish this. They include: combining influences or images that are not commonly associated with each other; introducing a single strange or alien element to otherwise very familiar imagery; or playing with an audience's expectations in clever and unexpected ways.

Along with developing tools and strategies such as those already discussed, it is also necessary to pay attention to the work being done by others in your field. You have to stay abreast of the kinds of imagery that seem to be making the biggest impression on your audience, what styles appear to be on the wane, and what kinds of things feel like 'flavour of the month'. This is not to say that you should always be chasing the market with your style; it is important to find and then maintain and develop **your own voice** in your artwork. The bottom line is that as you do this you should also be constantly aware of the environment and market you are working in.



*Working with an art director at a large publishing company like Wizards of the Coast (for whom this image was created) is a collaborative process. As an illustrator you are being hired for your ability to visualize fantasy worlds and characters, but you do not have total freedom to draw or paint whatever you want. The art director usually has a list of requirements from a number of different parties, and creating an illustration becomes at least in part a problem-solving exercise, where you are trying to find the best way to satisfy many (sometimes conflicting) conditions.*



*Images like this can sometimes be used large, as game covers, but more often will end up as trading cards for games such as 'Magic: The Gathering'. Although the final art for these cards is very small, sometimes as little as an 4cm (1½in) wide, the same care and attention goes into each of these illustrations.*

One of the first things you have to establish for yourself as you begin a project is the 'big picture'. Your client may have some ideas about mood or a certain character, or perhaps he wants magical flying armoured hippos in his game, just because he thinks they are 'cool'. As the artist hired to bring this vision to life, you have to be able to take a step back and perceive the project as a whole, so you know what parts are truly important, and what parts obscure the big picture. Do flying hippos fit into the world you are creating? If not, what kind of spin can you put on them so that they make sense with your vision? This could involve a lot of **thinking and research** on your part, even before you put pencil to paper.

This book should in no way be considered as a replacement for a good art education or experience in the field – it is simply one working illustrator's collection of ideas and strategies; things that seem to have worked consistently well for me in the past. My hope is that it can provide you with some useful **information and inspiration** on your path to becoming a successful fantasy artist.

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## Understanding the Basics

**Any creative endeavour has a greater chance of success when it is built on a solid foundation. For an illustrator or character designer, a sound footing comprises some basic knowledge and a number of different competences. This section looks at some of the fundamental tools and skills any artist should have in his or her visual toolbox, and will also define some important concepts.**

**Illustration inspired by the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, fortune, love, and beauty.**



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