

<Ed note – The illustrations divide into airbrush (the chromes) and digital (on the DVD). They're all so outstanding that there's not a lot of commentary that can equal the amazing excellence of the art. I'm stumped on captions and have to defer to your experience in this regard.>

Mark Fredrickson
Master Airbrush (and Digital!) Illustrator

The Path from Paint to Pixels

By Pete Johnson

A very recognizable style

Throughout the 1990s, Mark Fredrickson's airbrush illustration became a familiar part of the American graphic arts landscape. The foundation of his unusual style is an amazing ability to see people and events in visually-distorted situations and render them flawlessly. Mark's work goes miles beyond simple stretched visual perspective; he illustrates odd details, gestures, and facial expressions that are sometimes mildly disturbing, sometimes very amusing. He is an expert in the use of light, shadow, and color to highlight his effects.

The '90s commercial art marketplace responded. Fredrickson's paintings appeared in advertisements, editorial illustration, packaging, and many other markets. *Airbrush Action* featured his work several times.

Recently, we caught up with Mark Fredrickson to talk about his last fifteen years or so as an illustrator.

Mark has continued to produce a steady stream of work for publications like *Mad Magazine*, for which he's done most of the covers for the past two years. (Check out the June 2006 issue for the *Da Vinci Code* parody cover – Mark depicts Alfred E. Newman, *Mad's* perennial cover icon, as the Mona Lisa, in Leonardo's style.) In addition, Mark has produced about 20 book covers for the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres, plus game graphics, more advertising, and editorial work.

Mark's caricatures are top-notch. When you ask him about them, his modesty is surprising, if not perplexing. "It's not natural. It's a consistent source of frustration to me...I do them when asked. I have friends who specialize in caricature, but it's just not my best work." But Mark's the kind of artist who is keenly self-critical and is always studying and improving. That's one reason that his work is so good.

"I have some of my originals on display on the walls at home," Mark says. "Not long ago, a visitor was here and said 'I recognize that painting,' But he didn't know who did it. I got a certain amount of pleasure admitting it was mine."

But that painting, and in fact all his paintings, are things of the past. The interesting news is that all of Mark's work is now digital.

We asked: "Mark, will you do another painted illustration?"

And his answer: “No. Never. I don’t see that ever happening. I won’t ever use an airbrush again. I don’t get tired of using the computer.” But was it difficult making the change?, “The transition to digital was very smooth. It’s a business enhancement. Production is easier. Revisions are easier.”

With Computers Came Change

Illustration changed after the introduction of desktop computers. In the 1980s, illustrators felt secure that computers could never match their abilities. But the capabilities of computer art progressed, although digital illustration tools were sometimes both a help and a hindrance. They were relatively fast. Relatively, because in the early-to-mid 1990s, processors were slow, and a single image adjustment could take a long time to complete.

Digital illustration also implied that clients could get more work from more artists faster. In a sense, it devalued the illustration industry. Art directors worked on tighter deadlines and smaller budgets and the whole market adjusted accordingly, for better or worse.

Adobe’s Photoshop and Illustrator applications became leaders in the creative field, along with some others, such as Freehand (now owned by Adobe), and Painter (currently owned by Corel, along with their original well-known product, Corel Draw). The developers used the ideas they understood – how paint looks and performs – and converted that logic to working with the tiny dots, called pixels, on a computer screen.

Photoshop was originally both a tool for photographers and a graphic arts suite. Over the years, Photoshop has followed and supported both communities, though in 2006 there are even more specialized software packages for both photographers and graphic artists. But Photoshop used commonly-understood metaphors and art tools from the beginning, and quickly won a committed user base. Its big breakthrough came in the mid-1990s, when Photoshop introduced the concept of layers. These were virtual overlays that could be used, changed, or discarded. Adobe has listened carefully to its user base over the years and incorporated features that have made Photoshop an industry standard. But perhaps more basic, Photoshop has always allowed you to erase pixels. You could get rid of work that you didn’t want, and rapidly replace it.

But while digital tools and workflow have put many traditional illustrators out of business, some, like Mark, have flourished by embracing the technology.

Digital artists can work on both Intel PC and the Apple Macintosh platforms. Mark rapidly traded up the ladder of Apple models, and is now using the latest G5. Intel-based PCs also run most major graphics packages. The PC sales numbers are a reality that companies like Adobe can’t ignore, and so they publish their applications for both Microsoft and Apple operating systems.

Mark’s Turning Point

When Mark Fredrickson saw that erasing pixels, not paint, would revolutionize his professional illustration practice, he jumped on it.

He explains, “A friend of mine, Barry Jackson, showed me a lot of tricks and techniques using the early Photoshop. Barry’s an incredibly talented guy; he’s worked over the years in digital animation on films like *Shrek* and *The Prince of Egypt*. He painted a lot of backgrounds, like the ones that appeared in [the feature film] *Cool World*. He introduced me to this whole new world of working digitally.”

Photoshop then because Mark's choice of software. "I started with Adobe Photoshop, versus [Corel's] Painter. I've tried Painter, and generally speaking I like it, but it has a different focus in terms of the way it works and its features," Mark relates. "The work I do seems more suited to Photoshop."

Between Producing Airbrush versus Digital Illustration

"Overall," Mark begins, "to me, digital illustration is just easy on your mental state. There's less pressure. First, I can save all versions of an image and go back in time if I want. All my work is there. I can access those spontaneous 'happy accidents' that I'd otherwise paint over. You know, like a special part of a painting that I know I want to save and use, but sometimes it takes time to figure out exactly what to do with it. It's possible to save and access it again in Photoshop. For example, I can use the Photoshop history brush [to reincorporate a particular section]. That's impossible with a physical painting."

Mark also remembers, "I lost so many areas of paintings to stray paint. You'd have to erase paint off of the illustration board. It was a lot of work. That doesn't happen with Photoshop."

Not that digital work doesn't have risks. "Of course, working digitally, you can also lose an image through faulty hard drives," Mark explains. "I use an application called Retrospect that backs up my working drive every half hour. If the drive fails, I haven't lost a week's work."

Mark feels that there are stages in illustration that offer a good comparison between using paint and using pixels. "I've found some interesting differences between using the airbrush and using the computer," Fredrickson continues. "The *beginning* of an illustration is easiest with a computer. You can play. You can experiment. You make a foundation. If one thing doesn't work, you try others. It's quick. But with an airbrush, that's painful and time-consuming."

In contrast, Mark feels that, "The *middle* and *end* of a project seem happiest with an airbrush. You're flying along, filling in; it flows. That's the part that's more exacting with a computer. You're really focused and working in detail. But I wouldn't go back."

Reducing Strain and Fatigue

Naturally, when you don't use airbrushed paint, you eliminate a number of health hazards, such as inhaling aerosol paint particles. But that doesn't mean that working digitally doesn't have its own set of problems.

It's believed that people who do certain manual tasks over and over can end up hurting muscles and nerves. In 2000, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) said that repetitive stress injuries caused 34 percent of all lost workdays due to injury, and cost employers between \$15 billion and \$20 billion annually in workers' compensation. Not all these were attributed to computer use. But it is thought that daily stresses and strains using keyboards and other input devices such as the mouse have an adverse effect on users. So if he now sits and works, as he admits, sometimes for 15 hours a day (barring breaks), how does Mark do it?

Through a process of trial-and-error, he evolved his tool set. "If you work like I do, and you find yourself in pain, then you're not doing it right. The Wacom 12 x 12-inch tablet I use saves your hand. You hold the stylus like a pen when you draw – it's very natural and comfortable. It's not like trying to make lines holding a mouse. One of the handiest things I got was a Nostromo Speed Pad. Gamers use them. They have 10 keys, and are programmable to the tool bar in Photoshop.

So I can select my tools and their characteristics using simple finger combinations, and don't have to stop, grab the mouse, click the tool bar, and that kind of thing. It's instant, and uses muscle memory. I don't even look, I don't have to. My hand rests on a palm-and-wrist pad. There's no strain."

What about the rest of the body, shoulders, neck, and back? "A good chair is really important. I have a Herman Miller Aeron chair. The arm rests go up and down and you can adjust your sitting in a number of different ways."

Mark's Gallery

The illustrations in this article were Mark's pick for our readers. You'll see that his unique gifts of perspective, gesture, color, and light-and-shadow are vivid in both paint and digital mediums.

For his digital pieces, Mark Fredrickson works directly in Photoshop's CMYK color mode, which translates to process colors used in offset printing. This helps eliminate the dreaded "It didn't look like that on the computer screen" problem when a file is printed commercially.

An Evolving World

Computer illustration is a norm of today's commercial art world. Use of computers is a two-edged sword. It saves time and resources, but impacts other areas such as artists' health, copyright infringement, and changing ideas about quality. To find out more about these issues and others, check out local chapters of national graphic arts organizations, such as the American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA), the Graphic Artists Guild (GAG), and others.

But for an example of an artist who's switched over and grown in the process, check out Mark Fredrickson's work. Talent has a way of triumphing, no matter what the medium.

Resources

There are many good reference books on digital art. Visiting a local retailer may work better than ordering online, because looking through a book could be a better way to decide whether it fits your skill level or tastes. But there are dozens of useful titles which are updated along with new software releases of applications like Painter or Photoshop.

And correspondingly, there are many free tutorials on the Internet related to digital art, tricks, tips, and techniques. A simple search nets hundreds of articles.

Mark Fredrickson's online work: Mark is so busy producing illustrations that he hasn't had time to make a dedicated web site. An Internet search will find his agents, which change from time to time.

Adobe applications (Photoshop, Illustrator, and so on): www.adobe.com

Corel (Painter, Corel Draw): www.corel.com

Nostromo Speed Pad: www.belkin.com

Herman Miller Aeron chairs: www.hermanmiller.com

Barry Jackson's work: www.barryejackson.com

Wacom tablets: www.wacom.com

Retrospect backup software: www.emcinsignia.com