
Thomas Haller Buchanan has enjoyed a long and fruitful career as an illustrator, graphic designer, photographer and numerous other things. In his blog he describes himself as "a pictorialist, not just in my set of skills, but in my lifelong appreciation of the skills and talents of artists, illustrators, cartoonists, sculptors, photographers, typographers, and graphic designers". He is currently the editor of the Pictorial Arts Journal, A publication to showcase & promote the significance of the pictorial arts.

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your work in general?

My work in general is all over the drawing board. I illustrate, I design, I paint murals, I cartoon, I take photos, I dabble in the so-called fine arts, I write, I take out the garbage. Long ago and far away I learned that if I didn't have a hand in every medium or style it would be a looong time between projects.

2. Tell us about a few of the projects that you've worked on.

With 40 years of doing this stuff, zeroing in on a few isn't easy. Let's take some broad strokes. I really enjoyed being Artist-In-Residence at The Children's Museum of Denver. The work was fun, fast and furious (in the hurry up and finish it sense). Creating exhibits full of colorful and whimsical characters, creating signs for the building with kid characters four times actual size, waving at motorists on the adjacent busy highway. Creating crazy characters to fill an audience mural in the basketball court, etcetera. Another favorite period was working continuously on cultural and natural history murals and exhibits at The Denver Museum of Nature and Science—from Egyptian, Aztec, and Chinese cultures to dinosaur, dawn of man, and space technology subjects, painting myriads of subjects realistically and stylistically.

Lately I've designed and illustrated exhibits for visitor centers around the country in beautiful settings, illustrated some kids books, and portraits! I ALWAYS love creating portrait studies of interesting people!

3. When did your interest in creating art begin, is it something that you've always done?

Yep, as a little kid I would sit at the dining table with my parents drawing and painting. I thought it was marvelous that even though my mother and father fought a lot, that they could also spend time together, peacefully creating stuff rather than watch TV or such. I watched them skillfully draw cartoons and scenes and sometimes they would let me carefully apply color to them. Later I followed along with Jon Gnagy on TV and then I became school cartoonist from 7th to 12th grades. I wanted to pursue other vocations, like acting and writing, but art just kept *pulllllling me back in*.

4. Please tell us about your work process. (This could include daily schedule, where and how you work, any regular goals, habits or challenges that affect you, or any other details of production).

I work best from 4 in the afternoon to 4 in the morning, but that doesn't always work with other people's schedule. So I work when and where I can, drawing illustrations by hand and then finishing them on the computer. Thank God for the computer age—with 'undo' and 'layers' and save in multiple versions for multiple uses.

I regularly procrastinate as long as I can on any given project and then work like fury to give it an energetic finish in time for the deadline.

Last year I had a huge studio that I could get up and dance in to work off steam, but now I'm in a crowded little cockpit area, surrounded by towers of books. So the dog and I go romp in the back yard at 2 in the morning to work off cramped muscles.

I remember an article I read about the illustrator Albert Dorne, telling how he concentrated so hard on his deadline work that when movers were taking the furniture and studio stuff from around him, he wasn't ruffled in the least even as he and his drawing board were the last things to go. People seemed damn impressed by that. But that's nothing. I do that kind of stuff on a weekly basis, sometimes working a deadline while the plumbers are splashing through the flooded studio or by flashlight when the power goes out, or while the SWAT team, complete with helicopter is surrounding a kid with a gun (turns out it was a paint gun, but these days you can't be too

careful).

My challenges are the hundred interests that I have and only so many hours or years of my life to work on them. I know that everyone has that problem to some degree or other, but I'm obsessed with the notion that time is the most precious commodity of life. I *hate* wasting time! And yet, I believe strongly in ignoring time as much as I can and live and work and play in the moment. I make very few solid appointments.

5. What about your work do you enjoy most? Dislike most? What are the easiest and hardest parts of what you do?

In the last decade I have had a lot of long-term projects that drag out for several years, with two major problems. One is that my work at the end of the project is better than it was at the beginning of the project, so I want to start over, but can't. And two, it's so hard to keep up enthusiasm for such long projects. I want to just bam bam bam, get it done, but committees need months to tear things apart and put them back together and we work in 30%, 60%, 90% and 100% levels of design and approval. By that time I've got literally thousands of files that get mixed up by various stages of approval. Doing that with several projects concurrently drives me mad.

What I enjoy most is drawing portraits and designing page layouts. What I dislike intensely is pushing the elements of text and images around a page to perfectly fit together and then have the client change a horizontal image to a vertical, or add more text to jam in. Sometimes just one simple word or punctuation can throw the whole spread into turmoil. I'm sure you have that problem. Can we ever get final text approved before ever starting to lay it out? No, of course not.

6. What advice would you give to other artists or budding artists?

There's a zen zone in the creative process that, once you find it, time stands still and you are channeling the universe. Find that zone when and where you can. My advice for finding it is to start playing with your materials, not concerned about end results or what's right or wrong. When it kicks in you'll find a flow so that 'mistakes' or 'error of choices' become part of the process, taking you places where you otherwise wouldn't have had the courage to

take chances. Be prepared to drop out of the zone when your inner voice says 'stop, take a break'. If you come back to it and it looks like a mess, put it aside and try again, playing in a different direction. You might come back to the original piece and think, 'wait a minute, that DID work.' Generally I believe in 'do it until it's right'. I once did close to a hundred versions of a character drawing until I felt it caught the nuances it needed.

My other bit of advice is to make time for family and friends. On his deathbed, Leonardo had his Mona Lisa painting in the room, but no family and few friends, not even the King of France was there, contrary to passionate biographers. Okay so he was immortalized with his work, so if that's what's important to ya, go fer it.

7. What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you started?

That everyone poops. That is to say, we're all in the same boat with the same frustrations and frailties, the same yearning to be a kid again and to be loved (we learn from the movies that bad boy villains and art directors are the way they are because someone didn't love them enough). I realize now that I'm not alone in my dumbness—even art directors don't always know what they're doing. Be cheerful and empathetic with people. Ask questions. Sometimes in a client meeting I'll be perplexed by what's going on and I'll say waitaminnit! I don't understand this. And there will be a sigh of relief from others, thinking they were the only ones in a fog.

8. You're an enthusiastic supporter of the works of Walt Kelly and his comic creation Pogo, can you tell us a bit about that?

Walt Kelly's work rescued me from a stressful childhood, his books and comics an oasis to escape to, full of warm and friendly goofiness. Kelly's ink lines were so gorgeous that he could just draw furniture and it would be entertaining. I went into the army about the time that Kelly died, and I ignored my collection of his stuff for years. When I started a blog I started scanning his stuff to share and when I enlarged the scans, I REALLY saw how beautiful his ink work was, and I fell in love all over again. I LOVE zooming in on artwork of any kind.

9. Tell us about Pictorial Arts Journal.

Perfect segue. Blogging was fun, but mostly unproductive. I treasured all kinds of pictorial material that I was sharing, but wanted a bigger and better venue for the work. I've always been intrigued by the artful collaboration between text and images and when I saw Larry MacDougall's artwork on his blog, I was inspired to put together a pictorial essay of his work in the form of a journal. I enjoyed that so much and others enjoyed the results, so that I've been building momentum for the Journal to become a full-time gig for me, promoting art — contemporary and golden age — and design and ideas — and photography. There is no limit to where this can go.

I want artists, like you and so many other talented image-makers, to collaborate by contributing ideas and artwork. And I want writers to contribute fiction and non-fiction and poetry. And I want to bring art and text together in a way that blends modern journalistic design with golden age aesthetics. Think early Playboy magazine or early New Yorker or early Life magazine.

10. What is coming up for you?

I have a book of my art that has been published and I need to market. I'm looking for a new rep, for illustration and literary stuff. And mostly I'm gearing up the Journal to be what I want to work on for the rest of my life. I'm building a prospectus for it to go for some major funding so that I can pay contributors to make a beautiful showcase for all us image-makers.

11. Anything else you'd like to add?

I'm getting a huge kick out of socializing on the internet, with the thought that creative folk should get together in more projects to fly in uncharted skies, supporting each other's efforts in ways yet undreamed of (I have a specific idea in mind for that which will be fully explained in the very next number of the Journal, so I hope people will keep in touch with where the Journal is heading).

12. Where can we find your work? (URL, etc.)

Pictorial Arts Journal is located at www.PictorialArtsJournal.com and my basic portfolio is at www.THBillustration.com. I have several blogs

that can be googled: My Delineated Life, Snippets and Bibbets, and Whirled of Kelly.

Thank you Herb, for this interview.