

GRIMM

Making the cover: by Scott Altmann

Part II: Paint

Now it's time to lay on the paint. This stage is probably the most fun for me. I like the initial creation and searching for the image, and putting the final touches on a painting can be very satisfying - but the early steps of the painting are a blast. You really get to tap into your inner child a bit. Nothing needs to be tight, definite or finished. Just grab your big brush and go. But before we start, I'll mention a few important things - like getting some new coffee.



Reference: Using reference is a tricky subject and opinions differ from illustrator to illustrator. I am still learning how and when to use reference. Reference can be good for accuracy, but that doesn't always make an image better. It also depends on what you are trying to achieve with your image. My aim is representational, but not photo-realism. I aim hoping to maintain a level of expressiveness and slight stylization.

For this image, I decided to shoot reference for the kids as more of a lighting test than anything else. Will I use it? If I think it will make the image better, I will. At least I know if there is something I just simply cannot figure out, I can look at my reference as a guide.

Materials: I use various brushes for different effects and purposes. My brush collection covers everything from natural bristles, sables, anglers, synthetics, hybrid natural/synthetics, rounds, flats, brights, filberts and in all different sizes. It seems like a lot to choose from, but as I gain experience in painting I find I am getting better at which brush to use in which situation.



I also like to use palette knives to mix colors on my palette. I do mix colors directly on the painting as well, but I feel I get more control of the colors and keep them cleaner if I mix them correctly on the palette. Using a palette knife to apply paint also forces you to stay loose and you can get some excellent textural effects as well.

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This is a snapshot of my palette. It can be a little confusing where there are two colors named, but that's due to my constant revisions on my palette and changing colors. Sometimes I will substitute one blue hue for another or, for example, I'll use Venetian Red instead of Terra Rosa. It keeps you sharp and I am a firm believer in always experimenting. It should be noted that although several colors are seen here I do not use all of them in one painting. In fact, I try to minimize the amount of colors I use in a painting, so I may only use half of what is on my palette on a piece.

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I usually use just cold-pressed Linseed Oil as the medium. Sometimes I add a touch of stand oil in it to make it thicker and hold more paint, but I have been doing that less frequently. One advantage that digital has over traditional oils, is zero drying time. You can work right over an area the very virtual second you want to proceed. To assist traditional oil paints in drying, us painters with deadlines will add dryers. There are many on the market and some work better than others. Copal Drier is probably the most effective but it is also the most toxic. I decided to get rid of it all together, so I am using Galkyd to speed up drying. It seems to do the job well, and I feel a little safer using it.

In this poor photo, complete with nasty glare, you see the underpainting. Depending on the project I will take the underpainting further or leave it just blocked in, like in this cover for GRIMM.

I first make the sure the drawing isn't going anywhere and I spray the linen with a Workable Fixative. Then I moisten the surface with linseed oil with a big brush and rag. I like warm underpaintings for the most part, so I make a mixture of Transparent Red Oxide and Raw Umber and apply a thin wash to the entire canvas. Still using my largest brushes I will block in the large shadow shapes and rub out the lighter parts with a rag.

The only I danger I try to avoid with doing an underpainting is making it look too done. I keep them loose and sketchy, because if I refine them too much I find myself being hesitant in the layers of paint to follow. In painting, it is important to lay down brush strokes with confidence and integrity or the work may become lifeless and dull.



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Starting on top of the underpainting, I keep to the old and proven method - fat over lean, thick over thin. I keep the paint on the thin side just to get a feel of what colors are going to work, and so I don't over-commit to anything so early in this stage. I don't stay at this stage long, and in the same sitting I eventually start to commit and make confident choices, using thicker paint. The good thing about oil paint, is that if something is not exactly how you want it, there is a good chance you can change it.

I also use the underpainting a great deal, allowing it to show through in several areas. This enhances the optical effects of color combinations. A few key elements have been left out at this stage, like the several chains that are in the image. This way I don't have to worry about painting around the chain links, and it keeps me from getting hung up on details.

I usually work background to foreground, especially if there are many background elements. This way it's a little easier to get everything to relate to each other and harmonize. It is also a bit easier to keep the edges cleaner when painting the foreground characters later on.



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I start indicating the glow of the boy's wand, which will determine a lot of the image's focal points and color. Color choices are tricky, and I think more so in fantasy illustration than other genres. Visit any bookstore and browse through the fantasy / sci-fi section. The several high-saturated colors are there to attract buyers, but the effect can be a bit overwhelming. I start with more muted colors, and increase the intensity of colors where I want the viewer to look. I want the image to have that *pop*, but I want it to be tasteful and reflect my personal preferences. For this piece I had one simple concept I wanted to achieve with the color. The glow would illuminate objects with a nice cool light, while everything else would stay warm. This will create a nice contrast and look good for reproduction.

Part III: There is a long way to go before this is finished - be back soon with the final piece.....

*Note: I failed to mention that these progress shots are being shot without proper lighting and color and sharpness might not be accurate. When it comes time to shoot the final piece, I set up proper lighting to get the best picture.