

## Interview: Thomas Haller Buchanan on the Millennial Humanist Renaissance

Today, I'm delighted to interview **Thomas Haller Buchanan**, blogger at *The Pictorial Arts*, which is an oasis of light and beauty on the Web. Thom is also a professional illustrator. Buchanan's focus on art and visual culture is now finding expression through a new online journal: *The Pictorial Arts Journal*. The journal makes its grand debut online today, [here](#), and this interview supports its launch.

An additional publication is found at the same site, *Delineated Life*, which is an online magazine celebrating one special artist and their work per issue. The first issue of *Delineated Life* celebrates the 100th birthday of *Pogo* creator **Walt Kelly** (1913-1973).

In this interview, I ask Thom some questions about his new publications and what they mean in terms of Millennial optimism. The debut issue of the *The Pictorial Arts Journal* describes a continuity of visual culture from the Renaissance through to the modern period, especially the Renaissance-era value of humanism. Thom's journals are dedicated to reviving a new form of humanism suitable to our times.

To read a definition of humanism to which Thom refers in the interview, see Professor Paul Kurtz's *Humanist Manifesto 2000* ([here](#)).

**ToB:** Thom, tell us a bit about your background and what brought you to these projects?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** My background is generally as a starving artist. Over the course of 40 working years I have somehow survived the ravages of that stereotype and have prospered in some small ways—largely due to the studio partnership with my wife, who is an artist as well. Every job or project that we've had together in the last 25 years has had something to do with the creative arts—though

I must admit, none that took us within a cannon shot of relative fame or fortune. Fine about the lack of fame, but too bad about the lack of fortune. We've been conscripted to the needs of the client, not to the needs of our souls. A number of times I was known to mutter, 'if only we could just be turned loose to create what we want to create...'

Finally acknowledging that, being way past midlife, I am one day destined to leave this mortal coil, and being fortunate enough to have early 21st century communications tools at my command—*et voilà*— it was time to pull all of my ten ton interests and my creative skills together to boldly go where I've not gone before — communicating ideas through the synergy of expressive words and images. I call myself a pictorialist—a journalist who creates images to illuminate words and also creates words to dance around the images.

**ToB:** Please expand on the vision you have for the *Pictorial Arts Journal*, on how you define humanism, and on why you turn to humanism as an ideal that deserves revisiting now.

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** This journal is my attempt to document human values in our exploration of the universe. There are still simple observations of every day life that cannot easily be explained, and yet we (the collective WE) think we know how the universe began and will end. I think WE humans are but children raised by wild wolves (read harsh nature), or should I use 'Tarzan' as the metaphor—raised by apes in animalistic conditions. One day we find a clue that we are more than fierce and brutal survivors, and we continue to discover that we are capable of so much more than existing as tribalistic hunters and gatherers. And yet we respect our origins, our ancestors, our relationship to the natural world. We then step forward to challenge the harsh environment and begin to act as protectors to the eco-systems that our world is dependent upon.

This is the human condition in its ideal distillation. Humanism, in my mind, is the attempt to keep alive the knowledge that we are born of the mud, with our destinies likely to be the stars. I say

‘likely’ because society may one day (relatively soon) have to make a critical choice of electing to stay bound to the Earth until death do us part, or commit ourselves to the nearly impossible task of colonizing part of the starry firmament to survive as a species, but also to serve as stewards to the macro ecosystems of the universe, in whatever small way that we can.

To more specifically answer your question, the journal will aspire to explore our humanistic options in whatever topic we explore. I don’t intend to define humanism in a way that could become dogmatic, but to let words and images inspire whatever form of humanism any of us aspire to. We are humans. This is a critical point of our cultural development. We need to make informed and inspired decisions. My hope is that the journal would be part of a solution, not part of a problem.

**ToB:** I noted that you mentioned that *The Pictorial Arts Journal* should exemplify humanism as ‘practiced, not preached.’ Do you feel that humanism has been jeopardized by a confusion about how to realize our ideals?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** As humans, we are confused most of the time in nearly every thing that we do. I am astounded at how many amazingly astute and knowledgeable people exist in our time, and yet confusion reigns. Should we do this, that or the other thing? What is the other thing? Explain it to me, I don’t understand. Where do we go from here? Who’s in charge here? We have this person for a leader for a few years, then another person going a different direction for a few years. We don’t trust that leader to make the right decision, so we elect other leaders to keep him in line, following our collective desires. But these other leaders make deals and break deals, only to be replaced in few years by other confused people. What do we believe in? I believe one thing. You believe another. What do the billions of other people believe? Should I give them a chance to explain what they believe or shall I convince them to believe what I believe? I’m smart, you’re smart, but one of us is probably wrong. Maybe we both are. Who’s on first? What’s on second?

To realize our ideals (and who's to say what those are for everybody or anybody?) it seems that 'knowledge' should move onto a spur track and let 'wisdom' be on the express track for a while. We have barber shop wisdom, think tank wisdom, blogger wisdom. But we need Wisdom with a capital 'W'. Sometimes we're like teenagers who try to be adults, but make a mess of things and look to mom and dad for their wisdom to rescue us from poorly made decisions.

But as a human race, who is our mom and dad? Enter religion and politics. God the father or the President/Prime Minister/Dictator are who we look to. Personally, I think Morgan Freeman should be elected as President or elected as God. I look to him (and his screenwriters) for parental wisdom.

As functioning as the world is, we are all still confused, making up the rules and the game as we go. Bless us, that seems to be our way of progress.

**ToB:** I note a contemporary popular confusion, especially among economic commentators, about the value of the arts, the liberal arts, and the humanities. There is a misconception in economic circles that humanist spheres are somehow worthless and unreal unless they can find value as marketed commodities. Ironically, that core assumption still assumes that economies must be consumption-driven. My impression is that your credo as an artist comes close to a **William Morris** design of **artworks which should be usable**, which practically inform and enhance everyday life. So what is your sense of this reaction coming from the financial sectors against humanist values and education?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** That's a complex question and the answer is complex. I've been of the mind for a while now that "Art" is a bum. Oh, Art was once a go-to guy that visualized our myths and dreams and ideals. But capital 'A' Art has been freeloading off the prosperous minority, staying too long at the party. In fact, Art has moved in for the duration and has convinced the people of the manor that they should put up with ever bewildering shenanigans of **black on black** or **Piss Christ** or ever more inventive but meaningless shaggy dog creations.

In my mind, little 'a' art has been busy teaching kids and the rest of us important stuff. Graphic novels are tremendously effective in delving into the human condition and if they don't have answers, they certainly have questions, leading to critical thinking and problem solving. I think problem solving should be taught as a course in primary school and use visual thinking processes to help facilitate those skills.

It seems that little 'a' art has been misunderstood by the tech and financial folks as being frivolous and expendable by embracing a mindset of 'clip art' and 'stock art'. Why invest in a moderately expensive piece of illustrative art to grace a publication cover or help communicate an important idea? For pennies they can grab a pre-drawn or pre-photographed image of a housewife admiring her clean floor or a business exec scratching his head at production problems. Of course I'm being cynical here. Generally there is a great amount of creativity bubbling up around the world, but as a society we still seem to be chasing our collective tail, running around with lots of energy but not really going anywhere. We need, as a society, to set a long term direction of life that can be rallied behind.

To put men on the moon within less than a decade of starting the program—because the father figure of JFK inspired Americans to do so— demonstrates two things: strong and sane leadership is still essential to make things happen, and two, we as society surprise ourselves at what we are capable of accomplishing. If people say, "Let's not go to Mars until we can eradicate hunger on this planet," then let's get to it! With a massive effort, let's eradicate hunger so we can move on! Priorities need to be set— but there have to be deeds, not words . . . said by a guy who's going on and on with words.

Robert McCall, the late great space artist, created a wonderful painting that I recognized as a form of Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, though I don't know it was intended as such. Placing it within a group of other *Vitruvian figures* helped to make it more obvious. Though it's not polite or even strictly legal without permission of

the artist, I was totally inspired to design a slogan into the image: 'Deeds, Not Words', in Latin and English. And even though it's an ironic statement, to me it's an inspiration that we better stop talking and better start doing, especially that bum 'Art' that's been sitting on laurels for far too long.

**ToB:** Do you think that any false value placed on 'preaching' about humanist elements in our society arises from a confusion between the virtual and the real - between saying and doing, between appearance and reality, between form and function? In every case, we seem mistakenly to prefer the former and assign it substance? And do you think, by extension, that mass culture has abandoned a deeper understanding of what it means to make the humanist ideal a reality?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** Mass culture is such a huge entity—encompassing not only every human being alive but also every human that has ever lived. Unless we live under a cabbage leaf we have all been affected by the give and take of all those that have lived before us. Some sub cultures from history could be considered almost ET alien in their way and means of thinking, such as the Egyptian or Aztec cultures. I mean what WERE the Aztecs thinking, that all fires throughout the land had to be extinguished every 52 years, when the Pleiades were directly overhead and then relit from one source on a sacrificial bier?

Yet world culture encompasses that and every other good and bad belief and practice. Here we are today, with MOST people behaving in civilized, if not quirky, ways. We are the current end result of billions of minds making decisions, right or wrong—trying to do the right thing, sometimes for the wrong reason. WE are Genghis Kahn. WE are Albert Schweitzer. WE are Eleanor Roosevelt. WE are the nameless pioneers of any era, struggling to make a difference—in personal ways, for the community we live in and for the destiny of our world. WE are Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, tinkering with a primitive computer to impress our geek friends and end up changing the ways of the world. WE are the mothers who stay up nights nursing a sick child that may grow up to invent a cure or may grow up to be Adolf Hitler.

I don't think mass culture has abandoned a deeper understanding of making the humanist ideal a reality. I think it is struggling mightily to achieve it. In spite of the cynicism that has grown over the past decades, our media culture is ever infusing positive attitudes and basic morals in its reach. Literature, movies, comics, broadcasts, periodicals continue to inspire us: Be brave. Be inventive. Be patient. Be strong. Be careful. Be caring. Be smart. Be sacrificing. Be loving. Be a team. Be free. Be all that you can be. Just DO it.

One needs to be careful with the syntax of such messages. 'Be able to laugh' is a lot better than 'be laughable.'

Mass culture has become the boiling pot of ideas and served out in dollops that meet a given need. Yet through it all, we still cheer for bravery, for honesty, for wisdom and intuition. For the most part we live humanist lives right here and now. We're just confused on where to go from here.

I don't think I answered your question.

**ToB:** No, I think you did: form and function, virtual and real, thought and action are converging. How do you feel humanism when practiced through your journal, rather than preached, can specifically answer some of the needs of Millennial culture?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** Rather than preach humanism, for me it is far better to demonstrate it, showcase it, celebrate it, share it with words and pictures that reveal humanism in lovely and unexpected ways. 'Inspiration' was once thought to be a god or goddess reaching through our ideas and deeds. Maybe. But we also know that civilized people inspire each other to appreciate our culture and perhaps contribute to it, via creativity in the arts and sciences, and also by those who finance it, manage it, report on it, applaud it.

Collaboration is the key (and maybe the definition) to any society—and our millennial culture needs collaboration more than ever as we are so totally dependent on technical wizardry as much as thriving



commerce, as much as entertaining distractions to keep us content as we all travel from cradle to grave. It's most informative to sit through the end credits of a blockbuster movie to see the ARMY of creative talent that has collaborated with extraordinary complexity just so we can have 180 minutes of a great escape.

Through it all, **better education is necessary to allow us to discover options for better ways of life. Perhaps an option stepping sideways or even backward would be more advantageous than blindly moving forward in a fog, only to march-step right off a cliff.** I love a video game that allows me the option of sitting still for a few moments, to gather my wits and stamina to meet the coming frenetic challenges (I'm thinking *Bugdom* here. Is that still a game anyone plays?)

**ToB:** Does the specific online format you have created for the *Pictorial Arts Journal* challenge some other modes for expression, education and even politics, wherein humanism is only preached?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** The journal is in a format that can survive as long as the digital network survives (which given the possibility of a nuclear pulse is not a sure thing). I would like to see the journal evolve with many other people's opinions and creative contributions, making the voice a multi-faceted one. So yes, by making the publication attractive to look at and interesting to read, it conceivably could be an effective form of practicing humanism.

I'm not sure who is actually 'preaching' humanism these days. In my mind, Humanism (with a capital 'aitch') is a way of life, an attitude, a way of thinking and expressing ideas. It doesn't have to be a manifesto, though I do like what *Paul Kurtz* came up with for the *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, which articulates many valuable principles. To preach Humanism would make it dogma, which I am opposed to in most any form of beliefs. The only dogma that I adhere to is 'respect life, do no harm.' Beyond that, I think the rules can bend, twist, and do loop-de-loops. Humanism, to me, is that simple: Respect ourselves and respect the Universe that surrounds us. Okay, that's the personal definition that you asked for in an earlier question. I like circuitous routes.



**ToB:** Another way of looking at this problem would be to see a general sickness in society, a widespread malaise where people are depressed and know things are wrong, but they don't know how to make things better. It's especially evident in the economy. Is your journal an initiative that will start to turn things around in terms of reviving and reconsidering certain values that were devalued or ignored over the past while?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** Woosh, wouldn't I love for the Journal to have that sort of influence, but I don't kid myself. This is one publication among millions—past present and future. I'm not smart enough to know how to reach people on that level. I must admit that I hold a dream where enough people collaborated with this initiative that smarter people could take over and just let me tinker with some of the creative machinery.

I think people in general are depressed because life gets pretty predictable and boring, sure with some nice highlights, but often it's drear humdrum. Wars and disasters are horrible and yet many people feel more alive at such times and when they survive and come home from those kinds of events, they're grateful for survival but bored stiff and depressed that we don't have positive equivalents to keep our interests and energies thriving. Hence sporting events that turn into great celebrations and space missions that challenge the mind, body and spirit and yearnings for the supernatural, to transcend the ordinary world. **Humanism, as practiced by many, finds the extraordinary within the ordinary, using contemplation of such to create mindscapes that let us explore imaginary things as well—which is what Einstein did to arrive at his extraordinary conclusions.**

The Journal is an initiative to inspire people to seek out the wonder and excitement that comes from new experiences, new ways of thinking, new worlds to explore even if those worlds reside just in our imagination. The wide spectrum of the pictorial arts has been and will continue to be a huge part of the magic that people yearn for. We plan to make a big deal about that spectrum.

**ToB:** It's interesting that your work revives humanism now, when post-humanism and transhumanism are the calling cards of the Millennium. Do you feel that your journal on Millennial humanism will provide a contrast to those ideas, or a complement?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** Our Journal's brand of humanism encompasses any other brand of humanism and welcomes opposing or complementing views, because, really—we're on the same team. We're not playing to win—we're playing to be the best we can be as humans, faults and all. I don't think we're trying to be 'super-humans', but as James Tiberius Kirk might put it, 'to embrace our weaknesses, as well as our strengths'.

**ToB:** The new Millennium has so far been awash in pessimism. Is your journal part of an effort to raise awareness of looking at twenty-first century circumstances with hope and optimism, and genuine, as opposed to fake, creativity?

**Thomas Haller Buchanan:** Precisely so! The optimism that we as adults present to our kids when they're down and out and had a lousy day, we say "Things'll get better. They always do. Just get a good night's rest and things will be better tomorrow". We say this with false bravado as we know a hundred ways that things can get worse. But by convincing the people we care for, we are likely to convince ourselves as well.

Genuine creativity can take our minds out of a dark dreary place and transport us to times and places where we can truly make changes, & make things better. REALLY, things WILL work out one way or another.

They always do.