



Fantasy Art Techniques

By Boris Vallejo

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In a captivating, behind-the-scenes look into the creative process of a fantasy artist, renowned artist Boris Vallejo discusses in depth the techniques of a personal style that has placed him among the leading international fantasy and science fiction artists of today. 91 color images; 32 line drawings.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

YA A lovely browsing collection of color reproductions that will appeal to young fantasy fans because of Vallejo's exciting renditions of unearthly creatures and sexy humans. The moods range from the frightening to the humorous. Vallejo describes various painting techniques in an accompanying text, and he includes some rough sketches to illustrate the development of painting. This book is more of an introduction to fantasy art appreciation than a course in technique. There is no index or list of illustrations.

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The Concept

The elements of a fantasy illustration need make no pretence of imitating life such as they must in, say, an illustration for a gothic, a mystery, or a novel. Fantasy engages the imagination to a much larger extent; the creatures portrayed may come partly or entirely from your head. And yet, to be successful, the scenes from your imagination must be convincing enough for a viewer to be willing to go along with you: to willingly suspend his disbelief and say, "*Yes, this could work*".

How does someone begin to create these wholly imaginary pictures? The answer to the eternal question "Where do your ideas come from?" seems obvious at first. Naturally, they come from my head. Where else? Ideas come from one's head. It's true, when you set a manuscript to illustrate, you're likely to find descriptions in it. Still, it is up to the artist to interpret them. All those alien beings and landscapes come into being from what is, in fact, known to us. Existing life may be the point of departure, yet all successful fantastical creatures must relate back to it as traceably as vertebrates do to the single-celled amoeba. Muscles are what makes movement possible for the higher forms of living creatures. If you want to paint a combination animal/machine, let's say, there must still be a relation to existing animals and existing machines; the musculature, at least, must be plausible.

The immediate environment is a tremendous source of ideas for me: shadows, shapes, things that, as a result of being near-sighted, I don't exactly see. It's pretty easy for me to reinterpret something twenty feet away which is already fuzzy. With a little push it readily loses its real contours and becomes something else in my eyes. If I start elaborating on what I don't clearly see, I can go in any direction. All I need is an existing starting point; my imagination takes over from there.

This odyssey of the imagination need not be a deliberate or controlled thing. It's much better when it's not directed, when I simply sit quietly and let it happen. In a sense, it's as though my ideas don't come out of me so much as I allow them to move in on me. The most important thing one can do to nourish the imagination is relax. I have noticed that when I specifically try to think of something, really strain towards an idea, very little happens. Whatever does happen is usually stilted and forced. If I relax and open the doors, so to speak, ideas do come.

Often enough, inspiration begins with the model. I see someone and I think: I would like to use this person for a painting; I would like to focus on this or that special feature of this person. From there I can evolve a

character, an atmosphere, or an entire concept.

I once saw a young man at the gym I go to. He was an excellent bodybuilder, but the more notable quality about him was that he possessed not only huge muscles -- a really fine development -- but also a very boyish, almost child-like face, which presented a striking contrast with his physique. I stored this impression in the back of my mind, hoping that a job would come along for which I could use him. Then I was given a collection of stories by Isaac Asimov.

My original concept for this book's cover was of a young scientist type sitting on top of the earth in the middle of space. Subsequently I got a call from my client saying that although she liked the sketch, it was not exactly what she had in mind. What did she have in mind? Well, she was rather vague about that, but she preferred something with a more heroic feeling. As we were talking it occurred to me that, instead of emphasizing the human aspect of the stories, I might emphasize the mechanical.

It was then that I decided to do a robot -- not the typical machine-like robot, but a more human one who would, nevertheless, have a superhuman appearance. At once I made the connection between this idea and the young man I had seen in the gym. The fact that his face was so youthful and his body so highly developed led naturally to the idea of keeping the roundness of the muscles and the distinctive shape of the body but making it metallic, chrome, really beautiful and shiny out there in the middle of space. I still thought of having him standing on the earth, but as I worked, the earth changed into a simple globe. It also became shiny, like glass or chrome.

So, you see how the concept changed from the sketch of the robot that I started out with to the finished painting. With the use of that man as the model, the robot became an almost superhuman figure, spinning nebulae out of his bare hands. His face is nearly expressionless. Yet there is a suggestion of childlike wonder and joy at what he is doing: there he is in the middle of space, fascinated with the beautiful things he is creating. In this case, the "model" was just perfect, and the concept owed a great deal of its development to his physical characteristics.

Of course the concept may originate in a more general way than with the model. I may simply think: It would be nice to do something metallic; it would be nice to do something fluffy; it would be nice to do something in which I can concentrate wholly on the figure because the background would be negligible or, vice versa, in which I can concentrate mainly on the background because the figure is inconsequential.

Most often, however, the concept is established by the manuscript to be illustrated or by the movie for which a poster is to be made -- by the product to be sold. In the case of a book there is, first, the manuscript. There is an old saying that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But often enough a book is bought precisely because of its cover. Therefore, as an artist, what one must look for in a manuscript is a scene that is representative of the book, perhaps one with plenty of action or one that is, for its colour or subject, quite eye-catching. After all, there are hundreds of books on the bookstore shelves and the successful cover should draw the prospective buyer like a magnet.

Some authors are very descriptive and make the task of selecting a visually effective scene relatively easy. *The Lavalite World* is a good example. It is a book of adventures and consequently presents any number of action scenes involving the hero, the heroine, and the monster or villain. To show the hero and heroine riding a tree trunk into battle was, to my mind, colourful and unusual enough to evoke any browser's interest in the book.

Some authors are less visual in their writing. They write with less attention to detail and their imagery is more abstract. In such a situation one has to capture a feeling, something representative of the story rather than a particular scene or incident from it. This feeling must then be expressed in visual terms in order to

convey an immediate sense of what is going on in the book. My illustrations for *Enchantment*, which my wife Doris wrote, exemplify this.

The painting for "Web" does not represent a particular scene from the story. It is simply a depiction of the way I experience a spider woman. I began with the question: What typifies a spider? It has eight legs. But I didn't want to paint a totally unappealing woman with eight hairy legs. I wanted a woman who was sensual and sexy-looking, but at the same time menacing, and who would still evoke the feeling of a spider -- perhaps with a spiderweb around her.

The painting that was done for *Heavy Metal*, however, was not inspired by a manuscript or anything more than the title of the magazine itself: HEAVY METAL. I began with the idea of something metal, a heavy metal. A safe came to mind. The door of a safe which, to me, was quite representative both of "metal" and of "heavy". From there followed the image of a bank vault. Yet this was a fantasy painting that I was going to do. What did fantasy have to do with a bank vault? I decided to put it into space; a heavy metal bank vault floating in outer space. Still, something fantastical had to happen. What if something is inside there, I thought. What would have to be locked behind such a door? Some kind of creature, obviously, that has to be kept from escaping. And what if the creature has been pounding at the door? What if the creature has a metal hand that it has been pounding and pounding the door with and has finally broken through? The first picture that flashed through my mind was of some powerful and monstrous creature. But that would have been a bit too ordinary. So I made it incongruous: a kind of wild-looking woman instead of a creature, not all that physically powerful in appearance but with a crazed look. She not only had the metal hand but the wild eyes and the wild red hair. All these elements brought together in a painting should really make the viewer stop and say: Look at that! What's going on there!

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