

Analyzing the Relationship between Concept Design and Traditional Painting through Craig Mullins' Pioneering Artistic Achievements

Mingzhe Zhao, Yunxuan Li, Yahe Gao

School of Design, Xi'an Technological University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

Abstract: CG concept design, also known as digital painting, is an art form that utilizes computers, drawing tablets, and digital painting software (such as Photoshop, Procreate, Krita, etc.) to create artwork. It combines the techniques of traditional painting with the advantages of digital technology. The emergence and development of its unique form is closely tied to the growing demand in the commercial market. Using Craig Mullins' works as a starting point, this analysis explores the gradual maturation of CG design in the entertainment industry and its connection to traditional painting.

Keywords: Craig Mullins; CG Concept Design; Artistic Perception; Traditional Painting

1. Introduction

Compared to traditional painting, the most distinctive feature of CG concept design as a form of painting is its digital artistic characteristics. Specifically, it is characterized by the use of digital devices such as graphic tablets and touchscreens, replacing traditional brushes. During the creative process, there are no limitations imposed by traditional painting materials; it allows for high editability, layer-based creation to improve efficiency, fast output and distribution, and the creation of damage-free and environmentally friendly images. However, the methods of expression and techniques used in CG concept design are still rooted in traditional painting, as it has evolved based on traditional painting techniques. In other words, in order to achieve success in CG concept creation, it is essential not only to keep up with cutting-edge information technologies but also to have an in-depth understanding of traditional painting.

2. The Development of Craig Mullins' Artistic Philosophy

Craig Mullins can be considered a pioneering commercial illustrator. With the continuous advancement of technology and the arrival of the digital information age, businesses are required to transform and upgrade in order to adapt to a more tech-driven and digitalized commercial environment. Designers gradually began enhancing their skills in response to market demands, cultivating artistic design qualities that align with these changes. This has been a process of constant iteration in painting tools. For example, at the end of the 20th century, most movie posters were still created using traditional oil painting. However, with the progression of the third industrial revolution, design tools like Photoshop came into the spotlight for designers. These tools, with their efficient workflows and powerful visual expression capabilities, gradually replaced traditional oil painting in the entertainment industry for promotional purposes. Yet, the content encompassed by traditional painting is beyond imagination. Craig Mullins directed his limited energy towards both the continuous updating of equipment and tools and the innovation of design concepts in his artwork. Through extensive painting practice and by finding resonance in the works of great artists, he gradually developed his own unique style.^[1]

3. Craig Mullins' Artistic Perception

3.1 Using Light and Shadow to Build an Emotional and Narrative Visual Language

Natural elements, as a common and easily accessible source of painting material, frequently appear in Craig Mullins' concept design works. Whether in character design or scene composition, light and shadow are indispensable components of his visual presentation. Light is a force in nature that imbues all things with vitality and is the foundation for life's energy.

Similarly, handling light and shadow effectively in a design can infuse the artwork with an enduring vitality. Craig Mullins' treatment of light and shadow creates an immersive atmosphere that draws viewers into the scene, enhancing the emotional and narrative depth of the work.

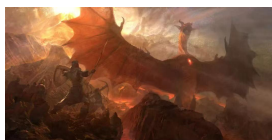


Figure 1. Halo 2 Concept Art

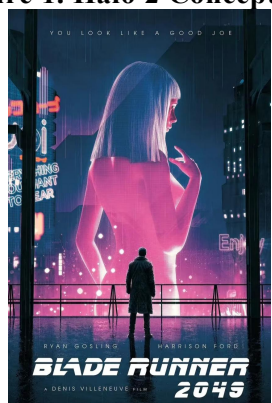


Figure 2. Blade Runner 2049 Design Art

For example, in his concept design for 《Halo 2》, developed by Bungie under Microsoft (see Figure 1), Craig Mullins uses a color scheme dominated by warm tones, with cooler colors used as accents. The main color scheme is based on the red tones of a winged dragon, complemented by blue to depict the sky and air perspective, creating a striking contrast. This not only conveys the volcanic heat and apocalyptic atmosphere but also retains the credibility of real-world lighting. From this scene, we can see that the backlighting of the dragon's wings presents an epic vision. The core creative idea is to use strong contrasts of light and shadow to focus attention on the battle between humans and the dragon, enhancing the overall environmental layers. This approach gives the visual center or scene strong emotional tension, making the subject stand out from the backlight, while the large dark areas create a contrast that suggests grandeur, increasing visual impact and emphasizing the narrative.^[2]

In films, we often see similar techniques used in key narrative moments, as they save on costs while reducing the complexity of lighting. Another example is in *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, where a scene depicts the protagonist K encountering the massive virtual image Joi after experiencing a

collapse in faith and identity (see Figure 2). Joi is towering and radiant, while K appears extremely small in the frame. The entire scene is bathed in purple-pink and blue neon, perfectly capturing the essence of illusion, desire, and cold technological aesthetics. The backlighting of the protagonist K and the holographic projection of Joi shows K's basic shape and posture, but does not reveal his facial expressions, clothing features, or bodily movements. This approach of showing only the silhouette without details naturally prompts the audience to wonder: What is K's emotional state? What are his next steps? This adds a layer of subtle mystery to the character, providing the foundation for the story conveyed through light and shadow.

It is clear that by minimizing information and emphasizing light and shadow, the core of narrative storytelling is created. Viewers are shown scenes of the knight facing the dragon or K confronting the holographic Joi, but they don't know whether the characters are tense or calm. What do the massive dragon and the holographic projection really signify for them? Is it a threat or a friendly greeting? The story woven into the frame leads the audience to speculate and interpret. This contrast between known scenes and unknown information makes the image more than just a static display; it becomes part of a larger narrative. The audience fills in the gaps, imagining what's hidden, thus creating a sense of immersion and space for associations. Craig Mullins firmly believes that the essence of storytelling in light-based scenes is to control the contours of information through light and shadow. By shaping the silhouette, the basic form of the characters is established, revealing the most core information. The story is not told directly, but through the play of hidden and revealed light, it prompts the audience to ask questions and make connections. Ultimately, this gives static images the narrative tension of an ongoing story, leaving viewers with a sense that what they are seeing is part of something larger, unfinished, and still unfolding^{[3][4]}

3.2 A Good Idea is “Stolen”

We can see that Figure 3 is an oil painting created by Craig, while Figure 4 is a CG concept design for *The Lord of the Rings*. The painting styles of both are relatively consistent. The characteristics of oil painting, such as its dryness and the ability to layer and repaint, can also be expressed using digital brushes, which gives the

CG illustration the charm and texture of classical oil paintings. In the process of borrowing oil painting techniques, the artist also incorporated his own unique perspective on the Middle-earth world created by George R.R. Martin. In other words, the creation process of the work cannot be separated from the artist's painting concepts, emotions, and references to the cultural heritage and era's cultural characteristics.^{[5] [6]}

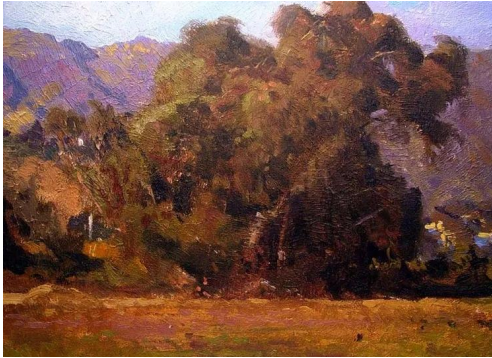


Figure 3. Craig Mullins Landscape Study



Figure 4. The Lord of the Rings Middle-earth Concept Art

Craig Mullins' works are mostly in the game and film industries, with a focus on fantastical and virtual themes. Examples include Star Wars, Jurassic Park, and Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse. No matter how far removed from reality these themes are, there are always similar elements in the cultural system for reference. This means that creators must base their works on an understanding of culture and express their thoughts and ideas through borrowing and reinterpreting. What designers often discuss as creativity nowadays is essentially a reconfiguration and re-creation of existing elements. This phenomenon is not limited to the field of painting—many outstanding artists, designers, directors, and writers admit that their inspiration comes from predecessors. In other words, almost all the artistic works we see today have, to some extent, been influenced by those who came before.

The famous Hollywood composer Hans Zimmer once said in an interview: If the film image, which carries the narrative structure and visual expression, is compared to the body, then the music is the heartbeat that drives the narrative and emotional resonance. Many classic works have their sources of inspiration. For example, the modern pop music we hear can be traced back to early folk and traditional music, and famous movie plots have intricate connections with modern classical literary works. These are not acts of plagiarism, but rather instances where ideas have been borrowed and fused to find a unique mode of expression. Imitation is a way of learning; by observing and understanding the works of others, we can better grasp creative techniques and styles. Picasso also famously said, Good artists copy; great artists steal. This emphasizes that the acquisition of inspiration in creation is a continuous process of exploration and experimentation.

Craig Mullins once mentioned that his painting style was born after being influenced by hundreds of mature painting styles. From his works, we can see the skillful oil painting techniques and experience the strong classical sentiment (as seen in Figures 3 and 4). His design philosophy borrows from 19th-century European oil painters. In interviews, he did not shy away from expressing his love for famous artists such as Monet, Rembrandt, and Manet.

Of course, borrowing does not mean simple replication. The creative process requires adding one's own understanding of the image and unique perspective on top of the borrowed elements. Craig Mullins also mentioned in an interview: Everyone's life experience and emotional reflections are unique, and they will leave their distinctive marks on their creations. One must learn to boldly "steal inspiration." Behind a great work, there are countless sparks of inspiration combined.

During this period, Van de Velde began formulating his early design philosophy. In contrast to the French Art Nouveau's emphasis on pure decoration, his approach, while also extensively employing curves and natural motifs like flora and tendrils, was not mere imitation. Instead, he sought inspiration from nature to develop a more abstract and rational language of line, infusing his designs with emotional force. His proclamation that "line is a force," attributing unique aesthetic power to the line, signaled his growing focus on the fundamental

principles of design. This early philosophical shift marked the initial transition in his work from Art Nouveau sensibility towards Modernist design thinking

3.3 Clarifying the Boundaries between Painting Creation and CG Design

For most artists, painting is a result of self-expression, conveying personal emotions and ideas. Design, on the other hand, is different. It is primarily about solving problems and is directly tied to the question of whether the needs and demands are being met. Classic works of art have a strong emotional impact, allowing the creator to express their artistic concepts while also fostering empathy in the viewer. The creator tells their own story. Design work, however, requires precise communication of information.



Figure 5. Death Stranding Firearm Design

We can see this in the gun design for the game Death Stranding (as shown in Figure 5). Each weapon design in the image has strong functionality, from the handgun and knife used for stealth missions to the submachine guns and heavy weapons used for assault tasks. These functional designs are the direct reflection of ideas exchanged between different design departments working together to enhance the game's storytelling. The designs precisely communicate the designer's ideas, contributing to the overall world-building.^[7]



Figure 6. Seaport Dock



Figure 7. The Lord of the Rings Argonath Concept Art

During the process of creating a painting, the artist directly relies on personal emotions, with the work often being deeply connected to the creator's painting techniques, experiences, reading habits, and the number of films they've seen. (As shown in Figure 6) In Luchinin's painting Seaport Dock, the central image depicts multiple wooden boats crossing through the waves, with figures entering from the rear view, as if calling the audience to join. The composition is primarily diagonal, where the white foam of the waves contrasts strongly with the dark-colored boats. The rough texture of the palette knife accentuates the wildness of the ocean. There is a clear contrast between warm and cold tones—the gray-blue sea sparkles with white, while the brown of the boats and the red of the characters' clothing combine to create a visual rhythm that is both stark and full of humanity. The relationship between the boats and the sea, and between the human body and space, strongly suggests a tension between humanity and nature, memory and the present. This conveys an intensely authentic subjective consciousness.

Design, however, requires very clear demands, such as the visual requirements of the script, the story's world-building, and the framework needed for the director to create specific scenarios. In Craig Mullins' work (as shown in Figure 7), the image depicts a narrow canyon, with a winding river flowing through it. In the foreground, several small boats are drifting downstream; towering on either side of the canyon are two massive human-shaped stone statues, their gestures solemn and postures dignified, symbolizing guardianship or warning. Sunlight pours through a gap in the clouds, creating holy beams that envelop the entire

canyon space. This is a typical "epic narrative" fantasy composition, where the viewer feels as though they are stepping into a fantastical Middle-earth world.

The creator's concept art often defines the story's time, weather, location, and the specific direction of the characters. In painting, subjective ideas are a necessity, with a very distinct personal style. In contrast, design leans more towards objective creation, focusing more on functionality and application. Craig Mullins has designed many scene layouts for films and games, particularly in the creation of fantasy environments. The costumes, props, and other details are meant to eventually be presented on screen to viewers and players, with all design work serving the story itself.^[8]

Self-directed creation in painting is a freer, more expansive process, allowing the artist to freely alter elements of the scene based on their limited knowledge. However, CG design is a systematic process, requiring early research. User habits, market acceptance, audience demographics, current trends, the transition to sketching, and iteration, all the way to the final product, must be considered. Each stage can even be broken down into more specific details. Over time, this approach has become mainstream, and within large industrial systems, it has matured, leading to the creation of many well-known and iconic works. For example, the successful development of the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) has made art design more formalized and systematic, becoming a key part of the film industry.

The uniqueness and irreplaceability of creative works are also absent in design, which relies on standardized solutions and processes. For example, in large film and game projects, style unity is always a top priority. Every Marvel film, for instance, requires a unique color palette to establish a visual guide and ensure tonal consistency across the films. There are even executives who oversee the different styles of Marvel directors, to prevent excessive auteur-driven expression, thus enhancing the film's mass appeal. This approach helps more comic book characters integrate seamlessly into the Marvel Cinematic Universe, leading to greater box office success, more value for IP characters, and greater inter-character synergy, which increases dramatic tension between characters.^[9]

However, timeless, classic works cannot be systematized or standardized. They emerge from the creator's bursts of inspiration and years of

accumulated skill. For instance, *Taxi Driver* by Martin Scorsese and *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino are iconic films that have made their mark in cinematic history and cannot be mass-produced.^[10]

4. Conclusion

Painting allows for the blurring of certain areas, while design requires clear directionality. Design must establish a bridge of communication with the audience, where the details need to be articulated clearly. Design can be viewed as an integral part of all entertainment project teams, playing the role of connecting and implementing ideas. Overall, painting is guided by emotional thinking, while design is driven by rational thinking. Whether in painting or design, both ultimately exist within a commercial world. The world needs trade, and the ability for designers and artists to exist depends on survival. Immersing oneself in a personal creative world requires stepping out and connecting with the outside world to make it better, more convenient, and more efficient. The first step is to move yourself emotionally. Combining painting and design in a harmonious and integrated way is the fundamental quality of a successful designer.

References

- [1] Liu Cuicui. "Reflections on Traditional Painting Systems and the Trend of Multidimensional Development: Multimedia Intervention in Artistic Creation," *Art Exchange*, 2003 (01): 6-69.
- [2] Zhou Xiu Cheng. "Art Perception in Craig Mullins' CG Illustration Works: Beauty and the Era," *Beauty and Times*, 2021, 03: 109-110.
- [3] Wang, Lijun. (2025). Interpretation of Posthuman Images and Reflection on Subjectivity in the Science Fiction Film "Blade Runner 2049". *Drama Home*, (06), 149–151.
- [4] Liu, Jiajun. (2024). The Language of Emotion: The Color Aesthetics in Denis Villeneuve's Science Fiction Films. *Drama Home*, (12), 148–150.
- [5] Quan Jian. "The Impact and Opportunities Brought by Multimedia on Painting Art," *Tianfu New Theory*, 2005 (S1): 180-181.
- [6] Jia Xiaolin. "A Brief Analysis of the Use and Impact of Digital Imaging in Contemporary Oil Painting Creation," *Art Education Research*, 2016 (21): 22.

- [7] Shi Tao. "An Exploration of the Artistic Characteristics of CG Illustration in the Context of Postmodernism," Talent, 2014 (25): 302.
- [8] Zhou, Nianjia. (2025). The Artistic Context and Aesthetic Tension of "Creating the Modern". Shanghai Art Review, (05), 85–88.
- [9] He Yuli. "On the Breakthroughs and Transformations in the Genre Narrative of Marvel Superhero Films," Drama Home, 2019, Issue 17.
- [10] Jiang Xiaoyuan. "An Analysis of the Themes in Hollywood Science Fiction Films," Nature Dialectics Communication, 2007 (05): 1-7+110.