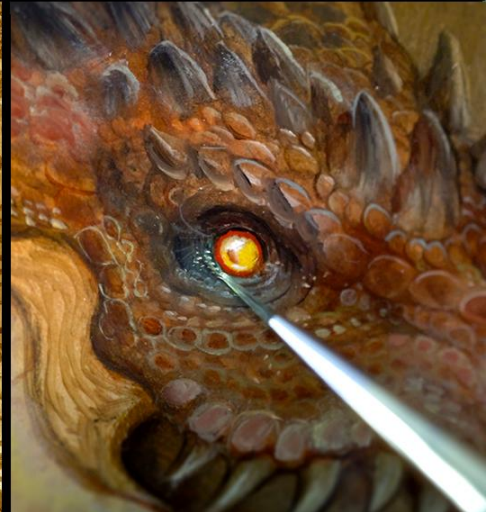




August 2022

Written Guide: "Journey's End" Collaborative Process

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By Justin and Annie Stegg Gerard

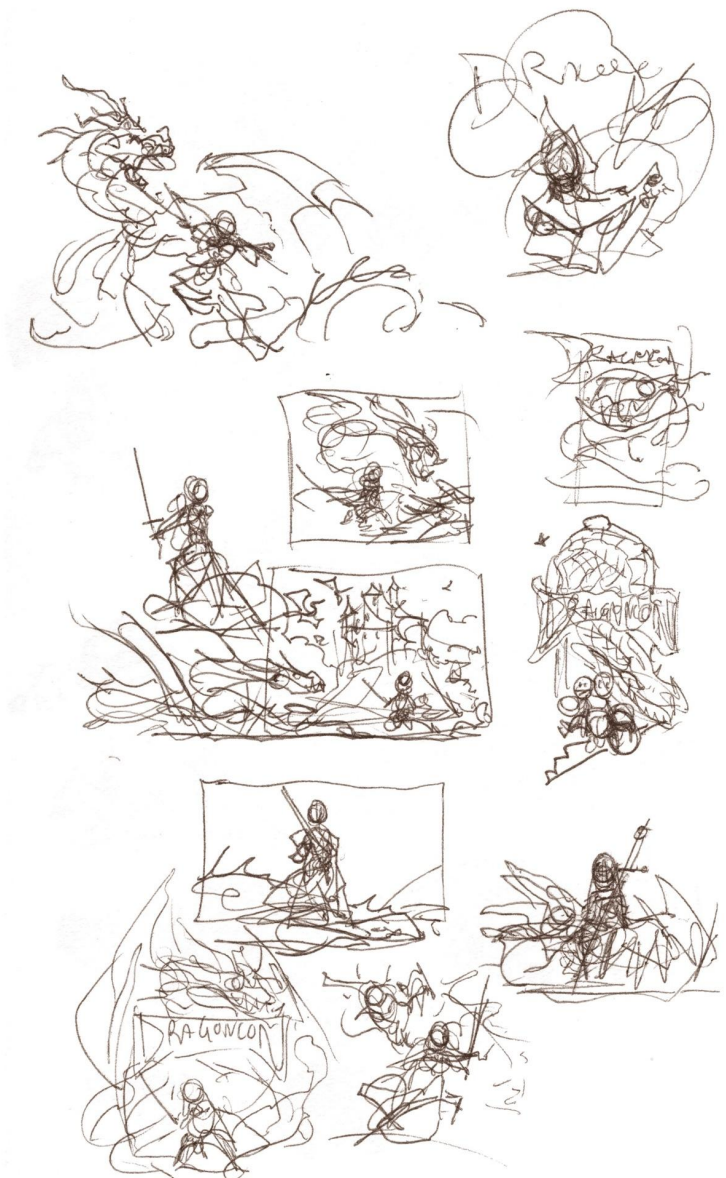
Artists are peculiar creatures, and no two are created alike. They often have vastly different goals and ideas for the same image, and will pursue those goals in wildly different methods. One may esteem classical beauty as the ideal for an artwork, while another may see anarchic cultural rebellion as the highest form of visual expression. Because of this, two artists collaborating on a single image can be very challenging!

In this article, we will describe how Justin and Annie Stegg Gerard painted “Journey’s End,” which was an illustration commissioned for the DragonCon 2022 T-shirt. We’ll describe the process of working together with the client to achieve the goals of the project, and offer an outline of the processes we use when making an image, and for working together to complete it.

COLLABORATING ON IDEAS

Visual art is inherently about communicating ideas between ourselves and others. As such, an image must begin with an *idea*. When we took on this project, we talked a lot about what might be fun to work on before we ever put pen to paper. We are two artists with styles that are different, but have a lot of overlaps. The challenge is finding where those overlaps are! Annie loves images of evocative, mysterious beauty, like the classical Rococo painters, and Justin loves classical, narrative-driven imagery of the Golden Age of Illustration. Two classical, but different eras, with different stylistic preferences and themes. *But we both love dragons!* It didn’t take us long to find a good overlap of subjects and styles we both loved and would enjoy working with.

After we talked about the style and direction of our illustration, we started



talking about specific ideas that we thought might be fun for this image. As we talked, Justin filled out a page of loose thumbnails in ink. These ranged from classical princesses and dragons, castles besieged by wyverns, and legendary knights battling fire-breathing foes. Being visual people, we love generating thumbnails as we talk so we can capture our immediate response to the ideas. These rough sketches give us a launch pad for the project. They help us decide what will work for the illustration, and what will not!

SKETCHES

After creating our loose thumbnail sketches, we choose a few of the stronger ones that we think will both work well on a T-shirt design, and would be enjoyable to work on as a painting. Justin then cleans up a few of the sketches before sharing our ideas with the client to get their feedback.

Justin tries to keep the designs very loose at this stage. This is for 2 reasons: The first is to save time, which allows for many more designs to be considered. And the second is to prevent getting too attached to any one particular image. After we have spent a long time drawing and refining an idea for an image, it can be heart-breaking when it isn't chosen, or when it is altered to fit the client's needs.

#7



#8



And this *ALWAYS* happens. Dealing with changes to fit the goals of a project is simply part of being a professional illustrator. So we try to not let our hearts get too invested in any one image before we send the ideas to the client.

We turn in our batch of sketches and the client responds with some great feedback. **Sketch #8** features a trio of trespassers, who have just looted an ancient temple and are merrily making their way off with its treasures. Behind them a dragon, quiet as a cat, is silently stalking them. This best captured the mood the client was after for the project, and so this one was chosen.

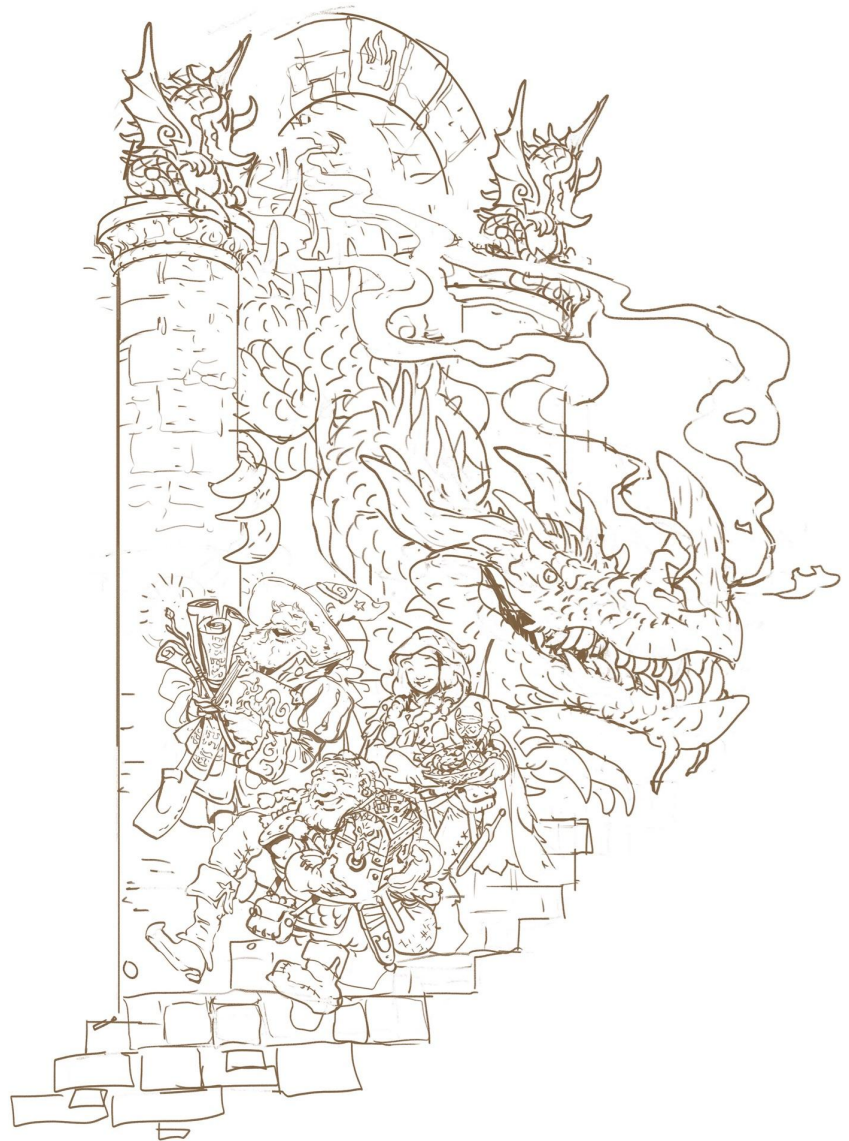
DRAWINGS

A vital step in the illustration process is the layout sketch. This is one of the most difficult and most unenjoyable, but also *most important*, parts of the image-making process. This is when the rough sketch, which has so much mystery and chaos and possibility contained within its chaos of scribbles, must be wrestled into forms that can exist in real space. In the sketch, a stray line might suggest an arch, or a cloud, or a tree to the subjective viewer. So many wonderful possibilities in a line! Or a the blob that represents a character might be a dwarf or wizard or orc. In this stage the hard decisions of what exactly everything is must be made. We have to exchange the delightful subjective mystery for col, objective reality.

The challenge we face as illustrators is preserving what made the original thumbnail sketch so appealing, while also crafting a clear and well-understood arrangement.

Since this part of the process often involves many, many reworks, Justin prefers to work with simple clean lines, which can be easily erased and reworked as these hard decisions are made, second-guessed, and reworked into their final forms.

With the hard part out of the way, Justin prints out his design and transfers it down to a sheet of Strathmore bristol to execute a tight pencil drawing. Doing so many drawings might seem like overkill, but investing time in the planning stages, (where reworks are easy) always pays off dramatically in the painting stages where reworks are very, very painful and much more time-consuming.



When collaborating with another artist a tight drawing becomes even more important. Once Justin hands the painting off to Annie, she may not know what a random squiggly line is. What to Justin is obviously an orc sword, to Annie might look like an oddly-placed salmon. She might think he has finally and irrevocably lost his mind. So it is even more important to produce a very clear drawing when collaborating!



COLOR EXPLORATION

With the drawing and design now taken care of, Annie and Justin discuss the possibilities for the setting and color arrangement. Justin produces a quick color comp in Photoshop to share what color and lighting was in his imagination while he was drawing. Annie will be painting in oils, so matching every color is not the goal. The color comp is more like suggestions, rather than actual rules to follow. But it can be an immense time-saver, as Annie will have much less guess-work to deal with when making choices on colors. This allows Annie to dive into the painting with much more confidence.



While designing the color comp, Justin also adds a few type treatments, to give a sense of possible places the type might appear on the t-shirt. This is important because these are areas Annie will need to leave less cluttered with detail or narratively-important elements.

THE HAND-OFF

Now Justin hands the drawing and design off to Annie, and she adds her own touch to the scene before she begins to paint. First she decides to widen the scene, to give it more context and atmosphere. This provides a bit of breathing room for our characters, and places for the viewer's focus to relax.

In this new space, Annie adds details such as tumbled down walls, ruined pillars, creeping ivy, and moss covered boulders, like she is designing the set of a stage play.



After this is complete, she transfers the drawing down onto a gessoed board of Ampersand MDF panel.

To make this transfer drawing, Annie places a sheet of carbon paper over her clean panel. She then tapes a printout of the drawing over the panel and carbon paper, and traces over the lines with a pen. This transfers the carbon down onto the panel, leaving a light, clean outline of the drawing that Annie can paint over.



With her transfer complete, Annie decides to do a monochrome underpainting using warm, umber tones. She works in traditional oil paint using Walnut Alkyd Medium from M. Graham as her medium, and employs a wide variety of brush types and sizes. Her favorite brushes are pointed rounds and angled shaders.

An underpainting is a great way to focus on the lighting effect before worrying about the color and fine details. As she works, Annie focuses on the shadows and making the shapes read as 3-dimensional. In many ways, this is like doing the drawing all over again, but this time in even higher definition. While adding the warm tones to the underpainting, Annie keeps her values a shade lighter. This is because she plans to add many layers of glazes to the painting. With each glaze layer, an oil painting tends to darken slightly, so working a bit lighter at the beginning can help compensate for that.



COLOR

With her underpainting complete, Annie dives into color. She works with semi-opaque color to paint over the underpainting. She does not want to obscure the paint underneath, only enhance it! Focusing on cooler tones and local colors, she slowly builds up the overall scene, working from background to foreground.

Working on the environment first is a good trick to ensure that you add solid detail to the entire scene. It is easy to lose interest in the support elements in a scene after the focal point has been finished. Since the figures are our focal point, Annie chooses to paint them last, so that the whole scene will have an even level of detail and refinement.

Painting the background first is a good habit to get into if you want your entire scene to be highly detailed!



With the background finished, Annie moves on to paint the figures, bringing them up to the same level of finish as the rest of the scene.

Once the background and figures have been painted, Annie sets the painting aside for a few days, to allow it to dry and cure. It is not finished yet, as there are many details she still plans to add. Setting a painting aside can be really hard to do, especially when you are really excited about it. However, there are some effects that just work better when painted over a dry surface. Techniques such as color glazing, or scumbling, or adding sharp details, and atmospheric effects, all suffer if painted onto a wet surface. If she tries to add them now, she might smudge or ruin some of the underlying details she has already established. So, she does the hard thing, and sets the painting aside to dry.

While she waits, she begins work on other paintings. Traditional oil painters have used this practice of rotating between paintings for centuries in order to make the most use of their time. This not only allows for some wonderful techniques and effects, it also allows the artist to come back to the painting with fresh eyes. Often, we get tunnel vision when working on a painting, and if we try to finish it all in one sitting, we won't be able to see the compositional errors or issues with proportion.

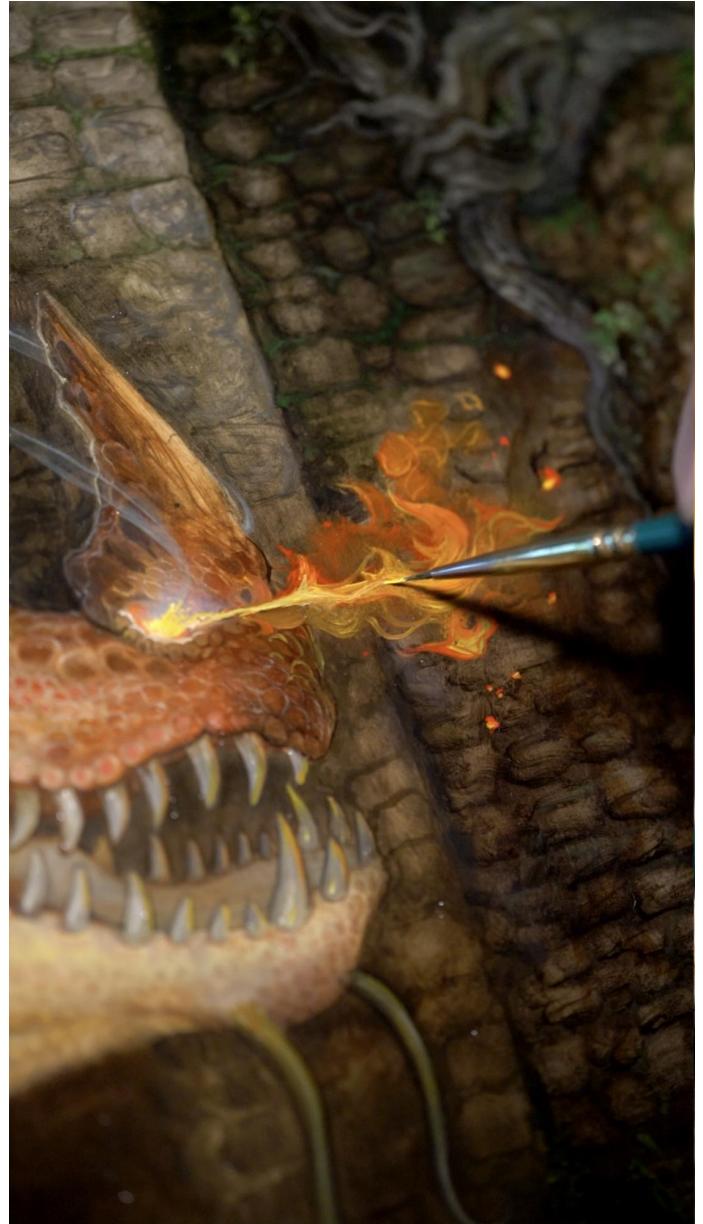
Coming back to it days later, the painting will reveal all of its issues and the artist will be better able to solve them.



FINAL DETAILS AND ATMOSPHERIC EFFECTS

After allowing the painting a few days to cure, the surface is now touch-dry. Annie can now safely add glazes of color and medium over it without worrying about wiping away any of the underlying pigment or detail.

Sparkling embers, tendrils of fire, and smoke trails are all effects that work much better over a dry surface. These are also a lot of fun to paint, so it can take a lot of restraint to not just add them right away!



To paint the smoke, Annie mixes titanium white and payne's gray with a touch of medium to create a semi-transparent smoke color, which she applies in long, sweeping brush lines using a synthetic pointed round brush.

For fire effects, Annie uses titanium white with Hansa Yellow and Sheveningen Red, from Old Holland Oil Paints. These vibrant tones simulate the intense color saturation of Cadmium Reds and Yellows, but without the hazard of toxic metal pigments.

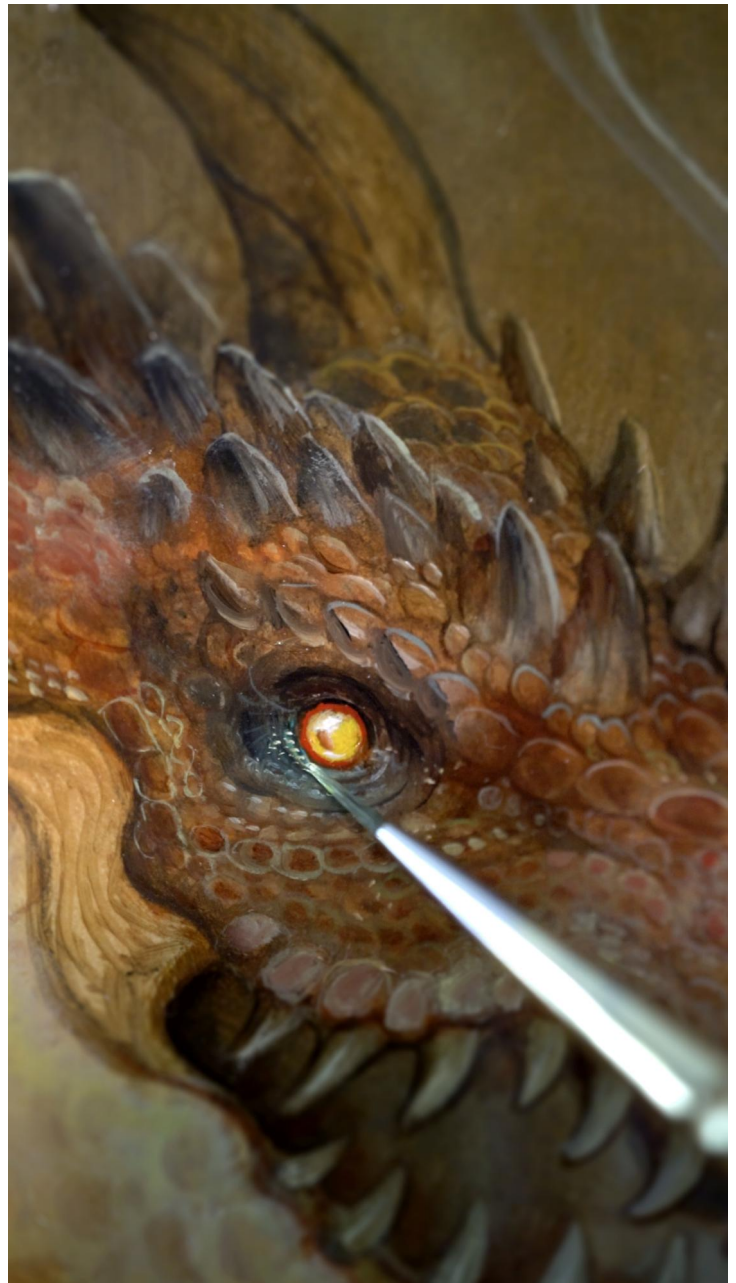


To paint these fire effects Annie uses very small pointed round brushes. It is important to remember that the area around the flame is where the greatest color saturation will be. If you paint the entire flame as a mixture of red and white, it will just look like a pink blob. But if you paint the red of the flame, then paint a yellow white mixture into the middle, it looks like a bright flame.

Annie repeats this same effect all over the background environment of the painting, adding details such as leaves and moss and stones.

With the background detailed, she now moves on to the figures and the dragon. On the dragon she adds more color and vibrance to its skin, and sharp highlights and detail to the horns and scales. One of Annie's great loves is for creatures, and lizards in particular. So these scales and horns are particularly fun to work on.

Around the eyes she adds tiny daubs of white to give it a sense of specular highlighting on its pebbly skin. As with the fire, she leaves a warm outer color to the eye before adding the bright white and yellow to the inside, giving it the appearance of glowing.



The characters and dragon are the focal point of the scene so it is important to spend as long as necessary on them to get the details right. Something as simple as the trim of the cloak can communicate volumes about the character. Is it trimmed in gold or frayed and torn? Is it an elegant, refined pattern, or a simple, folk design? The one might provide clues that our character is an experienced nomadic warrior, ready for anything, while the other might convey our character to be a soft, highly-cultured socialite, unready for the peril they are about to encounter. Either choice is excellent, and would add layers and layers of interesting backstory to the scene. Like Sherlock Holmes, we can deduce a great deal about a character from something as simple as the trim of a cloak. So it is important to invest the time into detailing those elements, since we as humans always find them so interesting.

The treasures is also very important to the story. Apart from the fact that we humans love looking at shiny things, the treasure also gives the viewer clues about the world our characters are inhabiting, and what happened before this scene took place, *and* what is likely to happen directly after





With those details finished, the painting is complete! Will our trio of trespassing adventurers survive the coming encounter? That is up to the viewer. Hopefully we have provided them with a stage play rich in detail and character for them to enjoy playing out the scene in their own imaginations!

JUSTIN GERARD

Anne Stegg

Thanks for joining us for this tutorial! I hope you've enjoyed it. If you have any questions or have any suggestions for future tutorials, you can message us at studio@gallerygerard.com.