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Thoughts on Being a Freelance Illustrator

by Steve Bjorkman

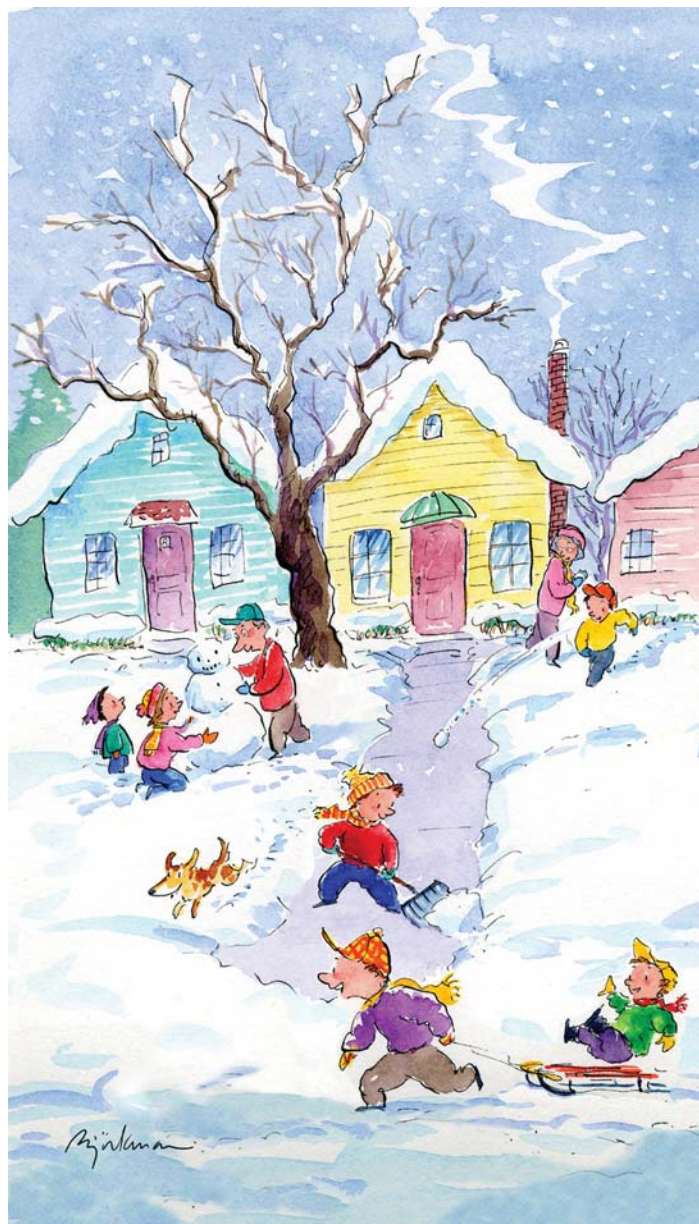
My salesman dad thought I'd be an illustrator long before I did. While I majored in English and Secondary Education, he was showing my drawings to the Art Directors he called on. He passed on encouraging words to a thoroughly embarrassed 20-something kid.

As a high school student a few years earlier, I didn't want to spend a semester drawing the cubes, spheres and cones of "Drawing 1" so I took photography instead. Those photography classes led me to a job in college doing photography and learning graphic design as an apprentice. A subsequent graphic design job found me inserting more illustrations into my designs. Within a few short years I had left the graphic design field entirely to pursue a career as a freelance illustrator. The next thing I knew I was showing my portfolio to those same art directors my dad had known.

Every job a freelance artist does is an audition for the next assignment. The attitude I bring is much like that of a chef or server in a fine restaurant. The customer should expect professionalism, timeliness, creativity and responsiveness. By trying to put myself in the client's shoes, and making their problem my own, I bring an attitude of helpfulness and service along with an artistic vision. Sometimes it means redoing sketches until we find the right solution. Sometimes it means redoing the final art. It always means bringing a positive, helpful attitude to every project. Of course good listening and communication skills make me more likely to get it right the first time!

Like any service business, building trust and relationships is important. I recently worked with an art buyer with dozens of illustrations to assign. After finishing a few illustrations on time (and sometimes early), I told him with a smile that my goal was to make him lazy. I figured that the easier I could make it to work with me, the less likely he was to call someone else. I wound up getting twice the amount of work he initially thought he had for me.

But if you always have to be right or can't take criticism, then perhaps this isn't the right field for you. If the uncertainty of not knowing where the next check is coming from is unsettling, then perhaps this isn't a good fit. As a freelance illustrator I am a temporary partner in a project, and the art I make is only successful when it accomplishes the client's goals.



Snowy Holiday

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.



Real Self

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

Illustration differs from fine art in that it's painting on a "different canvas size." It has different constraints. In "fine art" I am the client and can do what I want. As an illustrator, the art is serving a utilitarian purpose. I bring all the imagination and creative skills I have to solve a visual problem. The art has to provoke, inform, attract attention, create a mood, or capture the imagination. In the light of this, the freelance artist must have thinking skills to match his or her drawing/painting skills.

N.C. Wyeth, the great illustrator of the early 20th century, avoided depicting the same thing the text said, but worked to somehow tell more. For example, if the text says, "he left the yard," did he jump the fence, break through the slats, burrow under a wall, or leave by the gate, slamming it behind him? Was he in such a hurry that he sloshed his coffee or was he casually watching birds in the trees as he strolled through? Illustration sets the mood and communicates through the lighting, amount of detail, line weight, perspective, color palette, and over all expressiveness of the line and brush strokes.



Bank Robber Sketch

Pencil on paper.



Bank Robber

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

I sometimes hear people rave over the amount of detail in a piece of art. Though detail can add information and atmosphere to a piece of art, it can just as easily detract from the piece. I've seen illustrators become lost in details like shoelaces, eyelashes, shirt buttons, or belt loops and miss important things like facial expressions or how to make a car look like it's really moving. When an illustrator does include visual information it needs to be accurate. If I show a teen



Big Sandcastle

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

with an iPod, I'd better not make it look like those old cd players. If the iPod is the point of the illustration, then I may draw the teen looking at it, since our eyes will follow his eyes. If I'm just using the iPod to indicate a typical teen, then I may loosely draw it with just three or four lines.

Drawing from life has been a tremendous help even for a "cartoonist" like me who uses imagination to create images. I have filled dozens of sketchbooks with images of salt shakers in restaurants, fire hydrants drawn while at a stop light, and people by the hundreds walking, bending, reaching, reading, eating, talking, laughing, driving, and shopping. All of this helps me to create images that have an aroma of authenticity.

The overwhelming majority of my work is done in ink and watercolor. It is about as analog as one can get. I use an

old fashioned dip pen and permanent black ink, followed by washes of watercolor. Over the years the palette has changed a bit, but certain colors seem like dependable old friends. My paper choice for the last dozen years or so has been 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper. I've gone through hundreds of sheets. The bright white nature of this paper allows optimal reproduction and the slightly rough surface gives the ink lines a unique slightly ragged quality. Though some might prefer the smoother lines a hot press paper would allow, I have found the cold press more forgiving when laying in watercolor. I prefer the 140 lb. because it is weighty enough to take significant washes with little distortion (I don't stretch the paper) but light enough to put on a light table and easily transfer the sketch to the watercolor paper for final art.

Show Off Your Worst Stuff.

It's just one of the many activities at this year's Yamafest — the Yamaha snow festival where you can take demonstration rides on Yamaha's new snowmobiles and try out the all-new SNOSCOOT, plus contests, games, prizes and much more. It's a festival of winter fun for enthusiasts and newcomers alike. And it's free.

In our special "Ugliest Snowmobile Suit Contest," we're searching for the snowmobiler with the tackiest suit. And you may have a chance.

For several seasons now, you've had an ugly snowmobile suit... but just how ugly is it? Is it merely distasteful, or is it "championship ugly."

We'll find out at this winter's Yamafest in our search for that outstanding snowmobiler who truly has the wrong stuff.

At the Yamafest party, you just model your ugly suit for the crowd. The audience will be the judge if you're the snowmobiler

with the sloppiest, shoddiest, most beat-up, nastiest suit.

If you win, you'll take home top honors... the prestigious title of "Yamafest Ugliest Snowmobile Suit Champion."

And, to make it harder for you to win next year, we'll award you a brand new two-piece nylon snowmobile suit from Yamaha.

So bring your friends and family to the Yamafest party. And be prepared to show off your worst.



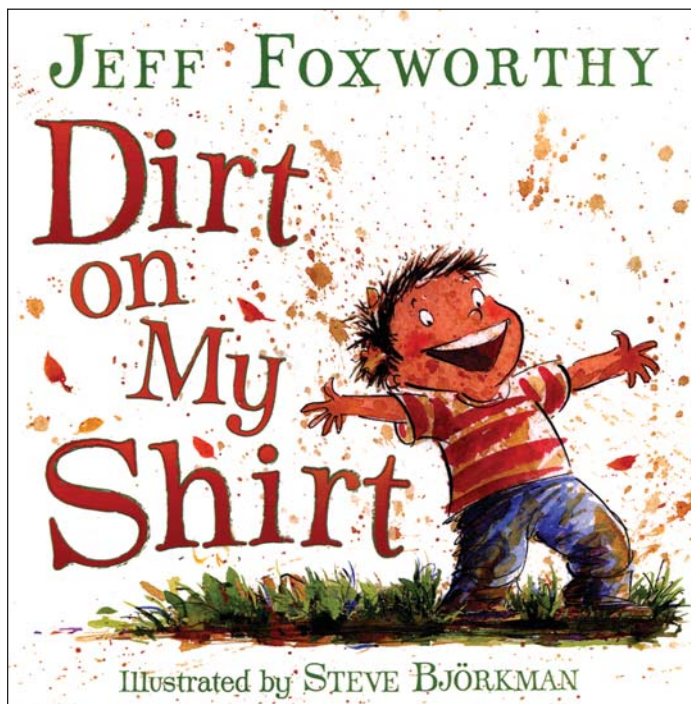
YAMAFEST: _____
 DATES: _____
 LOCATION: _____
 YAMAFEST PARTY—DATE AND TIME: _____
 FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL: _____

YAMAHA
 We make the difference™

Yamaha Ad

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

Until recently I'd always send off the original final art to the client. Nowadays I more frequently scan the art into Photoshop and send a digital file. So even though I use traditional methods to create the art, Photoshop is a constant ally in making corrections, adjustments, and preparing a file that is easy for the client to access and use. A correction that used to take an hour to carefully repaint can now be finished within minutes. Recently, I did the holiday card for Madison Square Garden. After completing a complex multi-panel image, I realized I needed to add snow across the entire bottom. Previously this would have required starting over from scratch, costing over a dozen hours of work. Instead, I painted a snowy "ground," adding slight shadows in the right places, and used the computer to blend it into the final image. It still took an hour or two, but I didn't have to start over! I can't imagine an illustrator working today without a tool like Photoshop. Some advances in the field can be both a blessing and a curse. Concepts that used to require an illustrator or a prohibitively expensive photo shoot, are now done by an art director with a stock photo and a computer. It seems like there is more competition for fewer jobs with lower budgets. I need to work to eat! For years illustrators have advertised in



Dirt on My Shirt

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

PEOPLE ACT DOWNRIGHT CHILDISH WHEN YOU ANNOUNCE A MEETING IN THE NEW PALM SPRINGS.

Underneath that cool, pin-striped exterior lies a great big kid dying to go somewhere really "neat" for the big meeting. And now, more than ever, Palm Springs is it.

Because Palm Springs is courting your meeting business like never before with exciting new and completely refurbished hotels, new and expanded meeting facilities, and our new Desert Centerpiece, a magnificent 100,000 square foot Convention Center opening in the Fall of '87. Plus a 100% commitment to making your meeting the most successful, most enjoyable business event you've ever planned.

For years, our warm desert sunshine, championship golf courses, sparkling pools, sumptuous dining and world-class shopping have made us a preferred choice among meeting planners.

But now there's more. An exclusive new shopping plaza along legendary Palm Canyon



Drive, the renowned exhibits at our Desert Museum, our dazzling new nightlife, the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, and the splashing good fun of our new Oasis Water Park.

Get all the information you need, plus help coordinating your Palms Springs meeting by writing Director of Sales, Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau, Dept.

8741, 255 North El Cielo Road, Palm Springs, CA. 92262-6993. Or call 619/327-8411 collect.

EASTERN REPRESENTATIVE

For group meeting information, contact Mary Ellen O'Brien, 915 King Street, Suite A46, Alexandria, VA 22304. Phone: 703/549-8026.

Palm Springs
CALIFORNIA



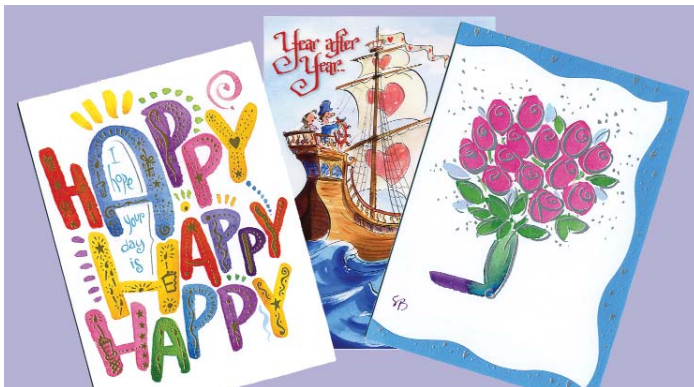
Palm Springs Ad

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

source books like The Workbook or the Directory of Illustration. An artist's personal website and online Portfolio sites like Folioplanet and thespot.com have become enormously important as well because they offer an art director a chance to quickly and easily see an artist's work.

The advertising business and some editorial work is the most deadline driven. I recall receiving a call from the Wall Street Journal at ten in the morning. After getting approval for the sketch, I emailed the final art by two that same afternoon. The illustration appeared in that Friday's paper.

Most deadlines aren't that tight. But meeting a deadline is a key part of the freelancer's job description. The artist must be able to read the article or ad copy, and come up with two or



Greeting Cards

Watercolor and ink on 500 Series Strathmore Imperial® 140 lb. cold press watercolor paper.

three visual solutions, often followed by a round of revisions. I will usually get a few days to do sketches and around a week to finish final art. Each client, however, can have his own world of time pressures. It is enormously helpful to develop a sensitivity enabling you to “read” the client and ease their mind about meeting their needs.

In children’s books the timing is on the opposite end of the deadline spectrum. I will often have several weeks, if not a couple months, to do sketches. Final art follows a few months later. Of course a book is much larger in both art size and the sheer quantity of pieces. I will work with the editor or designer or both. To the surprise of most people, I rarely have contact with the author before I illustrate the book. In fact, it’s only happened twice out of over 75 children’s picture books I’ve illustrated. The author does the writing and the illustrator gives the book its final form. This is why I only work on a royalty basis when doing children’s books. I want to partner with the author and publisher in the creation of a book.

When it comes to the greeting card work I do, I am literally in partnership with my brother, Carl. We work exclusively with Recycled Paper Greetings based in Chicago. Each company will have its own way of working and guidelines to get the ideas they want. Over the years we’ve done thousands of designs and sold over one hundred million cards. It’s difficult to reduce something like a greeting card to some sort of formula. Whether it’s an affectionate image and message, something mildly whimsical or downright funny, every card is essentially a form of communication, via a folded piece of paper, from one person to another. When creating cards we try to think of a specific person we could send this particular card to.

So much has changed for the freelance artist over the nearly thirty years I’ve been doing this. I occasionally will get an email inquiry, agree to a job, send the sketch and ultimately the final art while never once speaking to the client. But even in an increasingly digital age, nothing replaces relationships. My interest in an art director and his project can be communicated by voice in a way no email could approach. Perhaps that is “old school” but in a service business like this, it not only works, it is essential.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Steve Bjorkman



As his dad careened around corners on the way to the hospital, Steve Bjorkman was born a little over fifty years ago in the front seat of a '49 Ford convertible. The first of four children, he has been drawing, painting, and spilling ink on shirts, carpets and chairs ever since.

At first he had plans to become a high school English teacher. That was not to be, and for the past twenty-five years Steve Bjorkman has been an illustrator.

His early illustration work focused on advertising and editorial work. Then Steve also tried his hand at the greeting card business beginning in the late 70’s along with his brother, Carl. Together, they have produced thousands of different card designs for Recycled Paper Greetings.

In the mid-eighties, Steve was approached about illustrating children’s books. With three young children of his own at the time, this was a great fit. To date he has illustrated over 75 children’s books.

Between juggling the advertising, editorial, greeting card and children’s book work, Steve manages to occasionally exhibit at a local art show and try his hand at new mediums and methods of artistic expression. Lately he’s having fun learning to paint in oils.

Steve lives in California with his wife, three kids, a dog, cat and wandering desert tortoise. Other samples of his work can be found at www.stevebjorkman.com

Questions From Our Website

Many consumers use our website to ask questions about paper. We felt that our eNewsletter was good way to share answers to commonly asked questions.

What is lignin? What happens to paper if lignin is not removed during the papermaking process?

Lignin is a “sap-like” substance that is found in the cell walls of plants. It basically is the cement that holds the fibers together. It is found in all woody plants but the amount varies from species to species. Lignin has a natural yellow color. To make artist papers, lignin is usually chemically removed during the process of making pulp, which is the basic paper-making component.

An example of paper with large amounts of lignin in its pulp is newspaper. Think of what happens to newspaper over time, especially when left outside. Since the lignin is left in the pulp of the newsprint (paper) it is very reactive to oxygen, light and moisture. We all know that if you place a newspaper out in the sun for a relatively short period of time, that paper will turn yellow. Now you know why.

Note: Cotton contains no lignin, so you can be assured that there is no lignin, even residual, in our 100% Cotton Fiber Papers.



The cell walls of all woody plants contain lignin, which holds the fibers together.

Is the Rough Newsprint you sell the same as the newsprint that goes into my daily paper?



300 Series Newsprint

Our rough Newsprint is actually a grade of paper called Novel News and has rougher texture to accept dry media such as pencil. Also it typically is much cleaner and brighter than paper used to publish newspapers.

I would like to give small size reproductions of my watercolor painting to some friends of mine. What would you recommend?



Inkjet Watercolor

We have a watercolor sheet in our Inkjet line that is ideal for reproducing artwork using an inkjet printer. Watercolor Inkjet (code 59-771) is a true cold press watercolor paper that is coated for inkjet receptivity. Simply scan the image of the watercolor painting into your computer, set your printer settings to Heavy Matte or equivalent and Print Quality to Best. Finally hit the Print button. Note the paper comes in 8.5" x 11".

Featured Product

New Square and Landscape Fine Art Pads

Your creativity can soon explore new dimensions with our Square and Landscape Fine Art Pads.

When artists began requesting papers in unique and non-traditional sizes, we listened. Then we responded by creating an entire offering of new pad dimensions – from small and square to large and long.

If you're feeling square or keeping possibilities wide open, Square and Landscape pads are the perfect dimensions for you to express yourself.



300 SERIES Canvas

Square 6" x 6" • Landscape 6" x 12"



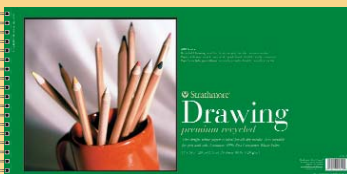
300 SERIES Bristol

Square 6" x 6" in smooth and vellum surfaces



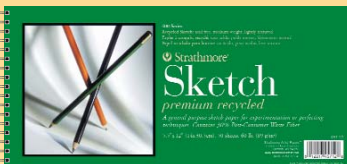
400 SERIES Acrylic

Square 6" x 6" • Square 12" x 12" • Landscape 6" x 12"



400 SERIES Watercolor

Square 12" x 12" • Landscape 6" x 12" • Landscape 6" x 18"



400 SERIES Recycled Drawing

Landscape 8" x 24.5" • Landscape 12" x 24.5"

Micro-perforated sheets



400 SERIES Recycled Sketch

Landscape 5.5" x 12" • Landscape 8" x 24.5"

Micro-perforated sheets

Look for these new products at fine art retailers this spring!