THOUGHTS ON TRUMP ARTISTRY

by Michael Kucharski

The sophisticated Amber player should bring with him a background that includes exposure to philosophy, physical and cultural anthropology, and art history. When you are thinking about playing a trump artist, having a class or two in basic drawing or painting is certainly not out of place. If this was not included in your education, you should be willing to do a little research. Why? Because the more you understand the perspective and motivations of an artist, the better you will be able to apply them to the Trump Artist you play.

To a creative soul, a 'true artist', the production of artwork is not merely a means to feed and clothe oneself, or to line one's purse, or to gain fame or power. It is a need; an urge to create which can not be suppressed. Stop and think for a moment. Dworkin is a Trump Artist, and the creator of the Pattern. Why did he do these things? What motivated him? And how does this need to create relate to your character?

For any artistic Amberite this need, the compulsion to create, should be no different. It may even be more pronounced, for an Amberite can "find" all the outer trappings of success in Shadow. To create something that is unique in all of shadow is a talent only an Amberite can possess. Some questions to ponder, as you create your character, or as your character begins to learn trump artistry: how does your Trump Artist think? Why does he create? Is he a 'true artist'? Or is he a technician, merely creating a device for communication? The answer to these will affect both what he creates and how he utilizes it. And finally, what do his creations look like? In order to answer this, we should review the history of western art.

Art's beginnings lie deep in the realm of sympathetic magic. What we now call 'art' was intended to aid the hunt, and to open communication with the spirit world. Later, the focus switched from the unseen spirit world to the equally mystic concept of 'the spirit in man.' Art began to depict the human form, as a means to express the numinous concept

of the Holy Spirit; the Gods and Goddesses wore human form, in order to communicate with man.

Eventually, as wandering tribes became rooted communities, both religious and political leaders began to portray themselves as numinous. God-priests and God-kings appeared in the art of the time. These images, however, remained stiff, formal and stylized - glamorized icons of perfection that few mortals could ever measure up to. Egypt and Assyria provide good examples of this.

As man began to see himself as the center of reality, the images became increasing faithful, more realistically rendered, then they had been before. Witness the depth of detail, and the idealized portrayal of humanity in the Hellenistic period of Grecian art; a style continued and further humanized by the Romans. After the fall of Rome, as the focus of artistic endeavors became the church, the bible became the main source material. God, his son, the saints and the disciples became primary images. Ordinary people were also shown, in pictorial narratives of the parables.

Later, after the first millenium passed, man began to turn his attention to the past, and its glories were rediscovered. The Renaissance was more than mere nostalgia. Old styles, formulas and techniques were embraced and improved. Art continued to be the tool used to depict the glory of creation and the creator, but now it also glorified mortal man.

As the concepts of spiritual thought waned, the concepts of rational thought waxed to replace them. In art, a new realism arose. All of life - youth, old age, zits, tooth decay — and all of life's imperfections were now being presented on canvas.

Then, with the arrival of photography, the artistic community had cause to question their function and role in society. Their unity in the realistic rendering of everyday 'present' life was shattered. Why recreate what the camera already does? Out of this dilemma, uncountable movements were born. Artists began exploring ideas which were once only an aspect of the whole - color, shape, value, hue, line, light and dark — these become the end, rather than the means.

All of this is your source material. Any of these eras, these artists, these styles may influence your trump artistry. As a trump artist, you are plagued with choices.

One of these choices is whether or not a trump image need be photographically realistic in its representation. Consider the following examples. A Paleolithic cave painting clearly identifies and captures the essence of the creatures upon its wall, so that you know who or what they are. Now imagine a Paleolithic Gerard. This is easy, picture a figure with a large chest, shoulders and biceps, no discernable neck, and proportionately small head and legs. Unfortunately, many Amberites seem to be of heroic proportions, so perhaps only size or color might differentiate Gerard from Eric.

Perhaps something a little more esoteric is to your taste. Visualize a trump rendered after the figurative style of the Irish Book of the Kells, or the Byzantine and the Ethiopian mosaics. This would be flat in color, linear and stylized beyond recognizable realism. Those not intimately familiar with the subject (the individual depicted in the trump) would not be able to discern subtle but important elements such as eye color, shirt color or symbols. Such uninformed individuals might not be sure they were reaching Caine, Eric or Gerard. They are all dark and bearded. A similar bit of confusion could occur between a horseless Brand and a beardless Bleys (or Rinaldo).

A more modern example might be more abstract in imagery, perhaps a representation through the depiction of objects. A deerstalker cap, a clay pipe and a magnifying glass will say Sherlock Holmes as well as any portrait or profile might. A trump of a hundred different weapons, on a banner of yellow and brown, with a small flower atop would accurately portray Benedict. Alternating strips of black, red and silver with be recognizable as Eric, and cards, dice and drums over plans for a hand glider would easily be seen as Random.

Note that each of the previous examples revolves around the premise of keeping communication limited to the initiated, not to be shared with strangers, or in some cases, not even kin. Considering the general nature of the sons, daughters and grandchildren of Oberon, it seems very natural that they would want to keep the use of (personal) trumps to themselves. It is

possible that someone might only produce these less obvious depictions with advanced or exalted trump artistry, as a way of avoiding the sharing of special knowledge.

Each trump artist must also choose whether or not to use color. Serious or very thoughtful use of color might be another way in which an accomplished trump artist, doing totally realistic or representational art, might confuse the uninitiated. Confusion could be created by using black and white renderings with heavy shadows concealing details; or by graying down color so far that reds and greens might look the same, yellows fade into whites, and dark colors could only barely be distinguished from black.

These are not the only choices available. For instance, in the novels, all trumps are recognizable, but there is mention of different rendering styles. The style of the art should reflect the personality and psychological profile of the artist.

I could easily argue that someone like Brand might visualize and paint like Vincent Van Gogh, to reflect the deepening mood swings, which led him to an emotional abyss and insanity. However, this may be too obvious a choice and I might opt for someone with rather more flair, like the American portraitist, John Singer Sargent. Both artists have clearly identifiable brush strokes, both are recognizable in their likeness, but their styles differ greatly. Either could be Brand's work, or neither for that matter. It is a subjective rather than objective choice on my part. Your character's choice is for you to decide, you should chose something that will work for your character.

Most people gravitate towards realism, as it is easier to understand and appreciate. This is no more right or wrong than any other choice. But even realism is not so easily pinned down, for there is realism, photo-realism, and super-realism, all differing slightly from one another.

Realism is rather self-explanatory. The closer the object is to the viewer, the more definition and detail is applied, and everything in the background receives less attention. In other words, a simple portrait created by any competent painter.

Photo-realism, like its name, moves the direction of the rendering towards photography, where only the center of attention is focused. The point of attention or focus is fully delineated; everything else gets softer and less defined as you moved away from the center. To utilize this in Corwin's

trump, only Corwin's features, and maybe the rose cloak clasp, near his face, are defined, detailed and sharp.

In Super-realism, the artist renders everything in full and equal detail, leaving nothing untouched by artistic license. Disregarding focus and perspective, every leaf on every tree in Arden can be made out in full detail, as the bright, gleaming, shining, white, full figure of Julian stands before it. This does sound like the work of Dworkin, with the attention to detail that Corwin spoke of. With all that detail, the eye would have no natural place to rest. It would take an act of strong will to find a point or center to concentrate on, to bring a trump to life, and to make trump contact.

Many things will influence the artist's work. Where an individual received his training, the school of trump artistry or the particular style of a tutor or mentor, will reflect in the early work of that artist. After some time, the artist's work will develop into his own unique style. Exposure to high impact popular visual cultures, anti-image cultures or just rebellion against conventional norms could easily lead a budding artist to a change their artistic style. The artist's own natural inclination may be such, that no matter how hard he tries to follow the traditional artistic path, or attempt to fit into the current popular trends, he will always seem to end up going his own way. An excellent example of such artistic behavior is found in the life and works of Vincent Van Gogh.

So, how is all of this reflected in my work? Everything that I will talk about here has been rendered to be camera ready, commissioned for reproduction in print. This limits the palette to simple black and white. Any work produced with grey tones requires an extra photographic process before it can be acceptably reproduced. (Try this for yourself – take a nicely shaded pencil drawing and run it through the Xerox machine – you will immediately see the problem)

For Dworkin's trumps, I wanted realism, as close to continuous tone rendering as I could get, without requiring halftones for reproduction. I chose ink and wax pencil on Ross board; with its stippled surface, it was almost perfect to achieve that end.

For the Amber DRPG book, three of the trumps shown are ostensibly by the hand of Merlin. Merlin, at this early stage, was a sensitive, naive, innocent and gentlemanly young artist, only recently cut loose from his mother's apron strings and still a touch unsure of himself. After a few experiments, I chose linen board and graphite in an attempt to capture the thoughts, the feelings and the mind of the artist in trump form. The Merlin trumps, in general, appear more sensitive in portraying their subjects as people, not pawns.

For the Amberzine trumps, there were various challenges. The first was, how would the artist Harlan would visualize his trump images? Eric Schneider, who plays Harlan in two different campaigns, is a student of Dworkin in both. It seemed logical, having been taught by such a strong personality, that Harlan's style should be a continuation of Dworkin's, with some sort of twist. In the art for Bronwyn's Tale, it was decided that all the characters would be shown with a window or a door in the background, as if these objects might humanize the characters, and allow the viewer to open them and look into the characters' souls. This idea, of a background element playing a role in revealing the nature of the character, was carried over into the renderings for Eric Wujick's main body campaign.

Then came the Wolfings... they had been originally conceived, by Morgan, to be his personal storm troopers. All shared the same parents. All were shapeshifters. All were outlaws. All were different. So both unity and individuality needed to be shown. A 'wolf' badge was given each of them, as a mark of unity. Where do you find wolves? In the forest. Trees were chosen as the background and backdrop against which the desires, dreams, needs and personalities of the characters would be reflected, if the viewer could decipher them.

For ShadowKnight, I made serious effort to visualize how a Chaos trump was made. This trump of Martin did not see publication. However, it seemed to me that a Chaos trump might be a fragmented image, like a cubist painting, showing multiple aspects of the same individual as a means to reveal the shapeshifting nature of Chaosians. Or perhaps a 60's psychedelic poster, with each aspect melting into the next. The latter was chosen for the trump, with only partial success, as color was truly required to pull off the effect.

In the campaigns I have run, Chaos trumps are powered by the Logrus, not an independent power source, and all Chaosians are shapeshifters. Similarly, the Pattern powers Amber trumps. Therefore, a Pattern based Trump Artist is unable to capture the likeness of a shapeshifter, because the Pattern trump would be a static image - a preserved unchanging representation, an inflexible reality - all the things a shapeshifter isn't. Therefore an attempt to capture a shifter's image would always be inaccurate, as a shifter is always in a state of constant, although perhaps otherwise undetectable, change. On the other hand, a Logrus based Trump Artist should, with considerable ease, be able to render an Amberite, as they are a visual still life by comparison.

Finally, we come to the Trumps of Doom, some by Brand, some by his pupils. Remembering that Brand had fallen into the Abyss, I chose to incorporate that story element, together with the idea of attacks from beyond the grave, by having all the cards have a black background against which the subject would be seen. I also wanted these trumps to seem bolder, stronger and more threatening, so I chose as graphic a rendering approach as possible. Thus I used Duo-tone board, a photomechanical shading medium, and heavy black inked masses and shapes, with white bordering outlines around the subject. The result is a strong and immediate visual impact and response. These are no gentlemanly attempt to get to know someone, something or someplace. These trumps are tools to be used. These are "Black and Decker" trump, if you will.

Trump production in role-play should reflect some realities. I am in disagreement with Eric Wujcik on an important issue – creating a trump should take longer than two days. I will use some examples to illustrate why I believe this. My business card, painted in 1991, might very well be taken for a trump image. It contains all sorts of symbolism you might find in a trump. This image represents the time spent to produce three or four preliminary sketches, a couple of color studies, and then some forty hours of labor for the final portrait. What then, are the benefits of experience? "Arthur of the Britons," painted in 1982, required the same amount of preparation time and took eighty hours to complete. So, yes, experience counts for something. There is a point, however, where you reach a limit to

this time gain. Certain mediums or techniques can reduce time, but short cuts will affect quality.

Now you may have seen some of those Chinese or Japanese Sum-ie paintings, masterpieces one and all, done in a few dozen strokes. Please remember that those Sum-ie masters have spent every day of their lives, for the last twenty or thirty years, working toward mastering this technique. They may be able to simply enter a room, which has been specifically prepared for this work, sit down before a piece of rice paper and a bowl of water, take up the ink with a brush, and with a few deft brush strokes produce a painting. Such painters have years of training, in only one style or stroke, to produce art in a matter of minutes, working wet on wet.

Also please consider the works of the great portrait artists. John Singer Sargent, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Rembrandt Van Rijn, Leonardo De Vinci, Norman Rockwell; none of these masters simply sat someone down and completed a finished painting. All of them first experimented with color, light, shadow, poses and so on. Sargent lived with his subjects for months, while he painted them. Leonardo's 'St. John the Baptist' hung in his studio 'unfinished' for years before he added the last 'missing' element. Rembrandt had a very successful career as a portraitist, until he decided to cut corners while painting the 'Night Watch'.

If a trump is the essence of the individual, filtered through the Trump Artist's eyes and hands, then every bit of body language, garment choice, jewelry, weapons, background and lighting makes a difference. These elements should be considered by every role player, in order to more fully flesh out their character. And each additional element included will add more time to the process.

An artist can only work so fast. Paints only dry so fast. Accidents, interruptions and all the possibilities of random chance slow the process further, delay upon delay. There is much to consider.

So both the GM and player should consider the development the character's Trump Artist skills; a newly acquired skill or power, without a long history of study should not be allowed to turn out trumps like a Xerox machine. There is progress. There is change. There is growth. Which, if you truly consider this line of thought, has much in common with role playing, where in the best situations characters experience change and growth.

In closing, when you play a trump artist, try to think like an artist. Trump portraits are not 'Kodak' instamatic moments. The thought, guile, creativity, cunning, openness, closeness, understanding and the lack of understanding of your character should all be a part of how you play the role.

Michael Kucharski's earliest memories of drawing involved some trouble he had in kindergarten. Since then he has gotten better, he can now follow instructions. At nine years of age, he discovered Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur* in a small two-room public library. Images of heroic knights and fair ladies captured his imagination. Some six thousand (plus) novels later, those images are still dear to his heart. He started his art education with the Famous Artist Correspondence Course (found on the back of a comic book), and finished it, finally, with a BFA from the School of the Society of Arts & Crafts. He has been a graphic designer, art director, art teacher, cartoonist, and illustrator. As a fine artist, his efforts have included wildlife sculpting, printmaking, and painting. His involvement in comic books and SF & Fantasy began in the late sixties. Since then he has worked for many book and magazine publishers, in addition to gaming companies.