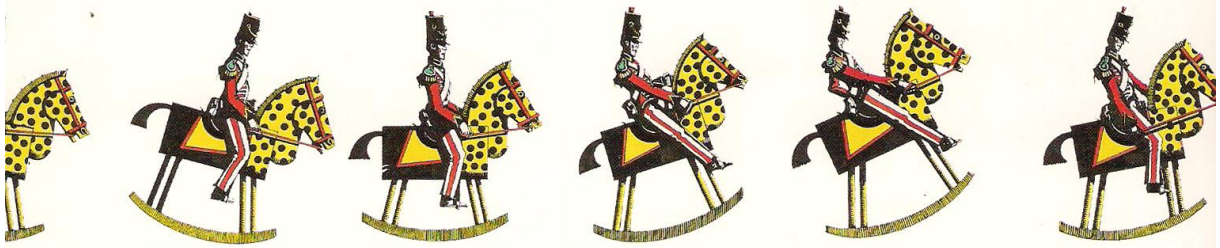


Interview from "The Guide to FANTASY ART Techniques" (1984, Paper Tiger books)



Ian Miller



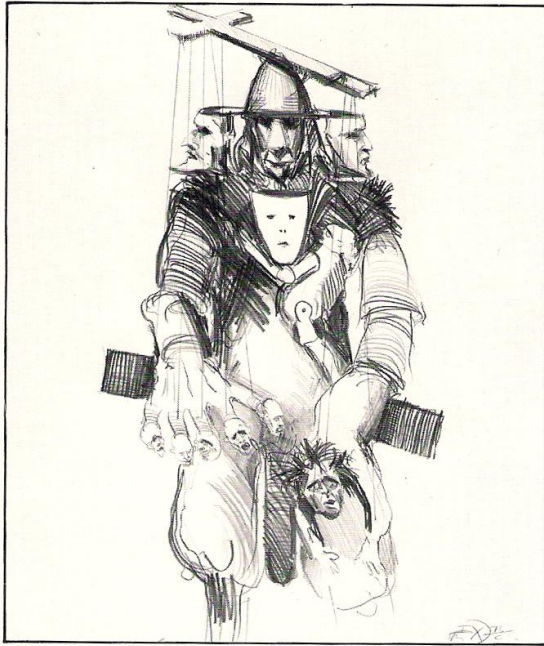
Delicacy of line and intricacy of detail typically characterize Ian Miller's work, though his subject matter and technique often vary greatly. Equally at home with complex machinery or living creatures of various guises, his illustrations range from loose figure sketches in pencil and charcoal to pen and ink drawings of complex artifacts, twisted trees or winged insects. In many of his pictures there's a sense of nightmare as a serpent rears its wedge-shaped head, a puppeteer sits surrounded by demonic-looking toys, or severed heads leer from the tops of barbed poles. What is always present is an element of the grotesque.

"I think that most of what I do has a very primeval root. I've been told that I'm mediaeval, but I think I'm more primordial. I have a fetish-cum-totem attitude towards images — I try to describe them in the simplest, most direct terms. I think that's why I used to enjoy doing the drawings for *Men Only* and *Club International*. They were primary and emphatic images — the perfect vehicle for experimentation. Stifling a schoolboy titter, I was able to develop elaborate pattern-making techniques that carried over into my

other work. I'm inclined to draw in a 'frontalistic' style, I suppose, after the manner of the Ancient Egyptians. The angles are never so acute or obtuse that people can't recognize what they're looking at".

Miller's mother was a theatrical milliner working for one of the leading costumiers to the film industry. "This connection brought an early introduction to the phantasmagorical world of film — a world from which I have never really chosen to escape. As a child, my toy boxes were littered with the paraphernalia from a host of films ranging from *The Black Prince* to *Sitting Bull*."

Born in 1946, Miller attended St Martin's School of Art in London from 1967 to 1970, originally completing a year of sculpture before transferring to the painting faculty. Earlier, while at Northwich School of Art, he had experimented with mixed media, painting at one point with concrete, but at St Martin's he developed a style using close pen work which arose as an offshoot of his newfound interest in etching. During this period he worked predominantly in black and white.



Pencil Drawing

“As a student in the transitory years of the sixties I identified very closely — I suppose I still do, though not perhaps in such naive terms — with the Japanese concept of ‘The Fleeting, Floating World’ and with the directness and unsullied perception of Japanese landscape artists. Their stoicism and singlemindedness is a great pointer for us all. It’s magic from sweat.”

On leaving St Martin’s, Miller ensconced himself in his parents’ garage for three months, never going out and devoting all his time to working on drawings with a Rapidograph pen. “When I finally emerged I had a folio full of landscape drawings. Somebody suggested that I should do the rounds of publishers and agents with a view to finding work, which I duly did. After weeks of trekking around, I was directed to one of the leading artists’ agents at that time. He took me on and initiated me into the ways of the illustrator. In 1981 I joined Young Artists.”

His earliest work included magazine and book-jacket illustrations. Later he produced his first book, *Green Dog Trumpet* (Dragon’s Dream, 1979), which appeared without the text that was intended to accompany it, but which nevertheless has a strong narrative content. In fact, a typical piece of Miller’s artwork is characterized by its sense of being a still or a single frame from some continuing piece of dramatic action. It has a storyboard quality.

“There’s a storyline to all my work. I usually write out a theme beforehand to direct the images. I think most of my images have their source in the written word.” Does the story change while he’s producing the images? “Part of the discipline is trying to stick to the original story, but there’s always some flexibility. I decided what I want to say, then I try to express that particular incident as dramatically as possible. What sometimes happens is that the drawing begins to grow beyond the terms of reference. Other elements creep in — sometimes to the point of clotting the illustration. The strangeness in some of my early work in some ways came out of an ineptitude rather than a skill. Some of the surfaces were originally there to camouflage poor draughtsmanship. Then they became a thing in themselves.”

What artists have impressed him most? “I’ve never been one for hero-worship, but the two people I relate to most are Durer and Da Vinci. For me they represent those skills I aspire to — though that’s not to say I didn’t look to more contemporary sources, particularly the German Expressionists. Durer gives me a great deal. I have a book of his work that I often look at, no matter what subject I’m tackling. Perhaps the solution to the problem is not in there, but just turning the pages and looking at the paintings and engravings somehow primes me. I’ve also got Durer’s *Rhinoceros* on a piece of plastic film which is always floating around. It’s helped me a great deal.”

Durer had never actually seen a rhinoceros, and he illustrated it from a verbal description of the animal, his imagination filling in all the missing bits. "I think that's the best way. I work that way with reference materials. If I look at them for too long, they confuse me rather than assist me."

In recent years Miller has tended to concentrate on pen and pencil illustrations, often with limited colour. "I use Rapidograph pens with coloured inks, and a mix of pencil and watercolour washes. I'm also using charcoal. When I first began painting seriously I worked in what might be termed 'fairground hues', and this inclination to a rainbow palette has never wholly deserted me, though recently I have tended to more muted tones and in my present series of drawings to the use of black and red only. I used to paint in oils but got lost in the mystique and pretensions of it all. I found self-expression through the pen — with oils it was quite the opposite.

"That was a long time ago, however, and I feel now that the time is not long off when the facility of oil paint will offer a real and viable vehicle for my imagery. In the meantime I'm busily experimenting with pencil, which is without doubt one of the most vital of mediums available to the artist and yet paradoxically one of the most neglected."

Miller professes a continuing interest in three-dimensional work, and he's produced montages which he describes as "a need to explode the censorship of always working on a flat surface". Other illustrations are very small — no bigger than a large postage stamp — but they're still filled with detail. "It may be something to do with being short-sighted and being obsessed with surface. When I look around me, all I see is texture. Give me a smooth surface and I immediately look for the pock-marks or bubbles of rust."

How does an idea develop? "I'm very much one for extemporization of the caged variety — a kind of rioting behind bars." Does commercial work such as book-jacket commissions take him down different roads? "Yes, it does. Only now am I beginning to come to terms with commercial work." Because it's an imposition? "No, I've never seen it that way. It was more a case of trying too hard and getting into such a state about it that I all but neutralized myself. I'm detached enough now to keep this type of work in perspective, enjoying it even."

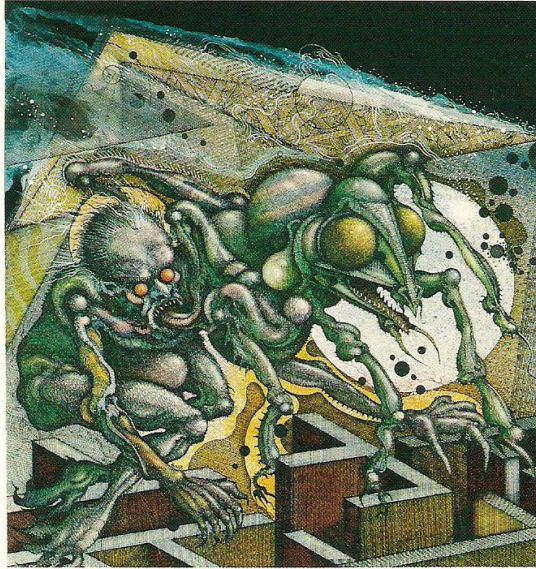
When doing cover art, he likes to read the book he's been given. "It gives you a source of reference, an an-



chor point. Once I've read the book I normally go through what I call hieroglyphics stage. I'll just think with the end of a pencil, rambling across page after page until something emerges that I can use. Having determined a specific image, the next thing is to prepare the paper size, according to the area I have to work in. That done, I think about image disposition — how I would like it to lie on the paper. In the past I always worked same size, but now I tend to do the original one-half larger than the required dimensions."

Does he work out a colour scheme? "To a degree, but there's a great deal of flexibility in what I do. Though I set the scene as it were, I try hard not to stifle the development process. You reach a critical point in any illustration when the picture begins to dictate terms of its own, and that's when the fun starts. If you're not quite together at this juncture you can spend hours or even days erasing and overpainting your way back on to the tracks.

"People are generally far closer to the creative process than some esoteric schools of thought would have them believe. If they directed their attention more to the actual process of image-making rather than allowing themselves to be intimidated and hamstrung by spurious precepts about what makes good art and artists, we would probably have a plethora of new talent and vital imagery breaking surface. Not having gone to art school or read Gombrich is not a handicap."



Maze Of Death

Does he get bored when doing the actual execution of an illustration? "I'm never bored by drawing. I think I do get hung-up sometimes by the problem of trying to over-achieve — demanding more from the material than it can possibly offer up in reality — a masterpiece at every stroke, as it were." He sometimes has the radio on when he's drawing, but finds that he works best in silence. A pen-and-ink drawing will typically take a few days to complete. "The further I get into a picture, the slower it becomes. When you've got plenty of space to play with, you can afford to make a few errors. But as the area begins to fill up, each line becomes that more critical."

There are recurrent images in Miller's work — for example, fishes, flies and a variety of robotic forms. Are they intended to symbolize anything in particular? "I suppose they must — a peculiar perspective on life perhaps. People are always imbuing them with forces and powers of vision that surprise me. That said, however, my images always seem to touch the edges where equilibrium gives way to discord and phobia, even when it's not consciously intended. I do work hard, though, to evoke a strong response in the viewer." He has reference books on mechanisms, and field guides to insects and fish. "I find them fascinating to look at. I'm not necessarily after a correct anatomical interpretation. I just want some idea of a form, to give me a jumping-off point."

In 1975 Miller went to Hollywood and did scene origination and background design for Ralph Bakshi's animated film *Wizards*. "I was left to myself to do as I would. I just lived in a studio and drew, and they fitted the animations around my drawings — until the

end, when I had to draw established sequences of animation. Then I began to really learn, because I had to leave spaces for animated figures. Actually seeing things move — I never got over that. From a creative standpoint it was one of the most vital times in my career."

Miller enjoyed working with a team and would like to do it again. "It brought all manner of benefits, and tended to chase away the cloying sense or preciousness that often afflicts one's work in isolation. I found the corporate product utterly fascinating and came away from America with a far more robust and outward-looking attitude towards my work." Out of the experience came the "Hollywood Gothic" series of illustrations which show landscapes and figures as backdrops or props on wheels. "It started trends of thought which are just beginning to come to the surface now."

In fact, many of Miller's illustrations are part of a series in which a particular image will recur. "I see any image as a way of extending a process. If I'm trying to improve my technical proficiency I'll tend to hang on to the same image until I'm familiar with it. Then I can elaborate and embellish. It's like a permutation on a theme, really." At the moment he's doing a series of black-and-white ink drawings of fish. "It's not that I'm overly interested in fish themselves. It's just a vehicle. I'm fascinated by the whole illusion of creating depth and solidness. By putting down veneers and lines you build up this new reality. It never ceases to amaze me just how one arrives at these particular effects."