

The Ancestors

by Jonathon Earl Bowser

"If one were able to watch the earth for a long time over geological epochs, it would not just be the infinitesimally thin biosphere that seemed to be alive. The body of the earth itself could be seen to churn and seethe, rising in places to great heights, only to collapse at last into ruin. It might even seem to possess its own ambition towards which it inexorably evolves - very much like the tiny life forms that dwell upon it. Forms come into being and gather toward some distant purpose, searching like a burning light, until they are finally consumed by the fire of their own unquenchable longing. And perhaps some mysterious Watcher, ever eluding the brilliant gaze of the new, sits there a time with the bones of the old, offering some small blessing of solace for the pain of their endeavors..."

Now that we have come to know the artist Jonathon Earl Bowser and his impressive works of art, there is only one way to top this: A workshop. How does Jonathon start, where do his ideas come from, which references does he use and how exactly does he proceed when painting his art? For the readers of Art Scene International, Jonathon has exclusively documented his most recent artwork "Ancestors" during its creation.

Paint: Talens Rembrandt
Support: illustration board covered with canvas and primed with gesso.

Each artwork starts with some kind of inspiration. Whether it is a rough idea that comes to your mind while walking in the forest or is caused by some occurrence - you have a sudden inspiration, see a concept or even a finished picture in your mind. If this inspiration is a special one that really enralls you, it may take several weeks or longer until you have found a con-

cept to transfer this idea into a visual picture. For "Ancestors", this process was rather easy because I fell back on a drawing from my sketchbook.



Fig. 1

Here it is. Although I work with a model every now and then I always try to sketch as much as possible from memory. And even when I am working with a model, I have a very detailed sketch at hand in most cases and the model serves to integrate missing areas, e.g. shadows or complex draperies of the clothing.

Fig. 2

When doing figurative drawings I always start with an undressed figure to which I adapt a costume, although I always take care not to hide or cover the shape of the body. In case I have already decided on clothes and ornaments I sketch them accurately at that stage already, but do not care about them any more until the final clothing is painted. The drap-

ery, too, ought to be completely determined in this step. Take care not to let it dominate the picture by putting too much emphasis on it. The figure is the focus of attention; it is the body that expresses something. As the original artwork that follows is principally based on this drawing as a reference, I do attach great importance to working out all details of the body and the clothing.

Fig. 3

A huge step? Not really, because this is not the original to come. It is another study, this time colored. Doing such a "preliminary drawing" helps to make out possible problems on time, before bigger problems come along with the original. Moreover, it does not take long to do it and the "by-product" sells very well because it is much cheaper than the original.

For my bigger pictures I mostly do sketches in 17" x 11" and in oil on paper with gesso coating. In this case, however, I have decided in favor of 14" x 11" in a mixed technique. To this sketch, I applied a lay-

er of paint consisting of a mixture of complementary hues of an earth color and put highlights and shadows with Prismacolor on it.

Fig. 4

Now I finally start doing the real original. I mostly do bigger works on stretched canvas, for smaller ones - like this one - I often use canvas coated illustration board. At first, I apply some layers of gesso as a primer, which I grind immediately with 200 grain emery paper and water (remove the surplus water immediately!). During the process, I concentrate on the areas where the figure is going to be afterwards. I do need an extremely smooth surface there, I do not mind if it gets rougher towards the edges. That is where the picture ends anyway and shows texture in most cases.

Now I start doing a rather simple line drawing. Finally, depending on the tightness of the schedule, I apply some white ground color. Then, in my opinion, the support is excellently prepared for my way of working. As a first step towards what is going to be a picture I do a basic structure of the light and dark val-



ues, which I paint monochrome with warm earth hues. In this case I use a mixture of Raw Umber and Burnt Sienna, thinned with turpentine.

Fig. 5

By the way, I use Talens Rembrandt oil paint. It is remarkably thinner than other brands and excellently apt





for my technique of applying thin layers of paint. In case it becomes necessary every now and then, I use some simple medium. 1 part oil, 5 parts turpentine.

I mostly start with the parts that are farthest, i.e. the background. However, I always take care to let the first layers shine through somewhat. These warm hues help me to give the picture the hold it needs. In any case, I do not use too many different hues, in this case Titanium White, Veridian, Cinnabar, Green light, Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Orange and

some yellowish Ochre, plus some gray hues that I get by mixing the first Umber/Burnt Sienna combination plus White. These are warm gray hues that I may push into the cool color area by mixing colors of the environment into them. In this work I do not use blue, but in other works I would add Ultramarine light, Rembrandt Blue and Pthalo Turquoise, sometimes even Cadmium Red Deep.

Fig. 6 and 7

Now I am working my way through to the foreground. While

doing so, I usually start with a thin layer of paint that I apply rather freehand. Then I continuously refine it. In most cases however, I wait one day until the paint is completely dry before I work in the textures and finer details.

Fig. 8 and 9

Unfortunately, nobody acted as a model for me in the forest, so I have to use my imagination to choose the right colors. The cool light of the shadow in which she stands, blue from the sky and green from the leaves will make

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the highlights of her flesh tint appear slightly gray. In her own shadow areas, e.g. under the eyebrows, the nose and the chin, the skin will get a somewhat warmer glow. I paint the figure almost



completely in the classical illumination, if there is no particular reason like e.g. a ray of light falling on her. To me, it is more important to depict classical peaceful scenery than to get

every single detail of the illumination right. Of course, I carefully take the incidence of light and the color of the primary and the environmental light sources into account. On the other hand, as neither the forest nor the woman really exist; I do not attach too much importance to the fact that these depictions of light cannot be 100 % accurate.

I proceed accordingly while doing the robes, with grayish and less intensive hues for the highlights and warmer, more intensive ones for the middle tone values.

Fig. 10 and 11

I have a large collection of pictures of stone and rock formations to which I refer quite often. Although I am going to change the shape as well as the colors, even light and shadows, in order to adapt to the work I am doing at the moment, but it is good to have a starting point. Nature still makes up much more interesting textures than I will ever manage to.





Fig. 12 and 13

After the robes are completely dry I do the details and embroideries. I start with the overall patten in a thin layer of warm gray hues and complete the embroideries with a lighter but cooler gray. Then I take a look at the work from various distances, make some changes here and there or add some detail.

It is only after this last step that I sign my work. Usually, these artworks need more than one week to dry completely.

Then I apply a final protective layer, which gives a pleasant, smooth surface.

I hope that you had fun with this insight into my working process. Documenting every step I do was a new experience for me, too.

