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Fine Art

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How does the understanding of the evolution of ancient fantasy contribute to
creating today's popular fantasy?

Ancient Fantasy and its Contribution to Creating Today's Popular Fantasy

Fantasy is defined in the dictionary as “the faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things.” From the earliest age, children are introduced to magical, mythical



Howe, J. (1996) *Celtic Myth*

worlds in books, in movies, and on posters. They contain creatures such as wizards, dragons, and centaurs. Fantasy art has been traced all the way back to Greek, Roman, and Celtic mythology. Centuries later it was re-born in literature by J.R.R. Tolkien. Freelance illustrator John Howe began illustrating Tolkien's works from an early age and was introduced to the vast realm of possibilities within fantasy art. Howe uses his knowledge of the evolution of fantasy art, from religious folklore to medieval times, to create a new,

contemporary, modern fantasy, which is relevant in today's popular culture.

Howe is firmly convinced that fantasy is “derived from myth” (*Fantasy Art Workshop*, p. 18). Indeed, fantasy art can be traced all the way back to the earliest cave drawings. They often consisted of paintings of beasts and other mythical creatures. Of course, in that day and age, fantasy art was used as a device to understand the “unexpected and unfamiliar.” Howe, like other fantasy artists, draws much of his inspiration from those ancient times. He is particularly fascinated by the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. Howe has become enchanted by depictions of heroes in myth and legend, especially during the time of *Beowulf* around 1000AD (The History of Beowulf, 2015). This story in particular beautifully showcases the combination of fantasy with Anglo-Saxon history (The History of Beowulf, 2015). As Howe himself stated, “*Beowulf* is neither an abstract nor a historical figure, but represents an aspect of humanity” (*Fantasy Art Workshop*, p.55). He places great emphasis on

details when creating period pieces by making sure that each helmet, sword, and shield is in harmony with both his chosen media and color selection for the given piece. Howe's success is largely linked to his extensive knowledge of fantasy art history.

Along with his love for stories like *Beowulf*, Howe draws much of his inspiration from medieval times. His obsession with century old religious paintings has always been evident in this work. His drawings of the time period included angels, demons, and gods. Over the years, he has made it his mission to collect as many photographs and artifacts as possible from medieval times. He states that whenever he needs inspiration, he will open the cupboards and drawers to find enormous piles of memorabilia, including things from armor to dishes and armchairs, which will immediately ignite a spark of inspiration. Terry Gilliam, a good friend of John Howe, stated that “by projecting these ancient symbolic elements into his work, Howe is able to take his audience back to a simpler but more wondrous time, worlds full of myth and fairytale, that can resonate with anybody” (*Fantasy Art Workshop*, p. 4).

Though Howe understands and appreciates the history and myth behind the origins of fantasy art, he also very much lives in the present. He understands that today's market and general popular culture has changed fantasy and became known as “high fantasy.” With the new age of fantasy artists and designers as well as new advances in technology, science fiction became the new popular form of fantasy. Along with new advancements came the rediscovery of the ancient medieval folklore. J.R.R. Tolkien's works completely transformed modern-day fantasy both in literature and in art. His works have proven time and time again that fantasy art and fantasy literature has always and will always be tied together. Tolkien's



Howe, J. (2002)
Gandalf Returns to Hobbiton

literature inspired hundreds of artists, including John Howe, to reimagine fantasy. “A great many, indeed, appear to owe little or nothing directly to Tolkien, and some writers may be said to surpass him in imaginative power or philosophical conception. The point is, rather, that Tolkien made fantasy 'respectable'” (Swinfen, A.).

Although our understanding and appreciation of fantasy has evolved tremendously from ancient times and has been widely commercialized in books, magazines, and on the big screen, it has also become increasingly more difficult for artists to be original. Popular culture has dictated the appearance of many creatures and objects such as phoenixes and magic wands. In general, it is harder for fantasy to survive in today's world, as science and logic have filled the gaps of the unknown. For example, contemporary style manipulates artists in drawing a unicorn a certain way. It implies that it is a slim, often pale horse with a horn in the middle of its forehead. Therefore, it is close to impossible to convince an audience of something new and potentially abstract. Stereotypes are starting to emerge in a genre that previously had no rules. Howe himself stated that “I often find my pencil stopping in mid-stroke, and wonder just why I am drawing something the way I am. Often the pencil is obeying convention and habit rather than innovation and originality” (*Fantasy Art Workshop*, p.66). Contemporary style has driven fantasy into a different direction. Modern fantasy has revisited existing archetypes and is reexamining their credibility. Many creatures now have to contain elements of real biological laws. Mythical creatures are beginning to look a lot more like actual animals. It has become a balancing act of what looks too “fantastical” to make believable for an adult audience or what is simply too human to be considered fantasy at all. Yi-Fu Tuan magnificently stated that “realism is generally deemed good, for without it human survival is hardly possible; yet it also suggests narrowness or lack of imagination. Fantasy, because it may be unique to the human species, is a trait of which humans can be especially proud [...]” (Tuan, Y., p. 446).

Essentially, fantasy is a metaphorical device used in writing and on screen to portray an extension of our own reality. From the earliest beginnings to medieval times to today's popular culture, fantasy art has always been present in our lives. Like Howe said, it is mostly due to the fact that “fantasy is the magnification and the enhancement of reality [...] a stripping away of the commonplace and an exploration of the potential of imagination” (*Fantasy Art Workshop*, p. 44). Though both children's and adults' fantasies include mythical creatures and powerful sorcerers, Howe understood that a fantasy's success is not only marked by its credibility but by its appeal to popular culture. John Howe has guided fantasy into the new age.

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